

## **From the Front Seat**

By Harvey Eisner

In my job as editor-in-chief of Firehouse Magazine, I read numerous fire reports, view thousands of fire scene pictures and hear about all types of fire and emergency-related incidents each and every year. I can remember back in 1967, when I was 12, seeing pictures in the newspaper of a firefighter holding a scorched helmet that belonged to one of the 12 FDNY firefighters killed in the line of duty in Manhattan. The firefighters fell into a basement of a drug store on 23rd Street. The fire was the worst tragedy up to that time in the FDNY. Since 1967, hundreds of FDNY firefighters have died in the line of duty, including 343 after the World Trade Center.

Each year the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and the United States Fire Administration (USFA) tabulate statistics on line-of-duty deaths. Many of these occur on the fireground. A majority happen while firefighters and fire apparatus are responding and returning from incidents in both fire apparatus and private vehicles. Some of the deaths occur while operating on the highway or while firefighters are operating in the middle of the street.

There are varied reasons why firefighters die. I will explain and review many of these possibly preventable incidents from my perspective as editor-in-chief, current assistant fire chief and 36-year member of the fire service. I believe that some of the members

who died were caught in uncontrollable situations, while others probably should not have been operating where they were, or got themselves into dangerous and fatal situations.

## ***Response***

It seems that many firefighters, especially volunteers, when an alarm is received and broadcast over their pagers, respond hell bent on making the first truck out of the station. If they have to respond from home or work, they will try to beat the next firefighter to the fire station. They drive as fast as possible, despite sharing the road with increasing traffic, drivers who do not care, drivers who do not hear the honking horn, drivers who do not see the flashing blue emergency response lights, and drivers who are listening to loud music or talking on their cell phones. Most of the calls are minor in nature or automatic alarms where a caller already has said it is a false alarm and to disregard.

If and when the apparatus does respond, many drivers act like there are people trapped, instead of driving at a reduced speed without lights or sirens to reduce the potential risk of having an accident. Go fast and make a lot of noise so the public thinks you are doing your job! The apparatus might not have enough power to make it up that big hill so instead of slowing down and stopping for a light or stop sign at the bottom, some drivers will chance going through the intersection so they can drive without slowing down and losing momentum. However, you can only be lucky so many times. I don't think that many people driving fire apparatus realize the liability or criminal

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charges that can be brought if they are involved in an incident. A fire chief once showed me a video of a responding fire apparatus driving right through several red lights without stopping or slowing down, then slamming on its brakes at the next intersection. The same department suffered an accident a few months earlier, when an apparatus went through a red light and collided with a car, killing three civilians. Makes you wonder.

There are many companies that try to beat another nearby company to the scene; this way they can get in to fight the fire without standing around and watching as a second-due unit. I have heard stories that the second or third closest unit, by traveling very fast, will try to arrive first and capture the glory of the firefight despite being located much further away from the scene of the incident. It goes back to the volunteer days in New York where the first company to raise a ladder to the front of the building was considered first to arrive. Many drivers are unaware of the consequences that may occur to themselves personally and to their fire company or department, if they are involved in an accident. When an order is relayed over the radio to respond with caution or at a reduced speed into the incident by a person on scene, firefighters probably don't realize that the communications are usually taped. Every word has been recorded for a lawyer to use against them if the matter winds up in litigation. Why was the apparatus still responding at a high rate of speed or going through red lights at an intersection when the order was given to slow down?

When you arrive at an incident, perhaps some first responders need to slow down and look at what you have upon arrival, instead of rushing in and getting into trouble.

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Several firefighters have fallen through fire-weakened floors into the basement where they were trapped and killed. Other firefighters were unable to reach them due to the fire, heat and smoke conditions. Just because there are other firefighters on scene or a Rapid Intervention Team standing by does not mean in each situation that firefighters will be successful in reaching their trapped comrades in time to save their lives. Trapped firefighters need to do their share; when becoming trapped or disoriented, by calling for help right away when finding they are in trouble. Time is of the essence. When the trapped firefighter is running out of air, every second counts.

The Phoenix, AZ, Fire Department did a training and evaluation drill with every member of the department, after a firefighter died in a supermarket fire. They found it took about a dozen firefighters to locate and remove one trapped firefighter, and that two members of the responding crew typically would get themselves into trouble during the rescue operation.

Speaking of precious breathing air, a point was raised in the area of air management. When asked how much air is in a typical cylinder, a group of firefighters said there was 30 minutes in small cylinders. When asked if the air cylinder would last 30 minutes, each firefighter answered that it would last between 15 and 20 minutes, depending on the experience of the wearer, age, and task they were performing at the time. The firefighters mentioned that, at their initial training, the manufacturer said the cylinder would last that amount time. The instructor, however, stated that each firefighter consumes the breathing air at a different rate. If a crew of four entered a fire building

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and each had a different air consumption rate, each member would reach a low-air alarm at a different time and would have to exit at a different time.

My own personal opinion is that there should be a warning on the breathing apparatus when you reach 50% of the air left in the cylinder. This would be in addition to the new technology of a heads-up display visible in the face mask showing the amount of air remaining in the cylinder, which is important. If you travel 100 feet inside a building and the low-air warning is heard, then you still have to return the same amount of distance you traveled inside to make it safely outside.

When some firefighters see fire, they run around the fireground like a chicken with its head cut off. First of all, before you enter this well-involved fire building, think: are the people or the building savable? Several recent fire incidents noted that firefighters made aggressive interior searches for possible occupants when in fact there was no one to save. Firefighters became trapped and died in the process. The FDNY noted recently in a safety report that the majority of their firefighters who died did so in buildings where there was no life hazard.

The FDNY recently stated to the members of the department:

We are not learning

We are not changing

We are not adapting

These findings were noted after a firefighter fell from the top of an aerial ladder and died when he was trying to reach the roof of a fire building. He was carrying too much equipment and was attempting to get off the aerial ladder at the wrong location. He tried to get off onto the top of a stairway bulkhead instead of the roof itself. These revelations are being looked at and emphasized to change the mindset of members.

### ***Lightweight construction***

There have been several line of duty deaths recorded in buildings built of lightweight construction. Further training into these particular dangers that firefighters face is needed.

### ***Mentality***

Some firefighters, fire officers and chiefs think that many of their members just don't get it because they see that safety issues are neglected by many members. It is true that you are supposed to be in full turnout gear before you board the apparatus. You are supposed to be seat belted in on every response. It is a fact of life that putting on your gear, wearing the seat belt, and trying to strap into an air pack en route, aboard a moving and shaking fire apparatus responding to an incident, is difficult and dangerous at best.

### ***What we are taught***

The most important time in a new firefighters' training occurs when he or she goes through some type of academy or probationary training period. The recruit is drilled

about how to do everything and anything. The officers who run many of these recruit schools run them like semi-military operations. When the firefighter reaches the fire station, veterans may lead the new recruits astray:” We don’t do it that way here; this is an easier way to do things.” Many firefighters fall into one of three categories: 1) those who study and advance through the ranks, are into the job, read fire magazines, attend conferences and educational seminar; 2) those who do what they have to do every tour and remain status quo; and 3) those who do the least to get by and take the maximum advantage of what is available to the fire service in the form of rewards and benefits.

### ***Aggressive operations***

Firefighters are taught to be aggressive. They were always taught that they had to accomplish every task, no fire too big, and no challenge too great. There is a sort of kitchen gung-ho mentality that overtakes some people. I remember that we first published some articles on giving a mayday call several years ago, when the topic was fairly new. The article said you shouldn’t be embarrassed to give a mayday call if you are in trouble just because someone will ridicule you later in the kitchen if it wasn’t necessary. It is better that you should live, and worry about any petty criticism later.

### ***Building inspection***

Many firefighters, officers and chiefs don’t want to be bothered if they have to go out and perform some other duties besides fighting fires. According to the NFPA the annual number of fires continues to decline. After a recent fire in New York, where two firefighters died in a collapse after questionable renovations were made to a structure,

some questioned the need to conduct further building inspections. Others pointed out that they were the ones who were going to have to be the first to enter the buildings in question in their response area, so why shouldn't they have first-hand knowledge of the hazards these structures may have.

These aren't all the answers to questions about why firefighters die. There are multiple reasons, of course, and then there are the unanticipated situations that may be uncontrollable. But there is a great deal to think about, especially by those who respond and put themselves in harm's way.

### ***About the Symposium***

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