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Friday, November 08, 2002

Torrance police officer saves partner from blazing car

CRASH: Crown Victoria patrol vehicle erupted after being struck from behind at a Hawthorne Boulevard light, witness says.

By Larry Altman
 DAILY BREEZE

Torrance police officer Mark Athan woke up in a daze in his wrecked police car, looked to his left and saw his partner slumped over the steering wheel.

Hector Bermudez was unconscious, unaware that flames were engulfing the rear of the car.



Hector Bermudez

“It was surreal,” Athan said Wednesday, about 12 hours after a suspected drunken driver hit their car. “It was crazy.”

As the blaze intensified and crept toward the passenger compartment, Athan became a hero among his own officers, yanking Bermudez from the driver’s seat just before the car went up in flames.

“I’m in a panic mode,” Athan said. “I remember going to his door and opening it — thank God it opened — grabbing him by the collar and (telling) him, ‘Hector, Hector, the car is on fire! You’ve got to get out of the car!’ ”

Both officers were recovering from

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the 1:30 a.m. crash at Hawthorne Boulevard and Spencer Street. Athan was home, but Bermudez remained at Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance for observation.



Mark Athan

The fiery crash possibly is the first in the South Bay that could be linked to a series of Ford Crown Victoria blazes that have killed a dozen officers and more than 25 civilians across the country.

Although the cause of the Torrance fire remains under investigation, the president of the Washington-based public interest organization Public Citizen said the circumstances are similar to numerous Crown Victoria gasoline tank fires that have prompted her to demand a recall.

“It’s terrible,” Joan Claybrook said. “Several officers have just burned to death. There was one officer I talked to who had to crawl out of the window.”

Athan, 33, resting at home with his wife and two daughters, said he does not remember much about what happened before the crash.

He and his longtime partner and friend Bermudez set out for their overnight patrol shift at 11 p.m. Tuesday. It was a quiet night.

Bermudez, 32, was at the wheel as they headed south on Hawthorne Boulevard. Neither officer saw what was coming from behind. A witness told police the officers were stopped or rolling to a stop for a red light when a 2002 Hyundai traveling at about 35 mph plowed into them. The crash projected the patrol car about 40 feet down the road, Torrance police Lt. Patrick Shortall said.

Both officers lost consciousness, possibly from hitting the Plexiglas cage separating them from the prisoner area in the back seat. Athan awakened disorientated.

“I don’t remember getting hit,” Athan said. “The only thing I remember is waking up and, when my eyes first opened, looking forward. Our car is a mess. Something has happened here. It’s not sinking in. I look over at my partner Hector. His chin was down at his chest and he was leaning to the right and he was completely out. To the left I can see the



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flames out the back window of the police car. We were already on fire.”

Athan reached out and shook Bermudez, yelling “Hector, wake up, something’s happened! Wake up!”

Bermudez did not move.

Athan looked at the police radio but it was broken. He opened his door and got out, saw the fire and moved around to the driver’s door. Fortunately it opened. In many of the Crown Victoria rear-end crashes, the doors jammed, Claybrook said.

Athan reached under his partner’s armpits from behind, screaming at him and pulling on his unconscious friend.

Bermudez awakened just in time and pushed on the floorboard with his legs, springing both officers out of the flaming car into the street.

“I fell back and he fell back on his face,” Athan said. “I just remember pulling on his upper torso and both of us falling.”

The car quickly became engulfed in flames. Athan, pulling Bermudez onto the curb, realized they had been in an accident and looked around. He saw the other vehicle down the street and ran over to check the driver.

Although he does not remember doing it, Athan used his handheld radio to call for help.

When he reached the Hyundai, he found driver Seung Jhin Lee, 39, behind the steering wheel. He was laboring to breathe, but was not bleeding.

A woman who witnessed the crash was on a cellular telephone and stayed with Lee until paramedics arrived. Athan ran back to his partner.

As he watched the patrol car burn, about 60 rounds of ammunition went off in the fast-moving fire. Flames, witnesses said, shot as high as the street lights.

“It went up in a full ball,” Athan said. “It just kept getting hotter, faster, faster.”

Torrance paramedics took Bermudez to County

Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. Athan believes Bermudez was hit in the back of the head with the security cage, and then bumped his head on the steering wheel. Bermudez, suffering from some memory loss, soreness and a cut to his knee, was later transferred to Little Company of Mary for observation.

Athan, who had not missed a day of work in eight years, was treated and released at the Torrance hospital. He visited his partner, who called him a hero, and received telephone calls from other officers who agreed.

Torrance Lt. Mark Hein called Athan's actions "pretty phenomenal." "He made us all proud here at Torrance," Hein said. "He was able to get his faculties about him after getting his bell rung and do what he had to do to save Hector's life. It could have been a lot worse. We could have two dead policemen."

Athan was not ready to accept the accolades.

"I'm thankful I woke up and I'm glad we are all OK, but I don't know if I would say that I am a hero," he said. "I'm just glad I woke up."

The other driver, Lee, was treated for minor injuries and booked at the Torrance jail on suspicion of driving under the influence. A blood test was taken, but the results were not immediately available.

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