Rare Rescues

The company officer's role during technical rescues

By Ray Gayk

In 1994, while I was part of Riverside County's FEMA Task Force 6, we worked a few days on a three-story apartment building that had collapsed during the Northridge earthquake. I was a paramedic on the team, and to be honest, I didn't see too much action, but I learned a great deal about technical and heavy rescue.

If you've ever been part of a special rescue, whether it was a high-angle, low-angle, swiftwater or any other, you know it takes a ton of *well-trained* personnel to make it happen. But most of us don't get the opportunity to work large-scale incidents like the Northridge quake. So as an officer, how do we acquire the experience that will help us successfully respond to technical-rescue calls? We get it from the smaller incidents we respond to every day within our own departments; often, they require the same tools, skills, procedures and incident management structure as those once-in-a-lifetime calls.

I don't know about your department, but my department doesn't have a "once-in-a-lifetime" standard operating procedure. But that doesn't mean we can't be prepared for specialized rescue situations. Specifically, there are three major things company and chief officers can do to help their crews be more successful during specialized rescue situations: 1) Set your massive "I can handle it" ego aside and get enough help; 2) know your crew's and your department's limitations and 3) know your place. These suggestions stem from what I've learned by making my own mistakes, watching others succeed and fail and remembering what I've heard through the grapevine.

CAN YOU HANDLE IT, *REALLY?*

There's a widely held belief in the fire service that handling every call with the absolute *least* amount of equipment or outside help is like a badge of honor. Another belief: If you're the first-arriving officer, you *shouldn't* ask for help because other officers will arrive and say, "You can't handle *this?*" which is generally followed by a slew of rumors about how Capt. Chicken Little freaked out and called the rest of the world for additional support. These cultural problems within the fire service must change, because they get firefighters and civilians injured and killed.

Initially, most officers can look at a problem (e.g., a structure fire) and easily apply the appropriate mitigating resources (e.g., fire hose and water). But when your first mitigating actions don't work, things can get interesting, which is why every officer must be able to look at an incident and know what's happening at that moment, as well as what *will* happen in 30 minutes, and not be afraid to ask for additional help before the incident gets out of control. This is particularly true in special rescue situations because they don't happen very often, and when they do, they require lots of manpower and equipment.

I've been on a few heavy-rescue calls that went very poorly because officers weren't able to, or chose not to, predict their needs. As a firefighter who actually did the work, I felt like we played catch-up the entire call because we didn't have the right resources, or the right *amount* of resources, on scene.

I'm not telling you to order a FEMA task force for a single-unit cut and rescue, but first-arriving officers should know that any incident's outcome depends on the number and type of resources you order within the first few minutes. Officers must also understand it's OK to ask for help and/or more resources early in an incident. Special rescue incidents are not the time or the place to become an egomaniac or a minimalist.

KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS

Every officer should have a good idea of their crew's and department's limitations for a wide variety of emergency calls; in other words, know what you *can't* do. For example, if you work on a truck company that has the ability to utilize its aerial ladder for a rescue, you should know the angle and weight limitations of your ladder. If you don't know these two things, you should probably run any "brilliant plan" you've developed by your engineer for the official thumbs up.

I don't fancy myself a heavy-rescue guru by any means, but I know my truck company's rescue capabilities and therefore its limitations. If we arrive on a call that's particularly challenging or requires some kind of specialty equipment, my job is to let the battalion chief know whether we can handle it. If you don't do this on a regular basis, you might catch yourself thinking you have the capabilities to handle *any* call—and the simple truth is you don't.

I've been on a few calls where we became so wrapped up in trying to accomplish one operation that we lost sight of our goal, which was to help someone. We kept thinking, "We're almost there!" and yet we continued to fail. After several attempts to complete the operation with just our initial resources, we realized (well into the call) that we weren't cutting it.

Why did this happen? Because we didn't realize our limitations and didn't anticipate failing. Other