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THE FLOOR ABOVE

Many of you interior attack firefighters will acknowledge that the position at the floor above the fire is the most dangerous during operations in a structure fire that is NOT under control. Well, as is the case in almost all firefighting lore, this is only true some of the time. It depends on the structure's construction and the occupancy (use group) classification for which the structure was built.

Frame one- and two-story buildings certainly are dangerous, but three- or four-story frame structures are even more dangerous to the floor-above person (er, ah, er, *team*). Why?

One of the major reasons is that we take away the second means of escape—dropping by gravity out the last window you pass in a two-story building. This escape route generally is not more than 14 feet over the ground; and if you hang from the sill, you usually are only five feet over a bush.

Construction type can add safety when the structure has masonry walls and full-dimension lumber floor supports, found in buildings constructed more than 25 years ago. Building use may also add safety to the floor-above position. A good example of such a building-use configuration is a multiple dwelling built to house more than one family per floor. The adjacent or opposite apartment from that over the fire can serve as an area of refuge or a waiting area for the victim waiting to be removed or a firefighter trapped (or both) should conditions deteriorate on the floor above the fire.

The degree of safety for members assigned to the floor above the fire in high-rise structures depends on whether the occupancy is built as a residence type (easy) or an office building (nightmare). So you see, again, no statement can ever be a valid rule in the firefighting end of this service. Well, almost no statement!

So, let's spend some time with operations on the floor above the fire. We will discuss the options and movements needed to "make" that position. We will also address the tactical operations necessary to sustain and support the firefighters in that position of operations on the "floor above."

Some rules pertain to all assignments to the areas above the fire—especially for those who are not privileged to take along a charged hoseline *all* the time.

- ***Determine that the area you are trying to make before fire control is indeed occupied!***

Unless victims are hanging out the windows on your arrival, you must decide what level of commitment you will make—dependent on size-up of the floor directly above the fire location. Lower-floor fire in two-story buildings is a given. But, how about attic spaces in large 2 1/2-story oldies? How would you determine that some occupants probably are living in that area?

Right! Open windows; air conditioners; shades, Venetian blinds, or window dressings all located at different levels in the windows; screens; fire escapes to the third-story level (2 1/2-story conversion).

The time of day will make the ascent to the top of the open stair in a two-story, platform-construction private dwelling urgent (at night) and not so urgent (daytime).

- ***Communicate.***

Tell people you are going there (to the floor above)! This is a twofold notification—outside and inside. Outside in person to the initial or interim incident commander or by radio to that command level from inside. Then to the team on the fire floor, preferably to the officer in charge of the handline, if there is one.

- ***Size up the condition you are going above.***

What kind of fire is it? Where is it in relation to the stair, to the occupied space above and (later) to the known second means of egress (aerial location, fire escape location)? There is a big difference between a two-cent mattress fire two rooms in and a two-room fire extending to the stair area or a cellar fire eating at the underside of the stair structure you are going to take to the next floor.

- ***Assess the probability that the fire condition will be isolated to that floor and not be allowed to extend to you on the floor above— at least not extend to and up the stair you take to get there.***

This indication is assessed by what is on fire, how it is being controlled—a closed door, an extinguisher, or a handline of sufficient size (an 1 1/2-inch line lets nothing past), and who is controlling it.

As mentioned before, notify someone in charge of controlling the fire floor itself that you are going up above it.

Now, here we have a problem. This is commitment time for you, and you must know with whom you are dealing, their stamina, and their experience level. Here is where a true firefighter is separated from one who just shows up. In the old days (I know you all hate that phrase), when you tapped the nozzle team or its leader or the nozzle person and said, “I am going up,” the nod and grunt you got in return was a contract. A contract! I said. The contract, an agreement between the two of you, said that if you (floor-above person) were hurt by the fire on the floor above it, it is because I (the nozzle) have already been carried out of the building!

I know some of you are saying that that is a very romantic notion. But, it was true and probably accounted for the saving of many firefighters’ lives, compared with today where nozzles are dropped; communication inside the building is hectic, less understood, more ignored, or just too chatty; and companies do not understand or believe in the interrelationship between tactical performance and the safety and accomplishment of another tactic! (Someone has to say it.)

The area of private dwellings or small-height multiple dwellings is where the team concept needs adjustment. Most books are written as though we must hold hands with a partner in every tactic performed. That is foolish. But it is true that another must be responsible for his partner by some type of continuous contact—physical, visual, or verbal. The best team effort in ascending the interior open stair to the floor above the fire in a private dwelling is to leave the partner somewhere on the stair to observe the extinguishment-holding effort of the fire floor team.

It is now the partner’s job to maintain constant communication with the searching member above him. As the holding and extinguishing effort is progressing, he must ensure that that fact is communicated. More important, if the effort deteriorates, he must signal that rapid evacuation is necessary and account for the member searching. Should this operation stabilize, and then the communication partner may join in the search effort on the floor above—each from time to time checking on conditions below.

Now, we are in position to begin the most dangerous search operation in dwellings. What are some of the “tricks” to making the operation more routine and more effective and safe? Next time.

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