

Correctional Officer And Inmates Rescue Truck Driver From Fiery Collision

By Michele D. Buisch

Returning from a work detail late in the afternoon last November with five inmates assigned to the Department of Transportation work squad, Correctional Officer Jeffrey Hunnicut of the Marion Correctional Institution in Florida, came upon a fiery wreck in the middle of Ocala National Forest.

The head-on collision of an 18-wheel tractor-trailer and a Lincoln Continental was blocking the two-lane state road. Unable to get a cell phone signal in such a remote location or call for help using his work radio, Hunnicut, 33, knew he had to act immediately if the accident victims were to be saved. So, the 11-year corrections veteran and his inmate crew ran over to the truck, which was engulfed in flames caused by the diesel spill. "I just knew I had to do something at that point," Hunnicut said. "We really didn't have too much time to think; it just happened."

Hunnicut put out the fire in the fuel tank using the two fire extinguishers he had on his work truck and, with the help of the inmates, pulled the truck driver out of the tractor-trailer. Although in shock and

suffering from injuries, the truck driver survived as a result of their selfless and quick actions.

After moving the truck driver to a location at a safe distance from the automobile, which was also on fire, Hunnicut and the inmates approached the car to see if the driver was alive. Finding that the 76-year-old man was already dead, Hunnicut and the inmates tried to extinguish the car fire to keep it from spreading. During their efforts to put out the fire, they heard screaming from the passenger side of the vehicle: "Help me, I'm on fire. Please God, help me I'm burning to death." The injured passenger, who was not immediately visible through the fire and thick smoke, was trapped and in danger of being completely engulfed by the flames.

By this time, the accident was causing a backup on the road. Many of the drivers, including truck drivers with fire extinguishers, got out of their vehicles to help. Hunnicut and the inmates used up 15 to 20 fire extinguishers and even emptied the drinking water from the inmates' coolers while frantically trying to pry open the car door and free the trapped 46-year-old male passenger.

A man who lived near the accident scene arrived in a tractor and provided a chain, which they used to force the door open about one-quarter of the way. While the fire was still burn-

ing, Hunnicut grabbed the man's legs and an inmate grabbed his upper torso and maneuvered around broken glass and twisted metal to remove the badly burned man from the mangled wreck. Hunnicut and his crew remained with the man and provided first aid until Marion County fire and rescue personnel arrived.

Unfortunately, the passenger died after being transported to the hospital. But thanks to Hunnicut's and the inmates' quick actions, the truck driver survived. "I was impressed by the way [the inmates] responded," Hunnicut said. "I have never quite been involved in anything like that or seen anything like that. And all five of them jumped right in. ... I was actually pretty surprised how they handled the whole situation." He continued, "It gave me an appreciation; I wouldn't expect five inmates to put themselves on the line like that."

In addition to the inmates, Hunnicut credits the administration at the Marion Correctional Institution and, in particular, psychologist Dr. Brad McFadin for their support after the accident, which he said helped him cope with a very emotional event. "It helped tremendously; it made it a little bit easier on me."

Michele D. Buisch is senior editor of Corrections Today.



Jeffrey Hunnicut

"I just knew I had to do something at that point," Hunnicut said. "We really didn't have too much time to think; it just happened."