

On August 26, 1975 Tooele City fireman Wayne Dow and his family were just sitting down to dinner when they heard a siren. It got closer and then quit in front of their house. A Tooele City police officer burst into the house and said, "You'd better come with me, Lauren's been burned."

The family rushed to the Tooele hospital where Wayne's brother Lauren and another man, Dan James, lay unconscious. Lauren gasped for breath. A helicopter from Dugway Proving Grounds quickly rushed both men to University of Utah Hospital in Salt Lake City.

Earlier that afternoon wildfires broke out near Stockton, about 5 miles south of Tooele and as was the procedure then, the Sheriff's Department responded to join suppression efforts with State, Army Depot and Stockton firefighters. Lauren Dow was a deputy sheriff and although he was off-duty, he headed out in the brush truck with Dan James, a Tooele City Animal Control Officer and Dave Jones, a young man who wanted to be a deputy. Since the Sheriff's office was in charge of wildland fire, the Tooele FD was not dispatched. The brush truck was just an old surplus pickup with a water tank, a pump and a hose reel. There was no radio and very little other equipment. The windows didn't even roll up. The crew wore jeans, boots and light shirts.

Sheriff Bill Pitt was in charge of the firefighting efforts but he had his hands full, it was the third fire in a short period of time. The weather was hot, dry and a little windy. Visibility from smoke and blowing dust and embers was getting worse. He did not have radio communication with most of his resources. He and his people had virtually no training in wildfire response. This was not uncommon. In 1975 almost no local government firefighters had any sort of formal wildfire training.

Dow's crew was laying hose out of the back of the truck in the mouth of a gully in the foothills northeast of Stockton when things got bad in a hurry. The wind shifted and a sudden updraft blew the fire towards the men. They were not able to drive out of the path of the fire. James and Jones ran uphill from the truck to try and outrace the flames. Jones tripped and fell into a depression, which saved his life as the fire blew over him, burning him slightly.

Deputy Walt Schubert was on a Cat tractor above the hellish scene. Later he said, "It all happened in seconds. The fire jumped a hundred yards. It flashed so fast it was like gasoline."

James ran for a ridge but part way up his clothing burst into flames. Dow stayed in the truck where he apparently inhaled the superheated air from the encroaching flame front burning through tinder-dry grass and sage.

Five men were hurt in this fire, most of them county deputies or Tooele City Police. The county fire truck stationed at Stockton was completely destroyed by the fire but the brush truck Dow drove was scarcely damaged as the fire moved by so fast. Schubert's tractor and some other vehicles were scorched. The fire eventually was stopped at 300 acres.

Deputy Schubert, accompanied by Patrolman Jerry Jones, cut a fireline on a ridge downwind and above the spot that Dow's pickup was burned-over. When Schubert saw that they could not escape the flames, he turned the Cat towards the fire and raised the blade as a heat shield against the flamefront as it quickly swept up and over them giving them minor burns. Both held their breath against the superheated air and smoke and crouched on top of the cat. Schubert stood and almost jumped from the Cat but instead found cool clear air above. Then the flames were gone as fast as they came. John Yarbrough, Dave Thomas, and Lester Moran were working nearby and also burned. All easily could have been killed.

At the hospital Dow looked ok, just like he had a sunburn, except where his cowboy boots protected him. But inside, his lung tissue was burned and fluid filled his lungs. Strength and size just didn't matter for the big man nicknamed "Tiny". He died two days after his 8th wedding anniversary. Cheryl Dow couldn't believe her 6'4", 230 lb totally macho husband was dead, he was just too big, too strong to die. He was a champion athlete, wrestling, football, basketball, any competition was a reason to fight for the win.

Life was hard for the family afterwards despite lots of help from the Fraternal Order of Eagles that Lauren belonged to and other organizations in the community. One son later died of diabetes and the other developed speech problems and ran into trouble with the law.

Danny James was a cut up, he was so much of a practical joker that his dad nicknamed him Obby, short for obnoxious. He loved to laugh and joke. He looked up to Lauren and the other fire and police personnel he worked with. He was proud of working for the Police department, even if it was just as the animal control officer. He did his job well and he knew better things would come if he kept it up. He never got a chance, Severe burns caused a massive release of protein into His circulatory system. His kidneys filtered the proteins out for a day but they could only handle so much before becoming basically plugged up. Two days after the fire Danny succumbed to his massive burns.

State Investigator, Lynn Borg, determined that the fire was arson and identified suspects. He was convinced of their guilt but there was never enough evidence to press charges. If there had been, homicide charges as well as aggravated arson would have followed. These brave men were murdered and someone close to the case felt strongly enough about it to offer the suspects names to Wayne Dow, in case someone wanted to affect some frontier justice. He declined to receive the information. Nothing was going to bring back his brother.

There continues to be speculation in the community that some young men who sometimes got temporary pay from the Sheriff's Office for firefighting, set the fires that day so they could get part time work. This practice was discontinued after this incident.

In November 1975 Governor Calvin Rampton gave the victims families posthumous awards for "Outstanding Service to the Utah Wildland Fire Control Program." Tooele

City further honored them by naming a city park and a recreation building after them. Both men's names appear on both the Fallen Firefighters and Fallen Peace Officers Memorials, although Dow's name was misspelled as "Lorin" on the Police Memorial at the Utah State Capitol.

This tragedy spotlighted the dangers that faced firefighters in the extreme fire conditions that have become even more common today. Most of the firefighters who responded that day were not well trained especially in fire behavior and incident command. Routine brush fires happened all the time and usually were not a problem to either let burn or to extinguish with small hoselines and tractor-cut firelines. Sheriff Bill Pitt and Tooele County fire departments implemented some minor changes in procedures and training to prevent future occurrences but it would be 30 years before state rules were enacted to require specific qualifications for wildland firefighters at the county level.

Case Study Questions:

What fire behavior factors contributed to the outcomes in this incident?

What human factors contributed to the outcomes of this incident?

What organizational factors contributed to the disaster?

Which Standard Firefighting Orders were not followed here?

You are the Safety Officer for the department, what changes would you implement to prevent further incidents?