REAL-WORLD RIT

RIT for Real

BY PAUL STRONG

MY LIGHT BULB CAME ON in 2007 during a meeting; a flood of ideas on firefighter rescue training rolled through my brain. I realized the fire service was fooling itself into thinking that it had been preparing its rescuers to a standard that may not even come close to a real-world potential. Perhaps for the first time in my career, I thought about firefighter rescue not from the standpoint of how well I performed my training but how well trained I want my rescuers to be if I were in trouble.

Putting myself in a down firefighter's boots and thinking of the rescue from his perspective, I built a realistic view on what should happen to save my life. First, consider that every situation is different, and you don't know exactly what you'll be faced with if you do get the deployment order to save one of your own. With that being said, you need to be prepared for everything. You can't control the unknown situation before it happens, but you can take control of personal accountability and responsibility by developing strong leadership at the company officer level, providing consistent and meaningful training, and eliminating laziness and complacency in your profession.

Firefighters will perform on the emergency scene based on their training and experience. When a rapid intervention team (RIT) is deployed somewhere in this country, it will perform largely based on its training because it is unlikely it will have any experience rescuing firefighters.

How well have you trained for this day? Hopefully, your answer to this question is, "My crew and I are not good enough. We must get better." This is the mentality that every firefighter and company officer in the American fire service should have. Never get comfortable with your firefighter rescue skills, and always strive to get better. Analyze your training and preparedness at the individual and crew levels. Approach it from the down firefighter's perspective. What is it that your victim needs more than anything else? Air.

There is a higher likelihood that a victim firefighter will be alive and savable inside a burning structure than a civilian. Why? The answer is personal protective equipment. The limiting factor in this situation—the time limit—is tied directly to the amount of air (life) that is remaining in the down firefighter's bottle. There isn't much time.

From the victim's perspective, there are three phases to a firefighter rescue: (1) Get here now, (2) keep me alive, and (3) get me out. The "get here now" phase is where your victim faces the highest likelihood of death; he will run out of air if you haven't trained properly, so you must get to him as quickly as possible.

Training—we all do it. Yes, you know how to perform searches inside a smoke-filled structure. And you can do it better than anybody, right? Change your perspective. This is a linear approach to your preparedness. You must take the 360° approach to training for a firefighter rescue. Every detail matters; it's the details that will shave time for the RIT to "get here now."

The details matter to the victim; they should be second nature for the firefighters who have been deployed to perform the rescue. Consistently train on basic firefighter fundamentals and choreographing crew evolutions to maintain proficiency. Company officers must maintain their situational awareness and resist the urge to perform firefighter task-level work. Without strong leadership during a RIT deployment, the details will fail.

So, how good are you and your crew? You are never good enough when it comes to fulfilling the most important role on the fireground: firefighter rescue. Get better at your job as an individual and as a crew. You owe it to your fellow members, and they owe it to you.

Staying at the top of your game with the basic firefighter fundamentals is a must; I call this "training for success." What is your typical procedure for completing a search and rescue drill? If you are like any other fire department, you place a firefighter or a rescue dummy in the truck bay or in the living quarters. A crew enters the structure and does a left- or right-wall search or maybe a tag line evolution. They find the victim, package him up, and drag him outside. Everybody high fives each other, signs the training roster, and calls it a successful drill.

If you and your brain have never been in a situation before, how do you know how well you will perform when it becomes reality? You don't.

Sure, there may be variables. You placed a little debris on top of the victim (don't bang up the firehouse), or maybe you were forced to find another way out (you know exactly where the nearest exit is in your firehouse). The point is that you completed the drill in a nonstressful environment in familiar surroundings. If this is the only type of training you do—training for success—then you're setting yourself and your firefighters up for failure. Firefighters must also be challenged with evolutions that require them to think, plan, and act in an environment of elevated stress. This is the 360° approach.

360° APPROACH

When the Mayday is called and your crew is deployed, you know it will be a stressful situation. So, why don't you train under stress? Firefighters will perform on the fireground based on their training and experience. They will take their sterile, linear training and use that learned behavior when attempting the rescue of a firefighter under highly stressful circumstances.

This doesn't make sense. If you and your brain have never been in a situation before, how do you know how well you will perform when it becomes reality? You don't. In a highly stressful, team environment, I have witnessed that the amount of talking goes up among the team members and the amount of listening goes down. This took place during real-life, stressful RIT training in which more than 100 crews participated. Further, critical decision-making and leadership skills were taxed among many company officers. As such, there were numerous lessons learned regarding what you need to do better when it comes to preparing to save one of your own. Many of these crews did a lot of things very well, but this article is about how the fire service needs to expand its RIT preparedness with a 360° approach. The linear approach alone doesn't work; it's time to get real.

Firefighters need to take personal responsibility for their preparedness so they may do their job. Do not dismiss opportunities for learning and practicing your craft. Strong leadership is absolutely necessary and needs to be supported in every organization from the top down. Give company officers the tools and the training to become good leaders and then evaluate them periodically to ensure they remain on top of their game. Well-written policies should exist in every organization! Add the element of real stress into your training from time to time so your crew will be better prepared to handle the Mayday when it goes out. If you think that a member of your organization is older or not in very good physical shape and shouldn't be subjected to stressful training, think again. Remember your personal and organizational responsibility. These people are firefighters; it is not just a title. Get them in shape. If this person is on your crew, help him out. We are all in this together, and this could be the person called on to attempt your rescue someday. Be good at what you do, and never accept "average" as being good enough.

Rapid intervention is NOT rapid. Why? Because we often load down the initial team with unnecessary tools and equipment. You must first find the lost, trapped, or disoriented member in the quickest, most expedient manner possible. Then you must establish or maintain protection for the victim. In most situations, initially deployed RITs should enter a situation with a limited number of tools. Leave the extra tools outside; secondary teams can be used to shuttle these tools as dictated by the situation found inside the structure by the initial RIT. Simply, tools are not the first answer; speed and efficiency are the primary goals.

Successful RIT operations are based on the following:

- Rescue planning, training, and implementation.
- Proactive actions for fireground survival (i.e., softening the structure, secondary egress).
- Effective communications within the crew, with the victim, and on the radio.
- Strong incident management and accountability.

The initial RIT should set up equipment caches, but they are secondary to the search operation. A RIT kit, tag (or hose) line, tool of choice, and thermal imaging camera (TIC) are recommended.

HIGH PROBABILITY OF "RESCUER" MAYDAYS

Rescuers are more likely to get into trouble because they tend to exceed their physical and equipment limitations. They attempt to accomplish more objectives than one crew can handle efficiently while they are deployed into unknown environments. This possibility can be reduced through realistic training. Rescuers may make the mistake of measuring their

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success on completing the rescue without the coordination of additional resources.

To reduce the probability of a rescuer Mayday, break down assigned tasks into the following simplified, accomplishable objectives:

- Search (rapid, thorough, last known location).
- Locate (broadcast location and situation—i.e., unconscious, trapped, and so on).
- Protect (air, anything necessary to keep him alive for an extended period of time).
- Resources (call for additional help).
- Extricate (determine needs, develop a plan, call for resources early).

TRAINING FOR SUCCESS

Firefighters are traditionally trained to complete their assigned task; you never leave until the job is done. If you continue to take a linear approach to rescue training, you will get firefighters injured or killed. When crews are trained to think that success is measured by their "completion of an assignment," they are being set up to fail when they are not able to complete the rescue. The crew communication may degrade with an increase in stress; critical decision making will be tested beyond a risk management level, and efficiency will most likely fail. If this takes place, you fail your members who are relying on you to perform like a well-oiled machine.

The element of firefighter rescue training that has been largely missed is handling the contingency. What if you are deployed to rescue one of your own and can't complete the mission? Did you plan ahead and call for resources early on? Are you taking unnecessary risks that may cause this incident to escalate into an operation requiring multiple rescues?

Successful 360° training occurs when each crew can work with speed and efficiency as a stand-alone crew entering the structure and communicating and coordinating with command and other RITs while maintaining that speed and efficiency as a rescue group. Plan RIT, firefighter rescue, self-rescue, and Mayday drills with the element of the contingency. Train for these incidents in the classroom or in a tabletop setting, under normal training conditions, and under elevated stress conditions.

THE UNKNOWN

A RIT deployment will always yield the unknown. Taking proactive steps to avoid a deployment makes sense. The RIT leader must perform a 360° walk-around with a TIC and tie in with the incident commander for valuable information sharing. The structure should be softened, and all ingress/egress points should be well lit. The RIT leader must also share all available information about the interior crews, the structure, the fire progress, and so on with his crew members.

RIT deployments are NOT the same as civilian search and rescue. In a RIT, you may encounter a situation where you will need to protect the firefighter in place for an extended time while other RITs perform the actual extrication. Calling for resources early is an absolute necessity. As the initial RIT, your job is primarily to search, locate, and protect in place. If you perform the extrication as well, that would be the icing on the cake. When you reach the victim, anticipate your needs, and call for appropriate equipment and needed resources.

The bottom line is to hold yourself and your crews accountable for being prepared. Develop realistic training, and go to work. Be honest with yourself and your crew members about your training evolutions; if they didn't go well, fix them and try again. Add the element of stress into your training so that your brain can draw from experience when it is needed most—during an actual rescue. ●

● **PAUL STRONG** is the creator, program developer, and lead instructor of RIT for REAL training. He is a 22-year veteran of the fire service and a responder in South King County, Washington. Strong has served as a shift captain, a training officer, an incident safety officer, a medical specialist, and a rope and dive rescue technician. He has lectured across the country on firefighter rescue and self-rescue.

Paul Strong will present "RIT for Real: Learning from Our Mistakes" on Friday, April 26, 2013, 10:30 a.m.-12:15 p.m., at FDIC 2013 in Indianapolis.