

**Investigation  
Line of Duty Death  
On January 24, 2009  
Wakulla County Fire Rescue  
Crawfordville, Florida**



**Safety Investigation Report  
Prepared by the Safety Section  
Bureau of Fire Standards and Training  
Florida Division of State Fire Marshal  
Florida Department of Financial Services**

Issued: February 5, 2010

# Safety Investigation Report

## I Authority, Purpose, and Scope

The Department of Financial Services, Division of State Fire Marshal (“division”) is authorized by the provisions of Section 633.806, *Florida Statutes*, to conduct investigations into the causes of firefighter employee injuries and death for the purpose of enhancing firefighter occupational safety and health in the State of Florida, and to make recommendations to the Legislature, firefighter employers, and insurers as to the best means of prevention. The division is authorized to impose penalties on any firefighter employer who violates or fails or refuses to comply with Sections 633.801 through 633.821, *Florida Statutes*, the “Florida Firefighters Occupational Safety and Health Act,” (“FFOSHA”), Rule 69A-62, *Florida Administrative Code* (“F.A.C.”), and lawful orders of the Department of Financial Services under FFOSHA. The scope of this investigation is to determine the facts surrounding a line of duty death (“LODD”) and the course of further action, if any.

## II Background and Methodology

The division learned of the LODD that occurred on January 24, 2009, through the news media and interviewed Scott McDermid, Wakulla County Public Safety Director, and Louie LaMarche, Wakulla County Fire Rescue (“WCFR”) Interim Fire Chief, on January 29, 2009, in Daytona, Florida. Based on the interviews, it was concluded that the death of Captain Richard Rhea (“Captain Rhea”) was the result of a tragic accident, and the file was closed. On June 29, 2009, an anonymous complainant requested further investigation, and the file was reopened. This report is based on the fire department incident report, the Wakulla County Sheriff’s death investigation documents, the autopsy report, the Florida Highway Safety motor vehicle crash report, dispatch tapes from Wakulla County Sheriff’s office, and photographs taken at the scene. The death investigation contained the statements of the Sheriff deputies at the scene. In addition, division representatives conducted a site visit and took ten sworn statements of the firefighters and medical services personnel involved in the incident. A representative of Talquin Electric Cooperative, Inc. (“Talquin”) was interviewed.

## III Executive Summary and Recommendations

At approximately 2:30 a.m., on January 24, 2009, a pick-up truck carrying two occupants, proceeding east bound on Lower Bridge Road in Wakulla County, Florida, struck and broke a utility pole by Miller’s Way. The impact brought down at least one power line and caused others to droop. The vehicle occupants appeared to be injured. The weather was misty and the ground surface was slippery.

Several organizations responded to the incident, including multiple units from the Wakulla County Sheriff’s Department, multiple units from WCFR, career and volunteer fire departments under contract with WCFR, Emergency Medical Services (EMS), and Talquin. Several firefighters arrived in their personal vehicles.

A deputy from the Wakulla County Sheriff's Office was the first to arrive on the scene, having witnessed the accident. He reported the crash to Wakulla County Dispatch at 2:31 a.m., along with information that power lines were down and sparking badly. The deputy assessed the scene and warned the crash victims not to move because power lines were down. Dispatch contacted Talquin and a technician was sent to the scene. Other deputies arrived and blocked the east and west approaches to the scene.

A volunteer for the Wakulla Station Volunteer Fire Department was the first firefighter on the scene. A deputy guided him to the crash scene through the only safe access to avoid contact with the downed and drooping power lines. The volunteer assessed and assisted the accident victims. Additional firefighters and EMS arrived shortly thereafter, including Captain Rhea. Notwithstanding the deputy's warning to approach from the east, not all responders received the message, therefore responders began approaching from both the east and west sides of the scene. The fire rescue vehicle ("squad") driven by Captain Rhea arrived from the west side of the scene. In total, eight firefighters, two emergency medical personnel and four deputies were at the scene. At least one power line was on the ground, and others were suspended, but drooping. Deputies on the scene warned arriving fire personnel that the lines were unsafe and to go around, not under, them; however, the interviews revealed that not all fire personnel went around the lines.

Captain Rhea approached the crash site to deliver equipment requested by those working with the crash victims. Several personnel on the roadway reported seeing the circumstances surrounding the fatal accident. They reported that Captain Rhea walked toward the roadway in the direction of the downed power lines. When Captain Rhea reached the downed power lines, he attempted to navigate a way through them. Captain Rhea then stumbled and while trying to regain his balance, fell onto the power lines suspended four to five feet above the roadway. The resultant autopsy report confirmed the cause of death as electrocution.

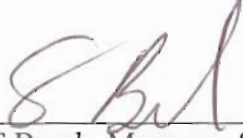
**Finding 1** - Witness statements revealed that there was not a clear understanding of who was in charge of this incident. Incident command establishment was questionable and never communicated to those on scene or dispatch. Deputies, EMS personnel, and fire personnel appeared to have operated independently without effective coordination.

**Finding 2** - Critical information regarding dangerous downed power lines and safety messages were not promptly communicated by dispatch to emergency responders, even though deputies requested those messages be conveyed. The use of different radio frequency bands by deputies and fire further complicated communications.

**Recommendation 1** – An assessment of WCFR and its volunteer companies for compliance with Firefighter Employment Standards as outlined in 69A-62 F.A.C should be conducted within the next two months.

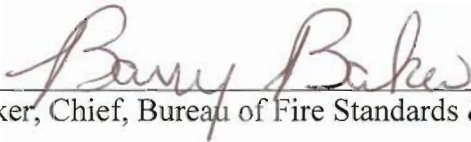
**Recommendation 2** – Personnel of WCFR, Wakulla County Sheriff’s Office, Dispatch and EMS should attend training as soon as possible on the National Incident Management System and response to incidents involving downed power lines.

Submitted by:



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Charles F Brush, Manager, Safety Section, BFST

Approved by:



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Barry Baker, Chief, Bureau of Fire Standards & Training

Approved for distribution by:



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Julius Halas, Director, Florida Division of State Fire Marshal

## SAFETY INVESTIGATION REPORT DETAILS

### IV Situation

(Source – Florida Traffic Crash Report # 77009790).

A pick-up truck proceeding east bound on Lower Bridge Road left the roadway onto the south shoulder of Lower Bridge Road and went airborne. The front of the pick-up impacted a utility pole causing the vehicle to rotate clockwise, overturn, hit some mailboxes and a wire fence before coming to final rest on the south shoulder of Lower Bridge Road facing in a south-easterly direction.

### V Pertinent Communications

(Source - CD of dispatch communications received from Wakulla County Sheriff's Office).

#### A. Initial Communications from the Scene

- Sheriff's Office unit L109 (L109) was on scene shortly after the accident.
- L109 transmits that he has a motor vehicle crash that just happened. He requests EMS be rolled and advises that he has power lines down.
- As part of another transmission L109 reports that the "lines are sparking bad".
- Another transmission from L109 reports "Crawfordville if you will, go ahead and get the power company I don't even know how we're going to get him out yet."

#### B. Initial Dispatch

- "Station 8 First Responders, Station 8 First Responders; I need someone en route to Yupon and Lower Bridge, Yupon and Lower Bridge. I got a traffic accident with entrapment, a traffic accident with entrapment."

#### C. Transmissions while fire / EMS units are enroute;

- L218 advises that there is a report of power lines down.
- Station 8 asks dispatch if they heard that and "when can we get the power company to arrive?"
- Dispatch responds "Yes...10-4... we're trying. Power lines are down everywhere. We're trying."
- Station 8 transmits "10-4 Crawfordville. Incoming units be advised we have hazardous power lines on scene."
- L109 contacts dispatch and requests rescue advising that one of the pickup occupants is "hurt pretty bad and I can't even get to him because of the power lines."
- Dispatch replies- "That's a 10-4."
- L128 contacts dispatch and requests that dispatch contact EMS and have them come in "from the Spring Creek side. If they come in from that side they'll be able to get to our patient. If they come in from Crawfordville end they're not going to be able to get to the patients cause of the power line blocking."
- Dispatch replies – "10-4. 10-39."

- Responding EMS unit Medic 2 (M2) contacts responding fire unit rescue 1 (R1) and asks “What’s the location on Lower Bridge?”
- R1 responds “Lower Bridge and Yupon Dr. SO’s advising to come in off of Spring Creek end, you won’t be able to get to it from Crawfordville side because of down power lines.”

#### **D. On scene communications**

- Echo 12, a law enforcement officer contacts dispatch and says “I believe that’s Talq (Talquin). We may want to go ahead and call them if we need to get to them so they can cut that power.”
- Dispatch replies “That’s 10-4. I’ve got the emergency line on the phone.”
- L109 advises “I’m going to try to come on down and walk underneath the power lines here. They’re sparking bad between mine and your cars so don’t, uh, they’re all over the ground.”
- L118 replies – 10-4, I see it. 128 and 172 you’re going to have to block your side of the road over there. Lines are all the way across the road.
- Squad 8 reports that it is on scene.
- Dispatch replies “10-4 Squad 8.”
- R1 contacts dispatch and advises “You can cancel Rescue 3 and Medic 2.”
- Dispatch replies “10-4. Rescue 3, Medic 2 did you copy?”
- R2 and M2 reply that they copy.
- Dispatch replies 10-4
- Unknown male transmits “Crawfordville, I need them to cut that power off, I have a subject on the lines”.
- Dispatch replies “10-4”.

### **VI Sheriff’s Death Investigation Report Summary**

(Source - Wakulla County Sheriff’s Department Death Investigation Report # WCSO09OF000141)

**The following was prepared from the statements made in the referenced report.**

#### **A. Conditions on arrival**

Dispatch was advised by Sheriff’s unit L109 of a traffic crash and that there were live power lines down everywhere. Prior to the arrival of fire and EMS personnel, dispatch was directed to advise all units to approach the scene from the east side due to the power lines down. There were four power lines down and they were about 15 feet from the back of the truck. One of the power lines was on the ground and the other three were about five to six feet in the air.

#### **B. Fire / EMS arrival and on-scene actions**

Two personal vehicles and Squad 8<sup>1</sup> arrived on the west side of the scene. Fire personnel were told not to step over the lines put to go around. Fire Chief Brazier had walked up to the top portion of the broken utility pole, examined it and stated that the line hanging near

<sup>1</sup> Three personal vehicles and Squad 8 arrived on the west side per fire rescue interviews.

the ground was a common line that was not energized, however the three other lines that hung about five feet off the ground were live lines<sup>2</sup>. At that point, fire units began walking through the lines, stepping over the line nearest the ground, and ducking under the other low hanging lines.

### **C. Electrocuting incident**

The fire truck with Captain Rhea came into the scene and proceeded past a deputy until a firefighter signaled for the truck to stop again. The truck came to an abrupt stop before the live wires on the ground. The firefighter<sup>3</sup> said “Richard I know you do not like driving over live wires and these may still be hot.” Captain Rhea grabbed a back board and headed for the front of the truck. The deputy advised that the lines on the ground were being treated as live wires and to be careful. Captain Rhea stepped between the two live wires on the ground with the back board and proceeded to the crash location, located approximately 45 degrees to the right of the rescue truck. Captain Rhea arrived at the crash site by passing under one of the down wires and stepping over another wire on the ground. Deputies were standing about 15 feet from the down lines. Captain Rhea was exiting the crash site when he caught his right foot on the power line on the ground<sup>4</sup> causing him to trip and fall into wires just above his chest level. Talquin arrived on scene at about 3:47 AM, securing the power, allowing the EMS units to attend to the deceased.

### **VII Autopsy report**

Cause of death was electrocution. (Source - Office of the Medical Examiner, District Two, Case 09M-030)

### **VIII Fire Incident Report**

(Source Wakulla County Fire Rescue Incident Report # 43, 1/24/09)

“FD blocked the east side of the accident with E8. Power lines were down in the middle of the two poles running from east to west. SO showed FD a safe means of entrance and egress FD went to the vehicle and advised dispatch that we had 2 pt’s who appeared to be injured. One patient was in the bed of the truck which we were advised he had been ejected. There was still one patient inside of the cab. Other FF’s arrived on scene and had come down to the vehicle. One FF which was holding traction asked for a backboard to be brought down from EMS which was on scene and Captain Rhea went to retrieve it. Captain Rhea came back to the vehicle. FF Johnson then asked for another board to be brought down so that we could remove the victim from the inside of the vehicle. Captain Rhea went to retrieve that one as well. The paramedic who was on scene was going to assist us in removal of patient once the backboard was brought back. All of a sudden there was someone who hollered and Captain Rhea had fallen into the power lines that

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<sup>2</sup> Chief Brazier during the fire rescue interview said he “wasn’t trying to imply the lines were not charged or still hot by any means.”

<sup>3</sup> The firefighter was identified during fire rescue interviews as Lt Posey

<sup>4</sup> There is disagreement amongst the officer’s statements as to whether the lower line was on the ground or up to one foot above the ground. This inconsistency was also exhibited during fire rescue interviews.

were on the edge of the road hanging about 1’ off the ground. All personnel looked over to see we had a firefighter that was laying on the line and was being electrocuted. Once the electricity stopped we were able to get the last person out of the vehicle and taken onto the road in a safer place. All personnel were removed with the last pt and stood by up on the road.”

From the report roster, the following firefighters were on scene;

Brandon Alyea	Darcy Brazier	Clint Monnin	Anthony Stephans
Andy Bowman	Jerry Johnson	Richard Rhea	Derrick Voyles

Incident Command was held by Jerry Johnson.

## **IX Summary of Firefighter and EMS Interviews**

On September 17, 2009, Charles Brush, Safety Programs Manager, and Lieutenant Jason Roberts of the Bureau of Fire and Arson Investigations conducted interviews, under oath and recorded, with the fire and emergency medical personnel who were on scene when the incident occurred. From the transcripts of the interviews with those listed below, the following summary was made.

For the purpose of clarity, the following two terms are used and defined:

- Scene – The area East and West of Millers Way surrounding the crash site.
- Crash Site – The immediate area around the pickup from the fence line to the power lines.

### **A. Those interviewed**

Alyea, Brandon - Firefighter II, Wakulla County Fire Rescue

Bowman, Andy – Volunteer, Crawfordville VFD

Brazier, Darcy – Firefighter I, Volunteer Chief, Crawfordville VFD

Duggar, Jarrod – Paramedic, Wakulla County EMS

Johnson, Jerry – Firefighter II, Wakulla County Fire Rescue

Monnin, Clint – Firefighter I, Volunteer, Crawfordville VFD

Posey, Jim - Firefighter 1, Volunteer LT, Crawfordville VFD

Skinner, Linda – Emergency Medical Technician, Wakulla County EMS

Stephans, Anthony – Volunteer, Wakulla Station VFD

Voyles, Derrick - Firefighter II, Volunteer, Wakulla Station 2

### **B. Arrival of EMS and Fire units**

It was a cool, damp evening with a heavy dew or light mist. The grass was slippery.

When the first fire units arrived on scene, they found power lines on the ground crossing Lower Bridge Road and lines hanging down from a fractured pole with a transformer on it that was between two intact ones. The lines were high enough so you could walk underneath them. Sparking was not evident but you could hear a hum indicting live lines. Most units on scene were parked between the 2 intact power poles with the fractured pole in between.

- **Fire / EMS units arriving from the east end of Lower Bridge Road**

Anthony Stephens in his own vehicle  
Clint Monnin in his own vehicle  
Jerry Johnson (Johnson) and Brandon Alyea aboard Engine 8  
Linda Skinner and Jarrod Duggar aboard the ambulance  
James Voyles aboard engine 2

- **Fire / EMS units arriving from the west end of Lower Bridge Road**

Chief Brazier in his own vehicle  
Lieutenant (LT) Posey in his own vehicle  
Andy Bowman in his own vehicle  
Captain Rhea in Squad 8

### **C. Incident Command(IC)**

Stephens was first on scene and stated that he had established command<sup>5</sup>. Stephens stated that Johnson assumed command upon his arrival. Johnson denied taking command and added that he did not have a radio with him. Alyea said that either he or Johnson had established command and that there was no IC in place until Engine 8 arrived. Voyles said that Stephens was IC because he was first on scene. Lt Posey stated that he did not know as he did not hear over the radio who called IC. Chief Brazier said that he was just overseeing, he had not taken command. Chief Brazier thought that IC may have been Stephens as he was first on scene, but he was not sure.

### **D. Crash site access**

- Those arriving from the east - Deputy Mitchell guided Stephens to the scene, stating that it was the only safe access. Engine 8 was met by Deputy Mitchell who told them where to stop, where the safe entrance to the scene was and to walk down the fence line to the crash. They were going under the wires, close to the easterly intact pole, on the downed wires side of the pole. As Duggar walked up to the crash site, at least one of the power lines had caught his eye. The line was still suspended a little in the air, not on the ground. Voyles assumed power was turned off. He accessed the scene by walking under the downed lines almost at the same location where Captain Rhea was electrocuted. He does not remember stepping over any lines or there being lines on the ground.
- Those arriving from the west found their way to the crash site individually. Sheriff's Deputies were up on the pavement warning him and others of power lines hanging down. Chief Brazier was also warning those in the area of the danger.

### **E. Crash site actions**

Once Stephens arrived at the crash, he assessed the patients, radioed Engine 8 to position on the east end of the scene and further advised that there were two patients. Joining Stephens at the crash, Engine 8's crew started spinal immobilization and secondary assessments. Clint Monnin arrived at the crash and assisted in spinal immobilization

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<sup>5</sup> There is no radio communication indicating the establishment of command by anyone. The fire incident report makes no mention of Stephens being or initiating command.

Johnson helped Stephens with the patient in the cab and Alyea started talking to the patient in the back of the truck. Alyea found out that the individual had not been ejected but had crawled out of the rear window. Alyea held C Spine on the patient in the back when joined by Monnin. Monnin and Alyea then took turns holding C Spine on the patient. Skinner and Bowman were by the ambulance.

#### **F. Arrival of Squad 8**

Squad 8, driven by Captain Rhea, arrived about 3 minutes after Lt Posey. Captain Rhea had pulled around a patrol unit and was heading for a power line which lay on the ground across the road. Lt Posey stopped the squad before the downed lines saying “hey, stop here, if you go any further you’re going to go over a power line” lines on the ground were driven over. Captain Rhea parked the squad at an angle facing down towards the crash site. It was running and the lights were on. Captain Rhea had gotten out of the squad and there were other people that were talking to him about the line. The lines were not on the ground at that point and high enough so that people could still walk underneath them. They had not come down far enough; they would not have gotten anybody.

#### **G. Electrocution incident**

Engine 8 was calling for equipment when the deceased came to the passenger side of the pickup. Equipment from the squad was requested. Captain Rhea left and returned with the requested equipment. Additional equipment was requested for the patient in the back of the pickup. Captain Rhea went to acquire that equipment. Skinner saw the deceased coming up from the crash site. As he was coming up there was a power line that was probably 12-18 inches, drooping from one pole to the other. It looked like his right foot slipped and he fell forward and hit around his neck or clavicle area. When Captain Rhea fell, the wire and the ground started to shake, there was a buzzing sound along with arcing and then it would die down. The sequence repeated twice more until the power line parted and recoiled back.

#### **H. Closing comments made by those interviewed**

- **Chief Brazier** - “those lines dropped down during that process because I don’t remember them being that low and I know Richard would not have tried to go underneath a line that was that low.” It is his feeling that Captain Rhea started back up there blinded by the light and suddenly saw what was there, tried to stop and fell onto them. He further said that they would “definitely do things different the next time just like the SOG we developed”.
- **Lt Posey** - “I think it was an evolving scene, and wound up being that the lines were real high to start with, they were passable to start with, but the pole was broken, the transformer was still on the pole, with the transformer still on it and gravity took force, I think that between the lines running across here between the weight of the pole and transformer, it’s what made the, because the lines weren’t on the ground when we first got there. They come down, just by sheer gravity.”
- **Voyles** - “I’ve changed the way I handle down power lines”.

#### **X. Talquin Power actions**

**(Source – December 23, 2009 Phone call interview with Mr. Ken Cowen, Director of Administrative Services for Talquin Power,**

At 0230, 1/24/09 their Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition system (SCADA) alerted to an event in their power system. At 0233 Wakulla County Dispatch called to report lines down on Lower Bridge Road due to a motor vehicle crash and request that the power be secured. Talquin dispatched the on-duty technician at 0235 to respond to the scene. At 0245, dispatch called asking for the power to be secured as they had someone on the lines. At 0247 the power was remotely secured using SCADA. At 0305 Talquin's technician arrived on scene.