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Truck 7

R.E.C.E.O. Re-visited: Rescue

A few weeks ago, a young firefighter overheard some conversation I was having while “holding court” regarding the responsibilities of the first-due truck company when there is a reported rescue. He was shocked to hear me explain that the first-due truck must support an aggressive “fire attack” by aggressively ventilating the building. His first thoughts out loud were, “What about RECEO?” I turned to him and asked, “What about it?” He stated he was always taught that the first priority was RESCUE, that’s why the first letter of “RECEO” stands for Rescue.

I laughed a bit, and then realized that there probably needs to be a deeper understanding of each component of “RECEO”. Many times we are given acronyms in the Fire Service with the instructor only explaining what the letters stand for rather than having a deeper conversation in terms of what they all really mean.

I was reminded of one of my early adventures on the Department, and as anyone who knows me; they know I like to tell a good story. So I jumped on the opportunity because young firefighters who care about the job are a captive audience. Twenty years ago, I was working at Station 6 as a probationary firefighter. No different today as years ago, the prospect of a good-working fire accompanied you while at work. And sure enough, sometime before noon, Engine 6 was dispatched to a working structure fire on a 2nd floor flat just at the edge of their district. Back in those days, you could count on 2 engines, 1 truck, and a Battalion Chief would be the only resources that were dispatched to handle this type of fire. Engine 6 arrived first-due, and reported smoke and fire from the rear of the 2nd story flat. While in route, dispatch had reported there was a possible occupant inside. Back in the day, the rules were if the fire is on your side, you were the nozzle firefighter, and most of the Captains on the first-due engine were going to stand outside and direct companies while the nozzle firefighter would enter the building and extinguish the fire. Many times the nozzle firefighter would enter the building by themselves. In reflecting, I have to admit that our response package, our SOG’s, and the duties and responsibility of the personnel arriving on-scene is much better today than it was in those days; despite what some of the “old-timers” might tell you. I pulled a 1½ inch to the front door of the 2nd floor flat. I called for water, bled the line, and opened the door to check on conditions. The visibility was zero, and it was difficult to make my way to the rear while traveling through the living room over and around the assorted furniture.

Conditions did not appear to get better, and as I entered the kitchen in the rear of the flat I ran into all 4 members of the first-due truck company on-scene. I extinguished the fire, and began a search of the immediate area when I finally heard the sound of a beautiful saw operating on the roof. By the time the hole was cut, the fire had already been extinguished, and the primary search completed as best as possible. We did not find an occupant. However, as I exited the building, I was met by my Captain who had run the fire from the street. He came up to me, and offered me his apology. He stated he had to call for an additional truck company to provide ventilation due to the fact that the first-due truck committed all of their resources to the interior because of the reported rescue.

I acknowledged that it was difficult because the visibility was zero, and based of the layout, it took some time for me to get to the rear where the fire was located. Fortunately, the damage was minimal, the occupants had already left the flat, and no firefighters were injured. However, prior to that day, and from that day forward, I have never forgotten how significant those actions could have been, and they reminded me of a valuable lesson I brought with me from my previous department.

Twenty-one years ago, while working in a 3-station Fire Department, I ran into one of the most knowledgeable Battalion Chiefs I have met to this day. Although he was a Battalion Chief in a small department, his 10 years as a firefighter with the Philadelphia Fire Department during the 70's, provided him with a lifetime experience that many of us will never gain. My first day on the job, he handed me a copy of Fire Engineering Magazine and said, "Kid, if there is one thing you must do your entire career it is to read this magazine". Additionally, he stated, "Follow the great wisdom of Tom Brennan!" If you don't know who Tom Brennan is, you need to re-dedicate yourself to the Fire Service". Fortunately, due to my involvement with FDIC, I had the great pleasure of meeting and sharing time (and a few drinks) with Tom Brennan before he passed away. He was one of a kind, and will never be replaced. One of the greatest things that Tom taught the Fire Service was a simple fact, "Put water on the fire, and everything gets better". This is something we should never forget, and we should strive to understand the deeper meaning of what he meant. This is where RECEO has failed for some of us.

One of the things we need to understand about RECEO is the fact that RECEO is an acronym for the strategic priorities on the fireground, not the tactical objectives needed to carry out a rescue. Although rescue will always be our number 1 priority, it is the tactical objectives that are the most critical in terms of how we carry out the strategy. The best way to effect a rescue is to ventilate and extinguish the fire. If we understand, and buy into that concept, then we need to aggressively split our first-due resources so that they can accomplish an aggressive fire attack and ventilation. What is causing the rescue problem in the first place? It is the smoke that inhibits the trapped occupant's ability to breathe, and/or the fire itself which has blocked their escape from the building. If the fire is aggressively attacked and ventilated, it improves the survivability of the occupants, and greatly enhances the efficiency of all firefighters to search the occupancy. In reality, search comes before rescue. We can't rescue someone until we search and find them. We don't know if we have a rescue until we search. It is my opinion, and has been for some time, that the first priority should be SEARCH. However, I'm not sure the experts would like the acronym SECEO. The fire at 8th/ F Street is a classic example of this philosophy.

A 3-story apartment building looked like it was vacant. We aggressively attacked the fire, searched the building, and rescued two unconscious (CPR on one) adult males who are alive today.

So, now back to my original comment; the first-due truck must aggressively ventilate the building for 2 reasons. A side-bar here; I have to admit, and I hate to put it in writing but, it is truly the engine company's dedication and commitment to fire attack that extinguishes the fire. However, the importance of ventilation by the first-due truck cannot be overlooked for the following 2 reasons.

First, the efficiency and speed of which the hoseline advances and controls the fire is directly related to ventilation. Secondly, the speed and efficiency of the search is directly related to ventilation.

Therefore, by aggressively attacking the fire which can only be accomplished by aggressive ventilation, then we can control the very 2 things that are causing the rescue problem in the first place, fire and smoke.

Simply put, put water on the fire, and things get better. The efficiency and speed of which that is accomplished is directly related to the first-due truck's commitment to ventilate. I'm sure that we can sit around and debate different fires, different buildings, and different scenarios to shoot holes in this concept. However, it has long been known and taught by those who understand this profession better than I, that the tactical objectives of rescue, which is the first priority in RECEO, are fire attack and ventilation. We can debate how many firefighter it takes, who does it, what tools they use, is it vertical or horizontal, but the fact of the matter remains; that the first strategic priority, RESCUE, is accomplished by the aggressive tactical objectives of fire attack and ventilation. We aggressively try and control the fire by dividing our first-due resources as needed to accomplish these tasks. I think this is one of the major reasons that all of us over the years have been a proponent of increasing our first-due resources on all fires.

As a young firefighter, it is important that you have a deeper conversation regarding this great profession. There are some great lessons that we have/need to learn from those who have gone before us. We all have a responsibility to learn from them. In the youth of today, there needs to be a commitment to have a deeper understanding of this job. Honor and learn from those who are going before you, and those who have already gone. Change for the good, but learn from the past.

Next time, I will be "holding court" on the first E of RECEO!