

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Limb Impalement Injury

Date: August 14, 2022

Location: Cedar Creek Fire
Oregon

“... the next thing he knew, there was a tree limb stuck in his arm—before he ever felt it...”

The Story and Lessons from this Tree Impalement Injury

There was a loud bang, what seemed to the driver like glass shattering—but was actually tree debris exploding within their engine’s cab—and a person screaming.

Kris, (all persons’ names have been changed in this RLS to respect people’s privacy) the Engine Boss, looked over to the passenger side of the cab. A tree limb was sticking out of passenger Alex’s arm. And there was a lot of blood.

From Alex’s perspective, one moment his arm was resting on the door frame with the window rolled down. And the next thing he knew, there was a tree limb stuck in his arm—before he ever felt it.

Kris quickly stopped the engine. It was approximately 1900 hours. Moments later, Alex got out, stood up on the vehicle’s steps and immediately propped his arm up on the utility box to elevate the wound. The bleeding stopped. Kris quickly got on the radio.

One by one, on the Tac Channel, he called for: DIVS trainee, DIVS, Task Force Leader and Task Force Leader Trainee. But after getting no response from any those people, Kris called out on Tac for any available medical units. When there was still no comms, he switched to the Command repeater and reached Communications at the Incident Command Post (ICP). They cleared the channel for emergency medical traffic.

Internally, Kris was Struggling

Kris did his best to communicate their medical situation while, internally, he was struggling. His brain felt like he was trying to wrangle a swarm of bees. It took all he could do to wrangle one while there were 50 others also needing to be wrangled.

Within minutes, a Safety Officer and an EMT arrived. The Safety Officer organized the departing resource traffic headed down the hill—it was the end of shift and many fire resources were headed off the line—to allow an ambulance to reach the scene, by having them move to the shoulder or hold in place.



Top photo shows how—as the engine was driving down the road—the treetop entered the side mirror assembly below the mirror, pushed the mirror in toward the door, and impacted the passenger.

Photo on left shows the remaining piece of the treetop that broke off and became lodged to the engine.

Meanwhile, the DIVS Trainee heard the traffic on the radio. She had the ambulance—located at a nearby Drop Point—follow her as she drove to the accident location. Once there, she took command of the scene while the medical personnel stabilized the broken tree limb that remained in Alex’s arm.

The medical personnel quickly arranged to meet at ICP to transfer Alex—with the tree limb still impaled in his arm—to a different ambulance that would take him to the local hospital for medical care. A little over half an hour had elapsed since the time of the injury.

After Alex departed in the ambulance, Kris and his remaining crewmember, John, took some time to collect themselves. With the help of others, they cleaned up the wood debris inside of the cab and the blood on the cab frame of the engine and then drove to ICP.

At ICP, Kris and John spent some more time talking with Safety, Division, and others. After a quick meal, they drove to the hospital to check on Alex. He had arrived at the hospital around 2000. Alex had the broken tree limb removed from his arm at the hospital. His wound was cleaned extensively to reduce the potential for infection. He was finally released around 0200. Alex returned home to rest and recuperate and did not return to the fire during the engine’s tour.



Arrow points to the remainder of the sapling that impacted the engine and struck its passenger.

Important Background Details

The engine crew had driven this same road every night for the past six nights.

No one recalls seeing that limb sticking out over the white line at the road’s edge.

Had that limb always been there? Did the recent rain or wind from passing traffic enable it to settle farther out into the road—just enough to be caught by the engine’s side mirror? No one knows for sure.

This incident occurred on the main route of travel for two different Branches with several Divisions of traffic coming off the fire line toward ICP and the Forward Operating Base.

Where the incident occurred, radio comms were known to be difficult because of the terrain. During this medical incident, several people reported hearing garbled radio traffic or static, but many weren’t quite sure exactly what was going on.

Lessons

from the People Involved in this Incident

- ❖ Hand over the Incident Within an Incident (IWI) Incident Commander (IC) position as soon as someone more qualified appears on scene.
 - The Engine Boss in this incident recommended that when it is your own crewmember who is affected, you pass off the IWI IC as soon someone more qualified appears on scene.

- When does an IWI actually end? Who takes command of an IWI when it is off the fire line? How do your work relationships affect your decision making when someone you know is injured? How is your decision making altered when it is someone you know?
- ❖ Crews should engage in repetitive medical training to ensure that they have a clear understanding of the first steps to take in the chaos of the moment.
 - Practice delegating tasks to lighten the load on the IWI IC.
 - One important task to remember is before medical assistance arrives, talk to the injured person, ask them questions and keep them engaged.
- ❖ When personally involved in an accident, before using the radio, take a 10-second pause to calm down and get focused before talking. Then get what you need rolling toward the scene to address the medical situation.
 - Write out the 8-Line completely so you can call it in on the radio in an organized manner.
 - If you are asked a question on the radio that you don't have an answer for say: "Stand By"—and deal with it when it is appropriate. Don't feel pressure to respond immediately.
- ❖ When driving, the driver should assign a copilot to watch the road as if they were also driving. Two sets of eyes are better than one.

This RLS was submitted by:
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