



### Safety starts before the truck rolls!

By Captain Erik Wood

Whether you are the Chief of your department, the Officer in charge of an apparatus, or the probationary firefighter who just joined the department safety IS your responsibility. All too often we assume that the inherent risk that is involved in our job means that there is no way to mitigate that risk. The nature of our job causes us all too often to focus on the goal and not focus on going home. It's time that changed! In 2012 the LODD total was 81. Although 81 is a very high price, for the second consecutive year no fatalities were attributed to being lost or disoriented, and only 1 (and 1 is 1 too many) was due to being caught or trapped, which is the lowest on record. For reference the average fatalities caused by being caught or trapped is 7 (from 2003 to 2012) and over double that for the preceding decade. That says remarkable things about the progress we have made as a profession about taking safety into our own hands. It means we are taking our safety far more seriously than we have in the past in a myriad of ways, most noticeably in our actions on scene.

What we forget is literally everything we do as part of our job is safety related. Cleaning and checking our equipment and apparatus, cleaning and checking our PPE, and restocking or ensuring that all the equipment for each truck is on each truck are all very important safety related tasks that we need to take seriously.

When we study and read about scene safety we forget a very important part of what I call the "bubble of safety". The "bubble of safety" is a term I use when discussing safety to probationary firefighters in a volunteer service. This bubble should surround you and everything you do on and off the scene of call to protect yourself and keep yourself and others safe. It signifies that everything you do effects your

ability to be and remain safe. What is commonly missed in this bubble is personal responsibility. Safety or taking safety seriously does not start when you get off the truck at the scene of a call. It starts when you clock in at the start of your shift. Our safety and our ability to operate safely involves so many things that it is mind boggling. What's horrifying to me is most of those things have nothing to do with orders given by an officer or conditions on the fire ground. They have everything to do with how seriously you take your own safety. An officer can only do so much to ensure your safety. Your brothers and sisters can only do so much to keep you safe. You have to keep yourself safe.

#### **When the Shift Starts:**

As a normal part of the work day, apparatus operators check over the truck. How this is accomplished varies widely from department to department depending on the needs, and work load of that department. Generally speaking the basics are all the same. Does the truck work and function as it is supposed to? Do all of the apparatus controlled functions work as they are supposed to? If the answer is no, what do you do about it? More importantly as an apparatus operator are you just assuming that because the AO from the shift before you didn't report an issue that there are no issues? First I would hope that you are reporting ANY issues with the apparatus to the officer responsible for that apparatus. Secondly, never, and I cannot stress this enough...NEVER assume that the person before you did a detailed job. Stuff gets missed; you can easily get distracted by having to run a call or being stopped in the middle of your truck check to do something else. Plus, we are all human. We forget stuff. Not to mention if they ran a call at 3 in the morning, they may not have done a detailed job rehabbing the truck. Take the truck check seriously; the pump is your life if you are fighting fire. There is no worse feeling than being at the end of a hose putting wet stuff on



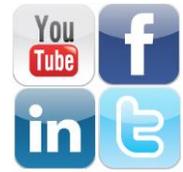
red stuff and then have the hose go limp because of a pump failure, or stand outside of a burning building with a limp hose in your hand because your pump is broke. Check the truck, maintain the truck and don't forget to take pride in the truck. I would strongly argue that taking pride in your truck means that you are maintaining it and doing a good job of checking it.

Another part of the normal work day is checking all of the equipment on your truck. In most departments that means operating all of the equipment, and normally this means starting saws, power units, and fans. In some departments this falls to the driver or apparatus operator. I would suggest that this task be done by the crew actually using the tools. Making sure all of the equipment you need to save a life is both on the truck and in working order. The tools that you need to successfully do the job need to be constantly checked. We are rough on stuff as a profession. Part of that is because of what we use the tools for and the conditions in which they are being used. Your ability to remove yourself from a bad situation could depend on these tools being functional and in good working order. For your safety, check the equipment! This is particularly important for the first due trucks on medical calls. If your truck carries a medical bag, make sure it's fully stocked per your department's guidelines, and any and all equipment and/or medication that has an expiration date is within date. Your life may depend on the contents of that med bag. The lives of others WILL depend on what's in that med bag.

A Lieutenant from a neighboring department, whose knowledge on PPE care, construction and inspection far exceeds mine will probably send me a nasty gram for missing something, but I would be remiss if I did not discuss the importance and need for taking care of and being responsible for your own PPE. NFPA 1851 has

very strict guidelines on how and when your gear is to be inspected and when and how it is to be documented. Outside of the required annual inspection, I would suggest that as a part of your daily routine you should be conducting a very detailed inspection of your bunker gear. Your gear is what protects you most at almost every call you run. It's the first thing you put on to go on a call and the last you take off after a call. You need to take care of it. This means cleaning it (I hear the boos and jeers from here), taking it apart to make sure there are no tears, rips or burn holes and making sure that whatever it is you carry in your gear is where it's supposed to be, that it works and is serviceable. Cleaning your gear routinely is vitally important to your long term health and safety especially after exposure to blood borne pathogens and calls where you entered a burning building. Each department should have guidelines on how and when to wash and clean your gear. Follow the manufacturer's instructions on care. Whatever those are, follow them, and take them seriously. The long term exposure to the carcinogens contained in our gear when it is not properly taken care of can have long term serious health risks for us.

The things that I just listed, are all too often considered routine, and far too often are considered a "necessary evil" of the job and therefore not taken seriously and not done to the level that they should be done. The fact is they should be considered important, vitally important, and done with the due diligence that an important task in our job demands. We all have a vested stake in making sure that those things are done correctly. Our ability to not only perform the job, but our ability to remain as safe as possible are all at stake. Safety is not just about avoiding entering a building you shouldn't enter or being able to read the smoke and fire conditions. It means taking pride in your equipment.



55% (or 45 individuals) of the 2012 Line of Duty Deaths were attributed to stress and/or overexertion, which makes it the primary killer of firemen. The vast majority of those (39) were heart attacks. It's also important to state, just as the report states, that this classification does not mean that the firefighter was in poor physical condition. The job we do is tough. Some of us can go days or weeks without having to fight a structure fire or go on a call that is very physically demanding. We go from sitting on the couch to wearing 60+ pounds of gear in all types of weather conditions into an environment that is unforgiving. Add the natural bump in blood pressure and pulse rate that comes with running a call and it's not that hard to see why these numbers are so high.

Of course there are ways we can mitigate this. Eating healthier, working out every shift or on a regular basis and not smoking are just a few. Part of our safety involves taking care of ourselves physically whether we are on duty or off. This is particularly true for volunteer departments who likely don't have the space for a workout room for department use or the funds to pay for gym memberships and who may go days or weeks without running any type of call and longer between big incidents such as structure fires.

The volunteer fire service, especially in very rural areas has its own unique challenges as it relates to safety, and to every other topic we could discuss. Career departments can institute and force some sort of wellness program upon its members, but for volunteer departments who have a hard enough time getting qualified folks to run calls, instituting and requiring a wellness program is almost impossible. Time for everybody regardless of what type of department you serve on is at a premium. Most volunteer departments require some sort of monthly training and call percentage, which is at

times hard to fairly enforce, especially when you need bodies on a call. Add that to having kids in school with sports, and other activities people in today's volunteer fire service have less time to devote than they did 20 years ago. This is where personal responsibility and self-preservation on the part of us as individuals first, and secondly as members of a community organization that needs its members must kick in.

I am by no means an authority on physical fitness, and not the poster boy for living a healthy lifestyle. I am however a father of 2 and a husband. Regardless of what role any of us have on a department, and regardless of the type of the department we serve on we owe it to ourselves and to our families to take our personal health seriously. What we do is dangerous enough if we are in peak physical condition; we don't need to add to it.

Apparatus/Equipment Checks

Dedication to Training

Personal Health



PPE Checks

Watching out for each other's safety on-scene

# BUBBLE OF SAFETY