



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Condemned If You Do, Condemned If You Don't

It looks like our time of being in the spotlight of being America's Hero might be changing. What I am referring to is the phenomenon that is occurring that is being caused by a change in philosophy that firefighting may require a different approach to offensive operations. . Maybe we are facing a time when the Incident Commander may have to say: "No more Mr. Nice Guy". We are not going in! We are going to play defense."

The discussion of this dilemma is based upon the rationale being proposed by instructors and text book writers that under certain circumstances the incident commander must decide whether to either - go in – or stay out. The consequences of the latter are that the building burns to the ground.

Is that decision really an option for an incident commander? I personally believe the answer to that is yes. I believe it has been invoked before. Is it a choice that we would feel comfortable making....Well, maybe the answer to that is – No? If you are an incident commander you might have to make that decision sometime soon. What is it gonna be? If you do decide to not go in can there be a public outcry? Not only Yes, but that has already occurred. In some cases it has spawned lawsuits for incompetent firefighting tactics and strategy.

Does everyone agree that if there is no visible or viable human life in a burning building that it makes no sense risking the life of a firefighter to go in there? The answer to that question is probably a qualified yes. There are some firefighters that still subscribe to the idea that we signed on to risk our lives and it is just a price we have to pay. We have to go in. They, as a group, seem to be getting less dominate every day.

If that is really true, then tell me why we continually place our people inside of burning structures. Let me guess, you're not sure if there is anyone in there. You've been told that there may be someone in there. Does everyone agree that there are some conditions under which you might take the risk, as a calculation of what you think you can withstand a reasonable time span to save a life? Come on- Say yes, because that is what is going to happen anyway. Remember that "we risk a lot to save a lot" slogan?

Now let's talk about your decision making window. Just how long do you have to make that decision? Is it measured in seconds, or minutes or hours? I would submit it is more likely to be in the seconds and minutes range. I also believe that we have killed firefighters by leaving them in places where they did not belong hours after the fire was out.

What does contemporary wisdom say about taking risk? Today we do talk a lot about risk. But, generally speaking decision making is still treated as personal set of choices not risk – benefit based.



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Back-up a few paragraphs. What is at risk? What benefits are there to act? If you are successful and a life is saved you're a hero. If you're the incident commander and your crew is killed or injured you subject to an investigation. Your reputation can be destroyed in a matter of minutes. If you are wrong, and you or those you took in with you die; the victim may or may not even be there, you get to be a part of a NIOSH Investigation. That is certainly not the way to end a career.

But, let go back to the present –

You are a Captain of some other rank of company officer, and you are on your hands and knees, you are engaged in making an entry. RIC/RIT is in place. Visibility is zero in the building. You are aware that there is no one in the building. Decision time. Go or no go?

What is the risk to you right then?

What are the benefits to you if you proceed?

Elevate that decision process to being a chief officer that is serving as an incident commander. You have several crews about to enter. You have some crews about ready to ventilate. Decision time; Go or No Go?

You can pretty well be assured that there is going to be a limit to the time period you now have to do anything of significance at either level. Rules of air management are now part of risk assessment also.

What is going through your mind? You don't need to be considered a wimp by wearing SCBA anymore. But, you had better not be staying in there until your bell starts ringing.

Interestingly, the way the fire behaves doesn't look like the one at the drill tower. Right, that fire was using gas for flame and heat. In this case we are burning plastics and wood. Is the fire we fought at the tower a replica of the one we are seeing for real?

What's your reason for continuing? You know this is a crowd forming up outside of the structure. Are you going to act because you think they have an expectation of what you should do?

What benefits are there to moving forward? You might catch the fire. You might not. What's on fire right now? Is it the contents or is it the structure? That's one big difference in risk. Let's keep it simple, contents can mean flashover, structural components can mean collapse.

Which is more likely?



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Why not go on in? After all, the fire department has given you the best PPE ever known in firefighting.

They give you a nozzle that can be used as a xxx or a scalpel. Why not disregard the risk and depend on them to protect you?

If you are already in that building in your mind, you have decided that the risk is minimized and your chance of success is high.

If you are still waiting at that door, you might be processing more information. How long has the fire been in progress? What is the fuel load? What type of floor do you have here? What kind of roof do you have here?

A few more seconds go by and you make a decision that is of great significance. You go or you stay?

Let's talk about You Go.

What are the factors that you need to have working for you to succeed.

Let me simplify it; you beat the clock. You get to the burning material and extinguish it before the production of large amounts of heat you can probably suppress the fire to create an area of very low temperatures. If its content are still burning after that attack, you still have a problem. Production of combustion byproducts means stay in SCBA. If the fire was in the structure, you now have a concern about stability of the structure. Buildings have collapsed after extinguishment and killed firefighters.

Church steeple anyone?

There it is, firefighting 101, Basic 1A. You get there, you determine what your chances are and you take chances on what happens next. This little scenario plays itself out probably thousands of times per day in Rural and Gotham America. It is tragic however, that we still have firefighters that will die in the line of duty because they have made the wrong choice because they have taken the time to place their priorities in the right order.