



**Battalion Chief Jeffrey Pindelski and Lieutenant Michael Mason**

# **Considerations for Commanding Rapid Intervention Company Operations**

The need for rapid intervention companies on the fireground is here to stay. Numerous incidents have taken place and have been documented where their deployment has led to the successful rescue of one of our own on the fireground. The question of what defines an adequate rapid intervention company and how a fire department establishes one on the fireground is open to individual interpretation. The important thing is that this resource be established as soon as possible and be managed in the proper manner to allow the greatest outcome for success if put into action.

The actual deployment of a RIT will create chaos. Fireground commanders must immediately gain control of the event and establish order and discipline to ensure all aspects of the fireground continue to be handled.

When the RIT is deployed to rescue a downed firefighter, they will be taxed both mentally and physically. All individuals will become so focused on rescuing their fallen brother that they will not realize or admit their own limitations. This may ultimately expose RIT members to possible injury and making them a further part of the problem. The importance of RIT training can not be overemphasized as it relates to decision-making and discipline by members of the RIT.

All firefighters on the fireground want to become involved with the fire incident operations. It is understood that if a mayday were to occur, that all members on the fireground would have an uncontrollable urge to move towards the emergency. Command officers must maintain control of their personnel and ensure that suppression activities continue simultaneous to any rescue attempt. This is important for two reasons;

- it limits possible exposure to the RIT; and
- it improves accountability in the original divisions or groups that were performing suppression activities.

Whenever it is communicated that a firefighter is in trouble, the incident commander needs to immediately ascertain accountability of the fireground. Until exact information is known regarding the firefighter in trouble, it will be impossible to properly initiate an effective rescue plan.

One of the most important areas for the commander is to make certain is that the fire fight is continued during rapid intervention operations. An IC will not be able to effectively manage both the rescue operation and fire suppression activities. When incident commanders are faced with a mayday communication they will have to expand the command system and apply a high priority to the rescue. A separate Rescue Branch Officer or RIT Chief will have to be assigned by Command to the efforts of the RIT. The situation can become very emotional and cause quick reactions that may lead to delays, misinformation and disorganization when trying to institute an appropriate plan of action.

Incident commanders must concentrate on making sure that accurate information is obtained and that the RIT Chief is acting upon the information. RIT operations must be flexible. An ever-changing rescue plan may be necessary. It is important to remember, flow charts and checklists do not make the problem go away. The people plugged into these positions in the IMS system must be disciplined and show a strong leadership presence.

The idea that one RIT, or even two, can resolve a fireground mayday is somewhat naive. The complications found in large buildings, including disorientation, collapse and other unknown hazards, create situations that will likely require resources and manpower far beyond the capabilities of a single RIT. Because of this, the incident commander should immediately request additional alarms or mutual aid companies when faced with a fireground mayday. Additional alarms or the request of additional resources can be done in a proactive manner as well. If there is any question as to whether help will be needed, it should be requested. Unused help can always be sent back. This proactive approach ensures the safety of the fireground as well as increases the probabilities of a successful rescue. Other areas that incident commanders should address are EMS support and technical rescue teams.

Technical rescue teams may require additional equipment and resources depending on the situation presented. Early notification will allow these resources to be assembled before they are needed. EMS support is also essential. A number of medical personnel will be required to treat the downed firefighter as well as the rescuers themselves. It has been highly documented that these types of incidents create additional injuries involving firefighters that are involved with the rescue.

When a mayday event occurs it is important for the IC to immediately seek the help of others. An additional branch under the IMS system will be required. The importance of establishing a rescue or RIT branch, and assigning strong leadership to it, can not be overemphasized. Command presence of the entire fireground operation, as well as the RIT operation, must be established and maintained. The size of the command presence is determined by the complexity of the incident.

The RIT Officer should be in place with the RIT when it arrives. The main function of the RIT Officer is to lead and direct the tactical operations of the RIT team on the interior or site of the rescue. There are so many things that will be taking place, that it will be difficult for the RIT Officer to successfully handle any additional responsibilities once the RIT is deployed. As stated before, the RIT will become so focused on rescuing their fallen brother that they may not realize or admit their own limitations, this includes the RIT Officer. This may ultimately expose RIT members to possible injury, making them an additional part of the problem. For this reason, the utilization of a RIT Chief is highly recommended.

The RIT Chief or Rescue Branch Officer position does not necessarily have to be filled by a Chief Officer, it requires a disciplined individual that is knowledgeable and can demonstrate a strong leadership presence. This position will directly support the RIT operation and will provide several advantages in handling a fireground Mayday.

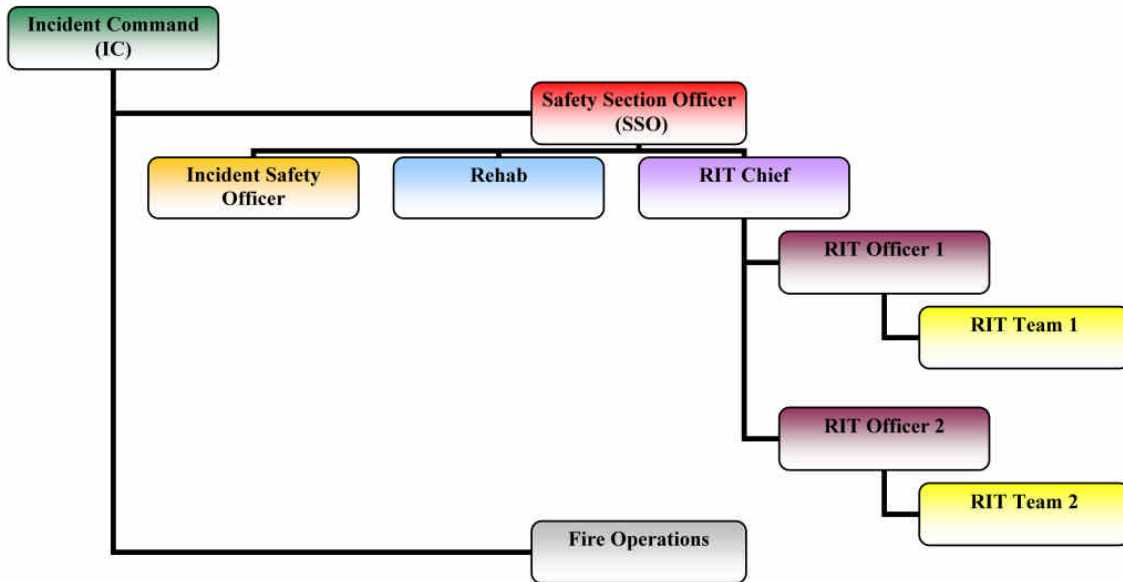
Advantages include:

- allows the RIT Officer to focus on the rescue efforts.
- assists the RIT
- controls free lancing in the rescue effort.
- provides direct accountability for the deployed RIT.

All communications from the RIT Officer should be directed to the RIT Chief since they will be responsible for providing resources and making any decisions related to the rescue. The RIT Chief should be mobile to a degree from the interior to the RIT's point of entry so that they can get a true indication of the operation taking place in the rescue effort. The RIT Chief and RIT Officer should work together to make certain that all necessary tasks and considerations are addressed prior to a Mayday.

Dedicating a Safety Section Officer (SSO) to the command team can also help control and evaluate risks in and around the actual rescue operation. This position has proven to be a valuable part of the Incident Management System (IMS). The Safety Section Officer is separate from the Incident Safety Officer. The Safety Section Officer is an aide to the IC that is in charge of the Incident Safety Officer, RIT Operations Chief, on scene accountability and Rehab. The person in this role will be located at the command post or inside the command van close the IC. The main purpose of the Safety Section Officer is to take command of the RIT operation when a Mayday is called. This will allow the IC to concentrate on the continued firefighting efforts of the incident.

A breakdown of the Incident Management System for handling a mayday is illustrated as follows:



When a mayday is called, the following should be considered by the command team;

1. If a mayday is received, IC should immediately perform a personal accountability report (PAR) in order to determine the number of firefighters involved, their location and what caused their situation. Are they trapped, lost, disoriented, injured, running out of air, etc?
2. Switch fire suppression operations to an alternative secondary tactical channel. This will help the affected firefighter communicate with the RIT and not get walked over by other traffic. Only the RIT, RIT Chief, and SSO should be on the same channel as the downed firefighter. It is strongly recommended that the RIT, RIT Chief and SSO also have a third tactical channel available to relay progress reports and other important information. This keeps the downed firefighter on an open channel for communication and also can keep them from hearing a progress report that may not be favorable prompting them to give up.
3. Immediately deploy the RIT utilizing search and rescue techniques that can be rapidly carried out. Once the RIT is deployed, the SSO should take control of rescue operations. It will be necessary for them to collect certain information and employ certain procedures or actions.
4. The RIT should identify the needs of the victim and communicate this to the RIT Chief, especially in the areas of air supply, entrapment with extrication needs and any possible fire threat that may be approaching them.
5. The RIT should provide progress reports to the RIT Chief while in the process of removing the downed firefighter.
6. The SSO shall provide EMS with mobile intensive care units ready to receive the downed firefighter or possibly other injured rescue members.

7. Upon the removal or successful completion of the rescue, the SSO should perform another PAR to account for all members on the fireground.

A checklist that is customized to the department's operations can help the command team remain focused on these tasks that must be performed and should be included as part of the incident commander's clipboard.

As simple as Rapid Intervention sounds, it is quite the opposite. Many disciplines and procedures exist and must be customized to fit the operational aspects of the department that is implementing it. The principles discussed should serve as major points of consideration for all departments when determining the best allocation and management of resources when one of our own is in trouble.

*Jeffrey Pindelski is a 16 year plus student of the fire service. Jeff is currently a Battalion Chief with the Downers Grove Fire Department in Illinois. He previously served for 12 years as a Firefighter and Lieutenant on the Truck and Heavy Rescue Company. In addition to his background in a career position, he has also served on departments in a volunteer and part time capacity.*

*Jeff is a staff instructor at the College of Du Page and also instructs courses at the Downers Grove Fire Academy. He is a Certified Instructor III and Fire Officer II through the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress while also being certified as a Fire Suppression Incident Safety Officer by the National Board on Fire Service Professional Qualifications. Chief Pindelski holds a Masters Degree in Public Safety Administration from Lewis University, a Graduate Certificate in Managerial Leadership and a Bachelors Degree from Western Illinois University.*

*Lieutenant Mike Mason is a 23 year veteran of the fire service. He is a Certified Instructor III and Fire Officer II along with being a staff instructor for the Downers Grove Fire Academy, Romeoville Fire Academy, Southwest United Fire Academy and other academies throughout the state of Illinois.*

*Lieutenant Mike Mason is the co-author of Rapid Intervention Company Operations (R.I.C.O.) on Thomson/Delmar Publications which is recognized as the largest and most comprehensive text available on Rapid Intervention.*