

## **FUEL TANKER ROLLOVER LESSONS LEARNED MAY 2004**

On May 22, while assigned to the KP Incident in Arizona, I was involved in a fuel tanker rollover. I wanted to share with you my experience so you can think about what you would have done if you had been in my position:

At 0515 I left the ICP (Fire Camp) with a 2500-gallon fuel tender (gasoline & diesel) following me. I was driving my 1/2 T 4X4 government truck. Our job was to fill the fuel tanks at the Strayhorse Work Station to support the Spike Camp that had been set up there. We kept our speed well under 40 mph since there was a constant downhill grade and switchbacks the last few miles before the workstation. Things were going well and the fuel truck slowed considerably as we entered the downhill grades. I noted that another USFS truck was behind the fuel truck.

The first hint of what was to come was when I looked in my rear view mirror at mile post 221 and saw the fuel truck careening around a sharp curve behind me on three wheels and the rear bumper dragging on the pavement, throwing out sparks, as it tried to roll over onto its left side. Miraculously the truck driver was able to get it back on 4 wheels. As it landed back on all 4 tires it shot forward at a high rate of speed gaining quickly on my truck since I had slowed down to see what was going to happen.

I accelerated as hard as I could but the fuel truck was gaining on me and I was having a hard time negotiating the curves at the speed I was driving. It became quickly apparent that if I didn't get out from in front of him that he was going to ram me and take me off the side of the mountain with him. I have to admit I had a moment of stupidity. I contemplated trying to utilize my truck as a bumper to slow him down. It only took a second or two for me to realize the weight of his rig would crush me like a soda can. (I've been watching too many movies.) The problem was that we were going too fast and he was swerving all over the road. The road had a severe drop-off on one side and rock cliff facings on the other side. He was swerving from one side of the road to the other trying to keep the truck from going over the side and rolling. I saw a dirt berm ahead with a drop-off on the right side. I turned my truck hard into the berm and slammed on the brakes. I stopped and kept from going over the edge and the fuel truck raced by me missing me by a few inches.

I then accelerated after it trying to keep it in sight. We entered several more sharp turns and again it went up on 3 wheels and almost rolled. I became extremely concerned as I followed him since he was in the left hand lane going around blind corners. I was worried at that moment that I had made the wrong decision by getting behind him. If I had stayed in front of him I could have tried to warn other drivers before he hit them and we had a major, head-on, fiery collision. Luckily, depending on how you look at it, we entered another sharp curve and this time the truck rolled onto its left side and slid across the road and down into a 30 foot drainage on the uphill side.

I stopped at the point where he went over and jumped out of my truck. His truck had hit the opposite bank so hard that the fuel tank had come off the frame. The truck was on severe list to the right side and looked ready to roll further down the bank. There was smoke coming out of the truck, an intense fuel smell, and the driver was hanging half way out of the cab through the windshield on the passenger's side. (He had not worn his seatbelt). He was conscious and screaming in pain. I had to make a decision. I could climb down in the hole and try to pull him out of the truck by myself with leaking fuel and smoke and the possibility of the truck catching fire or exploding or try to get help on the way. I'm not ashamed to admit I was scared to death and could not bring myself to climb in after him. It seemed more appropriate to try and get help on the way. I moved my truck further down the road in case the tanker exploded. The other USFS truck that

was behind us finally came upon the scene. He thought I was working a spot fire since he hadn't seen the tender go over the side. He wanted me to help him pull the driver out of the wreck but I insisted it was too dangerous and I didn't feel he should go into the hole. I was able to contact 911 and the Logistics Chief at the ICP. It only took a short time before help arrived from the camp and the medics/firefighters put out the fire and pulled the driver from the wreck.

My **lessons learned** from this experience:

1. **Be prepared for the unexpected:** One moment I was sightseeing, enjoying the country and the next moment and I was "running" for my life. It sure got my attention fast.
2. **Preparedness:** I kicked myself repeatedly for not insuring the tender driver had his seatbelt on. Sure maybe it's not my responsibility to baby-sit every driver but I could have taken the time to stick my head in the cab before we took off and maybe I would have noticed he didn't have it on.
3. **Trust your instincts:** I do feel I made the right decision several times through this entire incident. If I hadn't gotten behind him I probably wouldn't be here today. My fear kept me out of the hole but it was much better to get help on the way instead of trying to be a hero all by myself.
4. **Recognize your limitations and deal with the stress:** For the rest of the day I felt guilty for not trying to personally save the driver (listening to him scream in pain will stay with me a long time) and for some of my other actions (saving myself). I have never felt more helpless in my whole life, from the beginning of the incident to the end.

All in all everything turned out okay. Turns out that the driver had started down the hill in the wrong gear and tried to down shift. He missed the gear and was never able to get it back in gear. His brakes burnt out and he had no way to stop or slow it down. The driver ended up with a compound fracture of the femur bone in one of his legs. The 911 call notified an ambulance crew that was only a few miles away, which increased their response time. If I hadn't been with the tender and witnessed the accident he may not have been found for several hours and he could have bled to death since the accident wasn't visible from the road. If he had gone over the downhill side it would have been a hundred foot plunge. The tender didn't catch fire. All of the fuel leaked out and there is a HAZMAT team on site. A stress management team was brought in and with their help all of us that were involved worked through our emotions and stress.

I write this as a means to cope with what happened and to share with you what I went through. Others have asked me what happened and I hope this will make you think about all the above the next time you start down a steep downhill road with switchbacks. Drive safe and most important always look ahead and **BEHIND** to what's coming around that corner. Tim

Timmy D. Rollins  
Fleet Manager  
Coronado NF, AZ  
520 670 4590  
trollins@fs.fed.us