

BURNING ISSUES

Burning Issues--Fighting Complacency

By Lauren Keyson

An interview with Chief Dan Raftery, Greenville (NY) Fire Department, and Battalion Chief Frank Montagna, Fire Department of New York (FDNY)

Being vigilant. Fighting complacency with an attention to detail. These are some of the recurring themes that cropped up when we started a discussion on "expecting the unexpected." With more than 60 years of combined fire department experience, Frank Montagna, big city chief, and Dan Raftery, 'burbs chief, shared their experiences of what keeps their members fresh and staves off complacency.

LAUREN KEYSON: Are many of your calls fires? Or are the majority other emergencies?

MONTAGNA: Usually fires are the smaller part. I just saw national statistics, and EMS seems to be taking the major part in everything now. Ignoring EMS, the greater number of calls for us, and it's probably true nationally too, are emergencies. While FDNY may work a lot of fires compared with many other departments, we're doing a lot less than we did, and we have many more emergencies than we do structural fires.

Keyson: How do you get your members to continually expect the unexpected?

Montagna: One thing our department does on a routine basis is that every single call we go out to - whether it's for an odor of smoke, food on the stove, a gas leak, a lockout-the engine stops and takes a hydrant. When they arrive at the alarm, a firefighter gets off the apparatus and finds and tests the hydrant to make sure there is water. If the chauffeur hasn't seen the hydrant, the firefighter directs him to it. The chauffeur positions his apparatus at the hydrant and prepares to hook up. That's the engine company. Now they are ready for whatever happens.

In the truck company, our outside vent man gets off the rig and walks around the building, reporting to his officer anything he sees. This is done for every single run, regardless of what it's for. It is a process that I think should be mandatory. That type of attention to detail should be mandatory.

Keyson: Chief Raftery, how does that differ from a smaller suburban department's approach - where there may not be as many fires?

RAFTERY: We are one of the smaller fire districts in southern Westchester County. If we look at the area south of I-287, there are about a half million people living here. If this area were a city, it would be a fairly large one. Considering the fire district we cover in conjunction with our responses to other communities in the area, we try and have everyone think that if a major incident occurs, there is a possibility that you are going to be called there to fight that fire. We do travel. So, even if it doesn't exist in your district, you have to be of the mind that you may be called for that situation.

As far as the everyday work, we've gotten heavily into EMS. That accounts for about 40% of our runs. Most of the officers here have 12 to 14 years of experience as officers. I think everybody has in time been taught the lesson that you can't treat anything - even automatic alarm calls - lightly.

Keyson: Can you give us an example?

Raftery: Once we had an automatic dialer come in from a house, and the homeowner was making French fries and the oil caught fire. He thought he had put it out himself. He called us several times to try and turn us around. But it's our policy that we have to respond. We just told the homeowner, "They're on the road and they are going to be there shortly. They have to do that - but when they get there just explain to them what happened."

The rig comes down the street and the flames are blowing out of the roof about 15 feet in the air. The homeowner is standing on the lawn - he has no idea this was going on. His kitchen was clear as could be. But it had gotten up into the attic, and when he walked out of the house, he never turned to look back. So

when we pulled up, he was waving us off - and there is fire coming through the roof! So these things do happen.

Also, our firefighters are very energetic when investigating these alarms. We don't have one procedure where we walk around the building, but they know they are the eyes and ears for the captain. Most firefighters have outside skills, like electrical or plumbing skills, and when they report back that becomes very helpful to the officer in charge. This is because they have a specific knowledge. We try and take all the reports that come back to us and sort out in our minds as to how to make a determination.

Keyson: How many calls do you average a week?

Raftery: We do about 1,100 to 1,200 a year.

Montagna: You can't figure it out by the week - it varies. One week might be busy, the next might not.

Keyson: How many calls do you average a year?

Montagna: My battalion averages about 2,500 runs a year. To cut down our runs, the city has removed us from responding to recorded alarms in private dwellings and auto accidents without a confirmed pin job. I'd say that we are middle of the road as far as the number of calls per year as compared with other FDNY battalions.

Keyson: You have some very experienced firefighters in FDNY, and some people say that the more experienced, the more they are likely to disregard their safety. Is that true?

Montagna: I think it's the old adage "Familiarity breeds contempt." When people do something repeatedly they sometimes fail to see the hazard in it. You see that in any occupation - electric and gas companies, etc. While they're taking precautions and doing what they are supposed to be doing, they really don't concern themselves with the fact that what they are doing is dangerous. It is just part of the job. We need to be continually reminded of everyday hazards. The old-timers need to be reminded, and the new firefighters need to be taught the hazards.

Our job is dangerous. To do the job, I think we have to have something of a Superman Syndrome. We have to believe "This can't happen to me," because if you sat around thinking about what could happen to you all the time, then you couldn't do the job. So while the Superman Syndrome can be detrimental, I think it also allows you to go out and do the job. You have to say, "I know what I'm doing. My officers are good. I'm being careful. I'm going to come home tonight." If you didn't think that, how could you do it?

Keyson: Are your personnel embarrassed to gear up-- as recommended in training school, with masks, hood, gloves--for a routine run?

Montagna: I remember my first run - I was on the rig, and I had my boots pulled up - we had the rubber boots at that time - and I had my coat buttoned up, the collar up, my ear flaps down, my gloves on, and the other firefighters looked at me like I had four heads. Certainly, as time went by, I stopped buttoning everything up. I still put on my coat and boots. When we arrived at the scene, I would put on my helmet and, if warranted, my mask. Today with the onset of bunker gear and with the knowledge we have about the dangers and toxic hazards, firefighters suit up before they get onto the rigs, and when they pull up to the scene of an incident, they are already in their bunker gear. Automatically they are going to get off and put their SCBA on their backs - not necessarily with the masks on their faces - and they're going to wait to see what transpires.

The truck gets suited up with their masks and they go into the building to find out why were called to the scene, what in fact the problem is. This to us is pretty much routine for calls, because, as Dan said, if you are called to a food on the stove, or an odor of smoke in the building, you don't know what it is going to actually turn out to be. So we start out pretty much fully geared up. No one is embarrassed to do that. As things develop and you find out that this is nothing, or you get word back what it is, then the gear starts to come off if it is not needed. If something pops up later on, they might have to get ready again. But initially, for the most part, we arrive suited up and ready to go.

Even if it's something like a water leak, firefighters are still responding in their bunker gear. The truck goes in to investigate with their masks on in standby position, because this incident might in fact not be a water leak as informed by dispatch or may have developed into a fire as a result of a water leak. You don't want to be caught inside without your mask or some other piece of needed gear or tool.

Keyson: Chief Raftery, how does this differ in Greenville, where there are no high-rises?

Raftery: Like Frank said, we come from years ago when you had rubber boots, and a lot of times when fighting a fire, you didn't even pull them up - it wasn't part of your consciousness. I find that with the young members nowadays, it's drilled into them in probie school, and it's second nature to them to get fully dressed and fully geared up.

Montagna: When they come out of school, it's second nature....

Raftery: Everybody has to fight that complacency of, "Yeah, I know I should be doing it." Everybody goes through that at times. But embarrassed? No, I wouldn't say that at all. The people that get embarrassed sometimes are the residents - the homeowners. Sometimes the caller will say, "There's an alarm going off, but there is no problem," or "I smell something funny -- but don't send a fire truck, can somebody just drive up here?" That's obviously something we just don't do. We tell them we had no other way to get there. We try to reassure them - that's what you pay your taxes for, that's what you get. That's why we come looking this way.

Sometimes, if you're out on the road, doing inspections, and get a run, you kind of show up half dressed. It's not as easy to get dressed in the rig. So we were talking about before that rig even responds-- every body will get dressed, then get on the rig and go.

Keyson: What about misinformation - guys come to a call thinking it's one thing, and it turns out to be something completely different - how can they be prepared?

Raftery: Every call requires an investigation and a determination about the cause. Probably no matter where you work, you get a lot of "almosts" - "man, if we didn't find that, imagine two hours from now if we had to go back there." You can't leave those nonfire emergencies until you make the determination as to the cause.

I know there is nothing worse than being an officer and not being able to find anything. This is what the people are calling you there for, and getting sloppy is a mistake you have got to try never to make. There is nothing worse than leaving the scene and having to be called back again.

Montagna: I recall, as a firefighter, there was a chief who when we responded to an odor of smoke, or some other odor would hold us there until he was satisfied and he knew what the source of the odor was and that the building occupants were safe. Sometimes this would take a long time. It would interrupt either meals or sleep or television - or some other such "crucial" activity-- that was going on. And I, along with other firefighters, were annoyed as heck thinking, "Why can't he hold just one company and send the rest of us back? It is just an odor of smoke. It is nothing."

Well, as I went through the ranks, became more experienced and took on the responsibilities of an officer, I grew up into this very same chief --I turned into him! I'm sure that I now irritate the other firefighters. When I go to an emergency, I want to make sure that grandma sleeping in the basement and baby sleeping in the crib are going to be alive the next day and are not found dead because I didn't find the cause of the odor.

I'll tell you one instance where persistence paid off. We were called for an odor of gas, and the truck company went inside with a gas meter to investigate. They could smell the gas as they entered and saw that the stove burner was on, but there was no flame. They turned it off and reported that "It was an odor of gas, the burner was on and we shut it off. Everything is fine."

I then walked into the building and noticed that there was still a strong smell of gas. I asked: "Did we vent this yet?" They had vented, but the odor persisted. They vented more windows, but the smell still did not get better. I then thought, "How do we know that the burner was the only leak?"

We continued checking for another leak and entered the meter room, where we found high readings. We shut the meter off, and all of a sudden a previously unnoticed sound stopped. Apparently, there was a gas leak in the flexible tubing supplying a clothes dryer. It was making a noise that none of us had noticed until it stopped. The firefighters had found the burner off and thought that they had found and resolved the problem. They were willing to leave, thinking all was well.

After shutting the gas meter, we continued to check the area with our meter and noticed that the meter was registering a combustible gas where the gas service pipe came into the building. Because of the persistent high gas readings, we initiated an evacuation of the building. It turned out that in addition to the two gas leaks discovered, there was some kind of combustible gas seeping in from the sewer. Basically, this thing had taken on a life of its own. Here I was evacuating buildings, when at first we had been ready to walk away.

Another time, we got a call for a gas odor, but the firefighters went in and said they didn't smell anything.

When they checked the apartment with the gas meter, they found trace amounts of gas. I had them check the apartment on the floor below. They checked it and again found trace amounts. Then they knocked on the door of the first-floor apartment and this guy comes out with a cigarette in his mouth and the apartment reeked of gas - he couldn't smell the gas for some reason. There was a gas leak in the first-floor apartment that was traveling up the walls and seeping into the apartments above. Before we had gas meters, it's very likely we would have just gotten back into the rig and left! I wonder how many gas leaks we have walked away from in this manner.

Raferty: Just a few weeks ago, something similar happened in Greenburgh. We had a call from a homeowner who smelled something. It had kind of an electrical smell, like a computer or a transformer for a phone. Normally we would advise them and say we are going to disconnect this or identify the cause and tell them to have a repairman come in. But in this case we couldn't find it. So we used a thermal imaging camera.

We found that when we got up into the attic, above the room where the odor was, a previous homeowner had installed halogen overhead lights, and one of the lights was charring the paper on the insulation. So even though everybody likes to fight the high profile, big fires, a lot of times, something like that is a "save" - you saved that family and that house as surely as making a rescue in a fire.

If the members didn't find that and didn't stay there and be persistent enough to hang with it --and find the absolute cause--then it might have been the next night or six months from then, but it was going to be a fire.

Montagna: Two days after my article on investigating odors of smoke was published in Fire Engineering, I received a phone call from a lawyer in Massachusetts asking me to testify against a fire department there. They had been called in three or four times to a mattress factory for an odor of smoke but had found nothing. That night the mattress factory burned to the ground. It turned out that a water heater meant for use with a water mattress had started a fire in a regular mattress that had been placed on the bed frame meant for a water mattress. The firefighters had not found the source of the smoke, and now they were being sued. I didn't care to testify against a fire department, so I didn't, but it's kind of hard to defend the department's actions. Remember, not only is life at stake when you decide to stop looking and go home, but you also can be sued.

Keyson: So what is a sign of professionalism?

Montagna: Attention to detail. Let me preface this by saying you will not find a cause for every odor. But you need to continue to look until you have exhausted every cause you can think of. Before you leave, make sure that you tell the occupant to call you back if the odor recurs. Often odors dissipate and you must make sure that the occupant is not embarrassed to call you back if recurs.

Keyson: What do you think about people thinking they do not have time for this detail? How do you combat that?

Raferty: Sometimes people feel funny about calling you for strange odors, and you can't always find every odor. I'll give you a very easy for instance: a garbage truck pulls up to an empty dumpster behind an office building, and it's reeking of something, and the odor gets into the ventilation system. The people in the office give you a call, but a few minutes later the garbage truck is gone and the cause can't be found. The best you can do is stay there until the odor is gone and eliminate anything else that might be adding to it. Then walk the hall and tell everyone in the office, "We stayed here, it's dissipated, we feel everything is safe-- but if need be, give us a call back." That is probably the best you can do in that instance.

You have to be vigilant about it, and in a smaller department we can push each other to be that way. But even the highest-priced ballplayer will have a day where he is not totally on his game --that's just a fact of life. But it's peer pressure that keeps us focused. When the ballgame is on, it's nice to be able to go back where it's warm and watch the game in the fire station, but that falls on the officer in charge, and as far as the rest of the guys go, on the peer pressure.

Keyson: Chief Montagna, do they have that peer pressure in your battalion?

Montagna: If you have a couple of conscientious firefighters - and most usually are, though on any given day you might have someone who is not paying full attention to detail - they will carry the slacker. Nobody wants to walk away from an incident that could develop into a fire or other hazardous occurrence, but if they haven't been properly trained, or are not aware of the possible hazards of a situation, they just might walk away too soon. When I'm doing a lecture on routine emergencies, I'll start out by saying, "Who has gone to a training class on how to investigate an odor of smoke?" And you don't see too many hands go up. Then I

ask, "Who has responded to an odor of smoke incident?" and everyone raises their hands. It's the same with the other routine emergencies. If you haven't been trained, if you don't know what's going on, or what to do or why you're doing it, you could easily miss something important, or not tell your officer something that might be significant and, as a result, wind up getting hurt or hurting someone else. So if a chief wants his firefighters to do the right thing at emergencies, then he has got to make sure they are properly trained so that they can make an intelligent decision as opposed to having to be told everything that they must do or check at the scene.

Raferly: My experience is that most firefighters don't walk around complacent, and then all of a sudden have to catch themselves and say, "This could be something." I think they do the opposite. Ninety-nine percent of the time they're right on the ball. In anything, whether it's a fire or an emergency, the best thing the officer in charge can do is try to stay ahead of the situation, anticipate where this situation is going next. It's like sports -- you train, get mentally and physically prepared and properly equipped, but once that bell rings and the ballgame starts, all of a sudden you are two minutes into the game and 15 points down - and you're thinking, "What do I do next?"

Sometimes your conditions change rapidly and you get caught like that. So you always try to anticipate what's going to happen next - five minutes from now or a half hour from now.

Montagna: You should be thinking: What's the worst thing that could happen? What might I have to do to eliminate this hazard or prevent the extension or escalation of this incident? What could this lead to? Let's say a water main has burst, and it's undermining the road. A vehicle could fall into the resultant hole when the pavement collapses. If there are cast iron gas lines and they are undermined, they could break because the weight of the cast iron pipe is now unsupported. Now I have a gas leak that could ignite. If I have a fire in the street, it's going to expose adjoining buildings. So what kind of resources do I have? What do I need? Where could this incident go? Like Dan said, I want to stay one step ahead of this.

Raferly: Always assume it's going to get worse before it gets better. Then you usually don't go wrong. When I was brand new, there was a New York City chief who said to me, "Remember one thing: If you put water on what's burning, in 10 minutes 90% of your problems are going to go away." Even for emergencies - you have to get to the heart of the matter. There is a lot of other stuff going on around you, and you are getting reports that may be helpful or erroneous, but you have to keep focus to get to the heart of the problem, whether it's something burning or an odor. Narrow it down.

Montagna: I'm one of the instructors teaching at our Command Course for newly promoted battalion chiefs. What I tell them is this: If you're at some sort of an incident, whether it's a fire, an emergency, or a haz mat, you are going to have experts on the scene who are all too willing to give you information, advice, and to tell you what the hazard is and what can and should be done. But the bottom line is that the chief has to make the decision, and if the decision turns out to be a bad one, even if it's based on the experts' opinion, then the experts are going to back up into the crowd, look at the person next to them and say, "What a jerk that chief was." The chief is the guy that is responsible. All firefighters -- chiefs especially -- make life and death decisions based on incomplete information. You never have the whole story, but you must make decisions nonetheless and you will be held accountable for these decisions.

Raferly: We work a lot of auto accidents. Sometimes the worst thing that can happen is somebody is trapped in a car and someone comes out of the crowd and says, "I'm a doctor and I can help." And when they find they can't help, they just fade back into the crowd and disappear....

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Frank C. Montagna, a 32-year veteran of the Fire Department of New York, has served as an officer for the past 23 years and as a battalion chief for the past 15. He is the battalion commander of FDNY's 58 Battalion in Canarsie, Brooklyn. He is the author of the book RESPONDING TO "ROUTINE" EMERGENCIES (Fire Engineering, 1999). He was trained by the International Association of Fire Chiefs as a carbon monoxide response instructor. He has a bachelor's degree in fire science and has taught firematics and management as an adjunct professor at John Jay College in New York City.

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