

A photograph of a large fire, likely a bus or truck accident, with thick black smoke rising into the sky. The fire is in the foreground, and the smoke fills most of the frame. In the background, there are trees and a road with a sign.

# Smoke, Fire and Angels

Tragedy on Avon  
Mountain and the  
Life-Changing  
Aftermath

**By Mark Robinson**

All book proceeds will be donated to a fund for crash victims and their families.

**Friday, July 29, 2005** — It was a beautiful summer morning in Connecticut's Farmington River Valley. We were doing what we do hundreds of times a year: simply going to work. There was no way to know what was coming as we approached the traffic light at the base of Avon Mountain and the intersection — the intersection of Nod Road and Routes 44 and 10, of chance and fate, of wrong place and wrong time.

This is a true story about real people, the best and the most irresponsible among us. It's about what happened before, during and after one of the worst crashes in Connecticut history. It's about innocent victims and heroes — everyday people who did extraordinary things, literally picking up the pieces of the broken lives left in the wake of a poorly maintained, uninsured, fully loaded, out-of-control Mack dump truck.

I don't remember anything about the fiery crash. I do know I'm lucky. Five people died, many were injured. I broke nine bones, punctured a lung and got my first helicopter ride. I was on the receiving end of amazing courage and kindness, came face to face with death and was, for some unfathomable reason, granted a reprieve. As I began this journey to fill in the blanks of what happened that day, I wasn't sure what I'd find. I did know it was something I had to do. Because for some of us waiting at that light at the base of Avon Mountain, life would never be the same.

Mark Robinson  
Prologue

***Smoke, Fire and Angels***



West Hartford Detective Rob Magao (center), Chief Tim Vibert (left) and Medical Captain Jeff Hogan, Farmington Fire Department, were three of hundreds of rescuers who helped those injured in the crash.

The rescuers came from north, south, east and west. They came from above. They came in fire trucks, police cars, ambulances and helicopters. They came running from nearby cars, homes and businesses.



They came with the latest training and equipment.

They came with nothing but their humanity and bare hands. They responded to the sight and sound of steel and earth smashing into thin layers of metal and glass. They responded to hundreds of frantic 911 calls, to the hellish plume of dense black smoke piercing the valley's veneer of tranquility on a beautiful summer day. They came to help total strangers, fellow human beings who desperately needed them.



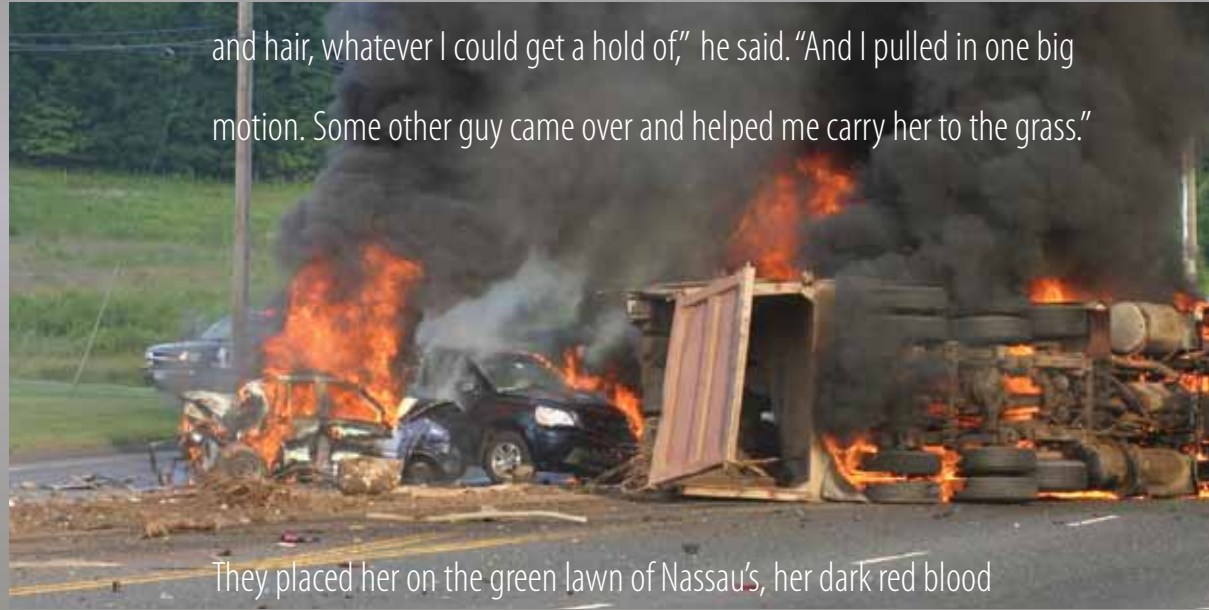


**Dr. Elena Tomasi, dazed and badly injured, was trapped in her burning car until West Hartford Police Officer Todd Myers saved her.**

“I see the dream and I want to wake up, but I can’t,” Dr. Tomasi said.

“I remember somebody wearing white. And I don’t know why, but I was thinking about angels. And why are they in my car?”

“Todd Myers kept saying, ‘Crawl to me.’ I couldn’t respond, so he brought his arm around me because the car was already on fire.” With broken glass embedded in his hands and his left arm already scorched, with only his thin white t-shirt for protection, Officer Myers again reached into the burning car with both arms and yanked for dear life. “I grabbed her by her shirt and hair, whatever I could get a hold of,” he said. “And I pulled in one big motion. Some other guy came over and helped me carry her to the grass.”



They placed her on the green lawn of Nassau’s, her dark red blood soaking the new black-and-white blouse. She was still dazed, still bleeding, still alive. The rescuers, her angels, looked back to see her car fully engulfed in flames.



Ramona Juan Clark holds her wedding album with a photo of her father on her wedding day.

At right: Frank Juan's bus surrounded by other vehicles that were in the truck's path on Rte 44.



Within a tangle of beeping, flashing, pulsating wires, tubes and machines lay her heavily bandaged, sedated, comatose father, the man who was to walk her down the aisle in 43 days. But 64-year-old Frank Juan would not be going anywhere in 43 days. The man who always got the job done, the guy who averaged one sick day a decade, was on life support.

A tracheal tube was inserted into his neck to keep the airway to his lungs open. A medical halo was surgically bolted directly to his head to keep it steady to prevent further damage from his broken neck and damaged spinal chord.

"I didn't think he was going to make it," Ramona said.

"Someone told me that if I talked to him, he might be able to hear me.

I just kept whispering in his ear, 'Dad, please don't go yet.

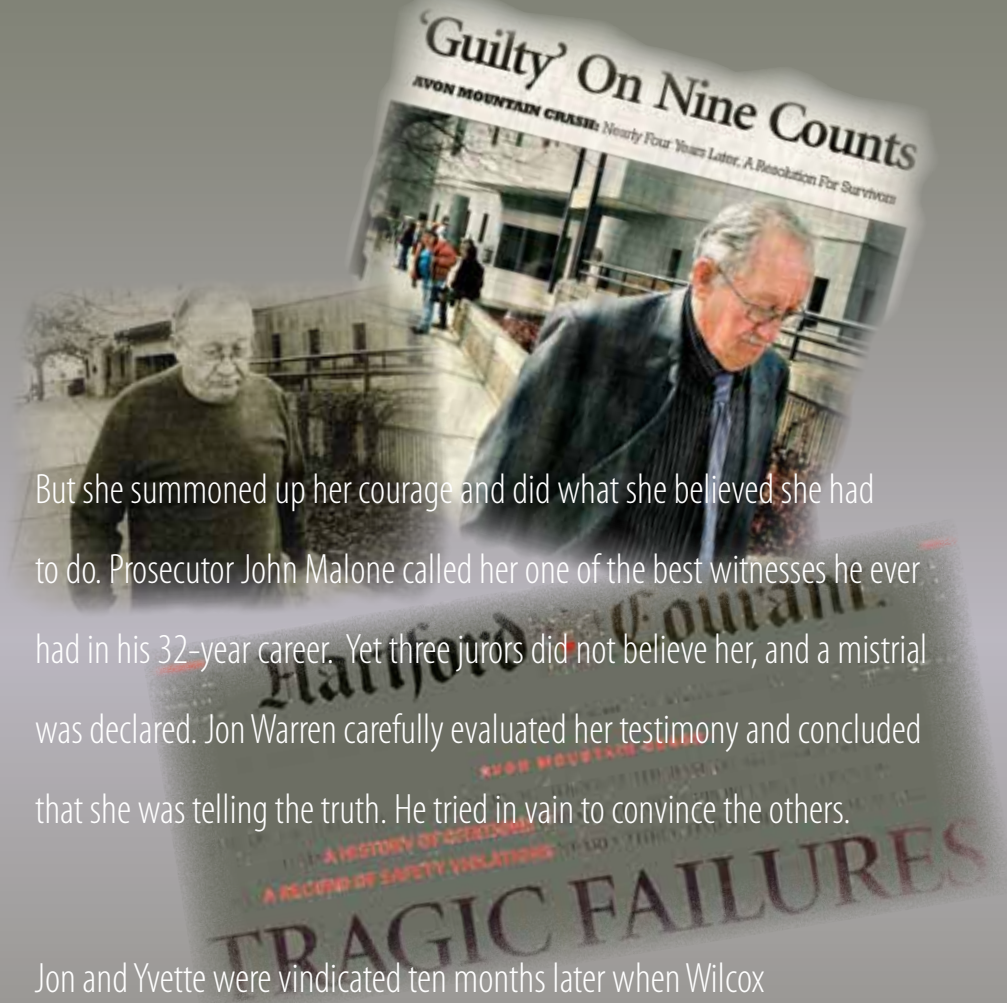
You still have a job to do. Don't go yet, Dad, please don't go.'"





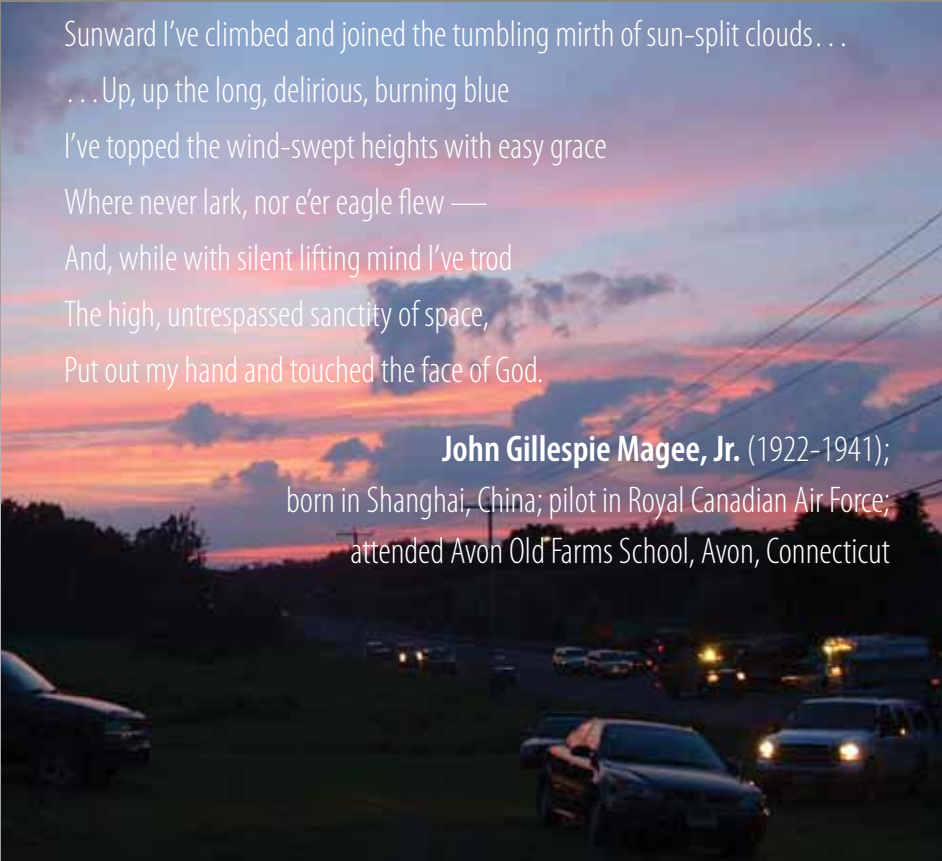
The witness, Yvette Melling (right), and the juror who believed her, Jon Warren.

Yvette Melling was terrified of her former boss, David Wilcox, the owner of American Crushing and Recycling. So it wasn't easy for her to testify against him as he faced insurance fraud charges in Courtroom A-3 in Hartford Superior Court.



But she summoned up her courage and did what she believed she had to do. Prosecutor John Malone called her one of the best witnesses he ever had in his 32-year career. Yet three jurors did not believe her, and a mistrial was declared. Jon Warren carefully evaluated her testimony and concluded that she was telling the truth. He tried in vain to convince the others.

Jon and Yvette were vindicated ten months later when Wilcox pleaded no contest to insurance fraud, in addition to pleading guilty to the other charges against him: four counts of manslaughter and five counts of assault.



Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth  
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
Sunward I've climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds . . .  
. . . Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue  
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace  
Where never lark, nor e'er eagle flew —  
And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
The high, untrespassed sanctity of space,  
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

**John Gillespie Magee, Jr.** (1922-1941);  
born in Shanghai, China; pilot in Royal Canadian Air Force;  
attended Avon Old Farms School, Avon, Connecticut

Cleanup crews still working after sunset, about 13 hours after the crash on July 29, 2005.

**For more information visit [www.smokefireandangels.com](http://www.smokefireandangels.com)**

Brochure copy: Excerpts from ***Smoke, Fire and Angels***, by Mark Robinson; [mark@smokefireandangels.com](mailto:mark@smokefireandangels.com)

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