

# The Incident Command System and Its Application to Fire Investigations

By THOMAS W. AURNHAMMER

**A** large loss fire occurs in a medium-sized city, negatively impacting the community's tax base; a serial arsonist sets a number of fires in the same geographical region, antagonizing firefighters and fire investigators; a copycat arsonist, seeing a major wild-fire on television, becomes inspired and starts setting his own fires; an arson-for-profit ring, conspiring to commit fraud, starts burning heavily insured vacant properties; a revenge arsonist starts a fire that turns into a multi-fatality incident. Looking at today's headlines, what was once a worst case scenario for fire investigators is becoming an everyday occurrence in some places. While training for fire investigators in areas such as determining the origin and cause of fires, interviewing techniques, incident documentation, evidence collection and case presentation has improved over the years, one deficient area is the management skill needed to direct the resources involved in conducting a successful, large scale fire investigation.

The Incident Command System (ICS) can provide the structural framework for a large scale, multi-agency and/or multi-jurisdictional fire investigation. The ICS can be swiftly initiated and tailored to any specific incident. Familiarity with the ICS will facilitate communication as to who is responsible for what aspects of an investigation and in keeping everyone speaking the

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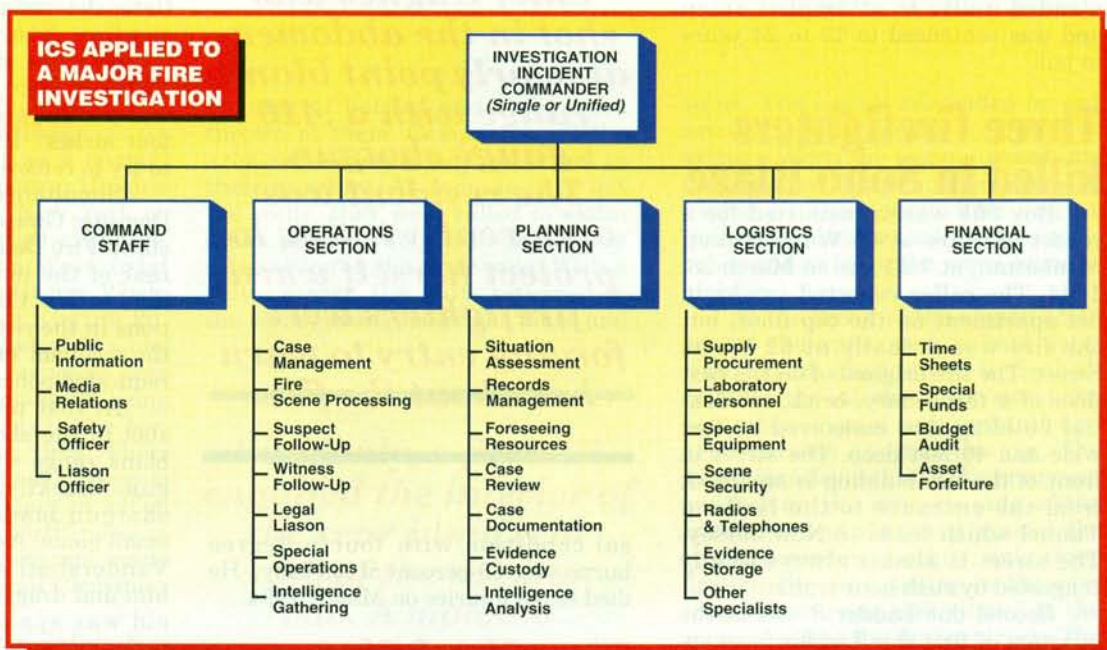
same jargon. Once an incident has concluded and multiple investigative agencies are on the scene, it is too late to design a workable system.

The ICS can easily be applied to fire investigations. The sections of the system can be activated, deactivated, enhanced or downsized depending on the needs and/or size of the investigation. A typical ICS organization chart is shown below.

Remember, the ICS is designed to be adjusted to a particular incident's demands. For example, at the onset of

system familiarization. At any emergency, someone must be in command, assessing the situation and available resources, determining an appropriate incident action plan, monitoring the plan's effectiveness and continually modifying the plan to meet the needs of the situation.

Just stating that the ICS will be used on all major investigations may not be enough. A conscientious effort to pre-plan and cooperate with other agencies before an incident occurs removes a lot of turmoil from the start.



the fire investigation, the fire investigator on the scene may perform the role of both the Incident Commander (IC) and the operations officer. As the investigative needs for that incident grow and the number of resources employed to meet those needs increase, the operations section may be delegated to another investigator. ICS operations are designed around management by objectives, restrict supervisory span-of-control to no more than five to seven subordinates and provide structured recording and sharing of information.

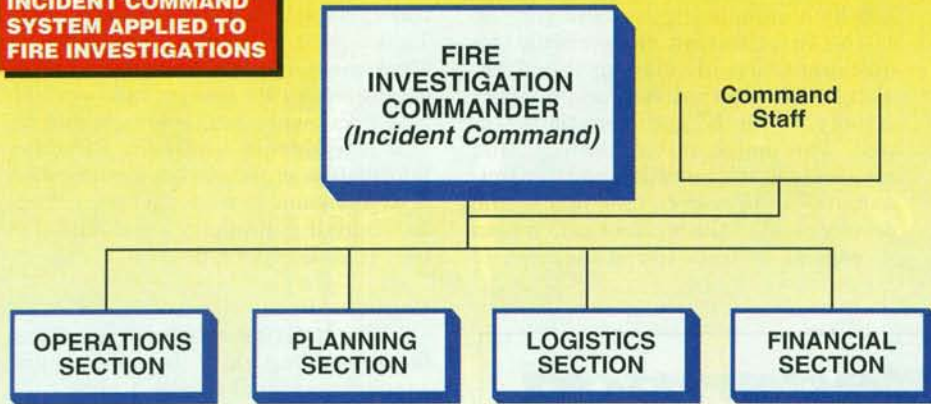
While ICS use lends itself to major cases and large scale fire investigations, its use on minor fire investigations can serve as a training tool for

We must practice in the same mode in which we are going to play. It would benefit any organization planning to use the ICS for fire investigations to notify other agencies of that fact, and suggest a table-top exercise or other informational-type gathering. The scene of a fire is not the place to try to hold your first informational and/or planning meeting.

The basic concepts of ICS are certainly not new to fire investigations. What the ICS will provide, as it applies to fire investigation, is the organizational structure to make sure all of the necessary tasks are being performed, and all of the players involved in the investigation are communicating. This tool will assist in pro-



**INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM APPLIED TO FIRE INVESTIGATIONS**



viding consistent and efficient management during the fire scene analysis, and during all of the much needed follow-up inquiries.

**Command**

The one function that will always be filled at every incident, regardless of size, is the Incident Commander's posi-

tion. The Incident Commander has the responsibility for overall management of the incident. The IC's duties include assessing priorities, determining the strategic goals, development of the incident action plan, producing the incident command structure, evaluating the resources needed and coordinating overall activity. He or she is

also ultimately accountable for safety, serves as the outside agency liaison and directs public information and press releases. Depending on the size of the investigation, these tasks could overwhelm one person. If this becomes the case, the command functions of safety, liaison and information should be delegated to a command staff member. If a multi agency and/or multijurisdictional situation is at hand, a word or two about unified command is in order. Basically, what unified command boils down to is having a ranking official from each agency or jurisdiction involved in the incident, making decisions with the Incident Commander in a team atmosphere. This approach should eliminate any turf battles and avoid any question as to what resources can be provided by which agency or jurisdiction.

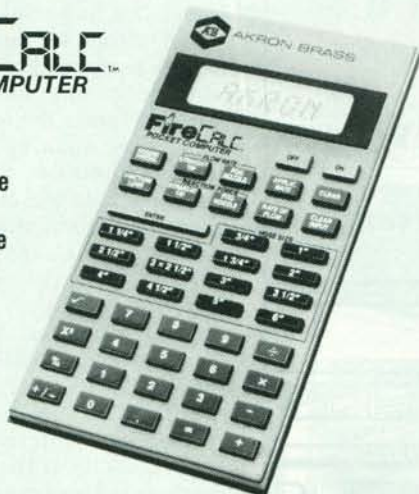
**Operations**

The operations section is responsible for all phases of the on-scene and follow-up investigation. The major

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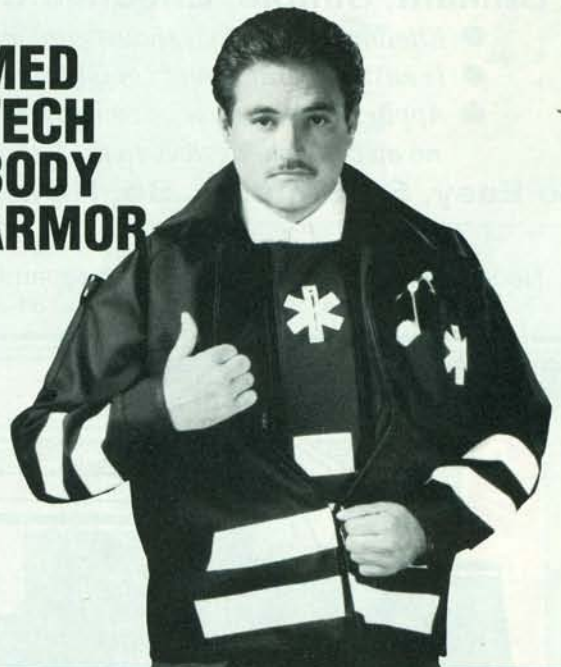
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responsibilities of the operations staff include consulting with the IC on the incident action plan, developing tactical objectives and operational plans, seeking and withdrawing additional resources as well as keeping the IC informed of the situation and status of operational tasks. These tasks may include case management, fire scene processing, suspect follow-up, witness follow-up, legal liaison, special operations and intelligence gathering.

### Planning

The planning section enhances the ICS by accumulating and studying all of the information concerning the investigation and relaying this data, along with alternatives for projected activity, to the IC and operations section. The major assignments of this area include the collection and dissemination of information, assisting in the development of the incident action plan — especially from the standpoint of

anticipated needs — and preparing elective strategic and tactical estimations, based on possible scenarios. Tasks here may include situation assessment, records management, foreseeing resource needs, case review, case documentation, evidence custody and intelligence analysis. Effective information on where an investigation is at any point in time, and predictions on where it is heading, are essential in the decision making process.

### Logistics

The logistics section is responsible for assembling all of the services and support personnel needed to bring the investigation to a successful conclusion. Principal duties for the logistics staff consist of producing the resources called in to meet the goals of the incident action plan. Tasks performed by members of this section may include supply procurement, gathering laboratory personnel, supplying special equipment, providing scene security, securing radios and telephones, maintaining an area for evidence storage and assembling other specialists needed for the investigation.

### Finance

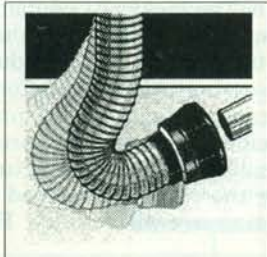
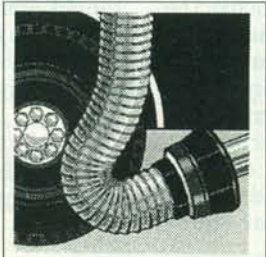
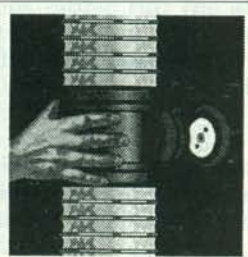
Documenting expenses, obtaining purchasing authorization and all of the associated paperwork is necessary to meet the financial demands of large scale or complex incidents. The assignments performed by this section should include tracking time sheets, obtaining special funds for informants and tip programs, auditing the investigation's budget and asset forfeiture. This last responsibility will only arise should the case involve violations of Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations (RICO) statutes and/or illegal drug activity.

Keep in mind that any or all of the sections can be activated and staffed, depending on the needs of the investigation. The functions of the sections that are not activated remain the responsibility of the IC. Try not to mix and match assignments. As an example, you would not assign the responsibility of being the incident safety officer to the same person who is in charge of operations.

The ICS is an efficient method to manage fire investigations. It is designed to supply common components in organization, language and approach. As we continue working towards reducing the tragic arson statistics that effect our nation, this management tool provides fire investigators with another way to meet that goal.



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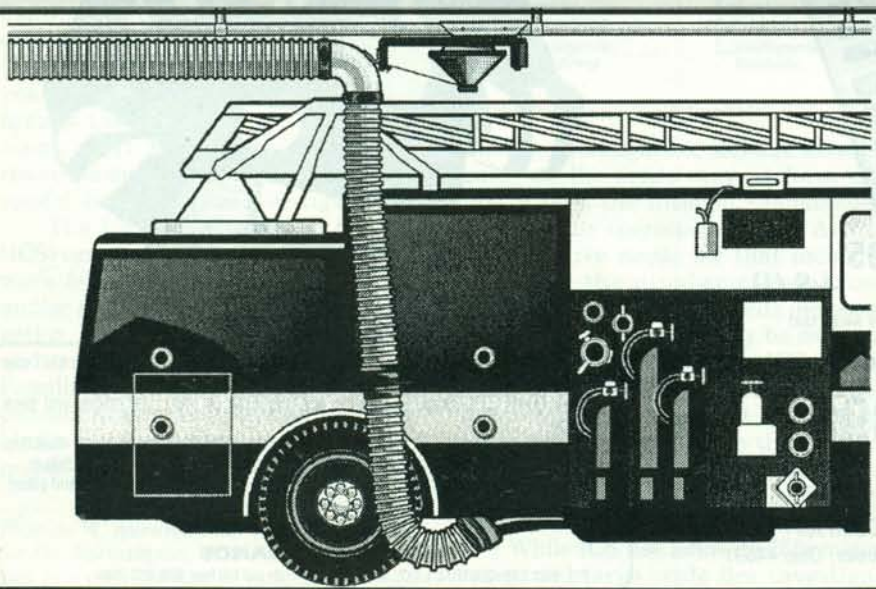
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