

ORANGE PEEL

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RAPID INTERVENTION TEAMS- The 'Denial and False Truth' Mindset

Why are we in the American Fire Service so satisfied by merely paying lip service to rapid intervention team training and the pencil whipped policies and procedures that are developed? Why are we not taking the initiative to do more training at becoming more proficient at saving our own?

Take a look at your organizations policies, procedures and training as it pertains to "Mayday" and "RIT Operations". Do you think that they would actually work when one of our brothers or sisters goes down on the fire ground, becomes disoriented and lost in a structure or is trapped from a partial building collapse due to a sudden change in fireground conditions? Do you think that the members of your organization, if called upon, are prepared to affect a rescue? Is everyone in your organization disciplined enough to abide by the rule of crew integrity and personal accountability; or will chaos ensue when the words "FIREFIGHTER DOWN" are uttered over the radio? If your answer is yes, I would like to hear from you, because most of us are only fooling ourselves with false truths and denial.

Phrases like - "It won't happen here, we are only a small department", or "We have enough people on the fire ground to just go in and get them out if we need to" or "It will never happen to me" are all too common of phrases voiced at many firehouse dinner tables and fire administrators offices that surround the area that I work - What are the thoughts surrounding rapid intervention teams where you work?

As I started to think about writing this article I decided to do a little research so I made a few phone calls. My questions were: "What does your department do for Rapid Intervention Training and what do your policies state on how your RIT would operate at the scene of a fire?" The answers that I got were all over the map. Some departments didn't know what the policy stated nor have they ever trained on it. Those that did train, the training consisted of a SCBA confidence course that was designed more towards an E-ticket carnival park ride then demonstrating proficiency in conditions that might actually occur on the fireground. In addition, many of the training sessions consisted of the Denver Drill, the Nance Drill and every now and then in the "California Taboo" Ladder Bail Technique. In almost all cases, the training did not include breathing air, blacked out conditions and/or simulated fire conditions.

If that wasn't enough, some of my follow-up questions were "Do you know why it is called the Denver or Nance Drill or why is the Ladder Bail Taboo in your organization?" The replies were just as disheartening – the common tread was - "Some guy died in Denver", or "Some firefighter named Nance fell through a hole," or "Some guy died trying to do the Head First Ladder Bail."

Do we really think that when one of our own goes down all of the smoke, heat and chaos will instantly vanish? Do we really think that we will be able to take our structural firefighting gloves off, with superheated temperatures surrounding us, and reach into our pockets filled with who knows what just to get our cutters out and effectively cut someone out of an entanglement?

Do we really think we will be able to operate an airbag and place cribbing appropriately in zero visibility to get one of our members out from a partial collapse without finding out our limitations during realistic training conditions? Do we really think that when it is time to exit the structure from an above ground window due to dramatically changing fire conditions that we will be able to do so in an orderly manner by standing up, getting on the ladder at our leisure, and proceeding down at our own pace?

Consider this quote contained in the text of one of Jim McCormick's Fire Notes book – *Firefighter Survival*, by Admiral Arleigh Burke, of the US Navy, ***"In the heat of battle you don't remember very much. You don't think very fast. You act by instinct, which is really training. So you've got to train for battle so that you will react exactly the way you did in training."***

Another phrase is often overstated but I will say it again – "It's time to go back to the basics" with regards to fire ground survival and rapid intervention team training. It all boils down to basic firefighting skills we all learned in recruit school. SCBA knowledge, basic survival skills, prevention, basic hose line orientation skills, basic search, basic team work, basic communication skills and most of all training day in and day out on these skills. Actually when you think about it a little more it all boils down to training, training, and more training.

One may argue that fires are down around the country (some say as much as fifty percent). The people that take this concept to work everyday and use it as an excuse not to go out and train are only fooling themselves. Complacency has taken over these individuals lives and if we don't do something to help change their minds they will bring many of us more down with them; maybe even into the grave! It doesn't take a lot of brain power to compare what was burning back in the day to what the average firefighter is exposed to during fires today. How many televisions, computer screen fire bombs, and Styrofoam plastic laminated gasoline torches do you have in your home?

Think about it, why are we losing just as many – if not more – firefighters today while responding to fewer fires? Why have the odds skyrocketed in regards to firefighters getting injured or killed on the fireground?

The theory of Rapid Intervention Teams was first introduced in NFPA 1500 a long time ago, it got more publicity in NFPA 1710 and 1720 and even more in OSHA's respiratory protection standard "Two-In/Two-Out" 29CFR1910.134 section (g)(4). Can anyone tell me why this issue has taken close to twenty years just to scratch the surface of the American Fire Service? Why in most organizations does it take someone to lose their life to find out that they were truly unprepared to handle such an emergency?

It is too easy for us to become complacent in our jobs and start thinking that a firefighter fatality will never happen to us, let alone anyone in our organization.

It is time we all get together and start being proactive in saving our own. This foundational principle should be centered on training. It's time for us to stand up and break the chain of history and stop accepting the fact that every year we lose over one hundred firefighters – thirty to forty of those on the fireground. I don't know about you but I enjoy going home to my wife and two kids in one piece. I also place a big piece of responsibility on myself to ensure that the entire crew I work with goes home to their families at the end of the shift as well.

Chief Vincent Dunn from the FDNY said it best when he said "*We must learn from those who have gone before us, we can pay tribute to those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice by studying what went wrong and correcting the chain of events in the future.*" It is time we start doing some historical research my brothers and sisters. It is not that hard go turn to the internet and find the FEMA website or by just punching in the letters "NIOSH" on google.com. Post the reports up at your firehouse so everyone can learn, even the closet readers who don't want anyone else knowing what they are doing. Just provide the information to your fellow brothers and sisters. You never know, you might get some real firehouse talk at the dinner table instead of discussing what happened on one of the all too many reality TV shows.

When all is said and done, it doesn't matter who you work for or for which department - big, small, combination, or volunteer. A fireground fatality can happen anywhere, just go to any firefighting periodical or internet site and see for yourself. We are all here to do the same job and fulfill the same mission, remember we choose our profession it didn't choose us. We all stood in those long lines hoping to score high enough on the written exam so we could get invited to an interview and hopefully get offered a job. We all participated in a probationary period of some sort and all we cared about at that time was to learn as much about the job as possible. Why have so many of us lost our way?

I have never seen a professional baseball player show up to a game without his glove or a basketball player show up without his shoes. Why are we consistently showing up to our chosen profession without the tools, equipment or knowledge to do our job? Why are members of our organizations consistently showing up to work not carrying at least one cutting tool in their turnouts, or why do they refuse to wear a flashlight that can be found in the cab of most any fire apparatus around this nation. Who knows one of these tools could save our life when we encounter the unfortunate of unfortunate circumstances on the fireground.

We must take ownership and pride in our profession. We must not accept failure and strive to look for new and better ways, any way, to overcome a problem. We all read these articles every month to help keep ourselves motivated, re-ignite our desire to not accept substandard performance but we must not stop there. Every one of us needs to help reignite the desire of excellence in our brothers or sisters who have lost their way. We need to keep fighting the good fight as a district chief in Denver has told me more than once. We must not be satisfied only by a paper document, or a buzz word to get a check mark in an Incident Command System worksheet. We must go out and train and find out what works for our organization and then work towards implementing these proven fireground techniques. We owe this to ourselves, our families, our loved ones and our fellow brothers and sisters.