

ORANGE PEEL

June 1, 2002

BY: DAVID BALDWIN
Sacramento Fire Department
Truck 6

OBSERVATIONS OF A TRUCK GUY

So many times I see an entire truck crew enter the building the same way the engine guys did. Or the 2nd due truck not throwing a second ladder to either the roof for the vent team or to above ground windows for rescue. For some reason, there is the mentality that we all have to get inside the fire room and get “dirty”. Fire after fire I see seven or eight guys in a 12’ x 12’ bedroom all trying to pull ceiling, and no one completing the basic truck responsibilities.

Most of these tasks are not glorious, but are just as important as getting to the seat of the fire with the hose. These basics have to be completed each and every time by the truck company. Here are some of the basics that are important and should be reviewed:

1. SIZE UP:

This is where it all begins. What type of incident are you responding to? When you get there what do you see? What is the building construction? What is the roof covering made of? What are the fire conditions on arrival? What are the smoke conditions? What types of access problems do you have? Are there any visible victims in need of immediate rescue?

These are the questions you should be asking yourself. You will only have a few seconds to “read” what is going on, and then make decisions based on what you see. If you “misread” or “tunnel” on what is in front of you, your actions may make the situation worse.

The time to get this information is prior to the alarm sounding. Know your district! Know what types of roof coverings are prominent in your district. Know the floor plans in your district! In the district I work in there are only a hand full of floor plans, most of which you can read from the front of the building.

While on your 6th first-aid call of the tour, take the time to study the floor plans. Pay attention to where the bedrooms are. What side is the kitchen on? Is the hallway in the center of the structure? Is there a rear door? Is there a security door? Are there bars on the windows? What are the living conditions like? Are there mattresses scattered all over the living room with kids sleeping in them? Has that laundry room off the rear of the kitchen, next to the back door, been converted into a sleeping area?

By knowing these facts ahead of time, you will decrease the time it takes you to get to the living areas and perform a rapid search for victims.

2. VENTILATION:

There are two basic concepts for ventilation, venting for fire and venting for life.

Venting for fire includes vertical and/or horizontal ventilation. This is the standard ventilation practice that has been taught to every fire recruit at the fire academy. Cutting the hole high above the fire as possible to assist in the removal of heat and gases from the fire building. Or sticking a fan at the front door, after making an opening on the opposite side of the building, to improve fire conditions on the fire floor.

Venting for life is the immediate ventilation and access to an area where there is suspected life regardless if you actually see it or not, or it is reported to you on arrival. Most of the time this involves the removal of glass to redirect the fire or improve the smoke conditions in the room.

“Hey in there, don’t break any windows” Heard that gem before? For some reason people think that breaking glass is a fire ground taboo. I say break it if you think is necessary. But, don’t break glass just to break glass. Have a reason.

If breaking glass allows you to search another foot, then break it! If breaking glass allows an unconscious victim a few more breaths before we find them, then break it! If breaking glass improves visibility allowing you to see hidden dangers (holes in floors, missing stairs, victims) then break it!

Breaking glass also reassures the inside crews that ventilation is taking place. They know that their hostile environment will soon be getting better thus reducing the panic factor. By doing so you are also telling the outside people where you are in the building. Usually searching firefighters, not civilians, break glass from the inside. Civilians tend to run to the closest exit (door) while firefighters are trained to break glass for smoke and heat removal. Should you be above ground, the breaking of glass will indicate where ground ladders should be placed for your secondary means of escape.

3. ENTRY & SEARCH:

The general operation that the trucks in my department employ is splitting into 2 teams of 2. The Captain and the Irons FF comprise the “Inside Team”, and are responsible for entry. The Operator (driver) and Saw FF comprise the “Outside Team”, and are responsible for ventilation operations.

The first question the inside team should ask is there another way in? **ALWAYS!** Find or make another way in! This is the job of the inside team. We have made it a practice on private dwelling fires to **get to the rear or side** of the building. This operation does several things: 1) It allows us to see more sides of the building, especially the rear.

You would be amazed what you find or see in the rear. 2) By going to the rear and forcing the door, it creates a channel (horizontal) for the smoke and heat to exit the building, thus allowing the engine company to get to the seat of the fire quicker. 3) But more importantly we have created a second way out for the interior operations. Searching behind the fire and in the opposite direction of the engine search means quicker more efficient searches being completed.

It is the third point that I feel is important, but is often neglected. Searching “Behind the Fire”. Common sense tells us that if a civilian is cut off from their normal egress (i.e. front door) that they will try to escape through other means. That just might be via the back door. So why not initiate a search there? Why not increase your chances or odds to make a successful grab. Why get bogged down behind the engine going through in the front, when you can go to the rear and be free of obstacles like hoses and other firefighters. Sounds simple, right? But this may be one of the most dangerous places to start our search.

Just beware that you will be in front of the advancing hose team. Know that when you open that rear door and enter for a search that you are going to take a beating from the rapidly moving fire. This is the area where the nozzle stream will push the fire and heat, so timing is everything. The fire is looking for a place to escape, and you just provided it.

You must to get to the rear, make entry, search and get out, preferably before or at the same time the engine pushes in. If there is any delay getting to the rear, that position will soon become untenable for you and the civilians. So time is of the essence.

What is missing from this equation? Communication and practice. Don’t just decide to try this without letting someone know what you’re doing. If you and the rest of your company members have not talked about and practiced going to the rear, you can get lost in the shuffle. You MUST make sure every one on your company knows where the Inside Team will be working.

When do we search? EVERYTIME! That dwelling is not clear until you say it is clear. Just because the person on the street tells you on arrival “I think they are not home”, do not take their word for it. That boarded up building deserves as much attention as the occupied dwelling. The fire had to start some how. Unless you search, you will never know until it is too late that there was a life that might have been saved.

When making your search, you should be on your hands & knees. Trapped and unresponsive civilians usually will not be standing up waiting for you to find them; they will be collapsed on the floor. It’s better to crawl and find them, than it is to step and trip on them. Your search has to be a disciplined, aggressive, systematic, rapid and thorough. Remember break out a window if it helps you go another foot on your search.

Begin your search in the fire room. Anyone in this area is in the greatest danger, and has the least amount of time for survival. Also from this vantage point you are able to size up the fire conditions, and the type of fire you are dealing with. Controlling the fire might be a simple as closing the door, thus buying some more time for the victims until you find them.

These basic items: 1) knowing your district, 2) proper and timely glass removal, 3) finding a second way into a building, and 4) performing a rapid search, will greatly enhance your efficiency and effectiveness in finding those soles who are counting on you to find them.