

‘When later comes’: The suppressed emotions from years of painful calls suddenly arrive

One incident years ago reemerges in an unexpected moment

Jan 28, 2020

Editor's Note:

FireRescue1 Voices is a place where firefighters across the country can speak up, tell their stories about difficult calls and voice their opinions. If you want to share your story with the FireRescue1 community, please review our [submission guidelines](#) and email editor@firerescue1.com.

By Nick Dickson

We come up to a fire – a “good” or “working” fire. Jesus, what is a “good” fire? It really just means the fire has a “good” head start and we’re going to put in some “good” work to put it out.

Smoke’s showing in the sky from a mile away. We know we’re going to work, wondering in what order we’re going to arrive and figuring out what our job is based on that order of arrival.



Dickson with his first-born daughter. (Photo/Nick Dickson)

We get there, third in. The two other engines already there are stretching lines and getting busy trying to put out a fire in a two-car detached garage that has been illegally converted into a residence.

We jump off, ready to go to work, and here comes a cop, holding some stuff in his hands. He runs, not walks, but runs, and puts this stuff on the trunk of his car. My captain orders me to deal with it. As I approach, I see that "it" is two little girls – one 5 years old and the other one only 3. I can't remember their names, but to me, they are C. and M. I go to help, and with an ambulance already pulling up, we are going to make a difference, or so I hope.

C and M are right there in front of me, smoke coming off their clothes, off their skin or at least what used to be their skin. Roasting a tomato over an open flame until the skin peels and contracts away is the identical look of my two little girls now. Skin sluffing off, hair curled up from burning, the smell of burned flesh in the air, a sweet stench that has no equal, all there in living color, too real to be real.

I can't focus on what I see because there's a job to do, a life to save, a heroic expectation to live up to. If I stopped to look at what's in front of me, it would be too overwhelming, so I focus on what needs to be done – stop the burning process, assess the airway, check the extent of the burns, remove the clothing, start an IV, administer fluids, give oxygen, get ready to intubate if things get worse, cover the wounds, transfer them to the ambulance, beat feet to the hospital, not the closest one, but the one that has the facilities to give them the best chance, 15-20 minutes away.

That's the robot, the objective, task-oriented response that is the only thing that keeps things progressing. Absorbing what's going on will have to come later, but when?

We start cooling the burns that are still smoking and M says, "I don't want to take a bath." A bath? Honey, I wish this was a bath. A bath? My God, from the mouths of babes.

Back to the task at hand. I'll have to "feel" about it later, again.

Get them both on the gurney. They're so small that two will fit on one bed, and away we go to the ambulance.

As we're getting to the ambulance, M says, "I'm sorry," and C replies, "It's OK." Two girls, critically burned, suffering from unimaginable pain, are taking the time to apologize and comfort each other.

You see, M is apologizing because the two of them were in the garage-turned-apartment alone while their parents were in the main house. They decided to lock the door so they could play around and began playing with matches. After the fire was lit and with the door locked, by the time the adults saw what was happening and tried to get in, it was too late and the damage was done. How do you live with that as a parent?


Sorry, I have something to do right now. I'll think about how they must feel later.

The girls get in the back of the ambulance and I hear a high-pitched squeak developing with C. When someone gets burned, the body's defense mechanism for injuries is to fill the damaged site with fluid to protect the area, resulting in swelling. When the airway is burned, this fluid collection and swelling happens from the throat through the lungs, closing the passages until air cannot pass. Now a high-pitched squeak, known as a wheeze, is a telltale sign that C's airway is constricting, and she soon will not be breathing. She's in big trouble. Her chance for survival has just plummeted, but we can't think about that right now; we have to work to save her. We have something to do. I'll think about that later.

C and M get to the hospital, where they're rushed into a room that is filled with doctors and medical students waiting to give them the best care possible and try to turn this tragedy around. Methodically and with absolute purpose, they work feverishly to stabilize and repair the life that is ever so quickly slipping from these two little girls who haven't even been given a chance to understand life yet.

My job being done, I don't wait to see what's going on; I have something to do. Our equipment needs to get restocked, we have to get everything in order, have to get back on the street ready for the next event, need to get the paperwork completed, need to get dinner going. Dinner? Who's hungry now? Doesn't matter, can't think about that, we have things to do.

We get back to the station, get the engine ready for the next call, get cleaned up, finish the paperwork, eat dinner and go on with the day. I reflect a few times on these things that just happened, but it must not be time to feel anything about it, because that is not coming. I guess I'll just feel about it later.

 Dickson (yellow jacket) poses with members during a training exercise.

Dickson (yellow jacket) poses with members during a training exercise.

Two days later, I get word that M did not make it through the night. The hospital stabilized C and transferred her to a burn unit at another hospital. What a tragedy, but it's two days removed. It feels like an emotionless news story, "Tragedy struck as a house fire claimed the life of a 3-year-old girl. Another 5-year-old girl was taken to the hospital and is in critical condition. Now to the weather"

Another two days later and news comes that C, the 5-year-old, also succumbed to her injuries.

Inside, it feels like another story on the news, a little bummed out, but it's the job and we tried. That's gotta be good enough, right? We did our best, we were Johnny-on-the-spot, we followed protocol, we

wasted no efforts. All of this is true, it is fact, so we sleep well knowing we gave it our all. I guess “later” won’t be coming after all. WRONG!

Fast forward six years later. My first born comes, a beautiful little girl. First initial is C. Two years after that, my second comes, another little girl. First initial is M, followed by my third little lady, G. Life is good.

Then one day, for no real reason, I guess “later” came calling. M says she doesn’t want to take a bath. A lump grows in my throat, those words like a key, scrambling up to my brain to unlock the vault that says, “Don’t open until later.”

The vault is open and “later” comes out.

The sights, the smells, the situation, all back in vivid detail. The only thing that has changed are the two little girls whose names I did not recall; they have become my little C, my little M.

I run the call back in my head, with the urgency of the event supercharged with the fact that these victims are my C and M suffering the same fate, with the same result. The only difference is it’s going on in my head, not in the street, so I all I do is watch, listen, smell and absorb everything.

You see, there’s nothing to do to divert my attention and shield what’s in front of me; I just have to feel the darkness of all that I have seen. I am just a spectator in my mind of memories, but it’s compounded because they aren’t just little girls, they’re my little girls. I have nothing to do because I can’t do anything. My “later” has come, it’s asked me to pay for what I’ve seen, and wants its payment with interest.

I live on a very fragile understanding that no matter how strong these emotions, my reality is that my girls are still with me. For the grace of God, they have not experienced anything close to a tragedy, but in my mind, I suffer the consequences of the emotion tied to such a tragedy as if they did, at times. Other times, it’s OK.

The funny part is, I teach them safety and heighten their awareness even at young ages to try and prevent anything from actually occurring. I wonder if I’m doing the right thing, or if my wife might be right when she laughs at my “lessons” and jokingly asks if I’m paranoid. If she only knew.

Editor’s Note: Have you had a similar experience that you’d like to share with FireRescue1? Email the editor at editor@firerescue1.com.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nick Dickson is a fire captain in his 33rd year, working along the San Francisco Peninsula. He has served in various roles, including apparatus operator, paramedic, captain and temporary battalion chief. Dickson has taught fire science at a local community college for the last 28 years, and has served as a member of USAR Task Force 3 as well as his department’s marine unit. Dickson is a certified chief officer and has an associate degree in fire science.

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Posted by [donnasatiro58](#) Feb 12, 2020

I think that each and everyone of those "victims" were extremely blessed to have someone come running to them during their trauma, what a blessing it is to have people like you who care enough to do that!
Staying present and focused was useful, you couldn't do as good of a job...had you not been in that mind set.
Thank you for your service!.... 🙏
check out a website ... Rapid Resolution Therapy, developed by Dr. Jon Connelly, there is a testimony by a 911 first responder... "Jack" getting that stuff were you can remember it, but it don't effect you in the problematic way it has been... it useful!

♥ 0



Posted by [bee.galindo](#) Jan 31, 2020

Although having responded to way too many burn victims before & after this call, & the sights, sounds & smells weaving them all together into a tapestry of some sort, the specific sound of an engine pumping (vs. idling) always took me straight back to this one

♥ 0



Posted by [bee.galindo](#) Jan 31, 2020

My worst call ever - chose to bookend the kids instead of waiting for a second-in unit - sure don't remember anyone coming with me in the rig (sorry, Nick) always wondered if I did enough to take the older one's guilt feelings away ("Mommy is going to be so mad at me - I'm supposed to take care of my sister, not hurt her")I was the last person they talked to since the hospital intubated them right away, little one kept saying "but I don't want a bath" as I'm trying to stop / cool the burn with

sterile water, the significance/ connection of “bath” did not hit me until after we had dropped them off at the hospital..... the girls visited me in my night terrors for years

♥ 0

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