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## Report of the Week

When an island isn't an oasis  
10/9/08

**Report Number: 08-375**

Report Date: 08/12/2008 1845

### Synopsis

FF falls through hole into basement, Mayday occurs.

### Demographics

Department type: Combination, Mostly paid

Job or rank: Fire Fighter

Department shift: 24 hours on - 72 hours off

Age: 16 - 24

Years of fire service experience: 0 - 3

Region: FEMA Region III

Service Area: Urban

### Event Information

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

Event date and time: 03/24/2008 1000

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Clear and Dry

Do you think this will happen again?

What do you believe caused the event?

- Situational Awareness

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Minor injury

### Event Description

Bracketed areas [] denote reviewer de-identification. March 24, 2008 did not start out like most shifts at [name deleted]. The lieutenant, fire-technician and senior firefighter were all out on leave. I was the only one from my normal shift working that day. Only four months off probationary status, I had no clue that I was going to be tested on what I had learned one year earlier in the academy. Other than not having my normal crew, the day started out like any other. I started apparatus checks, changed the battery in my personal radio, and made sure that my Self Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) was in working order. I also made sure all of the hose lines were ready to be pulled if called upon since I was running the line that day. At approximately 09:55am, Public Safety Communications (PSC) dispatched a box alarm [name deleted]. The assignment consisted of four engines, two ladder trucks, one rescue-squad and a battalion chief. Engine [1] responded to the assignment with four personnel. At 10:01am the crew laid their supply line about 100 feet to the address. The lieutenant of Engine [1] told PSC, "Have Engine [2] pick up my line at [name deleted]. I'm on the scene with a two-story single-family dwelling, nothing evident. I am establishing [name deleted] command. Indeed we arrived with nothing evident.

Because I was the lineman, I had to make a decision as to which line I wanted to pull. Since the only choice I have for lines is 2 inch or a 1 ½ inch hose, I chose a 200 ft. 1 ½ inch line with a breakaway [name deleted] tip nozzle. Normally I would pull a 200 ft. 2 inch line with a fog nozzle, but I had no fire evident and was not with my normal crew, so I wanted to make sure I had more mobility if I needed to advance my line. When I got to the tailboard of the engine, I noticed light brown smoke coming from a roof vent. At this time, I was thinking we possibly had a small room with contents fire on the second floor. I got to the Alpha/Delta corner of the house and noticed more brown smoke coming from a crack on the side of a basement window. Once I relayed this information to the lieutenant, I started to think of basement fire operations. Just before we made entry, Chief [1] arrived on scene and took command. Realizing his third-due special service in charge of Rapid Intervention was understaffed with two personnel, he requested an additional engine and truck company for the Rapid Intervention Team (RIT). Just as the forcible entry person opened the unlocked door, the second-due engine was starting to pull the backup line from Engine [1]. Engine [1] crew was met with a hazy blackish-brown smoke from ceiling to floor. Seeing this made me start to think that the fire had either smoldered itself out or that it was deeply seated in the house, like most basement fires. Knowing that the lieutenant and I were on the same page, we needed to find the basement stairs. As I advanced my line on the first floor with zero visibility, I asked the lieutenant if he had anything on the thermal imager. He responded, "No, everything is white". I decided to point my nozzle to the ceiling and open it to see how hot it really was. To my surprise, only a little water came back down. As I advanced my line, I felt heat to my left and saw fire. Thinking I ended up in a closet, I opened my line and knocked most of my fire. I yelled back to my lieutenant that I thought I found the seat of the fire and that I needed more line to get around a corner. Little did I know at the time, the forcible entry person went back to the front door to make sure the door had not shut on the hoseline. While on my knees pulling line I felt a sudden drop and no longer felt the hose in my hands. I ended up on my right side with my face mask ajar and my helmet hanging forward. I quickly resealed my face mask, placed my helmet back on my head, and realized that my right glove was missing. Thinking my right arm was broken, I placed my hand in my coat pocket and stood up to try to feel if I had fallen through the floor. I quickly thought I may have fallen off of a step, into a living room, a few inches down from the room I was in. Unfortunately, the fire I was trying to extinguish was higher than where it was when I just saw it and I realized that I must be in the basement. Thinking now there might be a hole above me, I started yelling up to my crew to try to alert them to stay away from that area. Still in zero visibility, I remembered that I had my personal [name deleted] radio on me. At 10:10 am, I grabbed my extended microphone and called out, "Mayday, Mayday, Mayday". Realizing that I was on "talk around" (a non-repeated channel that can only be heard within a small distance, usually the distance of a typical fire ground), I quickly switched my radio over to "A mode" (the repeated fire ground channel). Then I heard command telling PSC to activate the Mayday tones (a designated high pitch tone to alert units that there is a "Mayday" taking place). Command finally asked for the distressed firefighter to give his last location. At this time I gave my L.U.N.A.R (Location, Unit, Name, Assignment, Resources needed/Air supply), "Mayday this is Firefighter [name deleted] from Engine [1]. I fell through a hole into the basement. I'm at the end of the attack line. I need an attack ladder to get out. Once I knew that my message was received by command, I started fluttering my P.A.S.S device letting it have a 10 second burst then I reset the device and repeated the process again and again. Seconds later the crew of Engine [1] heard the Mayday

and P.A.S.S device activating. They found the nozzle next to the hole and flowed water down on top of me. As they did this, I tried searching one-handed to see if I could get reoriented. At this time, I felt banisters to a stair-well to my right. I now started to think that the "closet" I was in really was a stairwell that had burned through. What also felt discomfoting was how I kept seeing flames popping out of smoke to my right. This made me think there was a basement fire. I realized I needed to get to the left of the basement. As I searched left, I found a desk against the wall and thought for a second to search the wall and possibly find an exterior exit. However, I am not a gambling man and realized I had a hole right above me, water flowing down on top of me and any second a ladder that I could climb up to safety. My final decision was to stay where I was and wait for the ladder. On the outside with only two engines, one ladder truck, a battalion chief and two volunteer chiefs on scene, command gave the incident command to Battalion Chief [2] and had him switch to an alternate channel with all of the other units that were not on scene yet. Chief [1] took command of RIT operations that stayed on the original fire ground channel and assigned Chief [3], Engine [2] and the just arriving Truck [1] RIT duties. Truck [1] entered through side Alpha and tried to find to basement steps. The senior truck lieutenant quickly realized that the layout of the house was odd and decided to pull his crew out and enter through side Charlie. Once on side Charlie, Truck [1] broke out a sliding glass door and searched ahead of the redeploying Engine [2]. Performing a right handed search pattern, the crew found an interior door and tried opening it. Due to debris blocking the door, they forced their way into the room. At 10:14am, the ventilation of the sliding glass door and the interior door being forced-provided me with enough visibility to see smoke clearing and I crawled to the door where I was met by Truck [1] and exited the house via side Charlie. I was taken to a burn center nearby and treated for a third degree burn to my abdomen, sprained back, sprained right shoulder and sprained right arm. As soon as I was released from the hospital, I wanted to go back to the house on [name deleted] and try to piece together what had happened. With the help of Fire Investigations, I found that the fire had started in a kitchen island. The house was tightly sealed up which made sense, seeing as how we had nothing evident when we arrived. A fire had started in the kitchen island hours before anyone was home and burned undetected. When both the homeowner and fire department entered the house, oxygen also entered. This provided enough oxygen to the smoldered out fire to flare it back up. As hot as the heat conditions were, the bulk of the fire was not that large when we arrived on scene. Another surprise to me was how the "closet" I thought I had found was actually an opening to the kitchen. The fire I had found was a refrigerator on fire. Once I had that knocked and as I pulled my line, there was a perfect cutout of a hole where the island had fallen through the floor of the kitchen into the basement. The two by ten joists that were holding the island up were out-matched by the weight of the island and the fire conditions of the kitchen. As I pulled my line in zero visibility I must have lost my grip on the line and "tumbled" ten feet into the hole. I landed on the stove, sink and other remnants of the island. I do not remember trying to grab anything when I started to fall, but that is the only explanation as to why I didn't have my right glove. My burn was more of an odd situation. I had an eight inch rip in my coat, which can only be explained by a nail or something of the sort catching the coat as I fell. When I was laying on my stomach giving my "Mayday" the burned metal stove must have come in contact to my metal coat buckle, which then burned a hole through my shirt and caused me to suffer a third degree burn. Another surprise I had was the banisters to the burned out stairwell that I thought I found. As it turns out, the banisters were really exposed studs to an unfinished room in the

basement. The comforting information I found was that there was no fire in the basement. The fire I saw above me was the cabinets and fire running the floor joists above me. What made me realize how lucky I was, was the decision of Truck [1] crew to pull out and reenter through a side Charlie door. To make the basement steps, they would have had to make an immediate left through the front door, go through a computer room, which then had a door leading into a bathroom that took you to a hallway. In the hallway, there were four doors. Three of the doors were closets leaving the door to the basement. Once I understood the incident I wanted to see what it was that I would learn from this incident. To my surprise, finding answers to that question was going to be tougher than I thought. As I talked to people about my incident, a common question I had was "If you ran the same fire tomorrow, only knowing what you knew at the time, what would you do differently?" That is a tough question. I ended up alive, with minimal injuries and the fire went out. What more could you ask for in this job? But, there was room for improvement. From the beginning, I would have pulled my 200 ft. two inch-fog nozzle line. Had there been a basement fire, I think I would have rather had 200 gallons of water a minute than 100 gallons at the most. Secondly, since it was not that big of a house, a 360 of the house should have been completed. This would have given us a better face of side Charlie and the layout might have been easier to understand. Third, I would have liked to have had a window broken out as I advanced my line. This of course would have cleared some of the smoke and made the fire easier to find. The most important lessons I learned on this fire was not to be on talk-around mode. Talk around is a nice tool at times but during a working incident of any kind there is no room for it. Had I been in a situation where I was unable to access the toggle switch, I might have not been heard. The last lesson I learned was from a senior lieutenant of Truck [1] and that is, never stop thinking outside of the box. He and his crew were unable to find the basement steps and realized any kind of rescue operation inside would have been difficult due to the smoke conditions. A big piece of the puzzle was the crew entering side Charlie and showing me the way to an exit.

### **Lessons Learned**

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### **Discussion Questions**

"Lazy, blackish-brown smoke..."also, "...and everything is white..." screen on a TIC add up to a set of criteria in the fire behavior world that speaks to an increasingly dangerous situation that needs to be recognized and addressed immediately. After you have read the entire account of [08-375](#), consider the following:

1. How many hours of training have you or your officer had on using a thermal imaging camera?
2. "Lazy, blackish-brown smoke" fits into what category of burn: "growth," "fully developed," or "decay"?
3. Given your answer to #2, what hoseline would you select to take with you and why?
4. When, how and where would you ventilate a structure exhibiting "lazy, blackish-brown smoke" showing from the roof line and basement windows?
5. Does the scenario in 08-375 call for any special considerations for the rapid intervention team?

*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.*