



From the Fireground
by Jason Hoevelmann

Fast and Furious: Primary search tips you should know

We need to apply some common sense into basic skills to be more efficient, effective and safe

By Jason Hoevelmann

I love to read and hear the stories of fire companies making great saves during extreme fire conditions. After all, that is what we all got in the business to do, right? For most of us, this scenario is something that does not happen very often, if at all.

I know firefighters that have been on the job for more than 30 years and have never made a "grab." The opportunity just never presented itself. This is a good thing for the citizens, but can make us complacent on the fireground.

We preach about basics and fundamentals and it is easy to take out the most recent rookie or Firefighter 1 & 2 manual and go over skills and methods that are elementary.

However, as most of us know, we need to apply some common sense into these basic skills to be more efficient, effective and safe. The idea is to do the job and do it as good as we can while operating as safe as we can.

When I ask firefighters in the classes that we do to search a room in a pair, I see and hear the same things. One firefighter leads and starts either a left-handed or a right-handed search. The second has a hold of the first firefighter's leg and they search the exact same areas, one right behind the other.

I hear the first firefighter telling the second firefighter everything that he is seeing and touching, and then the second firefighter sees and feels the same thing. This is very counter-productive and really an inefficient use of manpower for the purposes of a primary search during a fire.

So, how should we search? For the sake of this article we are going to lay some ground rules because there are many variables when speaking of primary search tactics.

These examples are going to be based on a rural to suburban department that does not have a dedicated truck company to do search and rescue. In addition, we are going to search while advancing a hose line. I instruct in many jurisdictions and this seems to be the most common technique across most of the United States.

Tools

We have to come prepared and ready to accomplish the goals and objectives that we have laid out before us. There is no excuse for not having a tool. A typical complement of tools would be a set of irons, a thermal imaging camera and of course the hose line. Now, remember, we are doing a primary search, which means we are fast and furious. We are looking for life, so don't get bogged down taking non-essentials with you.

Purpose

The purpose of the primary search is to search for life as fast as you can. The idea here is to get in, do a rapid search of the building and get a victim out as fast as possible.

The problem we see with this typically is that it is too thorough. I've seen guys try to move furniture and to check every inch of the house. This search has to be fast; the longer a victim is left in the IDLH, their chances for survival diminish rapidly. There is a reason we do a secondary search.

Technique

When we train new recruits, we tell them to stay "close." Although this is true in theory, we create an idea that they can't lose physical contact with their partner. This really slows the search down and prohibits large areas to be searched as fast as possible.

There is nothing wrong with staying in voice communication during most searches. A typical house will allow two firefighters to stay in voice contact and be no more than a few feet away from each other. This is appropriate and should be trained on.

The first firefighter can take the wall and go right or left, it is up to him. However, what we want to consider is which side of the house will have the higher likelihood of having occupants in it.

So, we may want to start on the wall that leads to the hallway and bedrooms first. We know that fire victims are commonly found in areas of egress and in bedrooms. Keep in mind what time of day it is and things like toys in the front yard.

As you make your search, the first firefighter should be rapidly checking the area from the wall outward and the furniture he comes into contact with and the second should be searching the middle of the room that the first firefighter can't reach. Voice contact is all they need and this method can easily cover an entire room in seconds. Remember, fast and furious.

If you get to the bedrooms, in many cases the first firefighter can search the room while the second firefighter controls the door with the hose line. That second firefighter has the ability to protect your position and any victims you might find should conditions deteriorate quickly.

Remember, if things go bad and the hose stream is not knocking down the fire, you can always close that door and make a removal through the window.

So many times we see firefighters trying not to pass each other to keep the first firefighter first. During a primary search this may not be appropriate. Communicate to each other and just switch positions at the next room. For example, the first firefighter makes the first bedroom and completes his search.

When he gets back to the door, instead of climbing over the second firefighter, let number two lead to the next room and continue that direction. It eliminates needing to get smashed together and makes the search go faster. But, you have to communicate.

Finally, if you find a victim and remove them, make sure that you relay that the search is NOT complete. Just because you found one victim does not mean the search is over. There may be more, and another crew needs to pick up where you stopped.

Whatever the reason that you have to leave the search, make sure you communicate clearly where you left off. We don't want to leave victims behind because nobody continued a task.

Fight fire

When we are searching with a hose line, we need to be aware of the conditions around us. If we don't locate a victim immediately, the best we might be able to do for that victim is to put the fire out and remove the hazard. I have witnessed firefighters on a search pass a fire room to continue to search. If you find fire, PUT IT OUT! Put the fire out and continue your search. In some instances this is the best rescue technique available. Don't neglect it.

Communicate

We must communicate with our team members, command and other teams performing other tasks. If we hear another crew nearby, communicate with them. Let them know who you are and what your assignment is.

Let them know where you have been and where you're going. This is especially important for ventilation and in the event that you find a victim.

Additionally, if you do find a victim and as you are removing them run into another crew, instead of climbing over that other crew, hand the victim off to the team closest to the door. I know this sounds silly, but I have seen this happen in training scenarios.

Yes, the other crew will make the removal to the outside and you may not get the props. Who cares? Get the victim out as soon as possible.

There is a lot more to search and rescue than what we covered, but these are some very basic guidelines. You must train and communicate with your department to become proficient at search and rescue.

This skill must be trained on and trained on correctly so that it becomes second nature. That is what mastering the basics is all about. I had a basketball coach in high school that always told me, "practice doesn't make perfect, perfect practice makes perfect."

As always, refer to your agency's guidelines and operational methods when training and operating. These suggestions are not intended to take the place of carefully planned and written department policies, but only to offer additional ideas and techniques that have worked.

Stay diligent, stay safe and train hard and I'll see you next month "From the Fireground."

About the author

Jason Hoevelmann is a Deputy Chief with the Sullivan Fire Protection District and firefighter with the Florissant Valley Fire Protection District in Missouri. He has more than 20 years experience and 15 as an instructor. He instructs at the St. Louis Co. Fire Academy, has an Associate's Degree in Paramedic Science, B.S. in Fire Service Administration, is a state advocate for EGH, a Board Member for FLSS/IAFC and on NFPA technical committees for Professional Fire officer Qualifications and Fire Service Instructor Qualifications.

Chief Hoevelmann can be contacted via e-mail at Jason.Hoevelmann@firerescue1.com.