

TEXAS

STATE FIRE MARSHAL'S OFFICE

Firefighter Fatality Investigation



Firefighter Fatality Investigation FY 11-06

Lt. Larry Gale Nelson

Val Verde County Volunteer Fire Department, Inc.

August 12, 2011

Texas Department of Insurance

Austin, Texas

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The State Fire Marshal's Office thanks the following entities for their assistance in preparing this report:

- Val Verde County Rural Volunteer Fire Department
- Val Verde County Sheriff's Office
- Webb County Medical Examiner

Executive Summary

On August 12, 2011, Val Verde County Rural VFD Firefighter Larry Gale Nelson, age 61, died as a result of a fall while working at the Val Verde County Rural VFD Station 3 in the area of Rough Canyon, north of the city of Del Rio, Texas.

At approximately 12:14 PM the Val Verde County center dispatch received a report of an injured man at the Val Verde County Rural VFD Station 3. Emergency Medical Services and Val Verde County Sheriff's deputies responded. Witnesses found Firefighter Nelson on the asphalt apron in front of the fire station. Mr. Nelson was using the stepladder and lost his balance and fell to the asphalt striking his head on the pavement.

EMS arrived and contacted the Val Verde County Precinct 2 Justice of the Peace. Judge Gonzales responded and Firefighter Nelson was pronounced dead at the scene. Autopsy results indicated blunt force trauma injury to the head.

Larry Gale Nelson served with the Val Verde County Rural VFD since 2008.

This report is to honor Lt. Larry Gale Nelson by taking the lessons learned from this tragic incident so others may not perish.



Introduction

On August 12, 2011, Val Verde County Rural Volunteer Fire Department Lt. Larry Gale Nelson died as a result of injuries received from a fall while performing maintenance at the fire station. Texas State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) initiated an investigation in accordance with State of Texas statutes upon receiving information of the firefighter fatality.

On August 14, 2011, the SFMO learned of the death of Val Verde County Rural Volunteer Fire Department Lt. Larry Gale Nelson from Fire Chief Jerry Rust.

The State Fire Marshal's Office (SFMO) commenced the firefighter fatality investigation under the authority of Texas Government Code Section 417.0075.

- (a) *In this section, the term "firefighter" includes an individual who performs fire suppression duties for a governmental entity or volunteer fire department.*
- (b) *If a firefighter dies in the line of duty or if the firefighter's death occurs in connection with an on-duty incident in this state, the state fire marshal shall investigate the circumstances surrounding the death of the firefighter, including any factors that may have contributed to the death of the firefighter.*
- (c) *In conducting an investigation under this section, the state fire marshal has the same powers as those granted to the state fire marshal under Section 417.007. The state fire marshal will coordinate the investigative efforts of local government officials and may enlist established fire service organizations and private entities to assist in the investigation.*
- (d) *The state fire marshal will release a report concerning an investigation conducted under this section on completion of the investigation.*
- (e) *Not later than October 31 of each year, the state fire marshal will deliver to the commissioner a detailed report about the findings of each investigation conducted under this section in the preceding year.*
- (f) *Information gathered in an investigation conducted under this section is subject to Section 552.108.*
- (g) *The authority granted to the state fire marshal under this section will not limit in any way the authority of the county or municipal fire marshal to conduct the county or municipal fire marshal's own investigation into the death of a firefighter within the county or municipal fire marshal's jurisdiction.*

Firefighter Fatality Investigation

Lt. Larry Gale Nelson was a 61 year old male born October 21, 1949. Lt. Nelson joined the Val Verde County Rural VFD in July 2005 and had been promoted to second in command at Station 3. Station 3 is located in the community of Rough Canyon approximately 20 miles north of Del Rio on the north side of Lake Amistad.

Fire department training included certifications as a driver/operator, incident command, and training on hazardous materials, fire behavior, fire safety, hose practices, and ladder practices as well as several others.

Lt. Nelson was a self employed consultant to an oil drilling company and worked around oil rigs for much of his life.

On August 11, 2011, 61 year-old Val Verde County Rural VFD Lt. Larry Gale Nelson contacted Fire Chief Jerry Rust to advise him that he would be working on the signs attached to the exterior of Station 3 located at 6911 Texas Recreation Road 2, Rough Canyon, Texas. Chief Rust instructed Lt. Gale to use a ladder at the station and to have someone assist him to heel the ladder.

On August 12, 2011, at approximately 12:14 PM, the Val Verde County center dispatch received a report of an injured man at the Val Verde County Rural VFD Station 3. Emergency Medical Services and Val Verde County Sheriff's deputies responded. Witnesses found Lt. Nelson on the asphalt apron in front of the fire station bleeding from his forehead. A six-foot stepladder was standing against the exterior wall near the entry door below a metal sign. The stepladder was leaning against the wall in the closed position. A cordless drill and several sheet metal screws were on the ground below the sign when responders arrived.

Witnesses and emergency responders stated that Lt. Nelson appeared blue but he gave no response. Emergency responders checked his vital signs and found none. Emergency responders administered cardio-pulmonary resuscitation without response.

Sheriff's office deputies arrived and contacted Val Verde County Precinct 2 Justice of the Peace, Joey Gonzales. Judge Gonzales pronounced Lt. Nelson dead at the scene at 1:55 PM.

Dr. Corinne Stern of the Webb County Medical Examiner's Office in Laredo, Texas, performed an autopsy on August 13, 2011.

Autopsy results indicate that Lt. Nelson died from blunt force injuries of the head he sustained when he fell from a ladder.



Photo by Val Verde County Sheriff's Office.



Photo by Val Verde County Sheriff's Office.



Photo of sign location by Val Verde County Sheriff's Office.



Photo of sign missing screws by Val Verde County Sheriff's Office.



Photo of sheet metal screws on ground. Photo by Val Verde County Sheriff's Office.

Medical Background of Firefighter

Information provided by Mrs. Nelson indicates that Larry Nelson had experienced heart problems in 1999 and he had a double bypass performed. Later in 2007 or 2008, a stint was inserted.

He was diagnosed with Type II diabetes and had been treated at his physician's office as recently as a week before his death. He was taking medications for high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease.

Findings and Recommendations

Recommendations are based upon nationally recognized consensus standards and safety practices for the fire service. All fire department personnel should know and understand nationally recognized consensus standards, and all fire departments should create and maintain SOGs and SOPs to ensure effective, efficient, and safe firefighting operations.

Finding: Lt. Nelson was using a fiberglass, six-foot folding step ladder to perform maintenance on exterior signs at the fire station. The six-foot folding step ladder was found to be leaning against the exterior in a closed, folded position with the top of the ladder several feet below where the work was being performed. Lt. Nelson was working alone and the ladder was not secured by either heeling the ladder or tying off the top of the ladder to prevent movement.

Recommendation: Fire departments should research, develop, train on, implement, and constantly re-evaluate standard operating procedures or guidelines for members, based on established fire service practices and training addressing ladder use whether on fire scenes, at fire stations, or at home. Ladder use should be performed using established techniques on ladder safety by selecting the proper ladder for the job, placement of ladders, heeling or securing the ladder, and tying in to ladders when working from the ladder.

References:

NFPA 1932, Standard on Use, Maintenance, and Service Testing of In-Service Fire Department Ground Ladders, 2010 Edition; Chapter 5, Use of Ground Ladders.

Essentials of Fire Fighting and Fire Department Operations, IFSTA, 5th Edition, Chapter 10, Ground Ladders; and

Fundamentals of Firefighter Skills, IAFC, 2nd Edition, Chapter 12, Ladders.