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Officers flee Crown Vics' fiery crashes

By Bob Golfen

The Arizona Republic

Aug. 26, 2002

Two more police officers, one in New York and one in Georgia, are the latest victims of fiery crashes in Ford Crown Victoria patrol cars. Both barely escaped when their cars erupted in flames after rear-end collisions.

One of the patrolmen, a New York state trooper, was knocked unconscious in the crash and was rescued by passers-by who risked their own lives to pull him from the flames.

"I was extremely lucky," Trooper George Rought, 47, said from his home in Olean, N.Y., where he is recovering from head and back injuries. "It happened on the right highway on the right day with the right people nearby. Otherwise, I would be dead."

Sgt. Greg Abbott of the Cobb County, Ga., Police Department, was knocked unconscious briefly in the July crash, and awoke to flames roaring behind him. The driver's door was jammed, but he was able to kick out the passenger-side window and wriggle out.

Neither officer suffered burns.

The fiery crashes are the latest in a series of incidents involving police personnel in Crown Victorias. At least 12 police officers have burned to death, including three in Arizona.

Twenty-six civilian deaths are also linked with Crown Victoria fires.

Safety advocates blame a faulty fuel-tank design, in which a vertical tank mounted behind the rear axle can be pushed forward in a rear-impact crash and punctured by the rear axle or suspension parts.

Ford contends that such incidents are extremely rare considering the number of Crown Victorias on the road, and that the tank position is an inherently safe design.

Attorney Pat McGroder of Phoenix, who has been involved with Ford fire cases for a number of years, including the Arizona police cases, said the two recent crashes underscore the need to act quickly to fix the fuel-tank problem before anyone else dies.

"These officers are lucky to be alive," McGroder said. "They were just moments away from being incinerated."

Rought, the father of two small children, sounded shaken when he talked about the Aug. 5 accident.

"I'm just kind of dazed," the trooper said. "I'm still dealing with the whole thing, that it happened and how close I came to death and how lucky I am."

"They said that the way the car burned, there would have been no way I could have survived. It burned too quick, poof, just gone. A total inferno."

Rought said he had been aware of the Crown Victoria controversy before his accident, having read newspaper stories and seen TV accounts, as well as notices that came into the police department. Still, he thought the chances were small and he wasn't too concerned.

"You know, your attitude is like, it's not going to happen to me," he said. "I guess I can't say that anymore."

Abbott, who was at home last week recovering from an unrelated illness, said he believes the thick plastic partition behind his patrol car's front seat, designed to contain prisoners in the rear seat, may have delayed the flames from reaching him.

"The car went up and burned completely," Abbott, 42, said. "The only thing that saved me was the 'cage' in back. I definitely was close to being killed."

The Georgia patrolman's car was stopped at a traffic tie-up when it was rear-ended by a Postal service tractor-trailer traveling at an undetermined speed, according to police reports. There were no major injuries, and the investigation is still pending.

Police also are still investigating the New York crash.

Atlanta attorney Joe Fried, who has represented plaintiffs against Ford in other fire-related cases, said he has been in contact with Abbott for possible action against Ford.

"There's no excuse for what's happening," Fried said. "The technology has been available for two to three decades to avoid these rear-impact fires."

Arizona has been in the forefront of the Crown Victoria controversy, with the June 12 fire death of Chandler police Officer Robert Neilsen in a Crown Victoria prompting the state's law-enforcement agencies to act. Two other officers, Tucson police Officer Juan Cruz and DPS patrolman Floyd "Skip" Fink of Chandler, were killed in 1998 and 2000, respectively.

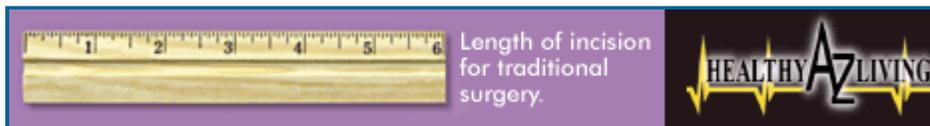
A Phoenix police officer, Jason Schecterle, survived a March 2001 fire in his patrol car, but with severe burn injuries.

A blue ribbon panel composed of members appointed by the state Attorney General's Office and Ford officials has been meeting to study possible solutions. Ford has also appointed a technical task force to study possible

solutions, including external shields and internal fuel-cell bladders.

Several Arizona police departments, including Phoenix's, are having the bladders installed on their own.

"The sense of urgency was created here in Arizona when we had those officers die, particularly the latest one," said Tom Prose, the Attorney General's Office's liaison on the study panel. "We're looking at everything we can do to fix this problem."



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