

THE 360

In a world of fire service inventions, this stalwart creation really deserves a hand.

BY JOHNNY PETERS

B SHIFTER BUCKSLIP, Sept. 24, 2024.

Cover up the rest of the column. Move down one line at a time, reading until you reach the line that says, "Stop here until you're done." (I mean the next line that says it.) Now, think of some inventions important to the fire service. I've got one you won't think of. Take as much time as you need.

Stop here until you're done.

Those are all fine things, I'm sure. But mine is pockets. There's no way you thought of that. You probably think I'm nuts. Twenty-odd years ago, when I first left the Val Jahnke Firefighter Incubation Facility, I would have thought I was nuts. My bunker pants had pockets, but there was nothing in them. For a short span, I had a flashlight in one of them. It wasn't designed for the fire service; it wasn't intrinsically safe. At any moment, I could have turned it on and blown us all to kingdom come. It didn't have a million candlepower beam. (I don't think we use candlepower anymore, but that was a lot back then. Now, we use lumens. I don't know what a lumen is, but you can fit hundreds of them into very small flashlights.) My smallest flashlight ever was a little black one that shed a dim red light. I used it to navigate back to my bed in the dorm at night—an improvement over my previous method, which was a sort of reverse sonar using the snoring of other firefighters to determine my position in the room.

That first flashlight didn't survive long in my bunker pants. I got caught in a flashover, and the light didn't make it out. The little yellow lanyard I imagined would make it easy to pull out of the pocket in darkness and confusion twisted into a pitiful yellow Twizzler that tasted like soot and blastoma, and its beam turned into a sickly yellow glow that coughed weakly through the heat-distorted lens. New batteries didn't fix this issue.



Which tool or invention pictured above is the GOAT?

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My pockets hold five items that can save time or save my life, all within easy reach. Nothing extra to pick up or find a way to attach. And yet, pockets are easily overlooked.

For years after, my pockets remained empty, and I used the issued lights. These had a stronger beam but were hampered by an energy-saving two-step switch. Step one was turning the switch on; step two was banging the light on a suitable surface. The light also had an auto-shutoff feature triggered by sudden shocks—like falling through a hole in the floor or being trapped under a collapse. I'm sure this seemed like a good idea to the design committee.



**Behold the noble pocket, that humble haven where treasures doth lie!
In thee, O pocket, rests the pride of utility, a vessel most cherished by
those of good sense.**

The first thing to go in my pockets after the death of the flashlight was a pair of wire cutters, which became popular as stories of near misses or even deaths from entanglement in HVAC duct wires spread through the fire service. Since then, I've added a shove knife, some small vise-grips (for holding open recalcitrant windows), some webbing with carabiners sewed on for hoisting equipment and a six-way screwdriver.

I'd like to take a moment to advocate for that last one. You can disassemble a lot of things with a six-way screwdriver. Most HVAC unit air-handler access panels are secured by quarter-inch hex-head machine screws. Thanks to my screwdriver, I've probably saved 24 hours of standing around on a roof waiting for someone to come back with a quarter-inch socket over the years. I've been through a few screwdrivers—eventually, you lose one of the bits. If you get one, be sure to pull it out of your pants after a fire and hit it with WD40 or some other water displacer, or it'll rust. Same goes for your wire cutters, by the way.

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These items each have their own designated pocket in the pocket. Pockets within pockets are nothing new. They were pioneered with blue jeans, but no one until the bunker gear designers of the 2008 Paris Fashion Week figured out how to make them useful. Before that, I used a system of old fire hose and zip ties (another miraculous invention) to keep items reliably in place within the pocket. I would argue these were more holsters than pockets. I understand that you may regard holsters as a type of pocket, but let's not quibble.

My pockets hold five items that can save time or save my life, all within easy reach. Nothing extra to pick up or find a way to attach. And yet, pockets are easily overlooked. They sit quietly, taking up little space, ready to be filled with useful items—but not wantonly so. There's only so much that gusset technology can do. You mustn't overload them, lest they weigh you down or burst or become useless with a plethora of jumbled tools. In this way, they represent the action economy on the fireground: Just as you must not overload your crews with tasks, you must not overload your pockets with items. In exchange for your discretion, the vigilant pocket safeguards the wisely chosen contents close at hand.

There is no better method of carrying small items. Women have struggled for years against the nearly omnipotent fashion industry to get pockets added to women's clothes. The lack of them drives my daughter batty. She hasn't gone for any of the pro-purse propaganda.

As Gloria Steinem* said, "The pocket is never empty. It always holds power." They may not have the flash of the Halligan, TIC or other fire service tools, but their utility cannot be questioned. Their job is not glorious, but it's inarguably vital. They're a lot like slack-pullers. **BS**

**She did not say this, but she should have.*



Johnny Peters has been with the Houston Fire Department since last century. In this time, he has successfully gamed the system and was promoted to senior captain, forever freeing himself of the burden of fire hose by hiding in a truck company.