



RESCUE ON THE HIGH RISE BRIDGE

With his truck dangling 70 feet above a roiling river and a storm whipping 50-mph winds, a trapped driver's only hope is a team of trained emergency rescuers—who are stuck in traffic

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The winds this April morning were giving Wayne Boone's massive 2007 Freightliner tractor trailer a good lashing. A driver for Butler Paper Recycling in Suffolk, Virginia, Boone steered the empty 18-wheeler up a stretch of Interstate 64 in Chesapeake toward Virginia Beach, about 25 miles away, where he would pick up his first load of the day.

The 53-year-old driver pulled into the eastbound left lane of the G.A. Treakle Memorial Bridge, known to locals simply as the I-64 High Rise, a four-lane drawbridge that traverses the southern branch of the Elizabeth River. On the span, the storm let loose its full force, finding no obstacles in its path but vehicles, which it pummeled. Rain hammered Boone's windshield. Winds grew fiercer. Boone slowed, letting cars pass. It would be good to get to the other side.

At the bridge's crest, 70 feet above the rushing estuary, the concrete road gives way to steel decking. Even in perfect weather it's easy to lose traction on the grids. Boone's front wheels met the slick steel just as a powerful gust blasted the driver's side.

To Boone, it felt as if the wind lifted his truck clear off the surface. He could swear that he was floating for a second before being dumped into the right lane. He had no time to consider how such a thing could be possible. His cab barreled into the guardrail on the far right edge, mangling the metal barrier that protected his truck from

pitching into the water below. He struggled to regain control. His empty trailer, meanwhile, jackknifed to the left, skidding sideways at an angle to the cab.

Fighting both truck and weather, the steering wheel unresponsive, Boone was swept along about 200 feet, unable to get traction. Then a second gust, raging more violently than the

THE WIND LIFTED THE CAB OVER THE EDGE OF THE BRIDGE AND THEN DROPPED IT.

first, blew through the open mesh of the bridge's steel grid. It slammed into the driver's side of the cab and simultaneously shoved it upward from below, lifting the cab, with Boone inside, over the edge of the bridge before dropping it again.

If he had had any hope of survival before, it was gone. The cab was now aimed straight down toward the gray-black water.

LIEUTENANT CHAD Little, 49, of the Chesapeake Fire Department, was on his way to conduct a CPR training class when an odd message popped up on his SUV's touchscreen: "Truck hanging over the bridge." He was only a minute or two away. He flicked on his emergency lights and siren and sped to the High Rise.

The traffic on the bridge was impassable. Little got as far as the drawbridge's grid and no farther. When he stepped outside, the wind blasted him. He tucked in his chin, walked ahead about 75 yards, and radioed in

his assessment. The front cab of a tractor trailer had gone over the High Rise, leaving its trailer still on the bridge. The heavy steel frame between the cab and the fifth wheel, where the cab couples with the trailer, had literally folded, and the cab, bent at a 90-degree angle, dangled over the river. Engine, hood, and fuel tanks had already fallen, leaving a slick on the water. The driver was trapped in the cab, hanging ten feet below the roadbed.

"This will be a complex technical rescue incident," Little reported. That



meant calling in Rescue 15, a team of highly trained firefighter-EMTs who respond when the unthinkable happens: an earthquake, a building collapse, a bombing, or some other disaster. He then switched to another channel to request the largest fireboat in the region. Working over the water in this weather, he needed assets below in case something—or someone—should fall.

Meanwhile, a bystander had tossed a rigging strap and the kind of harness a roofer would wear over the edge of

the bridge to the driver. Police officers and civilians stood in a line holding the rope as if they were in a one-sided tug-of-war. Little appreciated that they wanted to help, but he explained that if they pulled the driver out of the truck without the proper equipment, he was likely to tumble to his death. Once Rescue 15 got there, the team members would anchor their specialized equipment for a complex rope rescue before trying to move him.

The first ladder truck arrived from the westbound side of the bridge, where traffic was still able to move. Running chains over the concrete barrier that separated the east- and westbound lanes, firefighters anchored their truck to the cab's back wheels.

WAYNE BOONE, the driver, knew he should be dead. Busting through the guardrail and then literally flying through the air before nose-diving toward the river—it had all happened so fast. How was he still alive? Somehow, the back of his cab had snagged on the bridge's edge before it could complete its descent. Still strapped into his seat, he dangled at a 90-degree angle above the rushing Elizabeth River, swinging with each new gust. Whatever the force was that held the cab on the edge, he knew it couldn't last. Gravity and wind would have their say.

Sticky red blood spilled into his eyes. He was injured, but his body had yet to fully register the pain. He forced himself to focus. If he had any chance



Injured and disoriented, Wayne Boone was dangling inside the cab of his truck for over an hour.

of escaping the cab and surviving, he had to get free from his seat belt. The position of the cab gave little room to maneuver. The cracked windshield beneath him exposed the looming dark waters below. If he put any weight on the glass, he risked breaking through and falling the rest of the way. Under the howl of the wind, he heard voices from above. "It's about to go!"

Got to get free.

Releasing his seat belt, Boone tried to hang on to the seat, but he immediately slid into the windshield. The glass shifted in its frame. He scrambled upward, doing his best to grab pieces of the shattered dashboard, aware that he was getting cut along

the way. He slipped again. And again. Each time his feet met the windshield, the glass gave a little more. The next time could be the last. Summoning all his strength, straddling broken bits of truck, he pulled himself between the seats and wedged himself back as far as he could behind the driver's seat. He had only inches of space; it would have to do.

Minutes passed—to Boone, it felt like hours—before he heard the approaching sirens. To his ears, the jarring wail could have been angels singing. Somewhere in the cab, his phone rang. He would have given anything for the comfort of another human voice, but though he reached around, searching as well as he could from the cramped position, the ringing's source eluded him.

From the bridge above, an onlooker tossed him a harness. Boone reached out his open driver's side window and pulled it inside the cab. That effort was all he could manage. Disoriented and weak, he could not figure out how to get it on his body.

THE CALL CAME IN to Rescue 15 at 8:43 a.m. The trio on duty at that time—Brad Gregory, 57; Justin Beazley, 25; and Mark Poag, 43—piled into the rescue truck that carried all their extrication gear and headed to the scene, running through various rescue scenarios to figure out what ropes they would need and where they should position the equipment.

But their first challenge was more mundane: the sea of red brake lights that greeted them on the bridge. If this were an ordinary road, vehicles would have made way at the first whoop from a fire truck. But because the bridge had, at most, a two-foot shoulder, the cars had nowhere to go. Beazley jumped down, tapped on windows, and got a few vehicles to move in order to let the rescuers pass. As they inched forward, the clock ticked on the dangling trucker. Traffic filled in behind them, cutting off the possibility of backing up and approaching



As 50-mph wind gusts threatened to toss him off the truck, Justin Beazley did his best to put the trucker at ease.

COURTESY, CHESAPEAKE FIRE DEPARTMENT



from the westbound lanes, which police had cleared. A couple hundred yards from the accident, it was clear they would get no farther. Beazley grabbed the harnesses, rope, and some other gear off the top of the rescue truck and hitched a ride on Ladder 12, a fire truck headed to the scene in the cleared westbound lane.

Poag and Gregory gathered the rest of the equipment they expected to need from their truck: more rope, a pulley system called a set-of-fours, and a belay to anchor equipment to at the scene. As they marched toward the crippled tractor trailer, the wind grew more intense. Rain and sleet battered them sideways, soaking through to the skin. About a dozen bystanders had left their cars, braving the storm's fury to stand vigil at the bridge's edge.

Gregory, Poag, and the crew members of the ladder truck quickly devised a plan: Beazley would rappel down to the driver from the extended ladder of one of the trucks, open the door, and secure the driver to himself, and then the two would be lifted to safety. By now, sustained winds were approaching 50 mph, with stronger gusts. Working shoulder to shoulder, they had to shout to hear each other above the howling gales.

Beazley walked to the bridge's edge and tried to process what he saw. It was like no incident he'd ever responded to before. Spilled diesel fuel soaked everything on the ground, including their equipment. The cab

appeared to be barely holding on.

Getting into his harness, Beazley checked the rope and rigging. He would be tied in with an elevated anchor to prevent him from falling into the river should anything go wrong. The ladder operator positioned the fire truck's extended ladder over the top of the crippled tractor trailer and then set it in place. Ordinarily, firefighters would not raise a ladder in such high winds. It could shake the truck and wear out the metal. In

EACH TIME HIS FEET MET THE WINDSHIELD, THE GLASS GAVE A LITTLE MORE.

theory, the wind could even blow the fire truck over. But this was as far from *ordinarily* as it got.

Poag and another firefighter had command of the pulley system attached to the ladder. Beazley, in his harness, was fastened at the other end. Working the pulleys, they lifted Beazley over the bridge's edge, maneuvered him above the cab, and slowly lowered him.

As he rappelled toward the truck driver, the wind tossed Beazley like a pinball. He grabbed on to the cab to avoid being blown into the bridge. He'd planned to open the door to extricate the driver, but now he saw



Of saving the incapacitated truck's driver, Beazley told Virginia's WTKR, "It all happened so quick. You train for this, but you just never expect it."

that such a move risked putting more downward pressure on the vehicle. Any rescue attempt would have to be via the window.

The driver, Beazley realized, was in shock. After dangling in the wind for an hour, waiting to die, he was spent. But the relief in his eyes at seeing Beazley was evident. "My name's Justin," Beazley shouted. "What's yours?"

Boone replied, but Beazley barely heard him. "We're going to get you out of here," he said. He handed the harness through the open window and gave Boone step-by-step instructions for getting into it while he continued to grip the cab's side.

Boone fumbled with the apparatus.

He was trying to do as Beazley instructed but was clearly too dazed to assist in his own extraction. The wind, meanwhile, wanted to blast Beazley off the cab's door. The rescue became more precarious by the second as 50-to-60-mph gusts lashed at both the cab and the rescuer. Beazley realized there was no time left. He would have to get inside the cab.

Pulling his torso through the window, he worked quickly and methodically to get each of Boone's arms and legs through the loops of the harness, securing him to the rope system that effectively tethered them to each other. Beazley spoke reassuringly. "C'mon, you can do it," he said as he

grabbed the pulley and hoisted himself and the bloodied Boone through the window and fully into the whipping winds. Poag and a second firefighter worked the pulleys to haul them back up. As driver and rescuer cleared the edge, cheers broke out

BOONE WAS CLEARLY TOO DISORIENTED TO HELP IN HIS OWN RESCUE.

from the crowd on the bridge. Three first responders bear-hugged both men and pulled them back over the guardrail. It was over.

Paramedics bundled the injured man into an ambulance, but the storm wasn't quite done. A gust rose up and, despite the securing chains, lifted one side of Boone's empty trailer into the air and shoved it half a lane across the roadway, prompting the firefighters to evacuate the area.

BOONE WAS TAKEN to Norfolk Sentara General Hospital, having suffered lacerations and other injuries to his face, neck, shoulder, and knees. The worst damage was to his right ear, which was almost severed from his head in the crash, but doctors were able to save it.

Through it all, Boone had never panicked. He had accepted his fate. He was ready to go if that's what the man upstairs had in mind. But a stranger had risked his own life to save him. Hearing people shout with joy when they saw the firefighter deliver him to safety had been uplifting. In a world that could sometimes seem mean and lonely, people still cared. His heart was awash in gratitude.

Back on the bridge, once Boone was on safe ground, Beazley had reached out for a handshake. Naturally reticent and emotionally and physically drained, Boone had taken his rescuer's hand and hoped the gesture would say everything he couldn't. **R**

Secrets of the Keyboard

The longest word you can type using only the top row of a standard QWERTY keyboard is the 11-letter *rupturewort*, though *propriator*, *perpetuity*, *repertoire*, and *typewriter* are among the more common—and only slightly shorter—words. The longest common word you can type using only the middle row is the ten-letter *alfalfas*. But the bottom row contains no vowels, which leaves only *zzz* and *mmm*—if you even count those.

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