

PERFORM SEARCH AT CAR FIRES, TOO

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By Frank C. Montagna

It is the middle of the night. You pull into an unlit, secluded, wooded area to extinguish a fully involved car fire. Flames fill the passenger compartment and light the dark sky. After you pull the preconnected 1 3/4-inch hose off of the pumper, your pump operator charges the line and the fire is easily extinguished with the water from your booster tank. You bang on the car roof and doors, looking to see if any sparks present themselves. After wetting down the engine compartment, you pop the trunk and wet it down for good measure. Then you expend the remaining water in your booster tank on the surrounding foliage. There will be no rekindle after you leave. As your line is taken up, you play the beam from your flashlight onto and into the car and the brush that surrounds it. Seeing no problem, you take up from the scene.

The next day, a tow truck pulls up to the car. He is under city contract to pick up abandoned cars and to tow them to the junkyard. As the driver readies this car for its final trip, he looks into the gutted passenger compartment. In the light of day, he sees what the firefighters missed when the car was illuminated by the beams of their flashlights in the dark of night. He quickly radios his dispatcher and requests that the police respond to the scene. He has found charred human remains in the back seat of the car.

The fire crew missed the victim. No doubt, the death occurred before their arrival, so they bear no responsibility for the death, but missing the victim was unprofessional. Why did this happen?

This fire occurred in a secluded, unlit area. The only illumination available was from the firefighters' flashlights. Sometimes, a badly burned victim is not easily recognizable as something that was once human. The body may be broken apart and blackened, blending into the tangled and charred remains of the seat cushion and springs. Finding it requires more than a cursory look from a distance. Getting up close to the debris, moving it around, and providing as much illumination as possible will help identify the amorphous remains.

We typically perform a primary and secondary search at structural fires, so why not at car fires? Was the fire set to destroy evidence related to a homicide? Is there a body in the trunk or under the car? If the fire was the result of a vehicular accident, a victim might be hidden by crushed portions of the car, or he might have been thrown out and under the car. He could even have been jettisoned into nearby bushes. A fully involved car fire likely contains no survivors, but it may contain a victim's remains. Finding those remains is part of our job.

Frank C. Montagna, a 33-year veteran of the fire service and the commander of Battalion 58, has been a battalion chief with FDNY for 16 years. He was an instructor at the FDNY Probationary Firefighters School, the officer in command of the FDNY Chauffeur Training School, and an adjunct lecturer at John Jay College in New York City. Montagna is currently an instructor for FDNY's Battalion Chief's Command Course, a member of the FDNY Chief's Association, the author of Responding to Routine Emergencies (Fire Engineering, 1999), and an advisory board member of Fire Engineering. Montagna has a bachelor's degree in fire science and lectures on firefighting-related topics. You can view excerpts from his book and read some of his articles at www.chiefmontagna.com.