



'Driving For The Other Guy'

***By Chris Standard, KSFFA 1st Vice President
May 2004***

Did you know?

That over 269 firefighters and other emergency responders have died since 1979 from accidents involving emergency vehicles?

That every year between 20 and 25 percent of firefighter deaths are from these types of accidents? (In 2003 that percentage rose to over 28%--and 8% of those were returning from an incident.)

That every year vehicle collisions are usually the second most common cause of firefighter fatalities?

That the majority of these fatalities can be prevented?

What can we--as emergency responders--do about this problem?

There are various things that can and should be done to prevent these deaths—everything from ensuring that the firefighters who are driving have received adequate driver's training--to making sure that everyone is wearing a seatbelt before the truck moves. One thing that isn't talked about as much, however, is something that I would like to address here. I call it 'Driving for the other guy.' By this phrase, I mean that not only do you need to drive your own vehicle with 'due regard for the safety of others', but you also have to be 'thinking for the other driver' too. In other words, you have to be very vigilant in watching other drivers and 'expecting them to do the unexpected.' Let me give you an example of what I mean.

A month or so ago, I had been in Liberal, KS for a fire officer's meeting, and was headed home to Kismet, about 15 miles from Liberal. At the edge of Liberal, I had to pass through a kind of 'squirrely' intersection known locally by

the name of 'Six Points.' (It is called 'Six Points' because there are six sets of stoplights for the six different directions in which you can go, and I call it a 'squirrely' intersection because unless you live in the area and are familiar with this intersection, it can be fairly confusing as to which stoplights are for which traffic lanes.)

As I approached the intersection, I moved into the left-hand turn lane, and just before I reached the intersection, my light turned yellow, and then red. I stopped. The vehicle to my right plowed straight on through the intersection, almost clearing it before his light turned red. I looked around for a cop, but there were none to be seen. Rats! So vehicle number one got away with it. Fortunately, everyone else was stopped, so he made it through without causing an accident.

As I sat waiting for my light to turn green, the traffic lights for the other roads took their turns at turning green, yellow and red. During the course of my wait, I observed another vehicle blow through his light-but it was red before he was halfway through the intersection. I looked around again for a cop-still none to be seen. Rats! Thinking to myself, 'where is a cop when you need one,' and 'if I sit here much longer, I am going to see a nasty wreck', I waited for my light to turn green so I could proceed on my way.

The lanes of traffic to my left got their green light, and they proceeded. Their light turned red, mine turned green. Now, I have gone through this intersection hundreds of times before, and I know from past experience that if I turn left as soon as my light turns green, I can easily complete my turn before the car across from me who wants to come straight through the intersection can make it across the intersection. (This intersection is incredibly wide, and if you turn left, as I was going to, you can clear the intersection way ahead of anyone else. I know what you are thinking, and you are right—I should wait for the other car before I make my left-hand turn. After all, he has the right-of-way.)

For some reason, I did not proceed right out to make my turn and thus beat the other guy, as I always have done in the past. I hesitated, still mulling over in my mind 'where is a cop when you need one to talk to these drivers who keep running the red lights', when all of a sudden there was a quick movement to my left, and vehicle number three—a semi-- blew through the intersection-way after his light had turned red! My attention was 'focused' on the two vehicles that I had observed blowing the red lights and on the car facing me--not on the traffic to my left--after all, they had the red light!!

After observing the semi, I waited for the car facing me to clear the intersection, and I proceeded cautiously through the intersection, turning left. About fifty feet down the road-it hit me! If I had done what I usually do, I would have been hit broadside by a semi doing an estimated 45 mph! Guess who would have lost that battle? Right, me in my little Ford Ranger—not the semi!!

During the drive home, I mulled this whole incident over in my mind—and I had another revelation! What I had done by not pulling immediately out in the

intersection when my light turned green was 'drive for the other guy.' Granted, I did it by accident, but I vowed then and there to start doing it on purpose every time I drive anywhere—whether I am in my personal vehicle or in an emergency vehicle.

My point here is that I believe that we have reached the point where we as emergency responders—and citizens—need to really heighten our awareness of the other vehicles around us. There seem to be more and more people on the road these days who act as if they have no idea that there are other vehicles on the road besides the one that they are in. If we are to prevent some of these fatality accidents involving emergency vehicles, then we are going to have to 'put ourselves in the other driver's seat' and try to figure out just what the other driver's intentions are. This means doing things such as checking and rechecking vehicle positions as we approach intersections while running with lights and sirens; not just 'assuming' that the other drivers see and hear us; and basically expecting the majority of the driving public to do something entirely unexpected! It may also mean that if we can't figure out what the other driver is doing, then we may have to yield to them or get out of their way even if we have the right of way. After all, would you rather get to the emergency a minute or two later—but safely—or never get there because you 'assumed' that the other driver would do what they were supposed to do—and they didn't? We also need to practice this when returning from an incident—firefighters are also killed every year while returning from emergencies—not just while driving to them.

If you are already doing this—then great!! If not, why not try it the next time you get behind the wheel? Take the time to 'put yourself in the other driver's seat' in the vehicles that you encounter on the road. It could mean the difference between reaching your destination safely—and being involved in an accident.

Gwen Romine, KSFFA Webmaster - ksffa@earthlink.net