



www.firefighternearmiss.com

Report of the Week

Keep your feet up as you float downstream.
05/26/2011

Report Number: 11-0000098

Report Date: 02/28/2011 12:38

Synopsis

Boat capsized during water rescue attempt.

Demographics

Department type: Paid Municipal

Job or rank: Assistant Chief

Department shift: 24 hours on - 48 hours off

Age: 34 - 42

Years of fire service experience: 11 - 13

Region: FEMA Region X

Service Area: Rural

Event Information

Event type: Non-fire emergency event: auto extrication, technical rescue, emergency medical call, service calls, etc

Event date and time: 01/27/2011 12:00

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Told of event, but neither involved nor witnessed event

Weather at time of event: Clear and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What were the contributing factors?

- Protocol
- Equipment
- Situational Awareness
- Command
- Communication

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Minor injury
- Lost time injury
- Property damage
- Life threatening injury

Event Description

Note: Brackets denote reviewer de-identification.

Call Description:

Our department [name omitted] was dispatched to assist searching for a victim who had been fishing with his partner when he slipped and went into the river. [location omitted]

The victims fishing partner attempted to rescue the victim with fishing pole without success, so 911 was activated. The victim was last seen above water 35 feet from the rocks and was never seen going under the surface.

Keep your feet up as you float downstream.

1 of 4

Weather and Conditions:

The weather was clear with good visibility and temperatures at 50-55 degrees. There was no significant wind. The water temperature was 38 degrees. The water was stained brown-green, flowing higher than normal, and water was being released from the dam. The water class was mostly 2 with some class 3 noted downstream. The location consisted of trees, rocks and some steep cliffs.

Plan:

The initial plan was to do a search with Boat [1] in 'last seen location', river left and downstream to a slack water area near a log jam. When this was completed, the search area was to be extended downstream river left meeting with shore observation personnel from the Sheriff's Office. We would then close the box in a rescue mode looking for the victim above water. When this was completed, if the victim is not located in the search area, we would transition to a recovery mode. The plan involved locating the victim in the general area of the last seen location using underwater cameras and side scan sonar. The boat take out location would be moved to the private boat launch downstream. Other boats would join the search as they arrive.

Events Leading To Critical Situation:

During the course of the operation, all operating boats had maneuvered the 'last seen location' and/or along the banks without undue difficulty. At some point, Boat [1] was asked to search downstream (out of command's sight).

While in this area of the river, conditions encountered were considerably rougher, 'class 3' in some areas. Boat [1] was able complete that assignment and returned to the area of 'last seen location'. There was no communication to the 'group leader' regarding the rougher water conditions downstream, nor was a condition report requested.

It was sometime later (about two hours) that the Sheriff's Office Boat, with two deputies and one FF from our department onboard, and boat from another department was asked to search down river. Not aware of the rougher water, these boats started down river with the Sheriff's Office boat leading. Boat [1], being on a different radio frequency, was not aware of the other boats assignment.

At some point the Sheriff's Office boat lost sight of the other, and, with the rougher water, the Sheriff's Office boat attempted to pull out of the current to wait for them. During the maneuver, the Sheriff's Office Boat capsized, placing all three rescuers into the water. Some or all were trapped under the boat for an unspecified time. The FF from our department attempted three times to clear the boat. During that time the FF swallowed and inhaled water making the attempts more difficult. Once clear of the boat, all three rescuers followed survival procedures floating the river to an area clear of overhanging brush and trees so that an exit to the shore could be made safely.

While in the water, the Sheriff's Office boat radio operator radioed for assistance. Command ordered the other two boats to assist them. Boat [1], enroute downriver, met the second boat coming upriver. The other department thought Boat [1] needed assistance. Both boats now continued downriver until told to disregard by command since the Sheriff's Office reported all personnel were out of the water and OK (eight minutes later). Time logs show that, from the 'capsized' call to the 'safe on shore' report, was two - three minutes.

The Sheriff's Office sent a patrol car to pick up the rescuers who were returned to the boat launch area. After discussion/evaluation it was determined that the FF from our department should be seen at the ER.

Lessons Learned

After the Post Incident Analysis the following items were identified as needing to be improved:

- 1) Communications. Crews did not use a common radio frequency. Begin doing a CAN (Conditions, Actions, and Needs) on water rescue calls.
- 2) Situational Awareness. Keep risk versus benefit in the front of your mind at all times. Preplan the area for boat launches and water conditions at different times of the year.
- 3) Decision Making/Equipment. Know the limitations of your equipment. In our case the water was too swift to effectively use a zodiac.
- 4) Training. Develop swim tests for your personnel to assure their swimming ability. We also determined we need training on Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. After the near miss, the effected firefighter had signs of stress 72 hours after the incident. The Department did not identify those issues in a timely manner.
- 5) Equipment. PPE saves lives! In this case the firefighter was wearing a helmet, pfd, and a dry suit. All three contributed to his survival during the incident.

Report of the Week

Fire departments protecting areas with moving water face unique challenges when it comes to equipment, training and operations. Moving water becomes a threatening menace when it changes from being under our control to being the medium we battle to perform rescues.

"Our department [name omitted] was dispatched to assist searching for a victim who had been fishing with his partner when he slipped and went into the river. The victim's fishing partner attempted to rescue the victim with fishing pole without success, so 911 was activated. The victim was last seen above water 35 feet from the rocks and was never seen going under the surface...The weather was clear with good visibility and temperatures at 50-55 degrees. There was no significant wind. The water temperature was 38 degrees. The water was stained brown-green, flowing higher than normal, and water was being released from the dam. The water class was mostly 2 with some class 3 noted downstream. The location consisted of trees, rocks and some steep cliffs...The initial plan was to do a search with Boat [1] in 'last seen location', river left and downstream to a slack water area near a log jam. When this was completed, the search area was to be extended downstream river left meeting with shore observation personnel from the Sheriff's Office. We would then close the box in a rescue mode looking for the victim above water. When this was completed, if the victim is not located in the search area, we would transition to a recovery mode...It was sometime later (about two hours) that the Sheriff's Office Boat, with two deputies and one FF from our department onboard, and boat from another department was asked to search down river. Not aware of the rougher water, these boats started down river with the Sheriff's Office boat leading. Boat [1], being on a different radio frequency, was not aware of the other boats' assignment...At some point the Sheriff's Office boat lost sight of the other, and, with the rougher water, the Sheriff's Office boat attempted to pull out of the current to wait for them. During the maneuver, the Sheriff's Office Boat capsized, placing all three rescuers into the water. Some or all were trapped under the boat for an unspecified time. The FF from our department attempted three times to clear the boat. During that time the FF swallowed and inhaled water making the attempts more difficult..."

This week's ROTW, [11-098](#), reminds us that there will always be situations where both powerful forces of nature, fire *and* water, have the upper hand. Our best course of action is to establish SOPs, follow those SOPs religiously, and make sure all personnel are trained frequently in safety and survival skills.

1. Few areas in the country are exempt from the possibility of a water rescue. What equipment, PPE and training have you had in the last two years that prepare you to execute a water rescue?
2. Conduct an internet search for the terms "Class 2" and "Class 3" water. What are the differences between the two and how do the hazards differ?
3. Are water rescues in your jurisdiction a joint fire/law enforcement/EMS effort? If so, what coordinating efforts are used to unify command?
4. If water rescues in your jurisdiction are independent efforts, what problems exist due to the lack of a unified command?
5. What is the minimum PPE required for conducting water rescues? What PPE should be prohibited from being used during water rescue operations and why?

The threats encountered during water rescue operations are often insidious. Effective water rescue requires proper training, equipment and a plan to ensure rescuers don't become victims.

Related Reports – Topical Relation: Water Rescue Operations

[05-421](#)

[06-196](#)

[07-981](#)

[08-033](#)

[09-1052](#)

[10-1041](#)

Did this ROTW jog your memory about a near miss you experienced, observed or avoided? Tell the fire service your story through www.firefighternearmiss.com today so everyone goes home tomorrow.

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.