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Report of the Week

Was that something in the water?
3/14/08

Report Number: 08-050

Report Date: 01/29/2008 1602

Demographics

Department type: Paid Municipal

Job or rank: Lieutenant

Department shift: 24 hours on - 72 hours off

Age: 43 - 51

Years of fire service experience: 17 - 20

Region: FEMA Region II

Event Information

Event type: Non-fire emergency event: auto extrication, technical rescue, emergency medical call, service calls, etc.

Event date and time: 10/01/2007 0300

Hours into the shift:

Event participation: Told of event, but neither involved nor witnessed event

Do you think this will happen again?

What do you believe caused the event?

- SOP / SOG
- Human Error
- Decision Making
- Situational Awareness

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Life threatening injury

Event Description

On an early October morning at 0257 hours, an alarm was received for a female in the water of the [name deleted] river. Units arrived on the scene at the shore line. A marine company boat, while en-route, received confirmation that a person was in the water. The boat arrived within five minutes and proceeded toward the units on shore to find out the location of the victim. The land units informed the marine unit that they had a member in the water and that the boat just missed striking both the victim and the rescuer. An engine company member jumped into the water prior to the boats arrival with just a personal floatation device (PFD). In total darkness, with two people using one PFD and their heads barely above the water line, the thermal imaging camera was unable to locate them. The member was not tethered to a line and no lights were on him. Brackets [] denote identifying information removed by the reviewer.

Lessons Learned

- 1) Members entering the water should be wearing a personal floatation device.
- 2) Members entering the water must be tethered and in sight of members on the shore.
- 3) A second device, ring buoy or floatation device should be available for the victim.
- 4) During operations at night, all available spotlights, flashlights and apparatus headlights should be directed at the victim and rescue swimmer.

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Caution should be used to avoid shining a light directly at the responding fireboat. Lights from the shore may interfere with the visibility of the boat operator. 5) A slower approach in the immediate area of the operation is required when people are in the water. 6) Thermal imaging cameras can be used by land and marine units to locate victims that are floating on the surface and to keep track of the rescue swimmers. It will not locate victims that are under the water. 7) Rescue swimmers should have local knowledge of the area including tides, current and underwater obstructions. Victims on the surface will drift with the current at approximately 100 feet per knot. During tide changes, currents in this particular river can exceed four knots. 8) The Incident Commander should advise the Dispatcher that "members are in the water" and the responding fireboat should be notified of the exact location. 9) Land units should establish contact with the responding marine unit via portable radio or through the dispatcher to coordinate their efforts.

Discussion Questions

Water rescue puts first responders against forces of nature that are often underestimated and misinterpreted. The nation's rivers present everything from a harmless trickle to a frothy, seething hydraulic killer. Rescuers should have an awareness level of water rescue before getting within twenty feet of the shoreline. After reviewing the complete account and lessons learned in [08-050](#), consider the following:

1. What types of water rescue incidents are you likely to encounter in your service area? How about second or third due areas?
2. What is the formula for estimating the speed of moving water?
3. Do you have "Go-No Go" rules?
4. What other agencies assist with water rescue in your jurisdiction (e.g., police, Sheriff, other fire departments, Coast Guard)? Do you have a common radio frequency?
5. Who commands the incident when you run with multiple agencies?

Note: The questions posed by the reviewers are designed to generate discussion and thought in the name of promoting firefighter safety. They are not intended to pass judgment on the actions and performance of individuals in the reports.