



THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRUCK CHAUFFEUR POSITION

BY FRANK C. MONTAGNA

Dave had been a firefighter for six months. As a "probie," he was not yet allowed to carry the nozzle into the fire. Usually, he was the "go-fer." He was sent out to the street to bring back the needed tools, hoses, or nozzles. He thought that firefighting was exciting and glamorous, but he did not yet realize or accept the dangers involved. A multiple alarm in a commercial building was to change his naive and romantic view of firefighting to a more realistic one in which his knowledge and actions could mean the difference between life and death.

During this multiple-alarm incident, his hoseline initially was meant to back up the attack line; but the chief since had ordered the lieutenant to take the hose up to the next floor. There was not enough hose in the stretch to accomplish this new objective. Dave's officer told him to go out to the street for another length of 2½-inch hose and to bring it back into the building. They then would shut down the line, remove the nozzle, and hook up the new length to it. After reattaching the nozzle, they would be able to reach their ordered position.

As Dave walked out into the street,

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Photo by Rocco DiFrancesco.

he was awed by the volume of smoke issuing from the building. This was his first major fire. The two car fires, three stove fires, and one smoldering couch fire he had thus far helped to

extinguish had not prepared him for this experience. It seemed to him that smoke was boiling out from every crack in the structure. Above him, a firefighter on an aerial platform was

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venting the front windows of the building. As the firefighter broke each window with his six-foot pike pole, black smoke rushed out, obscuring the building—and occasionally the man in the platform—from Dave's view. All eyes in the street, including Dave's, were drawn to this spectacle.

The truckie broke another one of the windows. This time, the swirling smoke suddenly changed to flame and enveloped him. Instinctively, he dropped down behind the platform's heat shield, but he was unable to operate the platform control from this position. He could not remove himself from danger.

The chauffeur of the attack pumper instantly reacted to this danger. He scrambled up to his pumper's deck gun. He shouted, "Probie, give me water." Dave didn't know how.

To his horror, Dave realized that his lack of knowledge could result in the death or injury of the firefighter in the platform. Luckily for the endangered firefighter, the truck chauffeur was in position on the pedestal and thus was able to quickly remove that firefighter from the threatening inferno.

The picture of the helpless firefighter was indelibly burned into Dave's mind. As a result, he not only learned how to give water to the deck gun, but years later, after having been promoted to lieutenant, he frequently included pump operations in his drills. He would stress that every engine company firefighter should be able to perform at least the basic operations required to start water in the deck gun, in the booster line, and in a handline. Whenever possible, he would encourage truckies to acquire these skills as well.

ANOTHER LESSON

There is, however, another lesson to be learned from that day when the fire blew out onto the firefighter in the platform. What if the truck chauffeur had not been in position on his pedestal and alert to what was happening to that firefighter? What if the

truck chauffeur had been in the basement shutting off the utilities or had been injured and unable to perform his assigned function at the pedestal controls?

Truck chauffeurs perform many functions on the fireground. They may vent with their aerial ladders. They may enter and search from an accessible window. They may search for and operate sprinkler control valves. They may assist in forcing entry into a row of roll-down doors at a commercial building fire. They may help place portable ladders at a private dwelling fire. The list of tasks the chauffeur can, and often does, perform is long.

Nevertheless, ladder chauffeurs must keep in mind their primary function, the reason for which their expensive pieces of apparatus were purchased. At any time, a firefighter or civilian suddenly may appear at a window and may have only seconds to wait for a rescue before he must jump to escape the searing flames. The chauffeur's truck was purchased to effect this rescue. To do it, the chauffeur must be in position, on the pedestal and alert to what is happening.

Ladder company firefighters, including the chauffeur, could be transported to the fire in their own cars or even by public transportation, but only their unique piece of apparatus can make those upper-floor rescues. Without it, and without someone in position and able to operate it, lives will be lost.

Whatever task the first-due chauffeur or any truck chauffeur actively laddering the building performs on the fireground, he always must be in position to "make the rescue." He should not be committed to a task that could prevent him from operating the ladder or platform. In the rare situation in which he must make such a commitment, someone else—perhaps the second-due ladder chauffeur or some other properly trained firefighter—should take the chauffeur's position on the turntable. The aerial ladder chauffeur and the aerial platform chauffeur must keep these things

in mind. Both must remain in position to "make the rescue."

There is a temptation for the aerial platform chauffeur to leave the pedestal for other tasks once a firefighter is in position and operating from the platform. The logic used to justify this action is that the firefighter in the platform is covering the front of the building and can make any needed rescues, freeing the chauffeur to assist in other tasks. This should not be allowed.

CHAUFFEUR CRUCIAL TO PLATFORM FIREFIGHTER'S SAFETY

The aerial platform chauffeur, the pedestal man, serves as a crucial safety precaution for the firefighter in the platform. When operating at a fire, the firefighter in the platform tends to suffer from tunnel vision—that is to say, he sees the rescue or the fire he is extinguishing to the exclusion of all else. In addition, smoke and steam can obscure the view of other hazards. The chauffeur should be in position at the controls of the pedestal, getting the big picture and warning the firefighter in the platform of, or removing him from, danger.

The firefighter in the platform may not be aware of an overhead burning cornice threatening to fall onto the platform. The firefighter in the platform may not be aware of how close he or the boom has come to electrical lines. The chauffeur, watching out for such dangers, could warn of the dangers or move the firefighter out of the way. If fire vents out onto the firefighter in the platform, the chauffeur on the pedestal could immediately act to remove him from danger.

Emergency messages concerning the direction of the large-caliber stream or calls for help from trapped firefighters may not be heard by the "truckie" in the platform. The noises of firefighting or a defective portable radio can prevent it. The chauffeur should be in position on the pedestal monitoring all radio transmissions and relaying them when necessary, via intercom, to the firefighter in the platform.

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The aerial platform chauffeur—in position on the turntable at the controls of the pedestal—is an integral part of the operating team. He should take control of the platform whenever anyone, firefighter or civilian, is entering or leaving it. By switching control from the platform to the pedestal, accidental movement of the platform controls by a victim or rescuer can be prevented.

The list of firefighters and civilians saved by an alert chauffeur in position at the pedestal is long. The problem is that the frequency of such instances is small so that most of the time—but not *all* of the time—the chauffeur can get away with being out of position. When the chauffeur does chance being out of position, he is gambling; and the wager is life or death—most often not his own.

A dangerous variation of the aerial platform chauffeur's being out of position occurs when the chauffeur de-

cides to operate from the platform instead of from the pedestal. Leaving the pedestal position unmanned to make another pair of hands available for firefighting inside or at some other exterior location is a practice that jeopardizes the safety of all firefighters and civilians at the scene. Unless someone who is aware of the potential dangers and is trained to counteract them acts as pedestal man, the safety functions of the chauffeur, as listed above, and a whole host of others, are lost.

Without a pedestal man, a life-threatening situation that could be safely resolved by the mere pushing or pulling of a pedestal control lever can turn deadly for victim and rescuer alike. Without a pedestal man in position at the turntable of the aerial platform, a firefighter or civilian in need of rescue might not be noticed in time. Without an alert pedestal man closely monitoring boom movement and wall stability, the life-saving platform might be damaged and rendered useless for needed rescues.

At Dave's first big fire, had the aerial platform chauffeur been absent from the pedestal, the engine chauffeur perhaps could have jumped up onto the pedestal and saved the day. Perhaps not. One thing is certain: Dave could not have helped. Not only was he unable to operate the pumps, he also could not operate the pedestal.

Dave must accept part of the blame for this lack of training. He did not ask to be taught; he was content to function as a "go-fer," aspiring only to the venerated position of nozzleman. The pursuit of knowledge with regard to your job—firefighting—should be an all-consuming quest. Learning only engine work or truck work is not acceptable. At any given moment on the fireground, you may be called on to cross the line and to perform work usually done by the "other guys." Blaming an officer for not training you is no answer. You need to take the initiative. Ask to be trained. Ask the officer. Ask other firefighters. If you show a genuine desire and enthusiasm to learn, not many officers or firefighters will ignore your request. ■

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