

# FREELANCING ON THE ENGINE COMPANY

BY FRANK C. MONTAGNA

Captain DeHaviland of Engine Company #5 didn't like these "fire-proof" building fires. They were too hot. There usually was only one way to access the fire. There was no fire escape, and ladders often were useless. There was too much hardware between the nozzle and the pumper. Things could go wrong. Having been in the department for 25 years, he had been to enough of this kind of fire to know that it was important to "drill."

## THE MENTAL CHECKLIST

As he and his three team members rode up in the elevator, he began running through his mental checklist.

Smoke was showing from several of the 21st-floor windows of the apartment building. "We've definitely got something," thought Captain

DeHaviland. He sized up his crew. "They are all young," he thought. "They will do anything and fear nothing. I'll have to keep them on a short leash."

Getting back to his checklist, he noted that all the required tools were on board the elevator. They had brought into the elevator with them three lengths of folded 2½-inch hose and the high-rise kit—a canvas bag containing the solid-stream nozzle, a pipe wrench, spanners, and fittings. All four had their air packs turned on and their face pieces in the standby position. The young firefighters' faces showed excitement, expectation, and some tension—but no fear. "They don't know enough to be afraid," Captain DeHaviland observed. "This is some great adventure to them."

Captain DeHaviland knew enough to be afraid. He was always a little afraid as he prepared to go into action—not afraid enough to make him back off from his duties, but enough to make him careful. Over the years, his caution had saved many a firefighter from unnecessary injuries—and a few from death. He was cautious but still aggressive, and he tried to teach his firefighters to be the same way.

Most of the firefighters who worked under his watchful eye eventually

learned to temper their aggressiveness with caution. This, however, took time; the crew today was young and eager. The captain knew that these firefighters longed for opportunities to prove themselves as firefighters and as heroes.

Continuing on with his checklist, he looked at the elevator control panel. He already had punched in precautionary stops at five-floor intervals. These stops would alert them to any malfunction in the elevator and would allow them time to stop it and escape should it become necessary. Experience had taught him that elevators could behave erratically when subjected to the heat and smoke of a fire. He planned to get off the elevator at the 19th floor, providing his crew a two-floor margin of error.

He recalled being in an elevator whose doors had opened onto the fire floor. It was hot and smoky, and his team did not have their masks ready. He and the others in the elevator managed to find the stairs quickly and suffered only minor burns. He was lucky that time, and he was committed to seeing that it never happened to him again. Now, before entering the elevator, he always checked to see where the stairs were in relation to it. Safe in this knowledge, he felt he would be able to find and use the

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## FREELANCING

stairs as an escape route should the need arise.

### PREPARING FOR OPERATIONS

En route, the captain had heard on the apparatus radio that the truck company would be delayed. As they collected their hose, Captain DeHaviland asked one of the firefighters to get him the forcible entry tools. He carried them into the elevator and up

the stairs. He liked the idea of always having "the tools" in the elevator. In case the car stalled, they at least would be able to force the elevator door and possibly rescue themselves.

The tools also would be used to force the apartment door or, if it were locked, the stair door should the truck's forcible entry team be delayed. Forcible entry would be no problem for his firefighters; they are trained in it on a regular basis.

They got off on the 19th floor as planned, quickly found and entered

the stairwell containing the standpipe, and began their two-story climb. On the fire floor, they found the hallway door closed but not locked.

Captain DeHaviland had verified the apartment number, 21H, by questioning the distraught occupant in the lobby. The captain had been told that the fire had started in a pot on the stove and had extended to the curtains. At that point, the occupant ran out of the apartment.

The captain put down the forcible entry tools and felt the door. It was hot. Crouching down, he carefully opened the stair door to the fire floor a crack. Black, hot smoke boiled into and up the stairway. "It appears as though the occupant didn't close the apartment door on the way out," he mentally noted. The hall was hot, and the smoke was choking him. He closed the hall door.

He called to his nozzleman, "Get the line hooked up to the standpipe and flaked up the stairs. I'm going to look at the layout on the floor below. Wait for me here." He then went to the floor below, found apartment 20H, and knocked on the door. After a few moments, a woman opened the door. The captain explained to her that there was a fire on the floor above and that he needed to see the layout of this apartment. She opened the door for him. He peeked into the apartment, got an idea of the layout, then turned and hurried back to join the nozzle team upstairs. He thought, "It would be nice to have a truck search the hall for victims, but the best thing I can do for any victim now is to extinguish that fire as quickly as possible."

### THE FREELANCING MISTAKE

Even though only a little time had elapsed while waiting for the captain, the nozzleman was getting anxious. The pressure reducer was removed. The line was hooked up, bled, charged, and flaked up the stairs. He cracked the door open and peered out into the blackness beyond. It was hot. It was very hot. He inched out into the corridor and was forced by the high heat to crouch low. He

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thought he could tell from which direction the heat was coming—the left. "If we don't get water on it soon, it will flash over," he reasoned.

The nozzleman was the senior firefighter in the company that day—with all of two years' experience. He decided to move into the hall without the captain and try to reach the fire apartment. He snapped his regulator into his face piece and began to move in. The others followed him, eager to start fighting this fire.

Meanwhile, on his way back up the stairs, the captain thought, "OK, it's to the right and down six doors on the left-hand side. Once inside the apartment, we go to the right." His thoughts were interrupted by the sight of the vacant stair landing and the black smoke pushing through the partially opened stair landing door and up the stairway.

"What the ... Where are they?" he stammered, as he quickly fastened his regulator into position. He knew what had happened and why. He knew where they were. He'd really give it to them when this was over, but right now he just hoped they hadn't gotten into trouble. But they had.

As the nozzleman moved down the hall in the wrong direction, it kept getting hotter, so he moved faster. He no longer was sure that he was going in the right direction. The heat seemed to be coming from everywhere at once. He felt his backup man close behind him as he collided with the wall at the wrong end of the corridor. Turning left, he collided with an apartment door. He was confused. Why hadn't he found the fire apartment? He must have gone the wrong way.

Realizing his error, he tried to back-track, but the other two members of the team were right behind him. "Back out. Back out!" he screamed into his face piece. The backup man heard him and tried to, but the third man, unable to hear the nozzleman, kept right on trying to advance the line.

The nozzleman, feeling his ears burning, attempted to point the nozzle up, planning to cool the ceiling

He couldn't. As he maneuvered the nozzle, he slipped and fell down on top of the line with the backup man on top of him. That was when he saw streaks of red over his head; unknown to him, sporadic tongues of flame started licking out of the top of the open stairway door. Soon, the hall would flash over.

As the heat increased, the third man on the line stood up and bolted for the door. He ran, his neck and ears burning, into the captain, who was crawling toward him. The captain grabbed

him, pulled him down, and told him, "Get down, crawl, and follow the line out."

The backup man climbed off the nozzleman and rolled into a doorway. All he could think of was the pain in his neck, ears, and wrists. They were burning. He rolled up into the fetal position, trying to cover the burning areas of exposed flesh.

The heat was intense. "It will flash over soon," thought the captain. "I've got to get them out."

The nozzleman tried to lift the

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nozzle and operate it, but the pain of his burning flesh allowed him to think only of escaping the heat. He started to crawl back on the line and met the captain. "Who is this?" the captain asked. The nozzleman told him. "Where is your backup?" the captain demanded to know. "I don't know," answered the nozzleman.

### WHAT WENT WRONG?

This type of thing happens. It will happen again. The captain made the right moves. His firefighters were trained. He brought the forcible entry tools, took precautions on the elevator, and got the layout of the fire floor from the floor below. He told them to wait for him. What went wrong?

The captain might have avoided this fiasco had he stopped on the floor below before going up to the fire floor. In this way, he could have observed the layout there and arrived upstairs to the fire before his crew was ready to move in. That, however, would have prevented him from observing the conditions on the fire floor and perhaps from making called-for revisions in tactics. Had the conditions been less severe, he might have decided to immediately move down the hall and close the apartment door while the line was being hooked up.

In any case, the problem was not the short delay caused by Captain DeHaviland's going back down to the floor below. The problem was created when inexperience and bravado replaced training and discipline. The nozzleman was neither authorized nor qualified to make the decision to advance the line. He made the decision based on inadequate information. The others, with less knowledge and less experience, just followed the lead of the senior firefighter.

Certain decisions on the fireground should be made only by the officer in charge of the hoseline. Advancing the line is one of them. If the officer says "Advance," you advance; if the order is "Stop" or "Wait," you do it. The initial direction of the advance is for

the officer to decide, as is—should the need arise—the decision to back out. Beginning to flow water on the fire and shutting down the stream also are decisions to be made by the officer. That is not to say that in an emergency, the nozzleman can't open the line to protect the firefighters. Which type of stream to be used, straight or fog, also is the decision of the officer.

Among the tasks and decisions that can be delegated to properly trained firefighters are the following:

- Engine company firefighters should be trained to bring the proper tools and hose into the building without supervision. They should know that at most private dwelling fires, unless told otherwise by their officer, they should stretch 1½- or 1¾-inch hose. At a commercial building fire or a well-developed fire in a private dwelling, they should expect to stretch 2½-inch hose. For a high-rise building with a standpipe, they should automatically carry in rolled-up 2½-inch hose along with the high-rise kit.

- They should be able to hook up to the standpipe and remove or deactivate the pressure-reducing device without supervision. When the officer tells them to, they should be able to quickly advance the line to the fire.

### FOCUS ON THE OVERALL OPERATION

Once the firefighters have been trained to perform these functions unsupervised, the officer then is able to focus knowledge, experience, and attention on other matters vital to the success and safety of the operation and can note all that is going on.

When you pull up to a burning building and see smoke or flames issuing from it, your attention begins to focus exclusively on your specific firefighting task. If you are a truckie, you think, Force entry, vent, and rescue. If you are an engine company firefighter, you focus on the tasks of getting the hose to the fire and flowing water onto it. As you are readying yourself to move into a burning room by bleeding the line, adjusting your mask and other protective gear, you begin to develop tunnel vision—that is to say, you see your task, moving

down the hall and extinguishing the fire, to the exclusion of all other tasks at the fire. In reality, your task is only a part of the overall fireground strategy. True, it is an important part; but there is a lot going on around you that you just won't see if you develop tunnel vision.

Officers cannot allow tunnel vision to affect them. They must do the following:

- Monitor conditions as the line moves in, being aware not only of the fire in front of the team but also of conditions above, below, around, and behind it.

- Consider alternate escape routes and move quickly to bring firefighters out to safety, if conditions dictate it.

- Be aware of how one unit's actions will affect others on the scene, both firefighters and victims, and how the actions of others will affect the unit. Has someone gone above the fire? Is someone entering the fire area from a fire escape? Is someone, civilian or firefighter, reported trapped? Is the fire being vented? Perhaps it can't be vented. All these things can alter tactics and affect the unit's safety and effectiveness.

- Monitor the radio for pertinent information and report to the incident commander on the progress made and problems that arise, initiating communications with the incident commander if there is information to relay.

Officers have knowledge gained from experience and study. This knowledge is used to keep the team safe while pushing into the hostile environment of a fire.

The firefighters involved in this incident learned a hard lesson. It will make them more cautious. It should make them think twice before freelancing. It may help to form them into cautious lieutenants, captains, or chiefs. The problem is that by the time they become officers, there will be a new generation of firefighters who will do anything and fear nothing. These young firefighters also will need to be trained and restrained. We must teach these hard-learned lessons to the next generation. ■