

FAR FLUNG FIRE DEPARTMENT



Far Flung Fire Department

Official Investigative Report

■ Main Street: Serious Fire with Serious Injuries
October ■

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INTRODUCTION

October [REDACTED] at 0500 hours there was a serious fire at [REDACTED] Main Street in Ground Hog. Three firefighters were sent to the burn unit at [REDACTED] Hospital for injuries. The injuries were described as severe. After the fire the Mayor and City Council formed a bipartisan committee to investigate the circumstances of the fire with the purpose of political posturing and the prevention future injury to firefighters. As the mayor stated at the press conference announcing the formation of the committee, "...as citizens we have a duty to make sure that the people we pay to encounter risk for us, do not encounter untoward risk, but rather only risk as limited and moderated to prevent injury." His words.

The committee met and listened to audiotape, looked at photographs from the scene, reviewed technical reports about clothing, gear, and tools. They interviewed all participants and then they consulted with experts in firefighting from all over the country. It is the belief of this committee that this report represents the basic truth of what happened that day.

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE

Compared to others nationally the FFFD goes to a large number of fires. Each company in the department can reasonably expect to go to at least one fire every shift, at least one. The FFFD has operated for 75 years with an "aggressive interior attack" modality using small lines. There is a lot of experience in the FFFD.

The standard operating procedure (SOP) in the FFFD is based on standard situations. For these standard situations the SOPs work well. Given that the vast majority of all incidents fall within the realm of standard there is rarely a need for individual actors to develop adaptive mechanisms, there is no need and thusly no room for variation.

On a daily basis the FFFD places a series of ad hoc teams into stressful situations. They are ad hoc because of overtime, leave, work trades, special details and other circumstances that almost assure that most teams are different each shift. These teams are formed early in the morning at the beginning of a shift and dissolve at the end of the shift. These teams still perform well most times because most times they are dealing with standard situations; situations that make sense.

When these ad hoc teams go to a fire they are joined by other ad hoc teams, forming task forces, [*a small team formed to accomplish a short term objective*] under the "command" of directive leadership.

Then there is a fire at [REDACTED] Main Street. The fire starts outside and works its way in, which is atypical. Because of this it is unclear exactly what is burning and where. The buildings are under renovation which means that standard clues about smoke

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spread and fire location are no longer reliable. The teams arrive out of order. The fire behavior –as it relates to smoke- in the exposure is not what is expected. This one fire does not make sense. The ad hoc teams experience rapid fire growth, they struggle to escape, the team falls apart. They bumped up against the limited capacity of the human cognitive space to deal with exponentially changing/growing situations. Three men are hospitalized.

Things could have happened many other ways. Things could not have happened any other way.

Read enough reports and you come to realize that they are essentially the same report with different dates, times and names; different reports that lead to the same conclusion. This one is different. This committee has found that all crews followed all rules. All information was passed on to the right people at the right time. Staffing met all local, and consensus goals. The gear they wore that day was the newest stuff on the market. All SOPs were adhered to in what some have described as the most disciplined fire ground operation they have ever heard. Three men are hospitalized.

CONCLUSIONS

No matter how hard you try if you go to enough fires eventually you are going to come across one that burns you in both the literal and figurative senses. This is true. A fire of this sort is an anomaly and as such unlikely to be repeated as events regress to the norm. It is interesting that one report remarks, “Burn injuries mustn’t be accepted as ‘part of the job’.” Do we not recognize that every time we send men and women into a burning building there is a chance they will be burned? The only people who haven’t fallen off of bicycles are people who haven’t ridden bicycles.

This report finds that when you place ad hoc teams under directive leadership in situations that require quick adaptive decision making you are asking for trouble. This is nothing new and no amount of new rules is going to change that. This committee believes that there are two logical reactions to this fire and that they are equally acceptable:

1. The FFFD must reduce its reliance on rules and teach people to think.
2. The FFFD can do nothing and accept that every once in a while a major fire like the one at [REDACTED] Main St. will reach out and touch them.