

FIRE CONTROL=FIREFIGHTER SAFETY

Our PPE is not invincible. Here are 10 essential safety & survival requirements for structural firefighting.

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During the infancy of my firefighting career, I erroneously believed a set of NFPA-approved PPE would protect me from a 1,200-degree F flashover for 17 seconds. They wouldn't then, and they won't now. The lens of an SCBA face mask will fail long before the turnout gear. Bundling this safety reality with the 15-minute air supply a 30-minute SCBA provides further proves we must manage firefighter safety and survival in real time. Understanding the limitations of one's PPE is the first step toward remaining a firefighter and not becoming a victim.



PPE has limits. Put water on the fire as fast as you can.

My last installment explained how Fire Control is the starting point for achieving the tactical benchmarks of Life Safety and Property Conservation. Since the fire department exists to eliminate fires—rushing toward the hazard to keep it from ravaging the community—we cannot use the same approach we teach the public to stay safe from structure fires. Exposing yourself to temps over 1,000 degrees F demands a set of defined firefighter safety and survival requirements (I used to use other firefighters as shields when it got too hot). What follows is a list (in order of importance) of these requirements for structural firefighting:

1. Proper firefighting PPE, including turnouts, hood, helmet, gloves, boots, SCBA and radio. There should be no exposed skin, and the respiratory system must be protected by an SCBA. Every firefighter/crew must be able to communicate with the IC via radio. The company officer should have a thermal imaging camera (TIC).
2. Every standard and regulation identifies four people as the ideal minimum staffing for fire companies, and our task-level firefighting SOPs are designed around this guidance. However, much of the American Fire Service uses three-person staffing, inherently less safe than four-person staffing. Two-person staffing is the model used to staff ambulances, not fire companies. A crucial element of firefighter safety and survival includes operating under the direction of a task-level supervisor.



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3. Each company operating at the incident scene must be part of the dispatch—no freelancing.
4. The officer of the initial arriving unit must establish command. The IC must perform a constant loop of the strategic decision-making model for as long as firefighters are operating within the IDLH hazard zone (i.e., no fire control). The IC protects firefighters from fires that are too big or hazardous to fight using the offensive strategy by switching to the defensive strategy, utilizing tactics based on protecting savable exposures and using master streams to fight the fire.
5. The IC must assign each company to the incident with an order that includes the task(s), location and objective. The primary goal of the initial operation is Fire Control.
6. Each attack position must have an uninterrupted water supply.
7. Water must be applied to the fire as early as possible. Exterior water application is the quickest way to reduce the fire's size and intensity before entering the structure. It is the best single action we can take to restore safety for potential victims and firefighters operating at the incident scene.
8. Limit all forms of ventilation before achieving fire control. Once the fire is controlled, ventilate robustly.
9. Any attack position with three or more companies assigned to it requires an S/D tactical-level boss (not a working company officer). Building an effective incident organization supports the IC's span of control and improves incident communications. If the initial operation doesn't achieve fire control, command should be transferred to a strategic positioned IC. ICs operating inside a command post are more capable of evaluating the incident strategy and managing the strategic level.
10. Safety officers are embedded into the tactical level of the incident organization. They are assigned to and work for the S/D tactical-level boss.



We establish command at the scene of structure fires to ensure all responders can work under a single incident action plan. This produces the quickest, most efficient path to Fire Control, using the least amount of personnel and resources while minimizing fire damage and supporting life safety. We list safety officers last in the above list not because they are unimportant but because we must address nine other requirements before safety officers are required to assist with tactical-level management.

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Firefighters, water, and the proper amount of supervision and organizational support are the foundation for conducting a structure fire attack. Truth be told, over half of the structure fires we respond to are eliminated/controlled within the first few minutes of our arrival. The most critical safety requirement during my career was strong supervision. Young me survived because my supervisors outperformed my ability to tactically fuck around too much. Older me finally learned the only thing that outperforms assigning battalion chiefs to run sectors/divisions is when the initial response eliminates the fire. **BS**



Nick Brunacini joined the Phoenix Fire Department (PFD) in 1980. He served seven years as a firefighter on different engine companies before promoting to captain and working nine years on a ladder company. Nick served as a battalion chief for five years before promoting to shift commander in 2001. He then spent the following five years developing and teaching the Blue Card curriculum at the PFD's Command Training Center. His last assignment with the PFD was South Shift commander. Nick retired from the PFD in 2009 after spending the first 26 years of his fire-department career as a B-shifter and the last three on C Shift. Nick is the author of "B-Shifter—A Firefighter's Memoir." He also co-wrote "Command Safety." Today he is the publisher of the B Shifter Buckslip and a Blue Card instructor.