

# PROFESSIONAL INTEROPERABILITY: WORKING WITH FIRST RESPONDERS



*First responders may not always be trained in high-angle rescue. Try to develop a working relationship with the first responders who would respond to an incident in your work area and encourage joint training. All photos courtesy of the author.*

*By Stephen Connally, CTSP*

Let's begin our thought process by considering the workplace incident where you cannot perform a rescue of an injured climber aloft. Perhaps an aerial rescue (A/R) is not appropriate for the patient's condition or injury, because of a lack of personnel trained in A/R or for myriad other factors preventing completion of the rescue prior to the arrival of 911. Then what? Is there any way you can make a difference in how this rescue is performed in a timely manner?

Given the broad range of possibilities, hopefully some of these questions will be answered in this article. The important thing to keep in mind is that, just like in arboriculture, the first responders may not be familiar with or equipped to perform an A/R. They may not be comfortable with the situation or trained on A/R, and may instead rely on an aerial apparatus to perform at-height work. Inevitably, an incident will likely happen in the backyard with no access for a ladder truck. Fire departments, in general, do not take

these long, heavy and expensive apparatuses off paved surfaces. You'll be hard pressed to convince anyone to drive the \$3 million ladder truck through Mrs. Jones' backyard. It's just not going to happen. On the flip side of the coin, let's say they can get the ladder to the climber. Now what? Do they know how to perform a pick-off without causing the climber more injury?

There are experts around the country with whom I could rest easy knowing they were coming to rescue me. Unfortunately, skill levels, proficiency and departmental policies that dictate procedures and scenarios aren't the same across the firefighting profession. I spent a long career in the fire service, and I can tell you from my personal observations that there are differences in proficiency between stations and shifts. Much of my career was spent doing technical rescue on a specialty truck called a "heavy rescue." The duties of that truck included vehicle extrication, high-angle rope work, confined-space trench rescue and HAZMAT response. We were also responsible for victim search at structure fires. Different shifts had different skill

levels in the various required areas of expertise. The key to improving and maintaining necessary proficiencies was practice, pride and personality. The shifts with broad proficiency had the most unit pride. Consequently, we trained daily on perishable skills, and I was lucky enough to have the absolute best and most motivated firefighters as part of my team.

The point is, don't assume the team coming to get you has the skills or knowledge to effect a rescue in a timely fashion. The most common excuse I hear is, "The fire department (FD) can only use rated anchors, and trees aren't rated." Hogwash is the most politically correct word I can use to address this mindset, and, in the case of my old department, it just isn't so. If you look around the country, there are plenty of tech teams using load-sharing anchors on bushes and small trees to effect cliff rescues. Other teams are using boulders as anchors, vehicles or picket systems driven into soil, and whatever else works. It's a matter of training team members to think outside the box – the culture of their department or region, learning to impro-



wise without compromising safety and problem solving with available equipment in unique situations.

I've always enjoyed being told I couldn't do something a certain way because the book said otherwise. My average response was, "Watch me." Seeing it work changed mindsets for the better and helped counter narrow-scoped training processes. That's not to say I would freelance (similar to "cowboy" in tree work). I still had to work within industry best practices and manufacturer recommendations.

This brings us to the discussion of liability. The FD assumes authority and liability for the incident scene on their arrival. They now own everything that happens to FD personnel, the victims and the bystanders. They maintain that authority until the scene is turned back over to a responsible party once the hazard has been mitigated. The FD does not have the authority to allow you, as a private citizen, to assist in the rescue. Generally, contractual agreements or memorandums of understanding have to be in place before deploying you as a skilled asset – an agent of the FD and the municipal government. The main focus of liability rests on the FD and whatever government jurisdiction oversees it. If you mess up, get hurt, damage property or make it worse, government agencies generally don't like the public scrutiny that comes along with these high-profile mistakes. Imagine being the fire chief of a department who is faced with a climber aloft rescue. Somebody you don't know and haven't vetted offers to perform the rescue because you don't know how. This well-intentioned climber falls out of the tree, drops the victim or manipulates a spinal injury to the point of permanent paralysis. You are in the news, in court or in your termination meeting asking yourself why you allowed this person to work as an agent of the FD. Do you have an acceptable answer? I sure can't think of one.

In general, an FD isn't going to battlefield promote one of us to be the rescuer, although it has happened and will happen again on rare occasions. Many of the climbers and arborists who have been called on by an FD have developed some kind of relationship with the first responders and can be called upon as a subject matter expert (SME). The use of SMEs in the



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fire service is quite common and increases the likelihood of a positive incident outcome. I have personally leaned heavily on facility engineers and other professionals in technical incidents involving systems and facilities I'm not familiar with.

The point is, you want to do everything possible to stay on the working side of the yellow fire-line tape. Being a resource for the first responders may likely be the most positive impact you can make for an acceptable outcome and timely rescue. The tape is a tool of control. The main purpose of the incident commander is command and control of the incident. Remember, the FD's primary job is making a controlled situation out of someone else's chaos. Without a strong command presence and a linear flow of command and communication, an incident may unravel into complete chaos.

This is clearly evident in post-incident analysis of firefighter fatalities. The number-one contributing factor, aside from communication, is the lack of a strong command presence. Every incident that fell apart over my past three decades as a paramedic was due to chaos. I can say the same throughout my career as a lieu-

tenant and captain of a fire apparatus. Often the chaos came from other members of responding units. You absolutely need to make sure you are the calm, cool and collected representative of your own area of expertise. Patience and a good first impression will go a long way. You may not get asked for input immediately, so be patient.

The first few minutes of, and after the arrival at, an incident are taken up by the size-up and establishment of the incident command system. Once the scene is assessed and organized, a good company officer, or boss, will be ready to take as much information as possible from you. How do we know who's in charge? Generally speaking, the lieutenant or captain of a fire truck will be in the front-right seat. Many departments identify their officers with differently colored helmets, like red or white. Approach them and identify yourself as the responsible party or SME. Follow directions even if you don't like them. If the captain tells you to "wait here," then by all means, do so. They won't want to search around the scene trying to find you. Also, generally the incident command is in a stationary position. Remember, it's





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all about control and initial impressions of how you are carrying yourself. Calm, cool and knowledgeable lend to your being viewed as the professional you are.

Make certain there is one, and only one, person designated to be the SME. Have control over the rest of your team and keep them out of the way until called upon

to assist. People meaning well often clutter and complicate the scene. Trust in the process even if you don't completely understand or agree with the decisions being made. Offer gentle input with an expert's presence. The last place you need to be is on the bystander side of the tape. Keep in mind that the greatest contribution to the scene may be your input. That's taking into account not being able to get a rescuer off the ground before 911 arrives.

Personally, I believe getting a climber off the ground and into the tree prior to 911's arrival is a priority. Even if you can't or it's not appropriate to perform a rescue, being aloft will be of great assistance to the FD. Just setting some high redirects with their pulleys and slings will facilitate getting the FD's technician into the tree much more quickly than them figuring it out from scratch. By all means, follow their commands and exit the tree once the task is completed, or if you are advised to do so.

As the SME, you can present pertinent information in an organized fashion. The following is an easy-to-remember format for information the incident commander can implement into their assessment of the incident. This is also excellent information for the EMT or paramedic who will be administering patient care.

#### **S.T.A.T.S.**

**S: Situation** – Number of victims, events of the accident: fall, struck-by, electrocution, medical emergency, cut

**T: Tree Condition** – Type of work being conducted: hazardous removal, pruning, tree health and structural concerns, overview of hazardous tree and results of the pre-climb inspection

**A: Actions Taken** – Attempted rescue, medical care rendered, electricity secured, instructions for self-rescue aloft

**T: Technical Information** – Climbing system tie-in points, rigging points, rope identification, loads on ropes other than victim

**S: Patient Specifics** – Age, medical history, medications, allergies, drug or alcohol use, emergency-contact information, responsible-party information (employer)

Presenting this information in a calm

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and organized fashion will go a long way toward your continued involvement in the incident. Even if it isn't exactly how you want to be involved, keep in mind it's all about control, minimizing liability and protecting your safety as well as everyone on the scene. Staying on the working side of the tape may be the very best contribution you can make to save your co-worker.

## Conclusion

Putting it all together, a very important part of ensuring a swift rescue is making contact and trying to develop a working relationship with the first responders who will be responding to your incident. You may not get much interest at first. Be persistent. A little insider information here – don't go visiting the fire department during meal times. And don't go late at night. Afternoons are for training or rest, depending on the department. Every station has an officer assigned. Ask to speak with the captain or lieutenant and try to develop a training relationship. Before offering joint training, have a location and a plan.

If you are hitting a roadblock at the

station, try contacting fire administration. Make the first impression as professional as possible. Administrators love data-driven conversations. There's something strange that occurs when an operations-level leader becomes an administrator. I believe this to be the case in the tree industry as well. You used to be able to talk to them with scenario-based propositions. Now they want to see the data and run the numbers. Be prepared to share statistics. If they seem disinterested, pose the question of how this will play out in their response area. During a time and age when municipal governments are struggling to maintain a positive image, this might be enough motivation. Developing a relationship may pay off in the long run, although the goal is to never have an incident. Tech-rescue teams are very similar to tree climbers. Any excuse to get on rope is the best excuse. Be persistent and don't give up. Your life may depend on it.

*Stephen Connally, CTSP and ISA Certified Arborist, is owner and operator of Adaptable Aerial Solutions, LLC, a three-*

*year TCIA member company based in Suffolk, Virginia. A production climber for 24 years, he is also an NCCCO Licensed Crane Operator, a Crane Safety Climber School instructor and a TCIA Crane Operations Specialist instructor. He also is a fire captain/paramedic with Norfolk Fire Rescue-retired, a former member of the Tidewater Regional Technical Rescue Team and the Tidewater Regional Hazardous Materials Response Team, a research climber for The Center for Conservation Biology and The College of William and Mary and an instructor with Ascension Group Northwest, which provides professional training in safety and safe practices at height.*

*This article is based on a presentation he took part in, "Successfully Working With First Responders," with John Ball at TCI EXPO 2019 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. To listen to an audio recording of that presentation, go to [tcimag.tcia.org](http://tcimag.tcia.org) and, under the Resources tab, click audio. Or, under the Current Issue tab, click View Digimag, then go to this page and click here.*



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