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# Chief calls stabbings "near-death experience"

By **Karen Kucher and Lyndsay Winkley**

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**T**he chief of the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department said he'd never, in his 35-year career, seen anything like Wednesday's attack on two firefighters.

Ben Vernon, a 37-year-old firefighter/paramedic, was stabbed multiple times by a bystander while assisting a drunk man. Alex Wallbertt, a 32-year-old firefighter was stabbed when he rushed to Vernon's aid.

Vernon remained hospitalized Thursday with several wounds to his torso and a punctured lung. Wallbertt, also stabbed repeatedly in the torso, was expected to be released Thursday night. Both are expected to make a full recovery.

"I've been around for 35 years and while we've had altercations, and I've certainly been in a few myself over the years... I've never seen one that resulted in two firefighters facing a near-death experience," Fire Chief Javier Mainar said at a news conference at San Diego police headquarters.

The stabbing happened at the trolley station at Park Boulevard and Market Street about 3:55 p.m.

Vernon started helping a man when a bystander started advising him how to render aid, Mainar said. Then, for unknown reasons, the bystander took out a folding knife and stabbed the firefighters.

"They were really shocked," Mainar said of the injured firefighters. He said they first thought they were being punched, then realized they'd been stabbed.

Other firefighters ran to help their comrades.

Trolley security officers quickly took suspect Ryan Allen Jones, 34, into custody. He was jailed without bail on suspicion of six felonies including attempted murder, assault with a deadly weapon and resisting arrest. He was taken to a hospital with his head bleeding before being booked.

San Diego police Chief Shelley Zimmerman said investigators haven't determined a motive for the attack. San Diego officers have contacted Jones before, but she didn't say for what, and it's unclear if he was a resident of San Diego, she said. His criminal history, if he has one, is being investigated.

It's unclear if he had drugs or alcohol in his system. Police don't believe Jones was connected with the man who was being helped.

Mainar said Mayor [Kevin Faulconer](#) met with the injured firefighters Wednesday night. Much of the department was shaken by the incident and the crews who helped the injured firefighters were given the rest of the night off.

“Very senior people, supervisors, I spoke with last night were visibly shaken to the point of tears,” the chief said. He also thanked the community for their outpouring of support and the hospital staffs that assisted the injured men.

The department is reviewing the incident to see if personnel could have been done anything differently.

Previously: [Firefighters stabbed while treating drunk man](#)

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