

RISK TAKING ON THE FIREGROUND

BY FRANK C. MONTAGNA

John had never worked in this portion of the city. He had never fought a fire whipped by the winds blowing in off the ocean. He had never fought a boat fire because he had never worked near water before. He had no experience with the flimsy one-story wood bungalows prevalent in this beach community. He was more than a little nervous on this, his first night working on the beach.

He was a captain and had been to many fires in many different areas of the city. He was sure of his ability but still unsettled about working the beach. He had heard many horror stories of fires whipped by the wind consuming entire blocks of rickety shanties before being brought under control.

Tonight it was raining. It was a cold, driving rain pushed by a brisk northeaster. The alarm bell woke him out of a troubled sleep. "Get out," blared the PA system. The firefighters on watch added, "It's at Beach Second Street. The dispatcher says the caller hung up without saying what it was for."

As the engine approached Beach Second Street, John looked around, trying to see what types of buildings were in the area. The rain and darkness made that difficult. In the rig's headlights, he saw a man and a woman waving to the approaching pumper. "Stop," he told his driver. The driver was already stopping. As the two people ran up to the truck, John rolled down his window. "Where is the fire?" he asked, his eyes still searching the darkness as he sniffed the air for the telltale odor of smoke.

The man, obviously distraught, said, "No fire. A car with three people in it just drove off the road and into the bay."

Stunned, John said, "Show me." The man pointed to a place where the road ended and a vacant lot began. There were tire tracks in the wet sand. "Oh, no," John thought as he got out of the appa-

tus and followed the soggy tire tracks to a sea wall that was level with the sand he was standing on. He peered into the dark water and saw bubbles floating on the surface, about 10 feet from shore.

"What now?" he thought. "What have I been taught to do in this instance?" He had no answer. As far as he knew, his department had no SOP for this situation—but he had to do something.

He turned to his driver, who was standing next to him soaking wet. "Get me another engine and a truck company. Call the fireboat and scuba team. Also, get two ambulances and have the chief respond."

The driver said nothing, turned, and went back to the apparatus to call for help. He was trying to remember all that the captain had requested.

The two civilians stood in the rain and looked at him. John knew it would be some time before a scuba team arrived. He had to act now. He also knew he did not want to enter the water. He was a scuba diver and good at free diving—but, in this bay...? At this time of the year? At night? With no protective or safety gear? Jumping in was the last thing he wanted to do.

ENTERING THE WATER

As he stood there thinking, one of his firefighters, Bill, a man in his late 50s, dove into the murky waters. John watched. When the firefighter did not surface immediately, John took action. He told the driver to turn the spotlights onto the bay and bring ropes to the sea wall. Then, John took off his bunker gear and boots and, holding on to the sea wall, slowly lowered himself into the icy water.

He had never been in the water in May; and, when the cold caused him to gasp for breath and made his heart feel as though it had stopped, he wished he wasn't there now. As John settled into the water, the firefighter surfaced, swam a little farther out, and dove again. John, shivering, took the rope and clipped it to the firefighter the next time he surfaced. He then clipped a rope to himself and asked for his flashlight. It was a diver's light and illuminated several feet in front of him when he held it under the water.

His two other firefighters held onto the ropes and manipulated the searchlight as the captain and Bill dove repeatedly, searching for the source of the bubbles. Several feet under the surface and

■ **FRANK C. MONTAGNA**, a 24-year veteran of the fire service, is a battalion chief with the City of New York (NY) Fire Department. He has been an instructor at the FDNY Probationary Firefighters School, the officer in command of the FDNY Chauffeur Training School, and an adjunct lecturer at John Jay College in New York City. He is a member of the FDNY Fire Chief's Association. Montagna has a bachelor's degree in fire science and currently is lecturing on firefighting-related topics.

close to shore, they found a car and tried to enter it. After a short time, they realized it was not the car they were looking for, but a rotted abandoned hulk that had been submerged for some time. It had no windows, seats, or dashboard.

By now, help was arriving; it was none too soon. The cold water had done its work—both John and Bill needed help exiting the water. The cold water had drained their strength, and they could not stop shivering. Unaided, they could not have climbed back up onto the sea wall.

The fire department scuba team arrived as John and Bill were being stripped in a heated ambulance and then wrapped in wool blankets.

Bill, it turned out, was a lifeguard of 20 years and quite at home in the water. He had not been in trouble as John had thought.

Still shivering, they were returned to the fire station, where they took warm showers and changed into dry clothing. When the remaining firefighters returned, John learned the car was found 10 feet from the shore in 30 feet of water. A man and two women were in it. They were dead, cramped up against the rear windshield as if they had been trying to crawl out.

For weeks after the incident, John wondered, "What else could I have done to save those people?"

Save life first, then save property—never forgetting that the firefighter's life is included in the life portion of your mission.

If you spend enough time in the fire service, you will be faced with such a dilemma. It might not necessarily involve a car in the water, but it will involve an incident for which you have not been adequately trained. It might be a suicidal man threatening to jump off a building or a child who disappeared down a suddenly appearing sink hole. It may even be a fire of such magnitude that all your SOPs and experience do not offer adequate guidance. What do you do at that moment when you realize you'd rather be with the crowd watching rather than in the spotlight having to make instant life-and-death decisions based on incomplete information?

This is the time you must remember your mission: Save life first, then save property—never forgetting that the firefighter's life is included in the life portion of your

mission. John was right when his instincts told him not to dive into the water. He remembered that his primary goal was to save life. He knew the dangers involved in a water rescue. He had no indication as to how deep the car was and only a general idea as to its location. If he could see the car or the people in the water, then jumping in made sense. Given the proper gear and training, the benefit of an attempted underwater rescue would have been worth the risk. In any case, guide ropes, safety men, and lighting should be used. Not taking these precautions puts him and his firefighters at great risk with little hope of gain. A fast current, an underwater entanglement, or a sudden cramp could result in the death of a would-be rescuer.

The equation changed when his firefighter jumped in the water. Given the firefighter's age, his lack of protective and safety gear, and the water's temperature, John had good reason to think the firefighter might have needed help when he did not surface. Since John knew where the firefighter had been and could easily swim out to him, John was justified in entering the water—but he should have waited for the safety rope.


FiSerWare™
Software for the Fire Service

(For IBM Compatibles.)



- | | | |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| *BAR CODE SYSTEMS | *BUILDING INSPECTIONS | DATA BASE QUERY |
| *EQUIPMENT INVENTORY | FUND DRIVE | *HOSE RECORDS |
| *HYDRANT RECORDS | INCIDENT REPORTING | *TRAINING RECORDS |
| *PERSONNEL RECORDS | PRE-FIRE PLANNING | VEHICLE MAINTENANCE |

Call for free demo diskette



EXCEL DATA SYSTEMS, INC.
47 JOSEPH LN/GLENDALE HEIGHTS, IL 60139
(708) 690-2780 VOICE / FAX

For More Facts Circle 169 on Reply Card

"The tool no Rig should be without!"

DEMO DUFF

- * Removal of Plywood, Roof boards & Flake Plywood
- * Roofing materials provide no resistance
- * Drywall Removal
- * Locked Doors Opened
- * Go through interior & exterior walls
- * Eliminate window bar obstacles

- Quickly & Easily



Call Now for Information :

(414) 463-7132

\$89.99 + Tax + Shipping

Demolition Tool Co.
9551 W. Beckett Milwaukee, WI 53225



For More Facts Circle 170 on Reply Card



Cutters-Edge
VENTILATION SAWS • RESCUE SAWS • D8 GUARD/DEPTH GAUGE

1-800-742-EDGE

For More Facts Circle 172 on Reply Card

The risk-benefit analysis should be utilized at all department operations.

When John decided to enter the water after considering the risks, he had done so on the basis of a risk-benefit analysis. He weighed the benefit to be gained by entering the water with the risks involved. He did not have unlimited time to do this, and he had to make his decision based on the limited information gathered. He thought he could reach the firefighter and get him safely back with the help of the other firefighters on the shore. He did not think he could reach the people trapped in the car under the water with existing resources. When he realized the firefighter was not in trouble, the captain commenced a controlled rescue operation. Once again, he balanced the risks against what was to be gained.

A risk-benefit analysis must be made at all department operations. Should we go above the fire before a charged line is in place? Should we enter the apartment ahead of the line and search? Should we attempt a rescue at a haz-mat incident? First, we must decide what the risk is and what is to be gained by taking it.

A prime responsibility of each firefighter and officer is to return to his family at the end of the day.

If the fire building is a vacant one with little likelihood of occupants being trapped within, wait for the charged line and minimize risk taking. Consider an outside operation. On the other hand, if you hear someone yelling for help from inside the building, you must consider inside attack and rescue. It is important to remember, however, that just because someone needs to be rescued doesn't mean you will be able to rescue him. Never lose sight of the fact that your life figures into the equation, too. In a heavily involved building that is collapsing around you, you must take whatever action is necessary to preserve your own life. A prime responsibility of each firefighter and officer is to return to his family at the end of the day.

There is no reason to risk firefighters if the victim has already expired.

If entering the hot zone at a haz-mat incident will contaminate and seriously harm you, then wait for the proper protective gear and trained personnel. Remember, exposing firefighters to life-threatening danger is not warranted for simple body retrieval. There is no reason to risk firefighters' lives if the victim has already expired. On the other hand, quick action can save lives. The trick is to decide which course of action is the proper one.

To make a risk-benefit analysis,

1. *Recognize the hazard.* You must be trained to identify a dangerous situation whether it be at the fire scene, a haz-mat operation, or some other emergency.
2. *Know your capabilities.* At a fire, for instance, consider how much water is available to you. What is your available manpower? When will help arrive, and how much help will you get? What are your firefighters trained to do? What special equipment or protective gear is available?
3. *Formulate a realistic plan of action.* Once you recognize the danger and realize your capabilities, you can decide what you will be able to do safely.

The annals of firefighting are replete with stories of heroes who exceeded their capabilities in the face of life-threatening situations by making spectacular rescues. Unfortunately, they also contain the names of those who exceeded their capabilities and failed, paying the ultimate price. All are heroes.

Experience coupled with knowledge and judgment can make the difference between a live hero and a dead one. When experience is hard to come by, training must try to pick up the slack.

Firefighters are trained to take action in dangerous situations. Instead of joining the crowd and pointing at the danger, we act to save lives and property. If we have not first made a risk-benefit analysis, we may be acting foolishly. ■