



THE HAZARDS OF TRUCK COMPANY FREELANCING BY FRANK C. MONTAGNA

You are assigned to the truck company and are responding to a working fire in a four-story apartment building. The officer directs you to open the roof. The fire is on the third floor. As you climb the aerial ladder to the roof, you hear on your portable radio a report that a civilian may be trapped on the floor above the fire. You hit the roof and make a beeline for the rear fire escape. Additional companies are arriving at the scene, and on your portable radio you hear the chief assign one of them to search the floor above the fire. If you hustle, you may be able to beat them to it and make the rescue.

So what's the problem, you ask? Isn't a firefighter's primary function to save life? Isn't going for the rescue an attempt to fulfill that function? Yes, saving life is your primary function. No, going for that rescue may not fulfill that function.

WORKING AS A TEAM

When a firefighter is assigned to truck

work, he is assigned specific tasks. These tasks combined constitute the company's tactics for a specific type of building fire and are part of a *coordinated* fire attack on which rest fireground safety and success.

At this fire, if you are the individual or part of the team assigned to forcible entry, your job is to go to the fire apartment; gain entry; and, once inside, search for victims and fire and remove obstacles to the engine company's advance.

In the role of the driver/operator, your job is to position and set up your apparatus to facilitate needed rescues from the fire area and above. You will provide a means of egress for members operating on the roof and upper floors. You can vent windows with the aerial ladder. If immediate rescue is not needed, you can perform various tasks at the front of the building while remaining acutely aware of your primary responsibilities.

As the firefighter assigned to perform horizontal ventilation from the exterior, your job is to ventilate windows ahead of the advancing attack team. Then, if possible, you will enter the fire apartment from a window to conduct a quick primary search of rooms behind the fire. (In this dangerous position, you operate in the fire apartment alone and without the protection of the hose-line. For this reason, the horizontal vent position should be assigned to a well-trained and experienced member, as should the roof position.) If the truck operator is venting the front of the building, you should vent and search from another side of the fire. On lower floors, you would use a portable ladder. This tactic provides a two-pronged rescue effort for victims trapped in the fire apartment, with your venting allowing the attack team to advance more rapidly. If an

additional firefighter is not available to staff the outside vent position, then the incident commander can split the forcible entry team to cover this position or the roof man can drop down and perform this function *on completion* of his roof duties.

As the firefighter assigned to vent the roof, you go to the roof and survey the perimeter of the building, looking for extending fire and fallen or trapped civilians, and then report your findings to the officer or incident commander. (A portable radio must be issued to every firefighter assigned to operate at a location remote from the officer and other firefighters, to relay tactical information and request assistance when needed.) Then you must open the building's vertical channels (for example, bulkhead doors, scuttle covers, etc.), if applicable, and possibly vent the skylights and top-floor windows to remove smoke and heat from the building. In the case of a serious top-floor fire that could be extending into the cockloft, you should cut a hole in the roof directly over the fire.

FREELANCING

When you deviate from your assigned task, that task does not get done. If the roof man is preoccupied with making a rescue, the officer in command of the fire will be left without a visual assessment of conditions at the rear and sides of the building. Victims hanging out of windows or lying on the ground after jumping will go unreported, as will dangerous conditions, unusual building configurations, and extending fire. Vertical channels will not be vented, and civilians who unsuccessfully tried to exit the building via the roof door or scuttle will not be rescued.

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Venting from the roof prevents heat and fire gases from mushrooming down and endangering victims and firefighters. It facilitates the work of firefighters on the fire floor and above the fire. With vertical venting, untenable becomes tenable and, often, "rescues" become "removals." Not venting from the roof, on the other hand—in addition to its many disadvantages—will surely mean angry engine and forcible entry crews to reckon with after the fire.

I am not saying you never can deviate from your assigned task. That would be unrealistic. Saving life is a firefighter's first priority; should you encounter life in danger, you must act to either remove the danger or remove that life from the danger. But this in no way removes the urgent need for you to complete your assigned task.

How do you do both? Obviously, you can't perform your roof duties and make a rescue at the same time.

From your roof position, you may observe a panicked civilian clinging to a windowsill, prepared to jump. If you cannot make this rescue alone, you must call for the necessary help and tools. At the same time, you must calm and reassure the victim. Then you must vent the roof. Performing your assigned function will draw smoke and heat away from this victim's precarious perch,

enabling him, hopefully, to hold on until help arrives.

Your report of the victim's position will serve to spur on the interior team as well as direct the team to the victim's location. It may allow the incident commander to dispatch additional rescuers to an adjoining building to attempt to breach the wall to reach the victim.

Had you skipped your roof assignment and tried for the reported victim on the floor above the fire, you never may have seen the victim at the window. Not having seen him, you would not have been able to report his location to the incident commander or calm him. Not having received the benefit of your venting, he may have been forced to jump, risking not being noticed or assisted until much later in the fire. By that time, debris thrown or fallen from the building may have covered him from view. In trying for the reported victim on the floor above the fire, you may have lost the victim you might have saved.

With additional resources on the scene and operating, firefighters will be searching for the reported victim. There may in fact not have been a victim on the floor above. Experience teaches us that not all reported victims exist. Some already have escaped, and some were not home at the time of the

fire. Occasionally, the victim is a fabrication of a civilian who likes to see firefighters endanger themselves for no reason.

TRUE EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE

There are exceptions to the rule. Perhaps while climbing the stairs of the adjoining building to gain access to the roof of the fire building, you discover that the fire has extended to that exposure. In the hallway, you find an unconscious victim. You must act to save this victim. In such a case, you must report the presence of the victim and your need for help, as well as the fire extension, to the incident commander. The incident commander *must*, in turn, cover your position with another firefighter and send you help.

By removing this victim from danger and providing immediate medical treatment, you address a *known* life hazard before a *possible* life hazard. You perform your primary function—saving life. Though the situation warrants your not performing your assigned task, your actions do not constitute freelancing.

Always remember, however, that any deviation from your assigned task requires your immediate communication of that fact to your company officer and/or the incident commander.

* * *

When you stick to your assigned task, resisting the alluring call of possible glory that beckons you from elsewhere, possible victims are better served. You also better serve and protect the other firefighters operating at the scene by making their jobs easier. Staying with your assigned position also will help should you become injured and unable to call for help, since you can be found more quickly if you are where you're expected to be. (Remember: Your PASS device always should be activated on the fireground.) In the case of a collapse, the search for you will start where you are expected to have been.

When you are assigned a position by your truck officer, you should know what is required of you. Know where you should be and what you should do. If you must vary from the game plan, notify the incident commander and your officer. Freelancing puts everyone at risk. It jeopardizes victims and firefighters alike. Company and chief officers should discourage and not tolerate it. As a truck firefighter, you must work as part of the team, follow the game plan, and announce any necessary deviations from the plan. ■

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