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Report of the Week

And the walls come tumbling down
3/5/09

Report Number: 09-217

Report Date: 02/28/2009 1122

Synopsis

Wall collapse narrowly misses FF.

Demographics

Department type: Combination, Mostly volunteer

Job or rank: Fire Fighter

Department shift: Respond from home

Age: 16 - 24

Years of fire service experience: 4 - 6

Region: FEMA Region III

Service Area: Suburban

Event Information

Event type: Fire emergency event: structure fire, vehicle fire, wildland fire, etc.

Event date and time: 06/01/1990 1800

Hours into the shift: Volunteer

Event participation: Involved in the event

Weather at time of event: Cloudy and Rain

Do you think this will happen again? Yes

What do you believe caused the event?

- Individual Action
- Decision Making
- Situational Awareness
- Fatigue

What do you believe is the loss potential?

- Other
- Property damage

Event Description

I was working during overhaul operations at a school fire. The original fire occurred at approximately 0100 hours. I was part of an engine crew that was recalled to the scene hours later for flare ups. While operating during this second incident, the weather began to change. It had been sunny; however a thunderstorm was entering the area producing high winds. Due to the high winds, the outside walls began to sway. Incident commander ordered everyone to evacuate the area. I did not want to leave equipment behind so I stayed in the danger area longer than ordered to. Upon retrieving my equipment and leaving the area, two walls subsequently fell outward towards me, narrowly striking me.

Lessons Learned

And the walls come tumbling down

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I learned that equipment can be replaced, a life cannot. I should have heeded the order of the incident commander and exited the area right away. A split second more and I probably would have been killed from the building collapse. I also learned the importance of monitoring weather conditions during an incident. Since this incident, I have always kept in mind the integrity of the structure and how it can and will be compromised during fire conditions.

Discussion Questions

Being recalled to a fire is a double edged sword. Upon entering the scene of a fire where the fight was “lost” there can be a combination of embarrassment and frustration. There can also be a sense of disdain in having to waste time and energy on a scene where nothing is salvageable. Focused attention can overlook factors that need to be given serious consideration, like the effects of severe weather on a weakened structure. The decision and perceptual based errors that result from the focused attention can have devastating consequences. Once you have read the full account of [09-217](#) and the related reports below, review the following:

1. Does your department dispatch originally assigned companies to overhaul operations or recall fresh companies?
2. Does the ranking officer conduct a safety briefing before allowing overhaul operations to commence?
3. Is there a point where it becomes “too risky” to conduct overhaul operations?
4. Does your department use a fire watch procedure where companies rotate through a fire site to monitor rekindle?
5. When and how often is wall stability assessed during fireground and overhaul operations?

Related Reports

[05-240](#)

[06-158](#)

[07-912](#)

[08-170](#)

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.