

BULLETIN

HOUSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

OFFICE OF THE FIRE CHIEF

STATION OFFICER:

A. _____ B. _____ C. _____ D. _____

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BULLETIN no. #05

TO: OFFICERS AND MEMBERS

SUBJECT: PHILOSOPHY OF FIREFIGHTING IN THE HOUSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT

If a firefighter or Mrs. Smith (customer) were to ask what the philosophy of firefighting was in the Houston Fire Department (HFD), the members of the department would likely provide different answers. While giving presentations in the districts concerning the McDonald's and Four Leaf Tower fires, I have received several comments after the presentation that it was good to hear that it is okay to go defensive and keep the safety of our members paramount. I was assuming that this was already understood. The culture of HFD also plays a role in comments such as these because we pride ourselves in being very aggressive interior firefighters and look down on those that fight fire from the street.

However, there is a fine line between aggressive and careless firefighting. HFD has standard operating guidelines that provide an overall framework on how we should safely approach emergency incidents. The guidelines establish the parameters of how much risk is acceptable at an incident. It is very important that all Houston firefighters, especially the officers, know that we initiate offensive attacks only when lives are in jeopardy and the overall risk for protecting property is in the favor of our members surviving the incident.

There are no structures in the City of Houston worth the life of a Houston firefighter. We all take an oath to protect life and property and work very hard each day to fulfill that obligation. Many buildings lack sprinklers, do not utilize building construction that could meet the old 20-minute rule, and other enhancements that work in the firefighter's favor. Today, many structures are still not sprinklered; utilize unprotected lightweight truss construction, and other complications that make firefighting more dangerous than ever. Yet, HFD must

operate in this environment. This is why it is so important to articulate our philosophy concerning aggressive interior firefighting, educate us about these dangers, employ sound strategy and tactics, and keep safety at the forefront of all our actions.

This all leads to our basic philosophy. It is perfectly okay to attack a structure fire from the outside and protect exposures when the fire has advanced to a point that the danger to firefighters reaches an unacceptable level for an interior attack, particularly when no lives are at risk. Incidents cannot be approached recklessly when the odds are stacked against us. While we may understand that on a basic level, firefighters have to be willing to put that understanding into action. In some cases, it is more heroic to **not** make an interior attack because that officer was placing the safety of his/her crew first, rather than feeling compelled to take an unnecessary risk.

It is important to state at this point that I am not advocating all interior attacks as being inappropriate, just those that cross the line of unacceptable risk. Buildings have been built for many years now that cannot remain structurally intact after being involved with fire for 10 minutes. In some cases, even 10 minutes is too long. The old "20-minute rule" is a thing of the past. All the experts tell us that trusses exposed to fire necessitate a defensive attack. There are many other examples where today's firefighters work in a much more dangerous environment, despite many improvements in our profession over the years.

We must be vigilant about our safety. This vigilance cannot be done on a part-time basis. This may require modifications in our culture and attitude to allow defensive operations to be looked upon favorably when that is the most appropriate course of action. Whereas, pushing the envelope for no significant gain, such as initiating an aggressive interior attack on a totally involved structure when there is no life hazard, is not good strategy.

I recently had a conversation with a Deputy Chief after a large warehouse fire. He was explaining how crews were having difficulty with an interior attack, concerns with tilt-wall construction, unstable rack storage, and other factors causing command to change modes and go defensive. I am paraphrasing, but he basically stated, "It used to be that chiefs would keep ordering more firefighters in the building and tell the crews to not come out until the fire was out." Obviously, that attitude was flawed. I complimented him on the strategy and tactics employed at this fire. It was extinguished with no injuries. This scenario is an example of command continually sizing up the situation and implementing appropriate tactics that led to a successful outcome.

In closing, HFD will continue to be an aggressive interior fire department, **when the risk is in our favor coming out alive**. While we will never eliminate all risk from this profession, it should be our goal to minimize that risk as much as possible. Combined with experience, training and education are the keys to instilling into each

of us the skills of how to recognize the appropriate strategy and tactics required to mitigate any situation.

Every member of the department, from myself to the newest recruit, has a responsibility to strive for improvement through training and education in HFD. Our survival depends on it. Our goal is for everyone to go home at the end of his or her shift without serious injury. We owe that to family members and ourselves.

Chris Connealy
Fire Chief