25 to Survive: The Residential Building Fire
New York State Professional Firefighters Association
Health and Safety Seminar

Introduction: WHY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT THE RESIDENTIAL BUILDING FIRE?

Our job as firefighters, in the simplest of terms, is to save lives and property. This has always been the credo of the firefighter and fire department. As generations of fire service members pass our credo remains the same. Yet, we have had major modifications in how we fight fires. Change hasn't always come easy; our bold traditions sometimes tie our hands when there was a need for adaptations.

More firefighters are seriously injured and killed while operating at residential building fires than at any other building type we encounter. This presentation will address 25 critical firefighting issues common to the residential building. These 25 topics are obviously, by far, not an exhaustive and comprehensive list. They are however, repeatedly noted in recent "near miss reports" and National Institute Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) recommendations in many of our Line of Duty Deaths (LODD). They have also been seen in our personal experiences at fires in these buildings and in our teachings throughout the fire service.

These grim realizations reinforces the need for all firefighters, from the probationary firefighter to the Chief Officer, to have a thorough knowledge of these structures and how fire will travel through the residential building. Additionally, all personnel need to know sound strategies and tactics and how to employ them in order to fight these fires successfully.

The crux of this program will identify 25 prevalent and vital areas necessary for firefighters and company officers to address when called to combat fires in residential buildings. These critical issues are compiled from the lecturer's experiences, from data provided in several recent line-of-duty deaths, and "close call" reports. We will address topics from before the response through kitchen table critiques post incident. We will discuss the application of various residential operational tactics for Engine, Ladder, and Rescue Companies.

BECOMING COMBAT READY

Chapter 1: 'It's all about me'...Your Personal Attitude:

You must be "Combat Ready" as a firefighter or company officer. Being Combat Ready starts and ends with your personal attitude. Your fitness level, your efforts in bettering yourself, your attitude towards your present leadership, your views on recruitment, team building, esprit de corps etc...YOUR ATTITUDE will transcend what others may think and see that you are all about. Every run for a fire IS the biggest fire of your career until you get there and realize different!

Notes:

Chapter 2: 'Combat Ready' Fire Apparatus:

Setup your rig for **your** first due. Your engine should be setup to reflect your typical manpower and the buildings & challenges in your area. Many departments operate with the same setup they had 50 years ago, "just because" or to emulate the setups of "big city" fire departments. Borrowing ideas from other places is great – IF THAT IDEA FITS YOUR AREA.

Notes:

Chapter 3: 'Routine':

Nothing we ever do in firefighting is really ever "routine". Take time on the "non emergency" runs to plan for 'real' emergencies i.e. "FIRES". Use the runs for malfunctioning CO detectors, water leaks, and EMS runs to take the time to notice your surroundings. The next time you are here it might be lights out with people reported trapped.

Notes:

Chapter 4: 'We Are Aggressive':

There is a delicate balance between an "aggressive company" and/or an "aggressive fire department" and just running around at a fire breaking stuff. You must realize that for every fireground action you perform, there will be a reaction. You must be a student of fire behavior; you must be prepared to handle what it is you created. Aggressiveness should be linked with the ability to get the job done quickly and efficiently.

Notes:

Chapter 5: OUR SCBA...Really, it's the only time you have:

When it's done...so are you! If you are unaware of when your SCBA is running empty or how to handle malfunctions during the operation, what are you going to do? You may think you're a great firefighter; well, you can only operate the nozzle, find the trapped kids, make that push to floor above if you have the AIR. You must know the "in's and out's" of your SCBA. You should be as comfortable in it as you are in your favorite pair of shoes.

Notes:

DEVELOPING THE MASTERY OF FIREFIGHTING

Chapter 6: 'Brick, Sticks and Straw' - 3 Little Pigs Building Construction:

What are the concerns with fire travel in buildings built before the lightweight truss (say mid 70's?) and how does that differ with the fire travel in those built today? We need to know how to recognize Old vs. New construction styles and tell what is the differences are in terms of fire operations. How a building is going to act when on fire is paramount.

Notes:

Chapter 7: 'Get out there!':

This is what brought you to this conference; you are one of the "doers" in your dept. Get out there and see what's going on in your first due areas! Don't sit back and wait for the first fire in that new development. Get out there and view it, pre-plan it and drill in it, appoint a member to sit in on building department meetings. While this isn't the glory of the nozzle, it may just save a life the same way, with proper planning. FAILING TO PLAN IS PLANING TO FAIL.

Notes:

Chapter 8: 'Nothing Showing means... NOTHING':

You cannot garner any information as to what may be going on at an incident scene with this statement heard over the radio...other than there is "nothing showing." Have a department policy that for an on-scene statement. It will benchmark the incident when the first arrives and allow others to better assess what they are headed into.

Notes:

Chapter 9: Modern Fire Behavior, "Taking Science to the Street':

Fire behavior is changing. It is up to us to stay abreast of the changes that are occurring. Take time to read, absorb and understand the way the fires are reacting to today's environment. We must understand that the great majority of fires are ventilation limited. We must prepare, practice, and anticipate these new changes and prepare ourselves.

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Notes:

Chapter 10: 'Stairway to Heaven...or Hell' - The Stairs:

Where are they commonly found in the residential homes where you live/work? What are the common salient construction features? You must, when coming upon steps... Notify, Protect, Keep Clear, and perhaps start your operation from them. Make the move, stand fast, hold what you got...these are all stair related questions that you may have to ask yourself.

Notes:

Chapter 11: 'Da Fire Below'...Basements:

They aren't just for grandma's junk anymore; often times they are now for GRANDMA! Basement fires are certainly some of the toughest fires that we fight. Most homes also have the homes "guts" down there (boiler, hot water heaters, gas/water shut offs..). Usually there is just one way in and one way out. Fire attack must be coordinated and someone MUST protect the top of those stairs with a hoseline.

Notes:

Chapter 12: 'The 360'- Who and Why?

Whoever is tasked with the 360-check must relay any unexpected findings to all units on the fireground. Often times, we cannot get a full grasp of what is going on until we see or get a report from the rear and all sides. Make sure that someone, early in the operation gets a good look at all "6" sides of the fire. 6 sides being: all 4 exposures...above and below the fire!

Notes:

Chapter 13: 'Can I talk now?' Firegound Communications:

While almost everyone has a portable radio on the fireground today, we must exercise discipline. Having the ability to communicate and knowing the time to do it are 2 separate things. Use CAN (Conditions, Actions, Needs) reports to make all units and the IC aware of progress and concerns. Have policy on Progress Reports, Urgent and Mayday messages and KNOW WHEN TO GIVE THEM.

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Notes:

ENGINE COMPANY OPERATIONS

Chapter 14: Pre-planned Riding Assignments - ENGINE:

Why do we reinvent the wheel every fire we go to? Having pre-planned riding positions help to set the expectations of the crew. It aids in accountability and crew integrity. It teaches the teamwork and the importance of working together.

Notes:

Chapter 15: 'Back-up is a position, not a direction'- The Back-Up Position:

Backup firefighters can make or break the operation. He or she has to keep enough line so that the nozzleman can focus on the operation of the nozzle. The nozzleman often gets the glory when the fire is extinguished, but in reality he or she got the easiest job. The end result of a poor backup firefighter can lead to the engine company failing as a whole.

Notes:

Chapter 16: 'Where is my water'?

Have the wheels in motion for water supply every time you go out the door. If you're responding to a reported structural fire, PUT HOSE BETWEEN YOUR WATER SUPPLY & YOUR RIG EVERYTIME. The Engine Company's job is to always BRING WATER!

Notes:

Chapter 17: 'Come on, one more room!' - Line Selection:

Pre-connected lines certainly are the norm in today's fire service. We need to know what to do when the fire is beyond the reach of the pre-connected lines length. Size of the line (diameter) also has a factor in making that last room. The increase in diameter has a direct affect on its ability to be maneuvered.

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Notes:

Chapter 18: 'Go ahead, HIT IT!' - Nozzles:

We know that we said there is no order to this list, but there is a reason why we put nozzles last. They are the last line of defense between the firefighter and the seat of the fire. Many failures can occur here, what do YOU have and how can you handle a malfunction in an IDLH. Create a Nozzle inspection program and know the how to overcome any and all obstacles that may be thrown in your path. Remember, you can have a great water supply, a perfectly estimated stretch, the line brought flawlessly to the fire door, but if you can't get water to come out of the nozzle...everything is for naught.

Notes:

TRUCK COMPANY OPERATIONS

Chapter 19: Look, Listen & Feel:

Detail recognition inside the residential building will normally help keep you oriented. It's not so much guessing WHERE you are..."LOOK, LISTEN and FEEL," this may just TELL you where you are!!!...kitchen chairs, sofas, mattress, radiators.. WE live in these houses BROTHERS AND SISTERS, lets not DIE in them!!! Slow down and THINK. STAY AWARE of your surroundings by Looking (below the thermal layer), Listening (for civilians, hoseline operation, saws) and Feeling (use gloved hands to identify common household items)!

Notes:

Chapter 20: 'Bull in a China Shop' - Truck Work:

"Truck work" must get done at every fire and it must get done early...EVEN IF YOU DON'T HAVE A "PHYSICAL" TRUCK ON-SCENE. You do not, and should not, wait for the Truck apparatus to arrive to start "Truck Work". Searches and Ventilation must occur simultaneously with fire attack. If someone does not get Truck work started early on, lives and property will be lost.

Notes:

Chapter 21: Pre-Planned Riding Assignments - TRUCK:

"2 Team" truck work increases the effectiveness of even smaller staffed departments. At every residential building fire, there are "truck company" duties both inside and outside the structure that must be accomplished. A truck company needs a minimum crew of 3 to be effective. Commanders who note truck companies responding with 2 members should make plans to augment staffing immediately. With a minimum crew of 3 persons an efficient truck company can establish inside and outside duties, and give them pre-determined assignments.

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Notes:

Chapter 22: 'We Save Lives':

Everyone is out when WE say they are out. Neighbors and even the Police are great with saying "this and that", but ultimately WE are responsible to be certain that everyone is out! This being said, we must search with purpose and direction. Use the TIC as a tool to effect excellent and thorough searches.

Notes:

Chapter 23: 'Ladders, Ladders Everywhere':

How may runs do we get every year for civilians falling off ladders? Portable ladders are put into position and placed on the fireground by us, for us. If we wind up taking a civilian out on them, great...but most of the time they are there for us to get in and out of the building. Get into good habits and throw portable ladders at every fire. Place them in this order; at a minimum one to the fire floor, one to the floor above, then to the top floor... then those in between as needed.

Notes:

Chapter 24: 'To the... ROOF!?!?' - Ventilation:

Especially in limited manpower situations, we must decide upon who, where, and when to begin our ventilation. These decisions are usually based on the number of personnel initially on the scene. As such, the debate of Vertical vs. Horizontal ventilation will present itself.

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Notes:

Chapter 25: 'VEIS' - Probability in Search:

The technique of "Vent, Enter, Isolate, and Search" (VEIS) does indeed saves lives, yet it comes with inherent risks. VEIS should not be done willy-nilly. It must be done with purpose and based on probability.

Notes:

Want more information?

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