

"Trapped In A Burning Elevator"

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6:00 AM

It was May 23, 1997. Don Beahm, 43, put on his blue Portland, Oregon firefighter T-shirt and work pants. His three children were still asleep and the covers were tucked tightly around his wife Debbie, a firefighter in another city. He kissed her good-bye and left just as the sun was coming up.

A 24-hour shift at Portland's main fire station lay ahead of Beahm, but he loved his job on Squad 1, the city's only unit dedicated to technical rescue operations. Even after nearly 23 years as a firefighter, seven with the Squad, Beahm relished the challenge of saving people's lives.

9:10 AM

On the top floor of the Bargains Galore Warehouse in Portland, Dylan Burke, 17, wheeled the last of three pallets loaded with paper office supplies into the freight elevator. The teen shut the heavy metal doors, snapping the latch in place. Then he pulled down a protective wooden gate and pressed the button for the first floor.

The four-story building was full of salvage goods. Dylan's former step father, Al Semone, had been assigned to sort through the inventory, saving what could be resold and tossing the rest. His crew had rigged a plastic chute on the side of the building to carry debris to a dumpster below.

As the old hydraulic elevator descended, Dylan thought about the check in his wallet - his first week's pay. It felt good to be productive again. He had dropped out of high school that year and then just drifted.

But a few weeks earlier, Semone had offered him a summer job working in the warehouse and recently he'd talked to his mom about going back to school and getting his diploma. His life, he hoped, was back on track.

As the elevator descended past the third floor, the light inside flickered and went out. The elevator lurched to a stop. Above him, Dylan heard a crackling sound. Then the light came on, and the elevator resumed its descent.

The bottom of the elevator had just passed the second floor when the car halted again. This time everything went dark. Dylan heard the crackling again, like live electrical wires touching and sparking.

Pushing up the wooden gate, he peered through a small window in the metal doors. The elevator hadn't completely cleared the second level, which appeared deserted. Dylan tried to open the doors so he could crawl up and out, but the latch wouldn't budge.

Above him, the sounds of co-workers running across the third floor echoed down the shaft and into the open-ceilinged elevator. "There's a fire!" someone screamed. Then Dylan heard Semone's voice: "Everybody out of the building!"

"Hey, I'm stuck," Dylan yelled as loudly as he could. "Somebody help! Please!"

9:17 AM

An alarm sounded at the firehouse, signaling a commercial fire at Northeast 6th and Davis. Four fire engines, two fire trucks, and an ambulance were dispatched, while the Squad 1 rescue team took positions in their truck. Don Beahm was behind the wheel, Wes Loucks manned the radio next to him, Bruce Thompson and Daniel Hershey were in the back.

Northeast 6th and Davis was no more than a mile from the fire station. As Beahm pulled the truck onto the road, he and Loucks saw a huge column of black smoke above the city skyline. "This is going to be a big one," Loucks said.

Fire Inspector Gary Boyles was already at the warehouse, where a fire raged in the dumpster. He approached a group of employees gathered in a parking lot. Al Semone was counting heads. Suddenly he asked, "Where's Dylan?" Before anyone could answer, Semone ran back into the building. Boyles was behind him.

Inside, Boyles lost sight of Semone, so he started up the stairs to the second floor, where he heard a faint voice from the end of the building. Boyles followed the voice, zigzagging through the jungle of pallets. Looking out a window, he saw fire climbing up the outside of the building using the plastic chute as a conduit to the upper floors. Boyles found the elevator and heard Dylan screaming "Get me out of here!"

The Fire Inspector tried to open the doors by hand, but the latch wouldn't give. He found a piece of lumber to use as a wedge, but that didn't work either. "I'm going to get help," he told Dylan.

Boyles couldn't find the stairwell in the maze of debris and thickening black smoke, but he got to a window, opened it and straddled the sill. Down below, the fire trucks had arrived along with Squad 1. Boyles yelled, "There's a guy stuck in an elevator on the second floor."

Just then, glass shattered behind him, and a ball of fire whooshed across the ceiling. Climbing over the sill, he hung by his fingertips, then dropped to the sidewalk below.

Meanwhile, Dylan watched through the elevator door window as the second floor filled with smoke. The metal walls of the freight elevator, he realized, might hold back the flames, but eventually they'd heat up, turning the elevator into an oven.

Removing his shirt, Dylan covered his mouth, then lay face down on the elevator's wooden floor. He found a small crack where he could breathe clear air from below.

9:20 AM

"Grab all the pry tools, " said Wes Loucks while he and Don Beahm put on their gear. Daniel Hershey and Bruce Thompson were already wearing their protective clothing, helmets, breathing apparatus - nearly 40 pounds of gear. They went in first.

The fire had not yet reached street level, and there was little smoke on the first floor. They located the elevator door, but knew Dylan was stuck above them. "We have to get upstairs," Thompson said. They found a stairwell, but the fire drove them back down.

Beahm and Loucks finished unloading the equipment and entered the building just as Hershey and Thompson were coming down the stairs. "There's no way we can get up there,"

The men went back to the elevator on the first floor. Thompson and Hershey used the pry bars to open the doors enough so that Beahm could insert the jaws of life. The doors groaned apart and Beahm looked up the shaft. The elevator, which rode on a hydraulic piston, was stuck ten feet above them. Fire surrounded it.

"If we release the pressure, we can lower this thing," Beahm said. "Maybe I can puncture the piston." Beahm swung hard with his axe, but he didn't make a dent.

Before he swung again, he looked down the shaft into the basement, where he could make out a two inch pipe that was connected to the piston. If he could just figure out where the high pressure line was housed, he could bring this guy down.

While Beahm and Thompson, wearing masks, looked for the stairway, Loucks and Hershey sprayed a mist of water into the elevator shaft, cooling the air. "Whatever you are doing, it feels good," Dylan called down to them. They were buying time.

9:30 AM

The building was beginning to give way. Chunks of hot concrete dropped down the shaft into the elevator. Dylan looked up and saw flames shooting through the crack in the elevator doors, threatening to ignite the paper on the pallets. he stood up and knocked some of the paper onto the floor, then lay down again.

9:38 AM

Monitoring the fire from the command vehicle, two fire officers looked at their watches. The warehouse had been burning for about 20 minutes, and the top three floors were completely engulfed. Experience had taught them that now was the time when the upper levels would collapse. At that moment a report came over the radio: "The conditions are untenable."

One of the officers clicked his microphone. "Everybody out of the building," he announced. "We're going to suspend firefighting operations. Anybody inside is to call in on the radio." All trucks were then ordered to blow their air horns, sounding an all clear signal.

Two minutes later a Fire Captain called in on the radio: "We have a person trapped in an elevator. Squad 1 is on the first floor trying to effect a rescue."

"Give them five more minutes," came the reply.

9:40 AM

With their children off at school, Debbie Beahm had the television on. Suddenly the talk show was interrupted for a special bulletin about the fire. The image shifted to a wide shot of a burning building in downtown Portland. Then Debbie notice Squad 1 parked near the building's entrance.

The newscaster said the department had sounded the all-clear signal, but a group of firefighters was still trying to rescue a 17-year old boy. Debbie was terrified. She knew if anybody was in there alive, Don wouldn't leave until he'd gotten them out, or he would die trying.

9:46 AM

Dylan had heard the order to clear the building. "They're going to leave me," he thought. Too worn out to scream anymore, he closed his eyes and buried his face in this arms. He said good-bye to his family and friends, recalling the good times. That was the way he wanted to die, remembering the people who loved him.

9:48 AM

Beahm and Thompson found a stairwell leading to the basement machinery room. Inside was a jumble of pipes and valves. Looking for something that might relieve the hydraulic pressure, Beahm eyed a two inch pipe coming out of the wall. "This has to be it," he said.

Beahm beat on the pipe with his axe until he'd flattened part of the blade. Then he turned the axe over and hit it with the peen until his arms gave out. Thompson stepped up to the pipe. After 4 or 5 hard strokes, a stream of fluid spurted out.

9:53 AM

Dylan felt the elevator lurch. He scooted around so his feet were in front of the door. When he felt a pair of strong hands on his leg, he leapt from the elevator into the arms of two firefighters. He was rushed into an ambulance. Al Semone was waiting inside. "Glad to see you," he said.

On the way to the hospital, Dylan cried quietly, not believing he had survived.

Over 100 firefighters took part in battling the Bargains Galore blaze. The fire was still burning intermittently six days later when Dylan Burke visited the fire station. "Thank you for giving me my life back," said Dylan, shaking each man's hand. He vowed to return to school and make something of himself.

A month later the members of Squad 1 - Don Beahm, Wes Loucks, Daniel Hershey, and Bruce Thompson - were awarded the David Campbell Silver Medal Award for their valor.