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Report of the Week

My Mask is frozen and I can't breathe!

01/07/10

Report Number: 09-0001001

Report Date: 11/17/2009 10:29

Synopsis

Low air alarm freezes on SCBA.

Demographics

Department type: Paid Municipal

Job or rank: Fire Fighter

Department shift: 24 hours on - 48 hours off

Age: 25 - 33

Years of fire service experience: 4 - 6

Region: FEMA Region IV

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: Fire emergency event: structure fire, vehicle fire, wildland fire, etc.

Event date and time: 11/10/1994 01:30

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Clear with Frozen Surfaces

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- Weather

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Minor injury
- Lost time injury
- Life threatening injury

Event Description

While operating at a structure fire within a hotel laundry room, I was assigned on the attack team on the nozzle. The weather was 6 degrees Fahrenheit and the sprinkler heads in an adjoining room had fused from fire spread. We first entered the room and became very wet from the sprinkler heads. We then moved to the room of origin and while operating in zero visibility and having to climb over and through piles of laundry carts, the low pressure alarm did not function due to being frozen. All SCBA connections were frozen and the mask was frozen to my face. I was to the point of nearly reaching unconsciousness as I made it out the door when my partner broke my mask free from my face.

Lessons Learned

Monitor air consumption better and do not rely on the low pressure alarm.

While operating in cold environments, use care to ensure equipment does not freeze. Always maintain situational awareness.

Discussion Questions

Performing any action under extreme cold weather is an arduous undertaking. Everything is stiff, hard to move, or becomes stuck to something. Additionally, your body is less agile due to the bulk of your clothing and the stiffness that results when the water freezes onto the fibers of your PPE and other components, which includes our SCBA. Moisture and water, especially when frozen, wreak havoc on the functionality of this vital piece of equipment. Once you have reviewed the full account of 09-1001, and the related reports of operations in frozen environments, consider the following:

1. Have you experienced any unusual equipment incidents that are related to this week's extreme cold snap?
2. Did your training prepare you for the possibility of this occurrence, or is this weather outside what you normally experience?
3. What steps do you take to monitor your air consumption while wearing and using SCBA?
4. List other equipment that may be susceptible to malfunction in weather extremes?
5. If this incident had occurred in your department what steps, procedures, or practices would be taken to address the event and get word out to the rest of the department?

Related Reports – Topical Relation: Frozen Conditions

05-494

06-609

07-648

08-040

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.