



## Contemporary Size Up

By Captain Erik Wood

My grandfather was a volunteer fireman in an urban/rural volunteer fire department for 32 years and held every rank including Chief. The view he had from the officer's seat in his engine company was dramatically different than the view we have from the officer's seats of our engine companies. There is no mistake that the challenges he faced as the first officer on the scene of a call and what we face are very different. That is not to say that our job is harder than his was because it isn't. The job at its core is essentially the same. How we respond and mitigate the call is very different. My grandfather, Wilbur, did not have the advantages we have such as thermal imaging cameras, advanced studies on how fire evolves, how fire grows, and how best to extinguish. Not to mention the advancements in apparatus, firefighter safety, and PPE. Most of us don't have the large pool of eager candidates ready and willing to make the commitment to join. We do not have benefit of learning things the "hard way". We now learn from books and videos before we even set foot on a truck. Folks like my grandfather learned firsthand by riding the truck and putting out fire. As my uncle points out (a Captain and 27 year veteran of the same department my grandfather was on), we have heavier fire loading with lighter weight construction. My grandfather had less fire load and much stronger construction, but they had less man power and apparatus to accomplish the same the result.

In most locations, automatic assistance to a call for a volunteer department was almost unheard of 59 years ago. Auto aid agreements between departments and even counties are becoming more and more frequent, aiding in the success and safety of all departments involved. Help had

to be asked for back then and considering that the delays in just getting to the call for the first due department are things we can't even fathom today. My grandfather got his alerts at first by outdoor siren and by phone call. There was a phone tree to call the members of the department. Today, when I get notification of a call my entire department gets the same notification instantaneously. If I am sitting in the duty office of the fire station I can get it about 30 seconds to a minute before the tones go out. Even for a volunteer/combination department our average time from dispatch to first due apparatus rolling out the door is about 5 minutes. My grandfather's rollout time was probably considerably longer than that.

Although how we get the call and how long it takes us to respond has improved and changed one thing is the same. The senior officer on the first due apparatus has/had the same goal: save lives and save property. Just as they did 59 years ago, we size up the scene, determine what needs to be done, determine in what order tasks need to be done, and then act.

What has changed is how we do it. Volunteer and career departments are increasingly becoming offensive in their firefighting. 59 years ago, rural volunteer fire departments typically used an approach that was directly tied to their immediate water supply (typically less than 1000 gallons on the first due truck), the exposure risk, the life safety risk (were there people that needed to be rescued), and how involved the fire was with the structure when they arrived. In a rural setting, since the fire had been burning for quite some time before the responding department even arrived, this were much more defensive and a lot less offensive. Aggressive interior firefighting in rural volunteer fire departments was not as common as it is today, especially when there wasn't a life to be saved. They put wet stuff on red stuff, but they

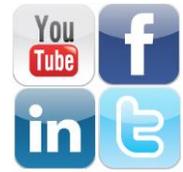


did it with a much different understanding of fire and its behavior than we do today. 59 years ago they knew what flash over was, what backdraft was, and had a basic understanding of what thermal layering was. Although they may not have called them those things they experienced them, saw them, and handled them. They did it without the advanced knowledge we have thanks to technology and unfortunately lost some of their own in the learning process. How to combat, prepare and handle those types of situations is much different than it was then. The dragon has changed because of the types of things that are burning and what they are made of, not to mention what modern structures are made of and how they are constructed. They took a much different approach to fire attack than we do today, but they also had less information about fire, and did not have all of the modern devices.

When we discuss initial fire attack in today's fire service it appears that as a profession we are a lot less likely to "surround and drown" than we are to go in and put it out. Some departments have a surround and drown policy on vacant structures (Detroit Fire comes to mind). Others have policies that outline what conditions must be met BEFORE an interior attack can even be considered. Generally it seems that the determination is made by the officer on the first arriving truck or the Chief that arrives shortly thereafter, but regardless of who makes it the call is made on scene. Today, typically we determine if there are lives that need to be saved. If there are, I am glad to say that most departments have taken the stance that if the structure is 85 to 95% involved it's unsafe for us to enter and odds are any person trapped is very likely to be deceased which means we can take a more defensive approach if the fire situation dictates it. It's a crappy decision to have to make, but our safety comes first. If the fire situation allows we aggressively search for the victim(s)

while simultaneously aggressively finding and extinguishing the seat of the fire. Like big cities, we all make every attempt to keep the fire in the building, in the room, or on the floor that it's in and prevent it from spreading. That involves a three pronged attack that was inconceivable 59 years ago on a volunteer department, mainly because of personnel and apparatus. The modern fire service aggressively finds the seat of the fire (and searches for victims if needed), aggressively protects the most vulnerable exposure and aggressively acts to mitigate or suppress any other hazard. If there is no exposure risk the second item becomes to aggressively protect as much property as we can. In the volunteer service this means we ask for help to include additional water early, whether we know for sure it will be needed or not. This is where the size up is very important. Properly size up the scene, issue orders, and get help on the way! Once that is done where we place our first due apparatus, and the water supply station are all keys to ensuring that the rest of the call goes as smoothly as possible. I would make a strong argument that successfully completing these three things at the onset of the call determines the success of the call.

Water supply is a hotly debated topic written about thousands of times. The only thing I will mention about water supply is that how every department does it is different, and in every department the situation at hand will likely dictate how you set it up regardless of policy. There is no blanket one size fits all answer to a successful water supply operation. That being said, in a rural setting have more water on the way and on hand earlier than you think you might need. As an officer you should be planning it as you get in the apparatus based on the location of the call. Ask for more water early. In October, the International Society of Fire Service Instructors (ISFSI) released a position statement and subsequent sample SOG's that



incorporate a variety of suggestions for tactical changes. As it relates to size up, they encourage size up of every fire which I could not agree with more. Generally speaking, there is no policy or formal education given to company officers on how to size up a scene properly, but I cannot put into words how vitally important it is.

How each officer completes an on scene size up is different. I tend to be a little wordy. Part of that is because I want my initial observations and orders recorded. Secondly, the extra 15 seconds I spend on the radio should mean that everybody else responding doesn't need to call me on the radio 1500 times and ask questions. This allows me to get my crew working on the issue at hand. Things that I include are: what's visible and from each side, what my initial actions are, what additional help I need from other departments, what I want the next arriving truck to do, and what I want the officer on that truck to take responsibility for. In a rural department like mine the truck behind the lead pumper is the tanker (or tender). I try to tell them how and where I want them set up. The next officer on scene normally takes charge of water supply. In the city or in a well hydrated area in my district the second truck is the second due Engine Company. Giving the officer on that truck specific instruction early helps him/her prepare their crew and issue orders so that when they arrive they can begin assisting. In discussion with some of the "old timers" one of the key differences between size ups now and size ups then is that officers today have a much better understanding of the need for initial bigger picture thinking. When we give our size ups what we look for and what we communicate normally includes far more than what they did 59 years ago. We look for additional hazards, consider additional needs, attempt to predict the next phase of the call, get the resources started, and relay instructions. On bigger departments or in cities it's typically the Battalion Chief

responding to the call that handles this. In the volunteer service it's typically the first arriving Lieutenant or Captain that does it, and we do it while we are preparing and starting to mitigate the call.

The generations of firefighters that came before us did a remarkable job and what and how they did the job is the base plate of knowledge each of us takes on every call every day. Just as we do today they had a better understanding of fire and firefighting than the generation before them. As tactics change, technology improves, our understanding of the dragon increases, the one fundamental thing that will always remain constant is the need for company officers to provide accurate, timely and specific scene size ups. Then those officers need to act and act quickly.

My grandfather passed away on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 1986. He passed away 11 years before my fire service career began, and although I only knew him a very short while he is dearly missed. He served the community of Skagit Valley with the Cedardale Volunteer Fire Department from 1954 (5 years after the department was created) until his death in 1986. Although I know I did not do him justice, this article is dedicated to him, and his service to his community.  
Stay Safe!