Let Burn
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A HOLE IN THE FLOOR

Effective fire control requires that water be applied directly on the fire or directly into the fire area.

—OFD OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS

I believe everyone in EMS eventually experiences one call that changes them, that alters their perception of the job itself, making them question what they do for a living. Mine came about six months after being promoted to lieutenant. I was still assigned to Engine 1 at the time.

It was around 4:00 a.m. on a quiet weekday morning. I was awakened by the “hotline,” the phone line that links our Dispatch Center to individual stations. I stumbled through the dark to pick up the flashing line. My engine was being sent to a smoke odor investigation. These calls typically involve cruising through the city, trying to sniff out an illegal burn or a homeless person’s cooking fire. I gathered my crew and we loaded up. The call had come from one of the local emergency rooms. Hospital personnel had been standing outside, enjoying a quick smoke break, when they noticed a heavy concentration of smoke in the area. They called 911 and we responded.
We arrived in the area and I spoke to the ER staff, asking them how long they had smelled the smoke. They said the odor had been around for about forty-five minutes, but was becoming more intense. We headed west from the hospital into a small business district composed of large, converted Florida homes that now served as offices. The smoke was getting thicker.

We turned down a side street, our heads out the window, sniffing like bloodhounds, trying to determine the source of the fire. Different fires have different smells. You can typically determine the type of fire by the characteristic odors associated with the different materials involved. Wildfires have the rich, earthy smell of burning trees and ground litter. Car fires carry the acrid stench of burning polyester and metal. House fires are a combination of everything you can imagine: wood, plastics, clothing, and even human tissue. The sense of smell is a primary tool of a firefighter.

We slowed down as we approached a large, two-story Spanish-style house that had a For Lease sign on the front lawn. It was a vacant office building and it was definitely on fire.

Heavy smoke was puffing from the ground-floor rear windows. I called in a full alarm, advising Dispatch that we had a “working house fire.” As the tones sounded over the radio, pulling crews from their sleep, we donned the rest of our gear and proceeded to the front door to make entry.

It started out as a textbook case: we would enter from the unburned side and make our way to the rear of the structure where we would force the fire out the back windows. Textbook cases always have a way of turning on you.

By the time we donned our gear and assembled our hose and equipment at the front door, we could hear the approaching wail of sirens as additional trucks came screaming through the city. As the trucks arrived, crews bailed off as the drivers slowed to position their rigs in front of the structure. My firefighter and I were joined at the front door by two crew members from Tower 1. We readied our hose line as they forced open the door. The front room was a small sunporch that opened, via double french doors, into a large main room. We crawled inside.

The smoke was extremely thick. We instantly lost sight of each other as the blackness enveloped us. Instantly I knew something was wrong. Heavy smoke is typically accompanied by an intense amount of heat, so much so
that we are usually forced to crawl on hands and knees to avoid the heated
gasses that rise with the smoke. But for some reason there was little heat. My
stomach began to churn.

It’s hard to describe the feeling of entering a dark, smoke-filled building
you know is on fire. Your first instinct is to rush forward to locate the fire.
But there are procedures that must be followed. OFD follows a “right-hand
search” approach, in which you always maintain contact with the wall to
your right so that in a pinch, you can turn around and retrace your way back
out. As one crew advances the hose line, other crews ventilate windows and
search for victims. Everything happens in concert.

So we entered the structure, stepping up into the main part of the house.
That nagging feeling continued, and I quickly flipped through tactics in my
mind, trying to settle on what type of fire would cause such intense smoke and
so little heat. It was then that I noticed a faint, orange glow that appeared to
be about twenty feet in front of us. I tapped my firefighter, yelling through my
facemask for him to hit it with water. He opened the nozzle, releasing a quick
burst of water then quickly closing the nozzle. This is known as a “thermal
balance approach,” where a quick burst of water is used to dampen down a fire
by converting the heat to steam. The glow disappeared for a brief moment.
We squinted through the smoke, trying to locate the fire when suddenly the
room burst into massive shades of orange and red. I can still remember the fire
against my facemask as the reflectors on my gear began to melt.

The flash pushed us backwards. I became separated from the others as
I was forced to the left, they to the right. I began to back out toward the
french doors, using my foot to try to locate the opening. Suddenly, my back
was against a wall. Somehow the fire had forced me into a corner and away
from the doorway. My brain was screaming for information. It was at this
point that events began to come together.

The radio was alive with the high-pitched chatter typical of fire scenes,
but through all the noise, I heard one voice call out “Basement fire, basement
fire!” My first thought was “There are no basements in Florida!” Because of
Florida’s high water table, few structures are built with basements character-
istic of older houses in northern states. In fact, I couldn’t recall ever seeing a
basement in a Florida home.
One of the crew members to my right began screaming for us to evacuate. His voice saved me. I used it as a beacon, crawling sideways toward the front door that had somehow shifted behind me when we positioned ourselves to open the nozzle. We scrambled out, dragging the line behind us as we exited the fully involved structure, collapsing in relief on the front lawn. I was never so happy to feel grass beneath my hands and knees. But I still couldn’t appreciate how close we had come to catastrophe. We later retraced the events leading up to the fire.

Carpenters had been working in the basement the previous day. They had left their equipment behind, knowing they would resume construction the next morning. One of their soldering irons had set the room on fire, which burned for several hours before eventually snuffing itself out as it consumed the last bit of oxygen in the room. What it needed was a nice gust of fresh air, which was provided by a firefighter on the ladder truck when he located and entered the basement.

Upon arriving on scene, the firefighter from the ladder truck had done exactly what he was supposed to do: proceed around the structure to ventilate the windows near the seat of the fire. But as he made his way around the building, he noticed a small basement doorway. He made his way down the narrow steps, forcing the door and making entry. It was the opening of the door that ignited the contents of the room in a powerful flash. The fire shot up into the main room of the house via a huge burned-out area of the first floor, right as the four of us were entering the room. The fire mushroomed through the opening in the floor, filling the room in its entirety, flashing over us like an orange wave.

When the fire was finally under control and we were able to walk through what was left of the interior, we were amazed at how close we had come to stepping into the giant burned-out hole in the center of the main room. Had we taken a few steps forward, all four of us would have fallen in. The flashover would have enveloped us in flames. There would have been no escape.

We stared at that hole for a long time. My firefighter had just celebrated the birth of his first child. He was stunned into silence by how close he had come to leaving his daughter fatherless. When I returned home later that
morning, I sat in the silence of my apartment, reflecting over the events of the morning. I had experienced close calls before. I had even experienced the loss of a fellow firefighter and friend who had been killed in a commercial structure when the ceiling fell in as he and his crew searched for the source. I had come to terms with the risks of the job. It was the potential waste of life that bothered me. The fact that the four of us could have been killed for the sake of an empty building was maddening. There were no victims needing rescue. Our deaths would not have been justified by heroic measures; they would have been for nothing.

This call changed my perspective of the job. It changed the way I looked at firefighting, the way I justified the risks firefighters take each day. In fire tactics, the concept of “risk versus gain” is a common theme and one that dictates decisions on the fire ground. When making tactical decisions, a commander must take into account the risk of personnel versus what can be gained by aggressive tactics. For example, in a structure with the potential for heavy loss of life, such as a nursing home, the risk of sending in personnel to fight a fire is justified by the gain of saving many lives. In the case of abandoned or dilapidated buildings, risking the lives of personnel in order to save such a structure is unjustified. Risk versus gain is fundamental to all fire-ground tactics.

It was perfectly reasonable to think about risking one’s life for the sake of another. That aspect of the job instilled in me a sense of pride and duty, and to this day I feel firefighting is one of the most noble of professions. But the idea of losing one’s life for the sake of an empty building rattled me, causing me weeks of introspection as to where I was in my career and where it was going. It was during this time that the chief of my department made me an offer that would change the direction of my career.