

UNDERSTANDING RAPID INTERVENTION FIREGROUND DYNAMICS

By Lt. Mike Mason

In the dynamic world of fireground operations involving aggressive firefighting concentrated in offensive procedures Rapid Intervention Teams and their operations sometimes need understanding, revisions and additional considerations. This is based on training and input provided by many of us at seminars and hands-on training throughout the country. Many questions are asked of our national lecturers and instructors regarding how certain things can work for one department versus another. In short one size does not fit all departments regarding what may be presented to them on any one given incident. Many misconceptions of terminology and a department's abilities in protecting their own and how this can be obtained are asked to us consistently. It is these grey areas that have to be elaborated on to firefighters everywhere through an understanding of proactive behaviors, Maydays, Rapid Intervention Operations and their recues to prevent the unthinkable.

The following are recommendations regarding proactive behaviors and philosophies. This along with considering policies and procedures that may improve function and understanding for any department reviewing their rapid intervention operations.

2in/2out and IRIT (initial rapid intervention team):

Due to limited manning in many departments across the country which may have 18 members or less arriving sequentially at working structure fires it should be made clear that that IRIT and 2in/2out could be one and the same. This is a very translucent fluid like movement involving the initial firefighters on scene involved in offensive procedures. 2in/2out should always be present at each and every firefight even though many times its fluid incorporation into the beginning of any firefight may not always be occurring as planned. Operations involving an arriving company of 3 men or even less should be well advised to commit themselves cautiously to any interior firefight while trying to provide this needed guideline. Departments supplying a 4 to 6 member advance on interior attacks will fare much better providing the 2in/2out and IRIT procedure.

Many departments with reduced staffing establish the pump operator and along with another firefighter possibly on the outside assisting in

the hose line advancement as a turn man to keep the guideline enforced. The question is can we consider this an IRIT, and the answer is a narrow yes. It is the pump operator's responsibilities that make this a less than ideal IRIT but a better suited 2in/2out role, again very narrowly regarding both.

It is the arrival of second and third company that can finally alter the safety of our 2 interior firefighters at residential structure fires. Their arrival can replace the initial IRIT or 2 in/2out at the original turn man position on the advancing hose line initially held by the first arriving company member on the outside of the structure. This first arriving member is now moving interior to continue the line advancement with his company. This is all happening within minute's sometimes even seconds of each other. Remember that every scenario poses different approaches but the safety of our members is what should be kept uppermost in our minds and is the reason for providing the 2in/2out and IRIT guideline. Obviously when rescues of civilians in immediate peril present themselves establishing 2in/2out or IRIT may need to be negated when it comes to risking a lot to save a lot and that is human life.

Moving on the second and third companies and its remaining members will also pull the second line while still keeping in mind the need for observation on the outside of the inside members as they proceed with tasks that may involve second hose line advancements, rescue, ventilation etc. We are advocating that the obvious choice from the second engine arriving is the officer with a thermal imager monitoring interior crews but allowing for the ready of himself and his crew into the firefight. This is known as a transient fluid movement of IRIT in order to maintain the 2in/2out requirement. With time preciously passing a formal RIT needs to be established in order to truly have the coverage and safety of our members on the inside as more companies arrive and involve themselves in additional fireground behaviors such as search, VES, ventilation and forcible entry.

Understanding RIT's, RITLO's and RIT Chiefs:

It must be understood that in many offensive procedures that are moving rapidly into interior firefighting that the ability of a formal RIT to have a RIT Chief Officer present early on is highly unlikely. A formal RIT and its Leader or Officer will be running the responsibilities of all proactive behaviors that need to be accomplished for interior firefighting members. The need for a RIT Chief is essential but should not be misconstrued as to its importance of the need for its presence in order for RIT's to function in an aggressive proactive manner. This is accomplished through training RIT's and initial commanders thoroughly in proactive tasks that are needed at all structure fires involving interior commitments by members. The RITLO's (Rapid Intervention Team Leader/Officer) will not be performing off of a check

lists they will be performing proactive functions that will be presented to them according to conditions that are happening in the moment. Departments that employ checklists at this level should consider removing them and train RIT's and their team leaders or officers according to sound continuous size up on fire conditions, interior/exterior firefighting members and needed proactive behaviors. RITLO's are expected to update all information to 1st in commanders and RIT CHIEFS when these positions are firmly established. Immediate formal 1st in RIT's when arriving at residential structure fires due not report to command for briefings they began at the point of the offensive procedure such as the hose line advancing through the front door on "A" sector or at the position of a Vent, Enter, and Search procedure that maybe on "C" sector. The exception to this would be larger operations such as high-rise, industrial or hazmat operations where needed briefings are a must for safe and efficient operations due to the magnitude of the incident.

Lessons learned here are to not advocate immediate RIT's and their Officer/Leader to work off a checklist or memorize one. Under duress this will fall apart without fail tying the hands of those we need to protect us. Keep the lists at the Chief Officer level.

Regarding RIT Deployments and Radio Communications:

Another area of great debate is RIT responses and radio communications during RIT proactive behaviors, mayday/firefighter distress calls and the communications relationship to Command, Chief Officers, Sector Officers or Scene Safety Officers. We are learning that RITLO's (Rapid Intervention Team Leader/Officer) and their RIT's should never have more than 2 radio channels at a time to be concerned with on the fire ground during offensive and defensive procedures. In some cases considering just 1 channel the fireground channel is the best way to go. Some departments incorporate into their procedures up to 3 and 4 radio channels for RIT operations; this is a disaster waiting to happen unless the need for it involves again a larger scale incident.

The confusion for many department policy writers is defining and explaining, how, when and where multiple radio channels are to be utilized. Again through our teachings throughout the country we have seen policy's that utilize up to 4 radio frequencies to the departments that still operate with one frequency and seem to do just fine. The idea of proper radio usage regarding RIT's and Chief Officers again comes down to training, accountability and keeping it simple and stupid.

Here are the recommendations through the experience of several instructors and their relationships with training and lecturing throughout the country. Policies should be written in such a way as to

break down time frames for radio frequency assignments and to whom they are assigned.

Let's start with an assigned incoming RIT. The idea here is to remind RITLO's that really there are only 2 channels that you will ever switch back and fourth on during an incident at a structure fire. Notice I said a structure fire, not high rise, not hazmat and not major large incidents at which multiple layers of chief officers are assigned branches but rather it all depends on the command structure of any incident.

The assigned incoming RIT will not stop off at the command post to bother a commander, the commander already knows their assigned RIT as long as they acknowledged their assignment coming in. When the RIT is coming into the incident it will monitor the operating fire ground channel and the main channel or dispatched channel. It will acknowledge its assignment on the main channel when responding especially when policies assign RIT through dispatch procedures. When the RIT arrives and has established its proactive position in the offensive task area of prominence it will announce its presence to dispatch or main channel as well as to command which may well be the fireground channel. This accomplishes the identification of the company assigned as RIT to all incoming as well as firefighters and command in the firefight.

Now here is where the problems usually began. Once the RIT has communicated on the main channel it will leave the main channel never to return unless a Mayday is transmitted on that channel, thus the need for the RITLO to monitor both. The channel of concentration though for the RITLO and his team members is now the fire ground channel. What we have learned about RIT's communicating on the fireground channel is that their communications should be prominently directed at the fire ground commander on the same frequency until a chief officer for the RIT becomes present. More commonly than not is communications taking place with a first in commander not an overall IC. On smaller departments it may very well be both roles residing in one individual. Nonetheless all benchmarks on proactive behaviors and safety concerns should be directed to those that need to know such as interior members, RIT Chiefs, SSO's and Sector Officers. The RIT listens more than it talks.

Now if departments invoke a third operational channel for RIT members and their sector officers to communicate within themselves then conscious discipline will need to be in order. RIT's need to monitor the fire ground with firefighters, their activities and their orders coming in to them as well maintaining communications with RIT members and RIT officers. Many times the 3rd channel is applied for communications between RIT members and their RIT Chief, Scene Safety Officer (SSO) or Sector Officer. When we incorporate the 3rd

channel the RITLO will need to move away from monitoring the original dispatch channel or main channel. We cannot expect a RITLO to provide adequate listening coverage by juggling 3 or more channels and expect to possibly pick up or not pick up a distress mayday call from a noise congested fireground. What we must remember about the way we are training firefighters when dealing with their Mayday communications is that if they don't reach someone on their operating fireground channel that they will switch to the strongest frequencies and the frequency with many ears outside their compromised area and that will be the main channel. The reason for this is that most fire departments provide their 1st channel the main channel on their portable radios positioned all the way left. The fireground channels are clock wise positioned all the way right which is usually red then worked back counterclockwise to white than blue to accommodate the gloved hand of a firefighter.

Monitoring and Communicating

RIT's having department policies that enact the use of monitoring and communicating on 3 different radio channels may result in some serious problems in fast moving dynamic fire grounds unless they are extremely disciplined through training. In the heat of the battle this can become questionable. Even with RIT's monitoring and communicating on 3 channels it must be remembered that each RIT member should monitor the fire ground channel predominantly while using possibly this 3rd channel to talk amongst each other, their RITLO and a Chief Officer. In a fast and dynamic fireground with precarious interior operations such as hose line advancements and aggressive searches we may not be doing our members the justice they deserve. The RIT having their undivided attention during the firefight especially on the fireground channel is the primary function.

What we have learned through our teachings with departments across the country is that RIT's, RITLO, RIT Chiefs, SSO and whoever else may be in charge is to predominately use the fire ground channel through listening and when needed to have RIT and their RITLO's communicate through the use of the fireground channel in fast moving fireground dynamics and only when necessary. Work and communicate face to face as RIT members and their RITLO's when utilizing proactive behaviors and tasks whenever possible is the better way to go. Having the RITLO do the communicating with the first-in commanders, RIT Chiefs or SSO's can be accomplished as well on the fireground channel by utilizing good radio discipline in providing only necessary, urgent and emergency traffic information to chief officers. Remember also what many times is not realized in communications and policy procedures is the importance of the RIT and RITLO's directly communicating to interior crews in helping and warning them of dangerous situations as well as providing information points of rapid egress made available to them if needed. If the need for a 3rd or 4th

channel is desired by departments make sure that RITLO's and their Chief Officers are disciplined in their use.

Do what needs to be done regarding proactive behaviors and stay off the radio. Listening while knowing where interior members are, their assignments and where they are going is the key to RIT operations, safety and hearing a Mayday.

The multiple channel changing act that many departments put into their policies are of major concerns in regards to their true proficiencies performed under fast moving dynamic fire environments. When RIT's are playing hopscotch with radio channels their not truly listening to firefighters on the interior let alone hearing their Maydays. Learn to work on the fire ground channel without interrupting suppression communication operations is the key. When well trained RIT's discover serious fireground situations they should utilize the fireground channel like any other member would that is involved in the firefight. This is their purpose as our protectors to let us know of a precarious situation that in seconds could turn into something ugly. Fumbling around with a gloved hand switching over onto other channels to communicate a dangerously occurring action that is happening in seconds to a Chief Officer must be done but it should be done after the RIT has alerted those first in the most danger.

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY!

One more situation that comes up at all our hands-on and lecture seminars is when the Mayday is called everyone else is moved over to another channel except the member in distress. This is only partly true. This action which is necessary to a degree carries with it grave responsibilities regarding accountability for all members especially those involved in the firefight, primary searches, VES(Venter, Enter, Search) maneuvers and roof operations. It is not as easy as most of us think as well as it adding another channel into the mix or trying to move everyone to an existing channel in use originally being used for another aspect of the fireground.

In many cases when a Mayday is called it is called by a distressed firefighter or another firefighter for that firefighter or worse maybe an entire crew. All those surrounding the firefighter or firefighters will react and involve themselves in many ways not planned on by the idea of these radio guidelines and their well intentioned philosophies. The reality is this. We will need to keep those affected by the Mayday and those that have reacted to it on the original fireground channel. This is where are RIT will be communicating as well as providing rescue efforts. Fire advancement and suppression efforts may also need to remain on the fireground channel instead of attempting to move them off to another channel. They may very well be the ones who are

protecting the rescue effort or even worse having one of their own being the Mayday somewhere in the structure.

The point here to remember is that the variables are many and that radio communication policies as well intended as we may think they are will need to be modified and creative when presented with different types of Maydays and their challenges. We need radio communications in our policies to provide accountability and information that is enhancing all proactive behaviors along with rescues by RIT's, RITLO's, and Chief Officers as well as our firefighters that are experiencing the unthinkable.....the MAYDAY!

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