

### **Safety at the Call!**

By Captain Erik Wood

The tones go off, you put your gear on, and jump on the truck. Up to this point, you have made sure that all of your equipment, including your apparatus are the in the best working order that they can be, you have trained, and trained hard. As you pull out of the station, is your safety helmet on? As an officer is your crew wearing their seat belts? Are you paying attention to the driving and traffic conditions? Are you thinking about what your initial actions are, are you giving out assignments? If you are riding in the jump seats are you double checking your gear, running thru your assignments and going thru the order that things need to be done in? Safety is not a single action, it's a culmination of a lot of different actions. Its preparations and actions at the beginning as well as during the shift. It also includes preparations and actions on the way to the call, and lastly your response and actions during the call.

#### **On the Way & At the Call:**

We have all heard the perils of getting tunnel vision while trying to mitigate and handle a call. All of us at one point or another have focused on one task and missed the need of another. The same is true of safety. As officers we tend to base our initial strategy and response to a call on what was last discussed at the officers/staff meeting or what went horribly wrong at the last call. What we need to be doing is preparing ourselves and our crew for the response to the call. This call....not a call from a month ago or a fictional call. The call you have just been dispatched to. This pre-planning and forethought into initial actions ensures that everybody knows their role, nothing is being duplicated and gives those in the jump seats and your driver the opportunity to think and plan in his/her own way what they need to do, before they actually

need to do it. As a brand new lieutenant I learned the benefit of doing this the hard way. The first few big calls I ran in the officer's seat I just flew by the seat of my pants, and I am sure we looked the keystone firemen. We got the job done, but it was initially unorganized and a little unsafe. Then my Fire Chief at the time suggested that I pre-plan and pre-issue orders on the way to the call to both save time, and get the rest of the call organized. We all know that just as in warfare, the plan you set out is not going to be the plan once the battle starts, but having a basic idea is helpful. Some things are constant. On a working fire, you need to establish water supply (whether that is catching a nearby hydrant or setting up for tanker ops), get hose stretched, tools gathered and attack started. Regardless of what you find when you get there, these 4 things will need to be done if you have a working fire. Something I commonly do is give directions to my driver about what I want the next truck to do and what the next steps to establish water supply need to be. This takes some burden off of me, as he/she knows what my initial water supply desires are and can do it (and has my authority to do it) while I take care of other things. I also issue orders to the others in the truck. Generally I assign the junior person on the truck the task of stretching the attack line or lines off the truck or catching the hydrant, then assisting the driver, while the two senior guys are ordered to pack up, grab the tools and meet me at the door. If my junior person is catching the hydrant, I will normally stretch the attack lines myself while the other guys get air packs on. That way, when the truck stops action begins and nobody needs direction. It cuts down our arrival to water flow time significantly.

As we prepare our initial attack or initial actions our profession demands that all of us put our safety hats on. This is where the safety bubble makes its appearance again. The preparations you made when you started your shift in

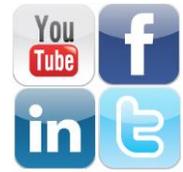


ensuring all of the equipment, apparatus and PPE are ready to go, and the preparations you made in the truck while responding to the call meet with now safely handling the call. As a company officer it is your responsibility to ensure the safety of your crew and your truck to the best of your ability. For Captains and above who may be actually running the incident, that means a whole myriad of other safety related concerns. Initially it means reading the situation correctly, is it safe and prudent to enter a structure and do I have enough water coming or on scene to safely conduct the operation? Here again is where we get into the different tactics that departments use based on that department's make-up and lay out. It's also where the inherent risk we all hear about comes into play. There is no way that we can truly be safe while doing our job. Regardless of how safe we are or try to be some of us will get hurt, and I would wager at some point in your career most of us will get hurt. That's the risk we all willingly take. Having said that, we can cut down on the injury and LODD numbers by taking personal responsibility for our safety, and as a company officer it isn't just your safety. It's your crew's safety.

Going into a building that is on fire is dangerous. There are times when the situation dictates that we do it, and do it aggressively. But we should be risking a lot, to save a lot, and "a lot" is not defined as contents (unless letting them burn will make things explode). It's defined as lives and large amounts of property. This sometimes means making that decision not to enter a building when there are possibly people trapped. We should not be risking our lives to retrieve deceased persons. If the building is fully involved or mostly involved, the odds of you retrieving a live or viable victim are extremely remote. Why would you risk the lives of 4 people to retrieve a body? That also means that sometimes regardless of whether there are or are not

possible trapped persons we have to enter a building to keep the fire from catching the rest of the block or building on fire or to help protect exposures which in the end again protect lives. The company officer, and you as a firefighter have a responsibility to ensure that you are being safe, and sometimes, that means telling command you can't go into a burning building or that you need to leave before the task you are assigned is started or completed. The individuals I work with know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that if I am the person in command of the call, and I order an interior attack that means the information I have before me tells me that the risk is worth the gain. But it also means that if the officer in charge of fire attack tells me, it's not safe I am not going to argue the point, or even discuss it. Their word becomes the law of the land. We switch to defensive action and re-think our strategy. They are the ones going into or that were in the building. They know the conditions far better than I do. Your crews have to know you have their back when it comes to their safety, and that you will listen to their input on the call.

The flip side to that is the not so popular stance that we don't need to go into every building that is on fire. Vacant structures have gotten a lot of attention recently, both in my home county and nationally. There are valid arguments for both stances. Why go into a vacant structure and risk our lives to protect no lives and normally save or protect property that has fallen into a state of disrepair? Not to mention the many, many dangers a vacant structure poses to interior crews. It's safer to just protect the exposures and surround and drown it. But....do we know that there are no victims to be saved. Homeless individuals are known to live in vacant structures and kids are known to play in them, not to mention that a lot of illegal drug activity occurs in them. A life is a life. Should we not be



making an effort to ensure that there are no victims?

If it's me in the Chief's car that day or I am the officer on the first due truck the decision for me is fairly simple. If the building is known to be vacant and is more the 75% involved, if there are no obvious signs of people trapped, if the fire has self-vented out of the roof, or if the fire involves more than one floor or is on a floor other than the first floor and its more than just a room and contents fire, I am going defensive. Protect the exposures and protect my crews. In my opinion, not only is it the safe and prudent thing to do, it's what my job as the Incident Commander requires me to do. The safety of my crews comes before all else. I am not going to risk lives without reason for a vacant structure. There are times when the situation requires that I put them in harm's way and to risk a lot to save a lot. But there are other times when the situation is that there is nothing to save, so I am not going to risk anything.

The last thing about on call scene safety I will say is use your PPE and use it correctly. Don't go into a burning building without being in full gear with an SCBA (meaning you are on air). All of us can share war stories about the one time we did this or that. What we need to be teaching our future and new firefighters is not the "old school" way. We should be teaching the right way. In order to teach the right way, we have to focus on safety. On every aspect of safety outside of the big calls, our everyday response to everyday calls needs to be the same as if the call was a big call. We should be balancing the risk and reward for everything that we do. At the center of that discussion is safety. There have been several articles written that more or less state that we are killing ourselves by not changing our thinking and strategy.

There is a lot of great research being done out there right now that has the ability to impact us in a very positive way. There are studies about the pros and cons of the uses of radio straps and radio pockets, crew placement in the room where the seat of the fire is, and some brilliant research into how different construction types burn, and fighting them safely. All things that are very obviously safety related. Take the time to read this stuff and keep abreast of current research and suggest or make changes to your strategies. Keeping up on knowledge is a great way for you to keep you and your crew safe. Safety is not just about doing things on a call right, training hard, preparation on the way to the call or preparation in cleaning and checking your equipment. It's about no singular thing; it's about all of those things. Our entire job is about safety. Other people's safety and ours. In our daily responses to calls we should be risking a lot to save a lot, risking nothing to save nothing, protecting ourselves by wearing our PPE, training hard, and learning new things about the unforgiving environment we work in. We all want to go home at the end of our shift or after the call. The way to do that is insert yourself squarely in the middle of the "bubble of safety". You will be a safer more productive fireman for it.