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Report of the Week

Out of the mouth of babes
10/16/08

Report Number: 08-097

Report Date: 02/19/2008 1550

Synopsis

Crew experiences zero visibility taking elevator to fire floor

Demographics

Department type: Paid Municipal

Job or rank: Captain

Department shift: 24 hours on - 24 hours off

Age: 34 - 42

Years of fire service experience: 17 - 20

Region: FEMA Region VII

Service Area: Urban

Event Information

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

Event date and time: 12/06/2007 1430

Hours into the shift:

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

Weather at time of event: Cloudy and Snow

Do you think this will happen again?

What do you believe caused the event?

- SOP / SOG
- Decision Making
- Situational Awareness
- Procedure

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Life threatening injury

Event Description

The department was dispatched for a fire alarm with smoke reported on the 5th floor of a five story class one building. The occupancy is a multi-residence, 100 unit, 150' x 150', U shaped building constructed in the early 1900's. It has two stair wells and two wet standpipes. The on-duty Assistant Chief arrived and established command. He observed light smoke rising from the B side. The first arriving engine was running with an acting Captain that day. The acting Captain had 28 years of experience. He and a firefighter with 7 years experience entered the lobby. A police officer met them and reported the problem as smoke in apartment 518. The crew carries forcible entry tools and high rise pack. The firefighter suggested taking the stairs to investigate. The acting Captain over rode this proper procedure and decided to take the elevator to the 5th floor. The police officer said he would come along to assist. When the elevator opened on the 5th floor they were met with heavy smoke banked to the floor. It was zero visibility but not great heat. The door would not close and return to a lower floor.

Possible because of equipment dropped in the doorway. The fire fighters donned their face pieces but the police officer was in an IDLH situation. The fire fighters told him to stay put and they left the elevator to find an apartment to enter for shelter. They found an apartment they could enter, returned to the officer and lead him to the apartment. The officer at this point was having much trouble breathing. The acting Captain shared his facepiece with the police officer as they crawled to the apartment. The apartment was on the A side. A female occupant was in this apartment. A 105" ladder was raised to this apartment window and the officer with smoke inhalation exited out onto the ladder. Due to his smoke inhalation he had difficulty and almost fell off the ladder. The original fire fighters returned to the hallway with the high rise pack and crawled towards apartment 518. The apartment was fully involved and had burned through the entry door and extended into the hall. The fire was extinguished without any great difficulty from this point. Additional units arrived during this time to establish ventilation and search and rescue operations on the 5th floor. The police officer was transported to a hospital and admitted with smoke inhalation. Due to the experience and abilities of these first fire fighters they were able to think their way out of this bad situation and recover to have a happy ending. It was a very bad broken play that turned into a "Hail Mary." If other members of this Department with less experience and ability had made these same mistakes it would have ended in at least a fatality of the police officer.

Lessons Learned

The building had a pre-plan in the first arriving command vehicle with diagrams of all floors and information on stairs, stand pipes and apartment locations. Use the pre-plan! It might be a real fire not a pan of food over cooked. It was not used until the fire had been knocked down. The Incident Commander and all fire crews CAN NOT read smoke and fire conditions in this type and size of building from the exterior. The apartments on the B and C sides have windows of wired glass that did not break under the intense fire conditions. This helped hide the fire and smoke conditions in the fire apartment. Do not be surprised to find a working fire when you have been dispatched to a fire! Never take the elevator in a 5 story building when dispatched to a fire alarm. Walk the stairs. Never take police or civilians into an area that could be hazardous to them. It comes down to being fully engaged, situational awareness, make smart decisions, and follow SOP's. Make tactical decisions on worse case scenarios. Follow your training and use the pre-plan on all responses. When a working fire occurs it will come as second nature.

Discussion Questions

Elevators have provided an expedient means to ascend buildings since 236 B.C. They are regarded as the safest mode of transportation. There is no doubt that firefighters can use elevators to their advantage when faced with fires on upper floors. However, using this tool requires strict guidelines. There are hazards associated with elevator technology that can jeopardize firefighters' lives if precautions are not in place and followed. In [08-097](#), the inquiry/suggestion by a less senior member to follow a best practice falls into the category of "trapping" an error about to occur. The suggestion is not heeded. The path to a near miss is usually lined with opportunities to avoid getting in harms way. We have to be alert for those trapping events, regardless of the direction they arrive. Once you have read the complete account of [08-097](#), consider the following:

1. What is your department's SOP/SOG for using elevators on fire incidents?

2. Is that SOP/SOG uniformly followed? Why or why not?
3. Did your last elevator drill include a segment on operating the elevator on a fire incident?
4. For supervisors: How alert are you to suggestions/observations from lower ranking crew members?
5. For subordinates: How strongly will you push to get a supervisor to see they are making an error?

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.