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## Report of the Week

A shocking reply to orders  
3/28/08

### Report Number: 08-147

Report Date: 03/19/2008 1247

### Demographics

Department type: Combination, Mostly volunteer

Job or rank: Fire Chief

Department shift: Respond from home

Age: 52 - 60

Years of fire service experience: 30+

Region: FEMA Region VIII

### Event Information

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

Event date and time: 03/16/2008 2100

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Witnessed event but not directly involved in the event

Do you think this will happen again?

What do you believe caused the event?

What do you believe is the loss potential?

### Event Description

The Department responded to a report of an electrical pole on fire during a snowstorm. Two engine companies responded. Upon arrival, the company officer (Acting) of the first engine assumed command. Initially, he directed his crew to pull a 1 3/4" line to extinguish a visible fire on the pole. Both of his crew members refused the order as this energized electrical lines on a pole. No line was pulled. The incident commander requested through dispatch that a truck company (aerial platform) respond. This alarm was dispatched and the Captain on the truck communicated with the incident commander what his directions were. The incident commander stated he wanted the tower positioned so that a crew could extinguish the fire on the pole with a dry chemical extinguisher. The Truck Captain refused the order. The Fire Chief, who was on the air, upgraded his response from non-emergent to emergent. Once on the scene the Fire Chief did a face to face with the incident commander and assumed command. Actions at this point became close the roadway. Move all apparatus back to a minimum of three poles from the affected pole, notified the power company, and protected the area from any possible entry by bystanders, police, or fire personnel. Power was eventually de-energized and the fire became a Class "A" fire and was extinguished with less than 20 gallons of water.

### Lessons Learned

This could have quickly become a tragic incident if the crew on the first arriving engine had not refused the order to extinguish the fire, the Truck Captain had not refused the order to put up his aerial ladder near energized electrical lines, and the Chief had not quickly responded and relieved the initial incident commander. Company officers and acting company officers must do a proper

size up of any fire condition and determine a safe course of action. Any fire involving potential electrical hazards should be treated as Class "C" fires. In the case of utility poles, a safe zone should be established, notification made to the power company to de-energize the situation and get assurance from the power company before attempting any type of extinguishment. If SOP's are not established for fires involving live electrical equipment, they should be and training conducted to that SOP.

### **Discussion Questions**

The downside of aggressively approaching such incidents is we are drawn into situations that are relatively benign until we engage. Then the risk factor rises to heights that exceed the height of the pole. The fire chief's decision to respond, assume command and subsequent actions illustrate a model of re-assessment and decision making unclouded by "duty to act." Once you have reviewed the entire report, consider the following:

1. Does your department have an SOP/SOG for handling utility pole fires?
2. What didactic and practical training have you received to handle fires involving energized pole mounted electrical equipment?
3. How would you react to crew members refusing an order; reconsider the order and adopt a new action model, or extinguish the fire yourself?
4. What are the consequences of refusing orders in your department?
5. What preparation and emphasis is placed on training "acting" officers in your department?

*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.*