

Youth Advisory

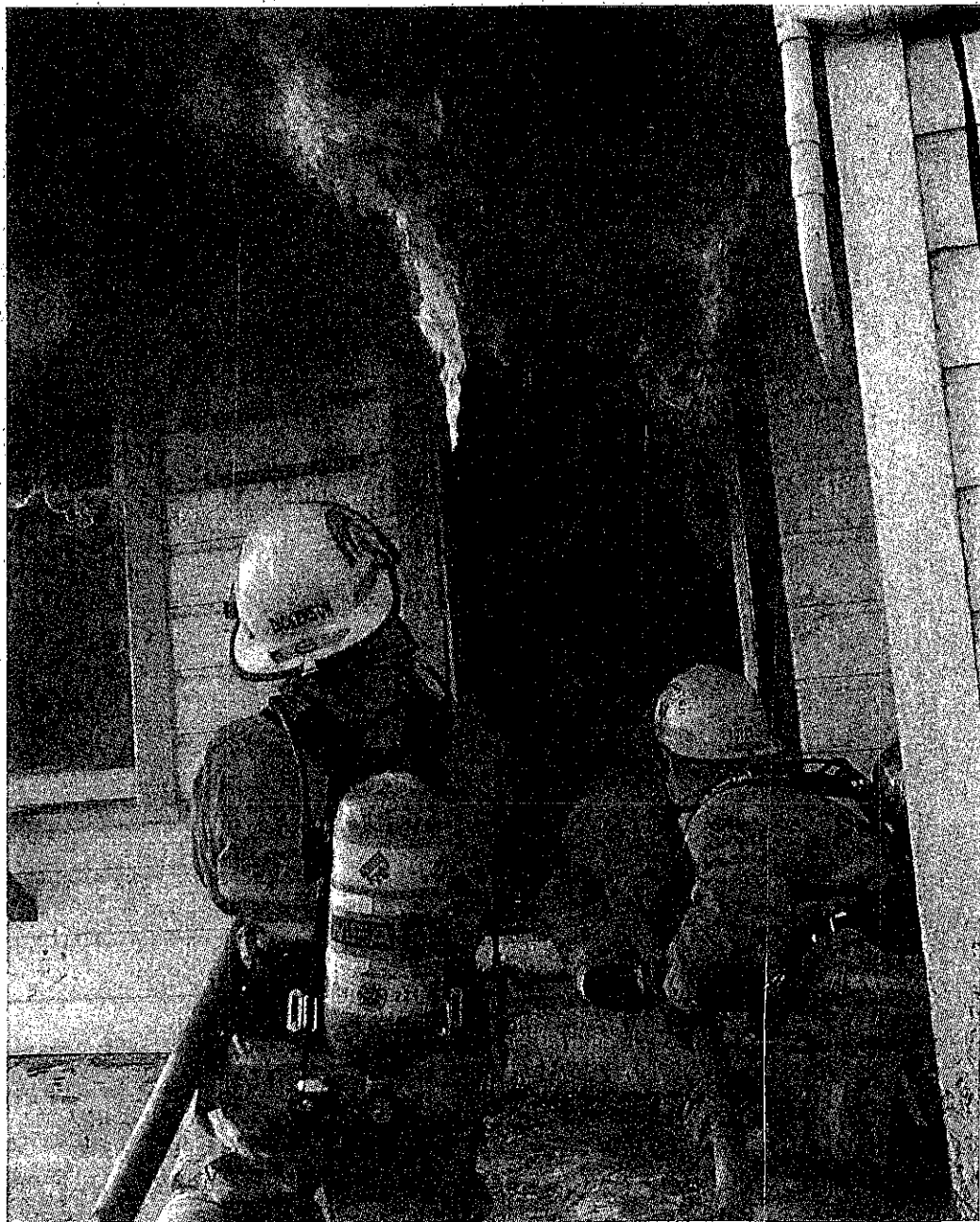
Advice & observations for our young recruits



By John Hinton

Recently, I had an interesting conversation with a friend of mine who's a training chief of a medium-sized department on the East Coast. His department, like many others (including mine) is cycling through many new faces, losing a great deal of experience at the same time. We are becoming much younger as organizations. (Unfortunately, not as individuals—I'm still trying to adjust to being an "old timer.")

Youth brings both challenges and opportunities. During the past several years as a shift commander, I have enjoyed the privilege of meeting with each of our recruit classes, during which I can engage recruits in discussion for a few hours. Later down the road, I observe them as functioning members of fire crews in the field. The difference between how they think as recruits and how they put their thoughts and training into action on the fireground is illuminating. ▶



Training should simulate actual conditions and prepare recruits for real-life situations. But pushing recruits to their limits in a training environment may lead to false assumptions about what is safe on the fireground.

Fire Attack

Frequent training is a must. Often, firefighters don't feel the need for training, but in after-training critiques, admit that the drills were valuable.



It provides the basis for the observations that follow, something I like to think of as bits and pieces of advice from an aging command officer.

The central theme of these observations: firefighter safety. As I get older, the only real fear that still remains for me is that one day I will suffer the tragedy of seeing another of our own seriously injured or killed in the line of duty.

LIP SERVICE IS CHEAP

We have all seen "lip service" in action: a firefighter who talks a good game, but can't *play* the game worth a damn. Talking cheap is not the same thing as making an occasional mistake. We know we will make mistakes; it's the nature of the work. If we are asked to perform often enough, we will fail on occasion. Making a single mistake is rarely fatal and usually is overcome, unless that mistake is a strategic one. We train to reduce errors and improve efficiency. Our fireground performance should be connected to our training—and, in fact, a product of it. The real problem, and a dangerous one, is the firefighter who believes *knowing* what's right is the same thing as *being* right. On the fireground, knowing what to do (knowing what's right) and actually doing it (being right) are two distinctly different things.

There are varying degrees of lip service: On one end, some people occasionally BS; on the other, some make a living at it. In the hazard zone, BS does not fare well. As we gain experience, our ability to actually play the game should improve at least at a rate equal to our ability to talk the game. What I see in our recruits is a lack of experience *in* the work (the game), but a high degree of respect *for* it. Unfortunately, what I sometimes see in our veterans (a shrinking number of them) is a high degree of experience in the work, without that cutting-edge respect for it. Maybe this is just the nature of experience; maybe experience causes a numbing effect over time, dulling our need to do it right every time. Or maybe we know what to

do, but our bodies just can't pull it off anymore.

I wish it were this simple, but sadly, I don't think it is. Instead, somehow, doing the job right gives way to lip service. What would happen to our injury and fatality statistics if we maintained the same degree of respect for our work that we had the day we became firefighters, even as we gained the valuable experience of many years on the fireground? Collectively, we have been scratching our heads and wondering what we can do to decrease the miserable, unchanging number of firefighter serious injuries and deaths each year. If experience is key to survival, an argument could be made that it should be reflected in these statistics. It appears experience alone is not enough.

PASS ON THE AXE

A major challenge within the fire service continues to be integrating physically fit youngsters into the service to carry on our work, without losing the lessons for which we and those who came before us have paid. I tell every new group (that will listen) coming into the service pretty much the same things:

- There may come a time when something on the fireground doesn't feel right to you but you don't know why. Don't be surprised when it happens.
- Just because you can't identify danger in a specific way doesn't make you wrong about it. If something feels goofy or out of balance, it probably is.
- Don't ignore your instincts. Smart guys continually pay attention to commonsense reactions.
- Our goal for you in training is to limit the number of times you must rely on your "gut feelings" alone. Training limits guesswork.
- Never disrespect your training. Violating what you have been and will be taught is disrespecting that training. Making it up on your own as you go is downright irresponsible and dangerous to you as well as to those around you.
- We train to a standard for everyone's safety.
- Experience and all that comes with it should ►

We all have seen "lip service" in action: a firefighter who talks a good game, but can't play the game worth a damn.

enhance your ability to do what you are trained to do safely, rather than increase your ability to take unnecessary and ill-advised risks.

- Pay attention during your training. You never know what piece of training may be the one thing that saves your life. (I often think about the crew that fell off a line during the Southwest Supermarket fire, and had to "read" the coupling to find their way out. The last time many of us did this was during recruit training.)
- There are no "do-overs" in firefighting. Unlike almost any other occupation, this one is unforgiving when it's not done right.

Such advice seems simple enough. But like I said, if it is just lip service, it is cheap. Unfortunately, on occasion, I see injuries that can be traced directly to a disregard of fundamental, basic training. Violating "Firefighting 101" stuff can lead to serious injury or death, regardless of the level of experience.

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR GOOD TRAINING

Experience is great, but in the absence of training, it holds only minimal value. Without structured

training, the only experience gained may be *bad* experience. That is to say, it is possible to do the job the wrong way, but in a way that works, repeatedly—until the day that it doesn't. Incidentally, this is why it is so hard to change bad habits. Bad habits don't always immediately produce bad results.

Training *creates* experience; therefore, our training must make sense—especially with regard to impressionable recruits. Recruits must be ready to hit the ground running. But how far should we push recruits during training? Fire service instructors disagree on this point. The friend I mentioned earlier believes training should be challenging to the point of bumping up against our abilities to perform. The conventional wisdom at play: Training that challenges us is the best way to realize our limitations.

This is hard to argue against; however, hazard zone training that "feathers the edge" can pose drawbacks. *Example:* When workers are exhausted in the hazard zone during training, the training exercise rarely "goes south"; it's rare to read or hear about a training exercise that got so out of balance something bad happened. (This is a good thing.) But pushing workers to their limits in a training environment does carry some risk and may lead to false assumptions about what is safe on the fireground. Working on the edge can be habit forming. I have seen practices that in training may have been safe, but in the uncontrolled, less-than-ideal circumstances that make up the fireground, ►

Data911

Responsiveness... At your fingertips

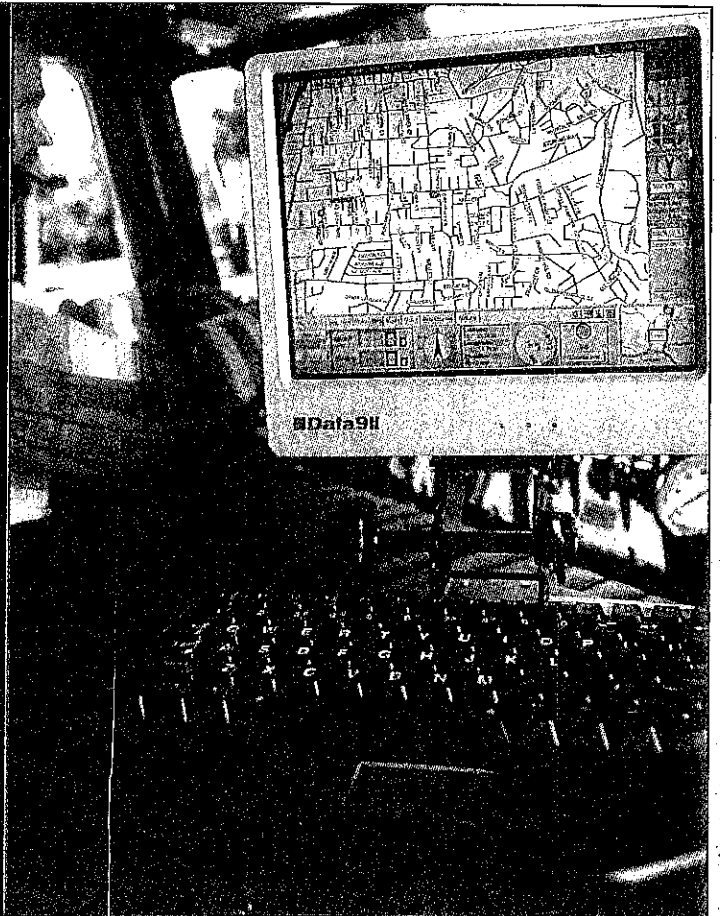
Data911 continues its commitment to providing state-of-the-art technology with its 5th generation Mobile Computer System, the M5.

The M5's modular design allows flexibility for upgrading, ease of installation in any vehicle, and many ergonomically superior mounting options for user safety and comfort.

The M5's rugged design holds up to the harsh environment of Public Safety vehicles. It can take whatever is thrown at it. High and low temperatures, high humidity, vibration, shock, and splashing liquid.

The M5 is a computer system you can trust to be as responsive as you are.

Sales Office:
1815 Clarkson Road, Suite 306
Chesterfield, MO 63017
p. 636.532.4211 • 636.532.4216
www.data911.com



Circle 50 or go to www.frm.lms.ca/6040-50

A good rule of thumb: If you think you need training, it probably has been too long since your last session.

put us too close to the edge. For example, how often are the skills we learn and practice in the daylight used on unfamiliar, burning structures at night? Does our training give us the margins (and habits) to do this work safely? Can we exhaust workers in the hazard zone in training exercises (in a controlled way) and have a reasonable expectation that those workers will behave differently when operating on the real deal?

This is a matter for further thought and discussion. I don't disagree with my training counterpart—training should be challenging. I would submit, however, that training should also contain a measure of restraint with regard to intensity, specifically with respect to hazard zone operations. We must somehow strike a balance in our training between "effort" and "reserve" that teaches habits that will work on the streets, every time.

THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR FREQUENT TRAINING

Any discussion of training is incomplete without addressing the frequency of training; that is, how often is often enough? I have seen experienced crews that have gone some time without formalized training exercises do well on the fireground, consistently. But

this is only true until one day it is not. Discounting that we all have bad days, it is bad timing (and bad luck) to discover in the middle of fire operations that it has been too long in between training cycles.

The best argument for regularly scheduled, routine training cycles is that, at the very best, measuring skill degradation is an inexact science. Too often, it is not noticed until something goes wrong on the fireground. A good rule of thumb: If you think you need training, it probably has been too long since your last session. My guess is that very few of our members feel they "need" training when they are scheduled to attend. But it's a scheduled, routine piece of our operations. It is not uncommon for instructors to hear, "We didn't feel like coming down, but it was good training." It's a peculiar phenomenon, but oftentimes we don't know we need something until we get it (or lose it). No truer statement could be made regarding training. Train often, even if things have been going well.

RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO BE EXCEPTIONAL

Our business is to solve problems, not create them. Most of what we do should be practiced and routine. But the nature of the work creates tensions that cause us at times to say, "just this once." This can show up in almost every phase of our work, and we usually get away with it. Then one day comes along and we don't. One blindingly obvious example: when we push ▶

TOTAL SOLUTION PROVIDER FOR DOMESTIC PREPAREDNESS.



TVI Corporation

Bio-Isolation Shelter Retro Fit Kits

Stretch the dollars you have already spent!

Our Bio-Isolation Retro Fit Kit will convert your existing 2 Line and 3 Line Decontamination Shelters or your Casualty Management Shelters.

Features & Benefits

- > Dual Purpose Use - Decontamination and Bio-Isolation
- > Meets CDC and FAO/WHO Requirements
- > Creates Negative Pressure for Bio-Isolation
- > Efficient and Cost Effective
- > Refurbish existing shelters for an additional fee

The Retro Fit Kits include:

- > Anteroom
- > Filtration System
- > New Ground Cloth that Seals to Shelter

For further information contact us at 800-598-9711 or 301-352-8800
Visit our website at: www.tvicorp.com

