RETURNING TO SHIFT

Time becomes an extremely important factor with regard to attack operations. The bigger the attack or the more interior the attack is positioned, the longer it takes to get it going.

—OFD OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS

My request to return to shift was granted immediately and I returned to my original position on C Shift, District 1. I would be the District 1 “floating lieutenant,” which meant I would be based out of Station 1 but “float” or “travel” within the district wherever a lieutenant was needed.

Many personnel don’t like the position of floater. You are basically homeless; although you are assigned to a particular station, you may end up working anywhere in the city. Traveling from one station to another is no simple thing for a firefighter. Firefighters can’t simply report to duty in uniform. They must bring with them all they will need for a twenty-four-hour shift. The most important piece of baggage is your gear, which includes bunker coat, pants, boots, hood, helmet, and any special equipment one chooses to wear with this gear. It might include personal escape equipment, tools, or specialized extrication gear.
Along with their gear, firefighters must also take their personal belongings. Most personnel carry a large duffle bag that contains all the personal items they will need for the shift: a change of uniform (for those scorching days when you sweat through your shirt before noon or those very special occasions when you are vomited on by a nauseous patient); personal hygiene gear, since it’s tough to go a whole shift without showering; and anything else to make the shift pass quickly. Books, hobbies, and even auto repair equipment are part of the personal assemblages that are brought to the station for those evening hours when the chores are done and the calls have slowed.

The final piece of baggage is bedding. Each individual has his or her own set of bedding, most of it brought from home since the sheets and thin blankets provided by the department are no match for the subzero temperatures of the dorms. The beds within the dorm rooms are assigned and serve as the only private space each firefighter has. My space always included several must-have items: multiple pillows, since I spent much of the night reading and trying to fall back to sleep following each call; two lights—a reading light above my bed and a small flashlight for finding my way to the bathroom in the middle of the night; and the most important item—a turbo fan that sat above my head to drown out the sound of snoring that pervaded the dorm.

Dealing with snoring was one of the most challenging aspects of sleeping in a dorm full of men. The volume could be excruciating. There were a few members of the department known for their ear-splitting snoring. The worst offenders were banished to the “dayroom” (our term for the living area of the station). If they refused, they would invariably find their mattress and bedding relocated for them when they headed for bed.

I had served a stint as a floating engineer and had been forced to endure the snoring when I traveled to other stations. It was tough dragging my turbo fan with me everywhere, so I had to settle for a mini version, which was usually insufficient in drowning out the noise around me at night.

But floating as a lieutenant was a little better. The smaller stations, those that housed one or two trucks, typically had a private lieutenant’s dorm that was separate from the main dorm. This was blissful. I loved finally having
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my own bedroom where I could read as long as I wanted without someone complaining about the light. The solitary quiet was a welcome relief after years of sleeping among the men.

Another aspect I appreciated about floating was the variation in crews, trucks, and locations. It’s easy to become complacent with your crew, especially when it is a talented and experienced one. You develop a comfortable rhythm, each member knowing exactly what is expected at emergency scenes. Knowing the personalities of your crew is a great advantage when working within the intense atmosphere of fire and EMS. Over time, you can almost predict everyone’s actions and how they will handle themselves, which makes for smooth-running scenes. As a floater, you may work with a different crew each shift. You can’t rely on familiarity among crew members. You must always be alert to each individual’s actions, since as the lieutenant, all of them are ultimately your responsibility. You must also develop flexibility and tolerance, since you may not always get along with those on your truck.

Familiarity with your truck is much the same. Most of the trucks are set up in the same format, so that if you need to retrieve equipment from someone else’s truck on scene, you know where to go to get it. But each truck has small variations, depending on the year of manufacture and the personal preferences of the crews assigned. As a floater, you are forced to familiarize yourself with the layout of the truck each morning. This is vital to being able to act quickly on a scene and find what you are looking for. This constant refamiliarization is a great refresher in equipment and location on each rig. Again, there is little room for complacency.

Finally, I enjoyed working at different stations and different districts within the city. The change of scenery was a welcome relief from the routine of shift, and it gave me a chance to be exposed to many different types of buildings. When I was preparing for the engineer’s promotional exam, I realized the best source of information and education was the seasoned members of the department. They had done and seen so much during their careers and were usually obliging in sharing what they had learned over the years. Whenever I was stationed with these personnel, I would tap their experience. They were the ones that knew the tricks of the trade.
My return to shift following the district chief’s exam ushered in a new era in my career: I was now able to ride “out of grade” as a district chief. Since I had passed the promotional exam and had been a lieutenant for over a year, I was eligible to act as a district chief. My first shift riding out of grade was a nerve-wracking twenty-four hours.

I was to ride as District 1, which was a plus, since I knew the territory well and was familiar with the crews. That familiarity was also a challenge, since I would be commanding personnel (especially lieutenants) who still hadn’t adjusted to my promotion to their rank. It was also a challenge being in a vehicle by myself, having to navigate without the aid of additional personnel to read the map. I was sure I would become terminally lost and end up wandering the city’s streets in search of each call.

I was also nervous about having to command a major incident. One of the first calls of the day was an apartment fire. A full alarm was dispatched: a rescue, two engines, and a tower truck. I arrived on scene and radioed “District 1 assuming command,” my first real-life experience in taking control of an emergency incident. It was awesome. I had my command sheet in hand, tracking the tasks of each unit and the flow of events. The fire was small and nearly out upon our arrival, but it still gave me the opportunity to try out the new rank on an actual emergency scene.

The remainder of the shift was uneventful. I responded to several other calls, but fortunately the city didn’t burn down and I didn’t total the district Suburban. All in all, it was a successful shift.

On the days when I stayed at Station 1, I had the opportunity to learn my way around the daily shift paperwork. Rosters had to be completed for the next shift, which meant rearranging personnel based on vacancies and individual skill levels. It was akin to a game of chess, with personnel and truck assignments as pawns. Empty slots on units had to be filled with individuals who were eligible to ride in those positions. Driver slots had to be filled with either engineers or relief drivers. At least one paramedic was required on each unit, since all the trucks within the department were certified for advanced cardiac life support (ACLS). Opportunities for riding “out of grade” were based on a rotation, so you had to ensure that these opportunities followed the proper order.
The months following my return to shift were filled with new experiences and responsibilities. I rode out of grade as a district chief on several occasions and was just starting to become comfortable in the role of command. I still experienced the occasional pang of yearning for graduate school. As September approached, I couldn't help but imagine what my life would have been like had I accepted the offer from Florida State. I would have been starting the graduate program, living in a new place with years of intense study ahead of me. Those thoughts became fantasy-like to me. I think everyone has those thoughts in the back of her mind: imagining leaving all she knows to venture out into a new world with new experiences. Or perhaps it was my transient upbringing that instilled in me the need for change, my abhorrence of routine.

Whatever it was, I fought through the urge to flee and remained focused on my upcoming promotion to district chief. My eligibility was a month away, retirements would be providing promotional opportunities, and I was learning everything I could about the responsibilities of my pending rank. Everything was in place for me to become the second female in the history of the department to make it to the rank of district chief. What I didn't know at the time was that the end of my career was just around the corner. The next months would be one of the most trying times in my life, when everything I had worked for was stripped from me and my future was forever changed.