

BACK TO TRAINING

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BY FRANK C. MONTAGNA

Lately, in the fire station, we spend time discussing the September 11 tragedy at the World Trade Center. What occurred, how it was done, who did it, how we responded, who responded, who died, and who survived are all topics for discussion. We dissect and reexamine our failures and our successes. We consider what we did and what we could have done before and after the attack. After heatedly debating all of the above and more, we begin again.

Where were you when you heard about it? How did you survive? How are the families doing? When is the next funeral or memorial service? This endless supply of topics fills our days at the fire station. When there is a lull in the conversation, a news story about the disaster, featuring the villains, the victims, or the heroes, comes on TV. Afterward, the dialogue begins anew. It's only natural.

This vicious attack wounded all of us in the Fire Department of New York. We lost our brother firefighters, our family members, and our friends. We, together with firefighters from around the country and around the world, worked tirelessly, side by side, in the hell that was once the Twin Towers, looking first for survivors and later, sadly, for their remains. In the fire station we feel compelled to talk about what we have done and could not do. We agonize over what we could have done better and how the current operation can be improved.

In light of what we have been through as a fire department and as a nation, and considering the ongoing threat of additional terrorism, we now need to train on terrorism-related topics. We should all be trained to some degree in the type of search and rescue that the FEMA USAR teams have mastered. Our haz-mat knowledge and awareness should be honed more keenly. Every firefighter should be more knowledgeable and aware of biological threats. We have a truly monumental task ahead of us. We are the first line of defense and need to train accordingly, but what about fires?

The last time I checked, we still respond to oil burner emergencies; people still fall asleep in their beds and chairs with cigarettes, and when a fire starts, we respond. Sprinkler and carbon monoxide alarms still sound, and we go to investigate and correct the problem. Gas leaks, water leaks, and car fires still happen. Buildings still burn, and firefighters still run into them.

Before the World Trade Center attack, we drilled regularly on all of these types of responses, and more. At these drills, the wide-eyed new recruit learned facts and skills that might someday save his, a civilian's, or a fellow firefighter's life. The seasoned

veteran trained to keep his skills sharp and to learn how to use new tools and perform new procedures.

Nothing has changed since we suffered the devastating loss of rescue workers and civilians. Our training needs have not diminished; they have increased. In the past, we had the luxury of ongoing and consistent training; it was part of our tradition. Although we may not have always appreciated or looked forward to it, we have learned from it. Because of this training, we are good at what we do.

Unfortunately, in many cases, the discussion of our thoughts, fears, and tears from September 11 have supplanted necessary drills. As a result, the new firefighter may not receive the benefit of this necessary training, and the seasoned firefighter may have neglected honing his hard-earned skills. Simply stated, if we do not train, we will not be good at what we do; for firefighters, that can be deadly.

We need to get training back on track as we bury our dead, lick our wounds, and move on to new challenges. Note I said as we bury our dead, not after we bury our dead. We can't wait! Training must pick up where it left off. We owe it to the new firefighters, the civilians we protect, and our own families who, rightly so, expect us to come home after our tours in the fire station. We must train to remain effective, efficient, and safe.

Even though we must add new terrorism-related training to our already extensive list of training topics, we should not do it at the expense of the basic firefighting training requirements. We are firefighters every minute of every day and as such may be called on to perform routine to extremely hazardous duty at any time. We must be prepared, and that means that we must train.

Chiefs and company officers need to talk to their firefighters and help them make sense about what has happened, but they also must gently but firmly nudge their troops back into the routine of regular training. It's necessary and even therapeutic to talk about recent events. We couldn't stop even if we tried, but we must ensure that the necessary time and effort are put into training. It's a matter of life and death.

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