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ATTIC FIRES- ARE WE DOING IT RIGHT?

Every fire department across this nation has some type of Mission Statement, and somewhere in there you will find some reference to “Saving life and property”. The saving of property also applies to attic fires. But as a fire service we tend to overlook this basic creed when it comes to the attic fire and the tactics we employ during these incidents. One needs to ask themselves, are we doing it right?

This particular debate hits home with many members in the fire service. Almost as controversial as smooth bore vs. fog, or where to take the initial attack line on a garage fire, what type of tactic do we deploy on the bread and butter attic fire?



Photo 1: Working attic fires requires us to change our tactics.

There two common schools of thought for extinguishing attic fires. 1) Do not vent the roof and apply a fog stream into the attic space via a opening from below and turning the water stream to instant steam within a confined space and thus extinguishing the fire, or 2) To wait until the nozzle team is position to pull ceiling and then coordinate with the vent team to open the roof simultaneously to allow the fire and smoke to evacuate the space.

We are not here to debate which tactic is best, but to stress the other facet of our mission during extinguishment, protecting property from unnecessary damage caused by the fire department, which is the reason we attempt to contain the fire to just the attic space.

I've witnessed too many times the Officer explaining to the homeowner that the fire was contained to the attic but we destroyed all of their belongings in an attempt to put out the fire with excessive or improper water application, too aggressive with our ceiling dropping, and covering the entire contents of the house with the insulation from the attic. So what can we do as a fire service to improve our tactics at these types of fires?

It wasn't until I started working for my current skipper that it was stressed upon me and the crew the vital importance of preserving the belongings or property of the homeowners which were not directly affected by the fire. If we take the time as engine and truck companies and have the discipline to perform our tasks as a team, we can accomplish both tasks needed to produce a positive result.

As an aggressive department, we rush in and begin pulling ceilings, walls and other portions of the structure to quickly locate and extinguish the fire. Too often we overlook the fact that in an attic fire that the remainder of the house now becomes an exposure and that we need to protect this exposure from damage caused by the advancing fire, or worse, caused by the fire department. However, we continue to dump the ceiling on the contents below so we can get access to the attic space for what end? The fact is that during an attic fire we are not going to save the upper part of the structure, so why would we want to extend the damage into the unburned portion of the structure. If we slow down and take an additional minute or two to put some protection in place for the contents what have we've gained? What have we saved? Have we met our obligation by protecting the property of the residence?

On arrival, the 1st due company should expect to find one of more of the following condition indicating a possible attic fire: (We are making assumptions that there is no basement, and that balloon construction is not a factor in our scenario)

1. Moderate to heavy smoke from the gable vent or eaves.
2. Smoke pushing or fire showing from vent pipes on the roof
3. Roof decking intact
4. Clear conditions to light smoke on the interior.
5. No active fire found on the interior during a check of the occupancy



Photo 2: Arrival conditions may be an indicator of a working attic fire.

Based on the above findings, you know without a doubt that this is an attic fire. The engine company officer MUST transmit this information to the truck company, and they should make it as plain as possible for all to hear: “This is Engine 16, the house checks clear; we have a working attic fire”. You have now left no doubt about your findings and this should perk up the ears of those other companies responding that we need to alter our attack plan to match our fire conditions. At this point, you have two basic options for this attack.

1. You start dropping all of the ceiling in all rooms and extinguish the fire. You continue to pull the remainder of the ceiling looking for extension through the insulation material and the underside of the roofing material. You assume your job is done, the fires out, no victims and nobody got hurt. When it’s time to start the overhaul process and you start to remove from the structure all of soaked sheetrock and insulation mixed in with all of worldly possessions of the occupants out to the front lawn you notice the horror on their faces as they watch everything they own come out of their house, nothing burned but never the less a total loss.

2. You realize that the fire is contained to the attic. You work quickly and efficiently to remove as much as you can from the room that to the best of your knowledge seems to be under the main body of the fire. Other inside crews stack and cover (tarp) the adjoining rooms. If the inside truck team grabs salvage covers as soon as they get off of the truck while the engine crew stretches line, we are ready. We take the time to clear or cover items in the room where we will begin fire attack and work through the rest of the house as needed at the direction of the Officer, we will preserve a vast majority of the belongings

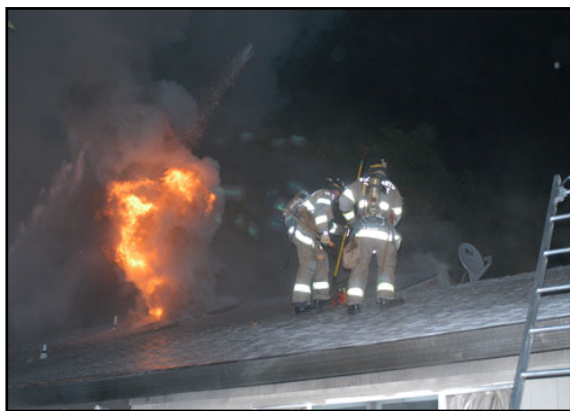


Photo 3: The outside vent team needs to stand fast until they are given the OK to cut from the inside.

The outside vent team gets to the roof and awaits the OK from inside to cut. The nozzle is in place and the inside team and outside team are prepared. Outside cuts the hole and the inside pulls the ceiling (hopefully onto the salvage cover you have already placed on the floor). The fire gets put out; the overhaul went that much easier because the only thing you now had to remove is that which came from above.

The owners now thank you for saving everything they own. Cutting the hole in unison with the hose line being put in place stopped the lateral and downward progress of the fire by giving it somewhere to go.

Obviously all circumstances have to be close to ideal for this to work efficiently. There has to be integrity in the roof for the outside team to be safe to function and you are doing more good than harm by taking the extra moments to salvage what you can before actual fire attack.

What does this do for us? We look like a professional Fire Department who takes pride in our work and it shows we still are caring out one of our primary missions-Protecting Property. In the eyes of the homeowners, next to life, we saved their most valuable and in some instance their only possessions. As for us, we saved ourselves endless time cleaning out the house of all of the debris that fell on everything, and now needs to be brought outside or cleaned off in the residence. If time allows, we have covered all of the belongings in the rooms and set down salvage covers on the floor as well as hall runners. It only takes a few minutes, and we usually for some reason have twenty people standing in the room anyway.



In conclusion, we should always strive to do whatever we can to protect property that would otherwise be destroyed, if not directly by fire but the firefighting activity. It takes training and preplanning for operations to run smoothly. We need to have good communication between the two teams. If we take a second to get the bigger picture of what 's going on, to take a breath and take in what you see instead of going directly into " give it hell " mode, we not only make our work easier, we do it effectively in the eyes of the citizens we serve.