Back On His Feet

An instinctive and split second decision during a raging rooftop blaze could have cost firefighter Jerry Salmeron his career. The expertise of an orthopedic surgeon at Eisenhower and the support of friends gave him back the life he loved.

Every kid's dream of being a firefighter actually came true for Jerry Salmeron. He made the decision in his early 20s to commit to the challenging and heroic field, one he remembers being extremely competitive at the time. Still, he was determined to complete the many hours of training and pass all the exams required. Jerry waited patiently for a position to become available. Finally, after seven summers of apprenticeships, one did.

Jerry was chosen as a member of the Riverside County Fire Department, working out of Palm Desert Fire Station 33 as a Firefighter II. In the position, Jerry fought fires, responded to medical emergencies, and eventually became part of the truck company as tiller operator, the firefighter in charge of steering the back of a ladder truck. Jerry climbed to the top of burning structures to create vertical ventilation for fires, which releases smoke and heated gases from a structure.

Jerry also served as an instructor to other firefighters and was part of the department's urban search and rescue team.

With 20 years of firefighting experience to his credit, a call to a fire at a single-family dwelling on March 9, 2006 seemed like any other to Jerry. "I was working as part of the truck company that day.When we got to the site, it was about three-quarters involved with flames.We went about our routine as usual," remembers Jerry. Acting as tiller operator that day, Jerry steered the rear of the trailer section of the ladder to position it, so his crew could access the roof. "When we first get up on a roof, the goal is to create an exhaust point by cutting a hole in it," said Jerry. "As I remember, everything was pretty normal that day."

When fire conditions began to change, Jerry headed down a ladder and was waiting for his partner to hand him a saw. Then, conditions changed rapidly. Heat and smoke quickly overwhelmed the area in which Jerry was working. Suddenly, flames shot from a window near Jerry's ladder. "It happened so fast," Jerry recalls. "I wasn't wearing a mask, and rather than suffering third degree burns to my face, I opted to jump.When you feel that kind of heat, you react. It was a split second, instinctive human reaction." Jerry pushed off the ladder.With him went the additional 50 pounds of equipment he wears on his back to every fire. All 215 pounds landed and came down on his left foot, which hit a three-inch high concrete ledge.

Remembering the details, Jerry says, "At the time I thought I had just badly sprained my foot.My main concern was getting my partner off of the roof.My engineer came to me and said he would make sure my partner was okay." By now, flames engulfed the ladder where Jerry made his jump. His engineer moved the ladder, and Jerry's partner exited the roof safely.

Jerry needed medical assistance. "I don't remember ever feeling pain like that," Jerry says. "When they took my boot off, my foot was swollen up like a football. I was given a couple shots of morphine on the way to the hospital and that didn't do anything."

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David A. Friscia, MD, Board Certified Orthopedic Surgeon at Desert Orthopedic Center located on the campus of Eisenhower Medical Center, was the first to see Jerry. "The first thing I remember about Jerry was his foot was grossly displaced," recalls Dr. Friscia. "It was swollen and extremely crooked. The bones were dislocated in the middle, and I could see the bend in the foot." Jerry had what is commonly known as a Lisfranc fracture, or a fracture of the midfoot. "Jerry's injury was severe enough that we knew we had to do surgery to stabilize the bones in his foot; however, the swelling was significant. Because the bones in the midfoot were severely dislocated, it was imperative that surgery was immediately performed, despite the swelling, in order to realign the bones," explains Dr. Friscia. "I don't remember ever feeling pain like that.… When they took my boot off, my foot was swollen up like a football."

Jerry was sure his career as a firefighter was over. As he headed to surgery, he asked Dr. Friscia about his odds. "I felt bad putting him on the spot like that," recalls Jerry, "but I just had to know. That's what I like about Dr. Friscia. He's direct and honest with me. He waited a long time to answer me, but he looked at me and said, 'You've got a long haul, but with therapy, you'll be able to go back.'"

The first surgery involved repositioning the bones with pins and screws in Jerry's foot to stabilize the bones, holding them in place as they began to heal. He left the hospital with a cast and crutches and with instructions that virtually no weight bearing was allowed. "I had to keep my foot elevated really high— above my heart," Jerry notes. "I would go for check-ups, and they'd tell me I wasn't elevating it enough. I was really worried at first that I wasn't doing things right."

Jerry was concerned, but with the discipline and dedication of a firefighter, he was determined to have a full recovery. "People kept saying that I wasn't going to come back," he reflects. "That it was a bad enough injury that they might have to medically retire me. That just made me more resolved to do everything I needed to be 100 percent."

The next 10 months would take all the mental and physical tenacity Jerry could muster. He spent most days in bed with his foot elevated. "I couldn't do anything. I tried to stay busy. I did some reading," says Jerry. "You can only watch so much TV. I visited with friends. My parents, friends, brothers and sisters and guys from the station and even other stations would come by to say hello or help out.My fire chief Ignacio Otero was extremely supportive. I don't know how I would have gotten through that time without these people."

Approximately two weeks after the initial surgery, the swelling subsided enough for Dr. Friscia to perform a larger, more definitive surgery to explore the joints and remove bone fragments. Additionally, Dr. Friscia replaced the hardware in Jerry's foot with permanent screws to hold the bones in a permanent position. Finally, five months after his accident, Jerry's cast was removed, and he was fitted with a boot to help stabilize the foot. Three months of intense physical therapy followed—first once a week and then three days a week.

Jerry returned to full active duty on January 6, 2007, just ten months after the accident. Now, he feels he is 95 percent back to his old self. “Dr. Friscia was there for me,” Jerry says gratefully. “To recover well you need not only a good surgeon, but you need to be a good patient. I knew I had to take care of myself if I was going to get better.” Ultimately, Jerry is thankful for even being able to walk. “Sitting around for six months really makes you think,” Jerry reflects. “You take things for granted—like just being able to walk a flight of stairs or going to work every day.When you get to walk again, you’re grateful. It is like a miracle.”

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