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# A Fatally Flawed Switch, and a Burdened G.M. Engineer

By BILL VLASIC NOV. 13, 2014

DETROIT — Raymond DeGiorgio was just another obscure engineer at General Motors — until the company blamed him for starting the worst safety crisis in its history.

But even after being identified as the employee who approved a deadly defect in millions of cars, Mr. DeGiorgio has remained an enigmatic figure at the heart of G.M.'s recall scandal.

G.M. dismissed him in June, and he went into seclusion, refusing interviews. When questioned by House investigators and company lawyers, he repeatedly said he could not recall events or interactions with co-workers.

That wall of silence finally cracked recently outside his home in suburban Detroit.

Asked about the dozens of people who were killed and injured because of a faulty ignition switch that he was responsible for, Mr. DeGiorgio, 61, broke down and cried.

“It’s very emotional,” he said. “I’m getting very emotional about it right now.”

Yet at the same time he was defensive and defiant. “All I can say is that I did my job,” he said. “I didn’t lie, cheat or steal. I did my job the best I could.”

G.M. has offered a litany of reasons for its inability to fix a defective part in its small cars for more than a decade, including a dysfunctional

bureaucracy and a toxic culture that shunned accountability.

But it has consistently focused blame on Mr. DeGiorgio, who approved the substandard switch in 2001 and secretly changed it five years later, leaving dangerous vehicles on the road and frustrating efforts within G.M. to investigate the problem.

Most damning was an internal G.M. inquiry by the former federal prosecutor Anton R. Valukas, who said that Mr. DeGiorgio's errors had "serious consequences" that have now contributed to at least 30 deaths.

Yet interviews with current and former employees and a broad examination of documents turned over to Congress reveal a different account — that of a midlevel engineer who tried to satisfy orders for a smoothly functioning switch that would help G.M. improve the image of its cut-rate small cars.

Documents show that Mr. DeGiorgio was in close contact with a number of other G.M. workers and officials at Delphi, the switch's supplier, in his attempts to fix the faulty part. And while he had considerable authority, he operated without significant supervision or oversight.

When the switch began failing because the ignition key could be inadvertently bumped, shutting off the engine and disabling airbags, Mr. DeGiorgio tried to have it replaced with a newer part. But his request was rejected by a high-level G.M. product committee, documents show.

He then violated company policy by ordering a modified switch from Delphi without a new part number, according to G.M. While that fixed the problem for future vehicles, it left countless people at risk of driving cars equipped with the original part.

To hear Mr. DeGiorgio tell it, he was nothing more than a loyal worker whose best efforts got him fired and made him a target of possible criminal charges. "I did what I was supposed to do," he said.

His response is revealing for what current and former employees say is the culture inside G.M.'s sprawling technical center in Warren, Mich., where thousands of engineers and designers work in a vast matrix of offices that one former executive nicknamed "cube city."

“DeGiorgio was part of what we called the ‘frozen middle’ at G.M., just another tiny cog in a massive machine,” said the executive, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because he now works for a major G.M. supplier. “You stay in your box and you do your job. And you don’t let anyone else into your box.”

Mr. DeGiorgio’s job in the spring of 2001 was to choose a switch that would improve the bargain-basement image of G.M.’s small cars.

Senior management dictated that new models like the Cobalt have higher-class, European-style components, interviews reveal. The message was driven home to engineers by a supervisory panel called TALC — the “touch, aroma and look” committee.

Presented with two design options for a Cobalt switch, Mr. DeGiorgio picked the one that required less force to turn the key. But it fared poorly in testing. “Failure is significant,” Mr. DeGiorgio wrote to G.M. co-workers in a previously unreported email. “I just returned from Delphi. They promised modified switches.”

Over the next several months, he expressed his frustration with the weak switch in several emails to G.M. colleagues and Delphi engineers, even calling it the “switch from hell.”

Documents show that Mr. DeGiorgio interacted with a wide range of G.M. departments about the problem, including warranty claim managers, supply chain officials, electrical engineers and test-track drivers.

By mid-2005, internal emails show that Mr. DeGiorgio was being pressed by two product committees to change the switch, and was meeting frequently with Delphi engineers for a solution.

“Cobalt is blowing up in their face,” one Delphi official wrote to a co-worker in June 2005.

In September 2005, Mr. DeGiorgio asked a high-level engineering committee to replace the switch with a new, stronger part designed for a future G.M. model. The request was rejected, documents show.

Reports of ignition failures continued to pour into G.M., including news media accounts of Cobalts stalling during test drives. In May 2006, Mr.

DeGiorgio made a decision. He instructed Delphi, in writing, to replace the switch with a stronger version that he had initially bypassed five years earlier.

But his failure to issue a new part number would torpedo G.M.'s efforts to understand why older Cobalts had much higher failure rates than cars built after 2006.

Mr. DeGiorgio compounded his mistake when he told G.M. product investigators in 2009, and again in 2012, that he had never changed the Cobalt ignition, according to documents.

But a reckoning was coming. Lawyers representing the family of Brooke Melton, a Georgia woman killed in a Cobalt crash, sued G.M. and discovered during independent testing that older Cobalts had different ignition switches than newer ones did.

In his deposition in April 2013, Mr. DeGiorgio denied replacing the faulty switch in 2006. "I don't recall ever authorizing a change," he said. But he could not deny the physical evidence presented by the family's lawyer, Lance Cooper, showing that newer Cobalts were equipped with a stronger switch.

"Do you see the difference?" Mr. Cooper asked.

"Yes," Mr. DeGiorgio said.

Soon after the deposition, G.M. lawyers quickly sought a confidential settlement in the case. More important, Mr. DeGiorgio's testimony revived an internal inquiry of the ignition switch that led to the recalls of 2.6 million small cars starting in February, and plunged G.M. into a safety crisis that has cost billions of dollars and smeared its reputation.

Now Mr. DeGiorgio is facing multiple legal threats. He could be criminally prosecuted for withholding safety information from federal regulators and possibly charged with perjury for his deposition.

Lawyers pursuing wrongful-death cases against G.M. are also focusing intently on Mr. DeGiorgio, as well as other company officials who worked with him.

"DeGiorgio was able to both successfully thrive and hide in the weeds of

G.M.'s corporate carelessness," said Robert Hilliard, who represents hundreds of accident victims and their families.

Until now, Mr. DeGiorgio, who worked for G.M. for 23 years, had not spoken publicly about his actions. But on a recent weekday morning, he opened up in a brief conversation.

A short, slightly built man with curly hair and a white mustache, he bristled at accusations he was incompetent and negligent. "My name has been trashed," he said. "I've been crucified in public. What else is left other than jail time? What else?"

He lashed out at news accounts of his career at G.M. "There's been so much written about me," he said. "Some of it is just fiction."

When pressed to explain, Mr. DeGiorgio abruptly cut off the discussion. "I could write a book just about the switch," he said. "Maybe someday I will."

But his protests hardly absolve him in the eyes of Laura Christian, the birth mother of Amber Marie Rose, a Maryland teenager who was killed in 2005 behind the wheel of a defective Chevrolet Cobalt.

"He had many opportunities to correct his mistakes or speak out about the defective switches," Ms. Christian said. "The pain he may be feeling is nothing compared to the pain of losing a child."

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