

by Rex B. Gordon
ISSS Historian

Unsung Heroes of System Safety

In 1968, the sudden death of the newly elected Society President B.P. Hilgenson brought on a potential crisis.

In these early years, the Society could not afford a paid administrator to handle the membership rolls, collection of dues, official correspondence, etc. Therefore, an elected officer or a designated volunteer needed to perform these duties. It had become the practice to have all administrative documents, membership cards, published documents, etc. boxed up and mailed directly to the newly elected president for the appropriate delegation of duties.

This 1968 election had moved the executive functions of the Society from Seattle to the Washington, D.C. chapter slate of officers. Elwood (Woody) Driver was the elected vice president, and assumed the role of president upon the death of Mr. Hilgenson, a top NASA headquarters safety official. Woody was confronted with a serious problem that required a solution — and quickly.

The Society membership cards, with the status of dues payments and all other documents essential to implementing the ongoing administrative functions of the Society, had been placed in a file box. But where was that box now? Neither Woody nor any of the other elected officers had a clue as to the box's whereabouts.

Fortunately for the effective ongoing survival of the Society, Jack Parish, chairman of the Washington, D.C. Chapter, took the initiative to visit the Helgenson home to extend the Chapter's condolences, where he discovered and recovered the critical missing records. He found that the box had been included among the items from Mr. Helgenson's office that the family had set aside for disposal. They had no insight about what this box from Seattle was doing in his home office.

After just saving these vital records from becoming "toast," Jack soon found he was the only one willing to assume the responsibility for doing the tedious work involved with collecting dues, organizing membership cards, etc. For several years, Jack continued to update the membership card file, send out dues notices and perform all of the Society's necessary admin-

istrative functions. He was appointed to fill the vacant Executive Committee slot, and was elected Society president the following year.

In addition to saving the vital records and then performing the critical administrative functions of the Society, Jack also created the path for the initiation of the Society-sponsored System Safety Conferences. At the 1970 annual Society meeting, Jack formally presented a motion that the Society pledge \$1,000 in seed money to any chapter willing to plan and host a Society-sponsored three- to four-day conference. From our current-day perspective, this motion may seem rather mundane; however, in 1970 it was anything *but* ordinary. To me, and probably to most other members present, it was a rather audacious, out-of-the-blue concept. The \$1,000 pledge represented a commitment equal to our income from membership dues. Corporate sponsors and advertisements in the *Hazard Prevention* publication were not covering the cost of its printing and mailing. The EC was being asked by Jack to "bet the farm" on the ability of some chapter to organize and conduct a successful System Safety Conference.

During the resulting discussion on his motion, Jack pointed out that unless the Society stepped up to the plate in this area, there was little likelihood that the Society would grow, or long survive. Other organizations were waiting to bring system safety under their umbrella, should the Society go under. His arguments were so persuasive that the motion passed without a single negative vote.

Fortunately, with the \$1,000 seed money and sponsorship from Martin-Denver, the Denver Chapter was the first to put on a successful three-day conference at the Brown Hotel in downtown Denver in July 1972. This was the start of the ongoing Society conferences, which have been essential to the promotion and implementation of the system safety concept, as well as the continued health of the Society.

For his vision and forceful action in establishing the path leading toward our Society Conferences, and for filling a serious administrative breach, I suggest that Jack Parish can be rightly considered not only a Hero, but also a Pathfinder of System Safety. Unfortunately,



“The EC was being asked by Jack (Parish) to ‘bet the farm’ on the ability of some chapter to organize and conduct a successful System Safety Conference. During the resulting discussion on his motion, Jack pointed out that, unless the Society stepped up to the plate in this area, there was little likelihood that the Society would grow, or long survive. Other organizations were waiting to bring system safety under their umbrella, should the Society go under. His arguments were so persuasive that the motion passed without a single negative vote.”

soon after the first Conference, Jack developed terminal cancer and our Society lost a valuable member.

I readily admit it is impossible to be totally fair and inclusive when attempting to identify all those heroes who have successfully closed an unexpected breach in an essential activity of the Society at some

point in our 50-plus years of existence. Who can know them all? Nevertheless, I would like to continue to recognize the more notable heroes. *To do this, I will need the help of you, the reader. Please submit any input you may have on this matter by email to the Society (system-safety@system-safety.org) or to me at rexbg@aol.com.* ●