

Lt. Smith and I get Run Out

Lieutenant Smith was a real smoke eater. He was a flat-out damned good fireman. Everybody knew that when Roger Smith showed up at a fire, he was going to get in there and get with the program, as we used to say. Early on, I had made it clear to him, that was what I was shooting for, too. That's what he wanted to hear from a rookie, so he took an interest in shaping me up to follow along in his footsteps.

I'm proud to say that with help from guys like Roger, Lee Mayfield, and Leonard Rush, I made the grade.

The first really exciting fire attack I made was backing up Lt. Smith on the first line in on a smokin' hot bedroom fire in down in the Flats. The house was a typical small two-bedroom wood-frame cottage. The owner was prompt in getting an alarm called in, so there was still plenty of stuff left to save when we arrived on scene.

Shorty took a crew around back and Roger and I took a line in the front door. It was hot and dark as midnight because the fire had not burned through the roof nor had it blown out any windows. It was what we called *a room and contents* fire. That adequately descriptive term means that the fire was simply contained to the room of its origin and the fuels that the fire was consuming were the contents of that room. In this case, of course, the contents were bed linens and furniture. Most firemen will tell you a room and contents fire is the *bread and butter* of easy interior fire attacks.

Lt. Smith was feeling his way along the floor in the total darkness doing his best to find the source of all the hot smoke we were being smothered in. We got as far as a hallway that led to the bedroom that was burning. We were probably twenty feet deep in the house from the front door and ten feet away from the open bedroom door in the hall. We could not see the orange glow yet. Roger asked me where I was. It was so dark that he couldn't see me just a couple of feet behind him on the hose. I reached forward and slapped the side of his boot and said, "I'm right behind ya, Ell Tee."

Suddenly, a huge fireball came boiling out of the bedroom and swept over us.

Roger knew that wasn't good, so he said, "Let's get the hell out of here!"

We shagged our asses out of there code 3, low-crawling lightning-fast to stay under the plume of fire. We got outside, pulled our masks off and took a look around. Our coats were smoking. Roger then determined that the captain's crew had probably poked a nozzle through a window into the blazing bedroom and opened it up on a fog pattern. The fog nozzle did its job, but in doing so, pushed the flames and smoke out into the hall and right on Roger and me. Roger said we ought to return the favor, so we masked up, and headed back in. In the meantime, Shorty had knocked out the window that they had roasted us from. Roger put the nozzle on full-fog and we

overpowered their opposing hose line and made it easily back to the bedroom and mopped up what was left of the fire.

In retrospect, if we had known what was happening, we could have stayed inside the first time and just gutted it out and played dueling hose streams with the other crew. But, when you're in that great unknown world of darkness and the heat and flames bloom exponentially, *it's usually time to get the hell out of there, just like Roger said to do.*

Bruno Changes the Fire Service

That incident described above was one of the problems of old-guard firefighting. One hand never knew what the other was doing. That problem was solved for us once and for all when Phoenix Fire Chief, Alan Brunacini, adapted and simplified FIRESCOPE's command system into a structure fire management protocol he called *Fireground Command*. FIRESCOPE was an organized California conglomerate of fire technologists, government agencies and a host of suppression teams that realized they needed a standard protocol to manage their huge wildland fires. Typically, those fires would involve fifty or more entities with hundreds of trucks and sometimes a few thousand or more individual firefighters. Their creation was called Incident Command System, or ICS for short.

It was probably four or five years after Roger and I got run out of the fire down in the Flats that Chief Maxwell brought Bruno to town. We hosted a regional seminar and history was made right then and there. Over the course of a long weekend, we, as well as most of the other northern Dallas suburban fire departments, found our way into the world of modern fireground strategy and tactics.

I was a fresh lieutenant when Brunacini brought his brainchild to Plano.

Shortly thereafter, I had the honor of being the Incident Commander and running the show at Plano's first structure fire using Fireground Command. I was riding seat on Engine 10 for Captain Doyle Spurgin out of Station 2. Doyle rode seat on the Ladder. He didn't much cotton to the idea of sitting up in the cab of a vehicle at a big fire, talking on the radio telling other people what to do, so he gave that job to me. He stayed on the ground with the men, his trusty ax in a scabbard on his belt.

That first fire was a two alarm, fully involved wood shingle brick. The roof was half gone by the time we got there. It was a simple matter for me to integrate Fire Ground Command with my fireground priority list and make assignments to the six crews I had at my disposal. I was now fighting fires with a radio, a pencil and a notebook, but I loved it. Thanks to what I learned from Brunacini, it was a piece of cake. Chief Maxwell later complimented me on how calm I sounded on the radio while directing the operation. He said the relaxed tone of my voice caused him to think it was just a small fire. When he got on the road and saw the huge column of black smoke on the horizon, he decided it wasn't just small potatoes after all.

Prior to our adoption of Fireground Command, not only were our operations disjointed, but our radio traffic had been a mixture of excited yelling and unintelligible gibberish.

I took example by Bruno and our own Assistant Chief Bob Acker. Talk low and slow and keep a cool head. In subsequent fires, on more than one occasion, some of the field officers had to ask me to speak up a little bit because they couldn't hear me over the ambient sounds of the engines and such. Actually, I took that as a compliment, but of course, I did speak a little louder when they asked. Chief Acker was another guy that could keep his voice down in a crisis. His radio protocol was pretty good and set the example for all of us.

Captain Spurgin was a hard-headed old-school guy, but we got along okay. At our fires, he got to do what he liked to do, which was breaking down doors and getting his hands dirty and I got to do what I liked to do. That's hard to beat. But what I really wanted was to be a captain and have my own crew.

Two years after that first FGC fire, my wish came true, and I got promoted to Captain. I was assigned way out west at Station 5. I had a good crew of men and it was just a mile or two down the road from where I had grown up. Naturally, I knew the district very well.

Once I made Captain, and was stationed way out on the frontier, I really refined the art of doing what I liked to do! Just ask my boys at 7A or 9B.