

# Starting the Shift Off Right

BY RICK LASKY

**B**ELIEVE IT OR NOT, SOME FIRE departments still require firefighters and officers starting the shift to line up in their Class A uniforms for a formal inspection. Usually, this is at a division or district headquarters station. One variation you might see today is a department that still lines them up but in their complete Class B uniform.

Regardless of whether you include a uniform inspection, the key is getting the troops together to discuss the schedule of the day. Whether you start your shift at 0700 hours or 1700 hours, one of the most important things you can do is conduct a roll. Whether you do it formally with an inspection or at the kitchen table, the value of it is sometimes taken for granted.

Since the first days of firefighters showing up for a shift or assignment at the firehouse, the roll call has served as the platform for setting up the work for the rest of the day or night. In the past, when most firefighters did some military service prior to joining the fire department, the roll call was an accepted practice mainly because firefighters were used to doing it in the military and accepted the concept as part of their daily routine.

I can't imagine a company officer starting a shift without a roll call and expecting the day to go smoothly and on somewhat of a schedule. But today, maybe because we don't see as many firefighters coming out of the military as we did before and many of the older veterans have retired, it has become a lost art.

Here are some basic points an officer should keep in mind in setting up the roll call to plan and organize the shift.

## IT STARTS WITH THE PREVIOUS SHIFT

First of all, it's hard as an officer to put together your notes for a roll call if you show up for your shift at the last

## Editor's Note

This month, we are introducing "Roll Call," a new column dedicated to the spirit and intent of the roll call. Each month, a hand-picked expert will share a topic that routinely would be found in the roll-call setting. This concept came from our upbringing and our time as officers, where on many days the roll required that you did some fast homework to be sure you gave out good information.

We all remember the first day we walked across the floor to shake the hand of the off-going companies. The next half-hour that morning, you listened carefully as the captain or lieutenant read off the roster, riding positions, and shift report from the day before. Several jokes flew around; some you got and some went over your head. Then the day was clearly outlined for everyone. This was roll call: all business, who is where, what is what, and sometimes why.

The roll call is where we sometimes get to see new tools, new methods, and new ideas. Roll call also is the place where lessons and information that have been passed down from generation to generation are reviewed in firehouses every day. The roll call sets the tone, the direction, and the focus for your shift. "The work" of the shift before is always an important part of the roll call, as it might influence what you do today or need to clean, replace, sharpen or repack.

Roll call arguably is the most important part of the shift. If you are with a job that sends out roll-call bulletins, you are working for a squared-away outfit. If not, maybe you can help change that. Maybe these columns will help.

We hope you enjoy this department as much as you did your first day and your last shift. All right, listen up everyone: to the day room for "Roll Call!"

—Chief (Ret.) Bobby Halton

minute. This only delays the whole process, which may also be delayed even further by one of those "runs" right off the bat at shift change. Then you're playing catch-up.

Your process should have started at the end of your last shift, before you ran out the door. You should have made a few notes for your next shift day that included some of the following:

What did we not finish?

- Training
- Preplans
- Tool, equipment, or station maintenance or repairs
- Miscellaneous projects

What new tasks are we going to need to do next shift?

- Part 2 of a project?
- What are we doing for training, and

is the drill going to require us to get started early?

- Are we going to need to attend any meetings?
- Should subordinates be evaluated?
- Any ideas for the next shift?

So you can see if you're one of those who gets up late and hurries out the door, you're probably on the path to forgetting or missing something in the next shift, and it will probably be one of those things you really needed to do.

Plan to get there early enough to unload your belongings, grab a cup of coffee, and meet face-to-face with the officer you are relieving. During your visit with the off-going company officer, ask the following:

- How'd your shift go? Any problems?
- Were you busy?

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- Were there calls I should know about or problems on that call such as:
  - problem or nuisance fire alarms?
  - problem "customers"?
  - construction at the site?
  - alarms out of service?
- Did they catch any "work"? If so, where was it? Will we need to go back and check for hot spots so we don't have rekindles? Were there lessons learned at the incident, or will it provide good fodder for training?
- Were any hydrants or fire department connections out of service?
- Were there any road closures?
- Was any of the apparatus or equipment out of service, or were you experiencing problems that I need to keep an eye on?
- Is there anything in the firehouse that needs attention? Does facilities maintenance need to be notified to come out and repair the washer, diesel exhaust system, plumbing?
- Do we need to get one of the rigs to the shops for repair or preventative maintenance?
- Is there an alarm out of service in a particular building?
- How did your drill go (if you're going to be attending the same training session today)?
- Does anybody from our firehouse or the department need some help for themselves or a family member, such as a sick child, spouse, or parent, or maybe a family member passed? Is anybody passing a hat around to help out a brother or sister in need?
- Is there anything else I need to know from the previous shift or shifts?



### PLANNING THE DAY'S ACTIVITIES

Next, take the information you just gathered and your notes from last shift, and sit down and take a look at it all. If your supervisor hasn't called you or met with you yet, pick up the phone or meet with him to see what is planned for the coming shift:

- Is there a drill for the day?
- Are there any meetings you need to attend?
- Are there any new policies that need to be reviewed with the shift?
- Is anyone sick or injured?
- Will you need to prepare for any overtime.
- Is anything coming down the pipe from the administration members should know about?
- Are there any other assignments?
- Is there anything else you know about?

After this call or meeting, you can begin to finish things. You've met with the off-going company officer and the boss. Now it's time to put it all together and add a few of your own touches, such as:

- What are the riding assignments and any other assignments?
- What's the weather going to be like today?
- Is everybody in the uniform of the day?

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- What time are we going to train?
- Who's the battalion chief for today, or (if I'm the battalion chief) who are the chiefs working next to me or near me? On this same note, who are the other company officers in my battalion or those who will be second- or third-due in my still district? Whom will I be working with at an incident? I need to think about their strengths and weaknesses if we catch some work.
- Do we have any projects to start or complete?
- Do any of the apparatus, equipment, or tools need maintenance or repairs?
- Do we need to do any prefire plans?
- Are any hydrant inspections needed? Hydrant maintenance?
- Should we make any fire inspections in our Still (single company response) area?
- What are we doing for lunch and dinner?
- Are there any items from our "previous shift" list?
- How about grabbing an SOP and do-

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ing a quick review? Nothing elaborate—maybe it's the start of winter, and it's time to go over your severe or cold weather operations SOP. Or grab one that pertains to the day's drill or training topic.

- Remind the troops to update their paperwork with the personnel department regarding insurance and other matters.

### ROLL CALL TIME

Now, it's time for the roll call. This needs to be accomplished as close to the start of the shift as possible. You may choose to cover some of the items right away so you can get the troops out on the floor doing their checks and other jobs and then get back together to finish it up a little later. Or, you may just go ahead and cover it all right now. It really shouldn't take that long to accomplish.

Keep in mind that roll call shouldn't be confused with a shift meeting, where you sit and discuss issues and topics for an extended amount of time. It may seem on paper to be a whole lot of in-

## ROLL CALL

formation that will take forever to cover, but it's extremely important if you want to get things going in a good, organized direction and keep them running smoothly for the rest of the shift. Again, you should be able to run through it pretty fast.

Another important note about a roll call: This is your chance to size up your firefighters. Is one of them coming off an injury or illness or feel-

ing a little under the weather? Does one of your crew members seem a little "out of sorts" or preoccupied? Are members in uniform, and does it look good and presentable? What's the mood like? What kind of "read" do you get?

Whether you do this as a formal process with a uniform inspection, at the back step of the engine, or at the kitchen table, it is the only true way to start off the

shift on the right step. Even if you work for a combination department or as a volunteer, you can still use a lot of this information. You just have to adjust it to your process.

For a volunteer department, perhaps you could accomplish this at the beginning of your weekly meeting or training night. Either way, it works to pull it all together.

One further point: Don't forget to write some of the highlights down on the blackboard so they can carry forward from shift to shift and be a little bit more noticeable.

If you're new at doing a roll call or one of those that has been doing it for a while, maybe this has simply been a review, or maybe there is something here that you could use to enhance what you're already doing. If you're not doing roll calls but you used to do them, consider this a nudge in the direction of doing them again.

If you've never done a roll call, maybe it's because no one has ever asked to do one with your shift, took the time to explain how to do one, or stressed the importance of starting the shift off with one. No matter what your situation, hopefully this article will serve as a guide to what is needed and how to put it together.

This is just a start: There is a whole lot more that can be covered. The bottom line is, it's really up to you as to how much or how little you want to cover. If anything, it will help your shift run a lot more smoothly. ●