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**ENGINE CO. OPERATIONS IN
PRIVATE HOMES**

by Lt. Dennis Gordon Rescue 4, FDNY retired , Churchtown Fire Co. (any questions or comments feel free to reach me at dennis.gordon4@verizon.net)

THE ROLE OF THE ENGINE COMPANY OFFICER

Last newsletter I spoke generally about Engine Company positions and about the Engine Officer. I would like to go a little deeper into the Engine Company officer's responsibilities.

The FDNY books state that the Engine Company officer will have more influence on the outcome of a fire operation than any other member on the scene. Why? Because he is the one directing the hose line operation. And as I stated earlier, the positioning and operation of the first hose line will have more of an effect on the outcome of a structure fire than any other single factor. Therefore, his responsibility of overseeing the movement and effectiveness of the **FIRST** hose line in a structure fire is of paramount importance.

I know we assign our officers through elections and things like time in the company but I would seriously consider voting primarily for the person who seems most capable of doing the job well regardless of popularity or time in the company. Some people can have decades of time in the company but hardly any time operating inside the fire building. Some of the more important qualities I've seen that make good fire officers is the ability to remain open, be able to admit mistakes at fires and operations and a genuine desire to improve at being a firefighter.

All interior FF's should be familiar with the Officer position responsibilities. They may become the Officer if none shows up or the Officer has to exit the fire building. Plus they may have to assist the officer in his responsibilities depending on the experience level of that officer.

Once the Engine Officer is on the truck he will make sure his radio and his crew's are on the proper frequency. He will make sure it is clear what each person's position is : Nozzle, Back Up, Door or Control Man. Details of the positions will be covered later.

If the Engine Officer is first on the scene and OIC by default he will radio for what additional assistance is needed. Extra Engines, Tankers, FAST team and **always** request a Tower Ladder at working house fires. He should also include an accurate description of conditions on arrival. e.g., "We have a 2 story wood farmhouse with smoke showing from 2 windows on the 2nd floor. No exposure hazards. All occupants are here outside".

The Engine Officer must then try to determine the location of the fire if it is not obvious. And even if it is obvious he must still do a 360. Fire showing out the second floor in the front could be an extension of fire on the first floor in the rear which is not visible from the front of the building. This could unknowingly put members above the fire.

When the Engine Officer is ordering the 1 3/4" stretched he must pay attention to the following: (2 1/2" will not be used inside private dwelling fires)

- Ensure that enough hose is stretched to cover all points in the house. You may be stretching to the furthest point inside the house.

- If using preconnects (sometimes called cross lays) be very wary of stretching short and not having enough hose. Does your company have a SOP for adding hose if the preconnect is short? You want to try to avoid having to add hose when the line is inside the building. This requires shutting down the line and leaving members without water. Depending on conditions they may have to back out to do this. This is a tremendous waste of time. Fully understand how much hose will be needed and how much is stretched.
- Don't get into the mindset of leaving the engine in front of the fire building because the preconnect is being used. The front of the building must always be left clear for a Tower Ladder. Using the preconnect and then getting out of the way could use up 1 to 2 lengths of your preconnect. In later newsletters I will discuss utilization of tower ladders at house fires in many other ways beside water streams.
- Try to avoid too much extra hose. This slows down the advance, creates more opportunities for kinking and demands more manpower to stretch the line, it also requires higher pressures.
- Make sure all the hose is properly flaked out for ease of advancement and to avoid kinking.
- Before entering the fire building, make sure the nozzle is operated for 5 seconds or so to make sure it is operational and the pressure is adequate. We want to do more than just bleed it.
- If encountering a clutter condition the Officer must organize a chain of firefighters to remove debris that prevents hoseline advancement or some other system to clear a path.
- Throughout the operation the officer is observing and assessing possible collapse potential.

While the hose is being stretched the Officer will do a full survey of all sides. Smoke or fire pushing makes it somewhat obvious. But if you don't have that luxury of obvious signs and it's night time the officer should look for windows that are darkened, smoke stained and sweating by using a good flashlight. If any info is picked up it should be noted so it can be used to instruct the nozzle team to where they are going.

When I say it should be noted, you should be very specific about what you see, what this means is that in all the excitement it is easy to see smoke or fire in the rear and get to the front and not be certain if it was the 1st floor or 2nd floor or left side or right side. Especially true if it is windy and it's getting blown around. This info should also be relayed to all units so other companies coming in will have an idea where to look for fire and extension within the building.

Also be aware that the lack of smoke or fire showing does not mean there is no fire inside. Modern content buildings with energy efficient windows and good insulation may hold it within for a while and much of the oxygen inside could have been consumed preventing it from being "pushed".

Let's say you walk around the building and you have smoke pushing from many different areas, eaves, attic windows, first and second floor windows but no visible fire. We do not want to stretch a line into this situation without having somewhat of an idea where the fire is. The reason for this is that we could be going past or above fire without knowing this. And this is how most Firefighters get trapped. Turning around and going back the way you came with a charged handline, no visibility and not certain where the fire is creates the stage for chaos. Plus if you lose water or adequate pressure you are seriously screwed.

So what does the Engine Officer do if not certain of the fire location?

If the situation is extreme and the members feel potentially unsafe they should not enter the building without the protection of a charged 1 3/4" handline.

If he feels entry can be made he will take another member and start a preliminary search entering through the front door. They will take a good flashlight, TIC, flat head axe and Halligan. The charged hose line will wait outside with everyone ready to go if you feel entry can be made initially without it (If your department is fortunate enough to have a truck company then this will be their first function. They will locate the fire along with the engine officer. The engine officer will then return to his unit to guide them in.) If there is no truck company then the Engine Company Officer plus one member will do this function.

They will mask up and go through the front door, forcing entry if required. When they pass through the door they will leave it chocked open so egress is available for them. It will also possibly provide positive ventilation. Many times opening that door will admit oxygen (especially if all the windows are intact) and will often draw the fire to that point. You will witness this as fire rolling across the ceiling towards you (not to be confused as a possible sign of flashover which will be much more severe with heavy black smoke). This is a good thing. You now know where the fire is. Just go outside and keep the door closed until the line is ready to move in.

If conditions seem too severe to enter immediately then get some water inside from the doorway before moving in. Generally we do not operate water on smoke but if temperatures are extreme we can cool the atmosphere with a straight stream nozzle directed 45 degrees ahead of you at the ceiling and whipped clockwise. This may cool it down to prevent a flashover.

If fire is not met behind the door, point your TIC at the ceiling at a 45 degree angle studying the ceiling ahead of you. Then look down the hallway looking for any red indicating the fire. If you don't see fire you may see thermal currents along the ceiling that appear as smoke on the TIC. If they are coming to you then follow those currents back to their source. Before we had TIC's or if I was having trouble seeing the screen (sometimes wiping my face piece would help clear it) I would raise a hand above my head with my glove pulled up revealing skin and notice how hot it was. I would then crawl another 10 feet or so and do that again. If I was getting closer to the fire I should feel the heat increase. If it was getting cooler I would reconsider what direction I was heading. Another way to do this is to pull back your hood off of an ear and stand momentarily. Repeat this after crawling another 10 feet or so to see if it is getting hotter or cooler.

In the situation I describe earlier here (smoke pushing from everywhere but no fire showing) the first thing I would do is to start searching the first floor and try to find access to the basement. It is not unusual for a basement fire to show smoke throughout the building. If you open the door to the basement and it is charged down there with smoke and heat (should readily show on the TIC since heat rises up the stair) then that is where the hose line will be brought. If need be the Officer and his partner will go back to the front door to direct the hose line in. He will make sure to shut the basement door before he leaves to slow down the extension. If entry down the basement stair seems too challenging (probably the most challenging attack in

my opinion) look for an outside basement entrance and consider stretching in that way.

As you crawl in you want to note any windows or doors that you may need for secondary egress in case your exit gets blocked by fire or you get disoriented. Avoid venting windows while searching without water and without knowledge of where the fire is. You could make the situation much worse. However, if you feel not comfortable about where you are, then vent the window and clear it for your egress just in case.

If you are encountering heat levels that seem too extreme without finding any visible fire you should retreat with your partner and exit the building the way you came in if possible. Close any doors there are behind you.

When searching for fire, listening is extremely important. As you search for fire you are also searching for victims. This is a quick search for victims while on the way to trying to find the fire. It is important not to get involved too deeply in a search for people without finding the fire first. Again, this is how firefighters get trapped. Pay attention to what you're hearing. I have heard fire crackling very often. I have also heard the occasional moan or cough of a victim. Keep your ears open. Pay attention to the radio. If a message seems important, stop for a second and focus on it. If you are getting disoriented, listening for the trucks outside and seeing emergency lights reflecting in the room you are in will reveal the front of the building or side if on a corner. Look out windows to get oriented if uncertain where you are.

If you pull up on the scene and a civilian reports a known life hazard to you in the building ("my grandmother was in her bedroom and didn't get out") you will do the same as above, if you can enter, you will take another member with a halligan, axe and TIC. The other members will stretch the line and get ready to advance. Get very specific details about where the missing person is supposedly and how to get there. Don't just run into the house. The people you are talking to are in there everyday and know every detail.

I think I'll leave it here for now. Next newsletter I'll get into the other Engine Company positions and then start talking about different types of private home fires.

There will be classroom sessions soon where we can discuss in person and clarify this information.

Stay safe out there and keep drilling! And don't hesitate if you want any assistance with this material.