



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

TAKE THE OOPS OUT OF ROOF OPS

No, you didn't read the title wrong. It says "roof ops". It's take off on a phrase I often see characterized in publications called "roof ops". I would like to talk for just a few minutes about the concept of being on the roof of a building when the building is on fire. I have done it. You probably have done it. There are hundreds of thousands of firefighters who probably do so continuously on a day to day basis. They arrive at the scene of an emergency, the building is heavily charged with smoke and someone, either the incident commander or a company officer makes a decision to put firefighters on a roof to engage in any number of physical activities. Ventilation is the usual reason.

While there are probably those among us who would take that kind of opportunity for granted, I would like to ask for a moment of hesitation and reflect on one fact. What happens if we underestimate the danger of being on that roof? I just saw a video of a truck company in Dearborn, Michigan, scrambling for their lives as a roof collapsed under them. We had a fire here in Sacramento a few years ago in a Nail Salon that almost took three firefighters.

This is not an insignificant question. People don't fall through roofs by accident. We have to go up there to become a potential casualty. Roofs have collapsed taking firefighters to their death or causing extreme injury for over 100 years. Do we really belong up on them? If so, when?

Before anyone gets too agitated, let me admit right now that I am not suggesting that we turn firefighting into a spectator sport. But, I am going to some strongly worded suggestions about whether we can afford to make unconscious decisions anymore.

If you don't mind me jumping context, I would compare going on a roof of a burning building to a confrontation between a police officer and a bank robber both of who are armed. They call that "one-on-one combat". There are rules of engagement for law enforcement officers. Police officers are trained to do everything they possibly can to avoid a gun fight. But they are also trained to survive a gun fight. It is my belief that we need to start shaping that mentality among the fire service as quickly as we possibly can.

Recently I got a hold of a document in which I am not sure has seen as wide spread distribution in the fire service as it deserves. It demonstrates some really excellent work by a team of individuals operating under the Safety and Health Organization of the IAFC. It is available as a pdf and can be downloaded from the IAFC website. If you have not read this document and you are a chief officer, I believe that you almost morally obligated to do so. I would like to quote two specific items out of that report for your edification right now. It is called the Rules of Engagement for Firefighters. The following are considered to be a set of ground rules for individual firefighters:



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Rules of Engagement for Firefighter Survival

- Size-up Your Tactical Area of Operation
- Determine the Occupants Survival Profile
- **DO NOT** Risk Your Life for Lives or Property That Can Not Be Saved
- Extend **Limited** Risk to Protect **SAVABLE** Property
- Extend **Vigilant** and **Measured** Risk to Protect and Rescue **SAVABLE** lives
- Go in Together, *Stay Together*, Come Out Together
- Maintain Continuous Awareness of Your Air Supply, Situation, Location, and Fire Conditions
- Constantly Monitor Fireground Communications for Critical Radio Reports
- You Are Required to Report Unsafe Practices or Conditions That Can Harm You. Stop, Evaluate and Decide
- You Are Required to Abandon Your Position and Retreat Before Deteriorating Conditions Can Harm You
- Declare a May Day As Soon As You **THINK** You Are in Danger

Now, this same report provides these guidelines for what an incident commander should be thinking of as they go into that same set of circumstances:

The Incident Commanders Rules of Engagement for Firefighter Safety

- Rapidly Conduct, or Obtain, a 360 Degree Size-Up of the Incident
- Determine the Occupant Survival Profile
- Conduct an Initial Risk Assessment and Implement a **SAFE ACTION PLAN**
- If You Do Not Have the Resources to Safely Support and Protect Firefighters – Seriously Consider a Defensive Strategy
- **DO NOT** Risk Firefighter Lives for Lives or Property That Can Not Be Saved – Seriously Consider a Defensive Strategy
- Extend **LIMITED** Risk to Protect **SAVABLE** Property
- Extend **Vigilant** and **Measured** Risk to Protect and Rescue **SAVABLE** Lives
- Act Upon Reported Unsafe Practices and Conditions That Can Harm Firefighters. Stop, Evaluate and Decide
- Maintain Frequent Two-Way Communications and Keep Interior Crews Informed of Changing Conditions.
- Obtain Frequent Progress Reports and Revise the Action Plan
- Ensure Accurate Accountability of All Firefighter Location and Status
- If, After Completing the Primary Search, Little or No Progress Towards Fire Control Has Been Achieved – Seriously Consider a Defensive Strategy
- Always Have a Rapid Intervention Team in Place at All Working Fires



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

-
- Always Have Firefighter Rehab Services in Place at All Working Fires

How much of those two paragraphs do your firefighters subscribe to? More importantly, how many of the incident commander points of view do your battalion chiefs, company officers and other ranks subscribe to? This is an expression of a paradigm shift in the American Fire Service that cannot go ignored.

My recommendation would be for you to go on the website, download the pdf and make sure that your training officer and operations chiefs are very much aware of what this document implies. Accept it or reject it, but don't ignore it. And if you do reject I would sure like to hear what your optional solution sounds like

Every time I open up an email that tells me about another firefighter who fell through a roof, I immediately start examining the factors surrounding the event. There are those that would like to claim that all of this has just been created by lightweight construction. That simply doesn't hold up under the facts that legacy buildings have killed as many or more firefighters as modern building construction. That is kind of like saying that nobody got shot with a peace maker as often as they did by 9mm GLOCKS. The cops have overcome technology changes and we have to also.

I was recently facilitating a workshop in which one of the individuals made a statement which I believe summarizes this entire phenomenon. "We have lost the battle to resist change. If we don't change, we will suffer the consequences of that failure."

In summary, it is my belief that there will still be firefighters that will continue going on roofs because someone believes it is a good idea. My only hope is that every single, solitary bit of combat intelligence has been applied to that decision and that it is not being done out of habit, ritual or tradition. If someone is going to die in the line of duty, let it be for an act of heroism not one of stupidity or lack of training.

First printed in Fire Chief, February 2013
© 2013 All Rights Reserved