



To: Keith McGee, Fire Chief
From: Spencer Lee, Fire Training Coordinator
Date: 06/25/2021
Subject: Recommendation of Recognition & Commendation for Actions

On Thursday, May 20, 2021 at 11:19 a.m. Cary Emergency Communications Center (CECC) began receiving emergency 911 calls in reference to a structure fire at 1118 Blackburn Road in the Town of Apex. One of the callers, Martha Whitten (79 year old), stated that her house was on fire and her and her husband, 80 year old Frank Whitten, were inside. Telecommunicator (TC) Barbara Clements received this call and spoke to Mrs. Whitten while maintaining the highest degree of professionalism during the crisis as she heard smoke alarms in the back ground. She heard Mrs. Whitten coughing and choking on the thick black smoke being produced by the rapidly growing fire. TC Clements maintained a calm but firm demeanor as she kept coaching Mrs. Whitten to get out of the home as she was having to talk over Mrs. Whitten who continue to loudly call out to her husband saying, "Buddy, come out! Come on Buddy! Ever how you are get out of here! The house is on fire!"

The urgency of the situation was evident to other CECC telecommunicators as they worked to obtain information from numerous callers while working to relay the additional information to first responders about the emergency. One of the 911 calls came from a frantic teen-aged neighbor confirming that "there's a fire and an old man is inside!" Telecommunicators Karen Smith, Barbara Clements, James Allen, Lisa Rhew, and Sean Wells received 19 emergency 911 calls related to this fire in the six minute time period between 11:19 a.m. and 11:25 a.m. During this time frame they also dispatched multiple units with Apex and Cary Fire Departments, Apex Police Department, Wake County EMS, and Town of Apex Electric Utilities to the fire.

As the message of the emergency was being transmitted by CECC via radio and mobile paging applications, Town of Apex Fire Captain Scott Pearson observed a rapidly developing column of smoke on the near horizon. Through his dedication to serve his fellow citizen, Capt. Pearson broke away from some important family matters to investigate the cause of the smoke and see what he could do to protect and serve his neighbors. When he arrived on scene he discovered that Mr. and Mrs. Whitten were still trapped inside. Neighbors of the Whitten's were doing what they could to effect a



Smoke Column

rescue. Mr. Rob Baber (neighbor to the rear of the Whitten's) had broken out a window on the north side of the home near the garage knowing there was still someone inside. Another neighbor had entered into the garage to try and perform a rescue but the heat and smoke conditions were too great, but not before saving the Whitten's dog.

Both Capt. Pearson and Mr. Baber heard Mrs. Whitten inside and called out to her to get her to come to the window. By this point, Mrs. Whitten and her

husband became separated and both were being severely affected by the toxic smoke. Mrs. Whitten had become confused about where she was at in the home and could not make it out on her own. Mr. Whitten made it to the doorway between the house and the garage by relying on his fire control team training he learned while in the U.S. Navy. He remembered the cooler and cleaner air would be close to the floor so he began to crawl and shouted to his wife to do the same. In all the panic, toxic smoke, and chaos they became separated. He began to go back inside to find his wife.

In the mere seconds in which all this transpired, Capt. Pearson looked for a way to enter the home. He risked his own safety by entering the home without protective equipment through the window previously broken by Mr. Baber. As Capt. Pearson entered the home the toxic smoke began affecting his breathing and causing his eyes to burn. His concern grew because he could no longer hear anyone. As he crouched down near to the floor he determined he could see someone's legs. It turned out to be Mrs. Whitten and he grabbed her and carried her to safety where neighbors and Apex Police Officer Sites helped her out. During the transition Capt. Pearson had badly lacerated his arm on some broken glass still held fast in the window frame.

The conditions in the home continued to rapidly deteriorate forcing Capt. Pearson to exit through the window. Neglecting his own injury, he knew Mr. Whitten was still inside the home and called out for him. Fortunately, the rapid response of the crew on Apex Rescue 33 (Capt. Kevin Butts, Lt. Kevin Smith, FF Michael Kallam, and FF Seth Mills) resulted in the unit arriving immediately behind Capt. Pearson's exit from the

home. Rescue 33's crew split into two functional teams. One team, Capt. Butts and Lt. Smith, entered the same window Capt. Pearson and the first fire victim exited to search for other victims. The other team consisting of FF Kallam and FF Mills assumed an outside safety team role and began deploying ground ladders. Almost immediately their attention was called to the area of the garage to effect a rescue. FF Kallam entered the garage area and quickly found Mr. Whitten and carried him out to safety as well. Afterward, Capt. Pearson quietly slipped away from the incident and drove himself to the hospital since everyone had been removed to safety and had his wound cleaned and stitched up.



Window of Escape

On June 3, 2021, both Mr. & Mrs. Whitten showed up at Fire Station 33 to express their appreciation to the firefighters who saved their lives. Capt. Pearson, who was off-duty, and all the

Apex Fire Department responders involved in the incident had been conducting an after action review of the incident to discuss the details of how well the incident was handled. Capt. Pearson's wound was healing nicely and he suffered no physical deficits nor lost any time from work as a result of the injury. Most everyone agreed that the circumstances were extraordinary—relating how fast the fire grew and the miraculous rescues that occurred. Then to have the Whitten's arrive unplanned really solidified the seemingly divine intervention that took place with the whole event. Mrs. Whitten stated, "I really didn't think we were going to make it!" With tear filled eyes, she hugged Capt. Pearson. Mr. Whitten recognized his rescuer, FF Kallam, and proudly shook his hand and stated to the whole group, "You all really are heroes! Thank you!"

After completing my investigation I recommend the following actions:

I recommend CECC TC Barbara Clements and her team be recognized and receive commendation for professional management and assignment of resources under

immensely stressful circumstances that resulted in the rescue of two of the Town of Apex's citizens.

I recommend Mr. Rob Baber be recognized for taking action that facilitated the rescue of his neighbors.

I recommend Capt. Scott Pearson be recognized and receive a commendation of honor for his selfless act that subjected him to injury and immediate danger to life and health and resulted in a timely rescue of Mrs. Whitten.