

THE BASTARDIZATION OF THE AMERICAN FIREMAN

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There's a reason little kids want to be firemen when they grow up. There's something beautifully simple about their description of mustachioed, bent-brimmed heroes, a purity of purpose combined with an unquestioning almost unreasonable courage. The American Fireman is a legacy, an iconic figure that has only grown in status and recognition over the last few years. Yet, at this very moment, there are those among us slowly but surely undermining the very basic tenements of this noble calling. Step by agonizing step, departments all over the country are losing the luster that comes with this job.

The basic tools of the fireman remain almost unchanged from those used by his counterparts throughout history. Fire expends energy breaking the hydrogen bonds of water molecules, converting them to steam, until it loses so much energy that the flames are extinguished. Put enough water on a fire, and it'll go out. Give her an axe, and her motions are the same as those of Dennis Smith or Chief Edward Croker. Put a pike pole in his hands and he looks no different than the men who graced the front page of the Chicago Tribune in 1871. More and more, today's Fire Departments are turning to modern technology to aid their fight with the flames. Thermal Imagers that transmit images hundreds of yards away, foam delivery systems, multi shell turnout coats, computerized pump panels, digital radios, self contained hydraulic rescue tools, breathing apparatus with digital readouts, combination nozzles and glowing fire hoses permeate firehouses across the nation.

The Modern Firefighter has become reliant on gear that will protect him in hellacious heat, imagers that will let him see farther through the smoke, bottles that will let him crawl farther into the flames. She has grown accustomed to power saws that will open a roof in seconds and on rescue tools that peel a car like an orange in the blink of an eye. And with that reliance comes complacency; too many of today's fire department personnel are unable or unwilling to perform without their technological aides. Rather than helping fight fires more quickly and efficiently, these devices are hamstringing their users, with growing reliance leading to complacency and unnecessary risk. Turnout gear technology has progressed by leaps and bounds over the last few decades, providing heat protection incomparable to that of cotton coats and three quarter boots. Inexperienced personnel can and do travel farther into burning structures that they have any business going, Thermal Imaging camera in hand, certain that they are in no danger. No longer are firefighters forced to rely on any kind of instinct or acquired knowledge; instead they wrap themselves in the security blanket of technology. When they are faced with the realization that the environment they've entered is untenable, it is often too late and the results are tragic.

This poisonous influence of technologies extends to the most basic skills that the firefighter is supposed to exhibit. Years ago, roofs were opened with nothing more than pick-head axes; a padlocked door was no match for a truckman with a Haligan; wrecked automobiles were taken apart with saws, come-a-longs and crowbars. Today, chain saws, Hydra-Rams and Hurst tools have simplified and expedited these same tasks, but not without a cost. Like the lame leg of a cripple who overuses his crutch, these skills have

withered to the point of atrophy. Most firefighters have never completed these essential tasks without their technological aids; though their theory may be sound, few of them are proficient in the performance of these skills the time-tested ways. When their tools fail them, they are lost, placing themselves and others at risk by delaying the completion of crucial functions.

High expansion foam is great, but there is something to be said for the ability of a competent engine company to “make the steps” on a basement fire, essentially climbing down the chimney of a fireplace, trusting each other, working together and having faith that respite awaits at the bottom of the stairs. The truckie searching a searing apartment without the protection of the hose line shares something distinctly fraternal with the men and women who performed the same selfless, systematic search in the days of 15-minute sling-packs. No amount of talk groups, Division Leaders, Incident Commanders, flowcharts or clipboards will put a fire out. The recipe remains the same as it always has been. Today’s Fire Department leaders need to place more emphasis on the fundamentals of this intricate craft, they have to train relentlessly with their crews. Drills that focus on the basic principles of firefighting are the only way to preserve the tradition of the Fire Department and unless skills like forcible entry, vehicle rescue, search and rescue and hose line placement are broken down to the building blocks and drilled into the heads of today’s crews, the profession as we know it will continue its downward spiral. It would be a shame to see the traditional mustache permanently replaced with the reflective vest.