Quiet Fire

By Emma Pritchett

The walls of the two story green house on 128 Fairfield Avenue encased an inferno as battalion chief David Decker pulled up to the scene.

Three front steps lead to a mouth of flames and intense heat, while the neat white trim around the windows of a green two story house were scorched black. The flames arching out from the front of the house crescendoed from brilliant oranges and yellows into grey and black smoke that billowed up to the side of the home. A large patch of black marred the small green lawn as the grass began to burn.

“I’m on the scene. Two story private dwelling. Heavy fire on the front of the building. Chief Decker’s gonna have Fairfield command make a working fire. I’m going to be out, doing a 360,” Decker said as he maneuvered his vehicle into a 360 degree turn.

Hopping out, he pointed his phone, camera rolling, attached to his dashboard toward the burning building. He grabbed his gear, and headed off to the fiery home ahead. Decker radioed command again, and received confirmation and reports that two engines were on their way to the scene.

The window trim began to collapse to the ground as the fire spilling outside of the house increased. A skeleton outline of the home’s front was all that remained as the blaze continued to consume the residence. Every panel of wood was food for this insatiable fire’s appetite.

Over the radio, the dispatcher informed Decker that an occupant of the home was on fire, and possibly trapped inside. He chewed on the information, a person trapped inside would take about 10 people away from responding to the burning building to tend to the injured person.

Frontline workers like Decker–dispatchers, police officers, nurses, firefighters, and paramedics– see things that are scarring on a daily basis. They do not get to pick and choose emergencies to which they respond. No matter how distressing it might be for them, they answer all calls for help. The events responders get dispatched to deal with are mostly horrible. Frontline workers are more likely to have post traumatic stress disorder, more likely to have substance abuse problems, and more likely to die by suicide, as shown in a 2018 study by Nova Southeastern University.

But somehow, in a moment that was all chaos, Decker stayed calm and collected. With the help of those on the scene, Decker established that the occupant was not on fire inside of the house. This call was now a routine fire response.

Soon after, the first truck arrived.

Once the engine was in position, firefighters brought out and unraveled the massive hose. The firefighter holding the nozzle of the hose prepared himself to fight the inferno. As soons as water was shooting from the hose, the first responder started spraying the flames ejecting out the side toward the neighboring house, then moved on to the body of the home. After giving the burning building a good douse, the firefighter pivoted to hose down the neighboring residence.

Nearly 20 minutes after battalion chief Decker arrived at the scene, the fire was safely under control with no injuries to both civilian and fire personnel.

The response to this fire, by the Newark Fire Department, was recorded by Decker and published to his Youtube channel. This channel has over sixty thousand subscribers and videos having hundreds of thousands of views. Fire departments across the country use these videos as educational tools to better their response operations.

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Decorating the wall behind the fire engines at the Madison Township Fire Department is a map outlined in red, black, gray, and blue. The red lines create a rectangle, boxing in the criss-crossing black and blue lines. Each black line snakes about the rectangle establishing a grid-like system, accompanied by street names like Swans, New Haven, and Montgomery. The two blue lines streaking across the town represent rivers. State Route 16 stretches across the map as a light gray line.

“This was here when I joined back in 1990. This was before we had computer stuff, so they put this up here because, number one, before you head out the door you can look and say, okay where is Hazel Dell road?” Decker said, pointing at the map.

Firefighters and EMS were required to memorize the map. Most fire departments have their responders do what Decker calls street testing. At Madison, they would be given a blank map, like the one on the wall, and have to label all of the road names.

Decker was an assistant chief for the Newark Fire Department for 32 years. Following his retirement in January 2022, he continued his service as a volunteer firefighter and paramedic, serving as assistant chief with the Madison Township Fire Department.

He knew he wanted to be a firefighter at a young age. As soon as Decker graduated high school he reached out to Madison Township, and was placed as a volunteer firefighter in the department.

“I knew that volunteer departments are almost always accepting people. They can’t have enough volunteers,” he said.

As a firefighter, he responds to any type of fire, house, car, or garage. His job as battalion chief was to give orders, and coordinate the activities on the outside to fight the fire, like the one on Fairfield. As a paramedic, he responds to calls requesting aid for car accidents, shootings, stabbings, and cardiac arrests. According to Decker, a majority of the calls they respond to at the station are emergency medicine.

A typical work cycle for first responders is what they call a 24/48 rotation. They have 24 hours on, usually from 8 a.m. to 8 a.m., followed by 48 hours off. Decker usually would do his 24 hours on at Newark, and during his off time he would respond to any calls needing help at the volunteer department.

Always on call, Decker took almost no time off.

“You’re pretty much always on call. Now, there’s nothing that says that I must respond to an emergency down here, but it’s kind of an expectation, you know, that’s why you join the department. You want to provide that service,” he said.

As he and his wife began building their life together, he had already been in the fire department for some time. His family understood that sometimes there would be holidays when Decker would not be there because he was on the job responding to an emergency.

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Two monitors sit atop a rectangular desk in the back office of the department, papers scattered about the work surface. Decker sat back in the chair behind the desk, a serious but thoughtful expression on his face.

“When I first got into this [firefighting and EMS] in 1990, there were no mental health services whatsoever. If you had a bad run, everybody just dealt with it on their own level,” he said. “Here’s what I can tell you, anybody that’s done this for any length of time, it affects you mentally.”

According to the Nova Southeastern University 2018 study, more than 80 percent of first responders experience traumatic events on the job. As a result of this, they are at a higher risk of developing post traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. Nearly one in three first responders develop PTSD.

“The stuff we see is, man, it’s just hard to shake out of your brain. You know. I could show you pictures that you would never forget,” Decker said. “I can tell you we’re now recognizing that this is a huge problem in fire and EMS, and we got to do a better job with it.”

According to Decker, the departments around Licking County have a debriefing team. Whenever something particularly ugly happens in the field, they can request the debrief team to come out and talk with the members involved. They are not required to speak, but if they need to process, this is a safe place to share what cannot be unseen.

“It took me forever to realize that I had a problem, and that I needed help,” Decker said.

He lapsed into silence for a minute.

“Are you religious?” He asked. “So you would probably understand if for instance, I responded to a run where a one year old was in a stroller and got run over by a car. I was furious with God, because I know the power of the Lord, and why would God let that happen to a one year old? Why do bad things happen to good people?”

Sometimes, when Decker would have serious runs involving children, even if it was in the middle of the night, he would call his wife and ask her to check on their kids. This was how he tried to stay grounded. Maybe he would be okay, knowing his kids were okay.

Eventually, he sought professional help, and found a counselor who was able to help him understand his trauma.

After Newark firefighter Jason Hufford responded to a fatal car accident involving a child. He began to drink, as this was a recurring theme, just enough so he could sleep. He told the Newark Advocate in 2019 that he started having chest pain soon after. As the manifestations of his anxiety worsened, Hufford came forward to his wife about his struggles. He knew he needed help.

Given that, there are professionals working to understand and help first responders heal from their trauma. In Granville, Dr. Brian Barkett is the psychologist behind a small practice, Better Minds Group. Prior to 2019, Barkett had never worked with first responders, until Hufford walked into his office. After Hufford went public about his journey, Barkett found himself with lines of first responders wanting to see him.

Barkett believes that as humans evolved, our brains developed a biological alarm system keeping us alive under extreme conditions. That system is calibrated for speed over accuracy, we often choose flight over fight. According to Dr. Barkett, when we are traumatized by something, a first responder encountering a haunting scene, the fear becomes implanted into our nervous system.

“We're seeing something now, the old memory goes off, that becomes activated, our body chemistry changes to match the state we were in, and the percent that feeling that gets activated fuses with the perception now. And so you're having a reaction, 80 to 90% of that reaction could be the memories from the past, and you can't tell the difference,” he said.

He uses several different therapies to treat people with significant trauma: cognitive behavioral therapy, electroencephalogram biofeedback training or EEG, and eye movement desensitization reprocess or EMDR. Barkett has used EMDR for over 25 years. The process begins with patients picking a traumatic memory. As they concentrate on a box with calming music in their ears, he asks a series of questions designed to bring up a fraction of the memory.

“Now the way this works is when that old memory is activated and the alarm goes off, people go into their fight or flight response, and a fight or flight response is mobilizing to deal with a physical threat,” Barkett said. “When you're doing EMDR on that bilateral stimulation, it interrupts that pattern, and energy is able to migrate back to the frontal lobes.”

They are able to process the memory for the first time since it happened. These responders' brains can finally determine that the memory does not pose an existential threat to them in the present time. When they do this, they can let go of the memory and the trauma holding them back.

According to a 2022 Journal of Traumatic Stress systematic review on EMDR for the treatment and early intervention of trauma among first responders, studies suggest that EMDR is an effective treatment for work related trauma exposure and PTSD for first responders.

For Hufford, EMDR helped give him back his life. His wife recalled Hufford coming home following treatment with new eyes and demeanor. He now shares his journey in an effort to help others find the kind of healing that he found. During his time at the Newark Fire Department, Decker worked with Hufford for over 20 years.

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“Have you ever heard of the jaws of life?” Decker asked.

The jaws of life, also known as hydraulic tools, are essential firefighter and rescue equipment used to extract people from confined spaces, vehicles, and other hazardous situations. These tools employ hydraulic power for spreading, cutting, and lifting.

“A couple weeks ago we were out here in the parking lot. Here’s a car that was upside down. Cut the doors off this car, cut the roof off,” he said.

Decker pulls up images from a training service on the Madison Township Fire Departments Facebook page. Every Thursday the department has training, where each week rotates between EMS, fire, and rescue training.

Emergency responders have to go through a lot of training to prepare them to be able to respond calmly and effectively to emergency situations. These training courses cover specific events, like active shooter training, or general training on how to maintain command and control in various scenes.

“I took a lot of training on fatalities, whether it be civilian fatalities or firefighter fatalities, and how to maintain calm and control during those situations,” Decker said. “It’s critical, because if I don’t stay calm it clouds my ability to process everything that’s going on. As far as the EMS world, you have to stay calm. You cannot feel your patient's pain.”

Decker has his own company, Command Vision, where he offers fire command training programs educating firefighters and chiefs to experts in the field. On the Command Vision website he releases Learning Blog posts breaking down the footage from fires on his Youtube channel, and discussions rooted in other areas of the job. He published a post titled,, “Stress can sabotage your ability to command!” detailing the importance of fire officers and fighters being able to control their stress levels. Decker also travels around the state of Ohio and the country teaching training topics with remaining calm a key component.

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Raejene Riley, known as RJ by her peers, sat on a black case, leaning forward with her forearms on her thighs, along the wall of the chief's office. A bulletin board hangs above her, papers are pinned across the cork. She is among the group of volunteers and paid firefighters at a Madison training session.

Riley has been with Madison since early 2020. Her work in the fire service is her side gig, a way to get a little extra cash, she has worked as an insurance fraud investigator for over 25 years. Before that, she spent seven years as a state trooper.

During her time as a state trooper, Riley encountered many gruesome scenes not far off from what she sees as a firefighter.

“In July of 1990 we got dispatched to a motor vehicle crash out on State Route 571,” she said. “When we got out there, there was a semi truck, and there was a Ford F1 pickup that was absolutely annihilated.”

According to Riley, the truck had been going eastbound as the pickup truck, with four teenagers inside, blew through a stop sign. All four of the teenagers were sitting in the front seat. There were two males and two females. The fourth teenager, a girl, took the brunt of the damage, and was unidentifiable. The other female was identified. Riley and her patrol partner were tasked with informing the family.

“It’s 5:30 in the morning, and when we get there, I knock on the door,” she said. “The porch light flips up and this woman opens the door.”

The woman walked out and began to poke her index finger right where the cut out of Riley’s ballistic vest was.

“She said ‘you better not be here to tell me my babies are dead,’” Riley said.

The two girls were twin sisters.

“I said to her, ‘I’m Trooper Riley, this is Trooper Cosgrove, with the High Patrol out of pickwick post. Can we come in and talk?” she said. “And she goes ‘they’re dead, aren’t they? They’re dead, they’re dead, they’re dead.’”

Riley asked the woman about the identification card found on one of the girls, and learned that the twins were together all of the time.

She had never been exposed to anything like that before.

“I remembered I called my dad at the office. He picked up the phone, and I started crying,” Riley said. “He says, ‘what’s wrong?’ and I said, ‘Daddy I don’t know if I can do this.’”

Now 58, she still has nightmares about the horrific events she witnessed while on patrol.

“There’s still things that are burnt into my memory that will never go away,” Riley said. “There were times I’d give death notifications, and then I’d get in my cruiser, and I’d go somewhere behind a building and sob.”

Riley credits her friends as her support system for getting her through tough times. They pick up on when she might be struggling as her behavior changes. Outgoing, loud, and funny becomes quiet and withdrawn. In addition to her friends, David Decker is quick to tell when his friends and comrades are down.

“He can tell when something’s not right, and he will pull you aside and go, ‘Hey is everything okay?’” she said.

The training the department does together, like the service that evening, is important not only because it hones their response skills, but because they learn to be together. According to Riley, cohesiveness is huge for any first responder. Outside the chief’s office, the rest of the group jokes around and teases each other relentlessly. Obnoxious, Riley says. This lighthearted nature is what glues them together, they have each other’s back making them better on the job.. A cohesive unit is a strong unit.

A week later, Riley came into Madison around 5 p.m. to work her evening shift. It was her and her coworker on duty. Hanging in the back of the ambulance, Riley and her fellow first responders joked around about their fun escapades of the past. After a while, the topic of dinner came up, and the two nightshift workers decided to dine out for the evening. They headed out to the Hanover American Legion, a frequent haunt for the Madison crew.

The trust between Riley and her coworker was clear as they loaded up what they needed into the ambulance in case they got a call. The pair was calm and relaxed, an easy banter flowed between them, like two friends going out to dinner after work on a normal Wednesday evening, knowing the calm would be essential if summoned.

After a hearty meal, the two load up again in the ambulance. Riley, who was in the process of building a new home, insisted they go check on her hole in the ground.

The atmosphere in the vehicle was still light as they drove a couple minutes to the location of her new home. The pair kept their walkie talkies on as they hopped out and mosied over to the hole. As the sun began to make its descent in the sky, Riley walked around her property, pointing out what things were, and excitedly remembering the picture she took atop her mountain of dirt.

The ambulance basked in its golden hour glow, patiently waiting for its drivers, ready to take flight the moment duty called.