

# EDITOR'S OPINION

## A LESSON IN HUMANITY



The main ballroom of the Fire Department Instructors Conference was packed to the limit. More than 4,000 faces were focused on the stage. The social club fire in New York City had claimed 87 lives less than two weeks before. The newspaper articles appeared worldwide but the audience was filled with instructors who needed the facts and lessons "from the horse's mouth."

The assistant chief stood in place of his commissioner. He accepted a last-minute invitation to speak. He did an expert job of describing conditions on arrival and the traumatic operation of removing, identifying, and recording the meticulous data that often can get muddled in multiple-death fires. His visual aids were hurried but adequate. You could have heard a pin drop.

I knew Frank Nastro for years. We fought fires together, played together, and remained good friends. But there was something wrong today. He had too many pauses (reflections) in his speech. He spoke haltingly and swallowed a lot. It wasn't the crowd and it wasn't the high-tech presentation equipment. He'd handled this too often in the past.

As he spoke, he moved away from the podium. He strayed from his notes. He got closer and closer to the audience—so close that the tips of his shoes were out over the edge of the stage. He spoke of his first concern after size-up. He spoke in hushed tones. His sincerity enveloped him and reached out to hug the entire audience, drawing them close. And they knew it. I looked around—virtually all were leaning forward in their seats.

"My primary concern," he said, "was for my firefighters. My second was that a sense of dignity should prevail through the difficult and heart-wrenching task." He spoke personally with each company before assigning job functions. He wanted them to know that he understood what he was asking them to do and that he cared.

The moderator came on stage as a signal that time was nearly over. Not for Frank, however. He leaned even closer to his audience. He told them of his ride home in his silent staff car, confident that he and his department had done their best, almost glad that he had been in command of the operation.

Then the story.

Continued on page 9.

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When the situation becomes more complex, the ICS must include how to divide up the incident scene to keep it manageable. This simply applies span-of-control techniques to the fire and believes the officer in charge of some of the responsibility. Most fire departments are concerned with how the operational side is divided. There are several staff functions that may be necessary, including logistics, planning, and finance.

Operations can be divided geographically into divisions (sectors) or by the specific task assigned into groups (functions). This can be further broken down into task forces, strike teams, or individual companies. A strike team is defined as five like units—for example, five engine companies and a strike team commander. A task force is five unlike units and a commander. Groups or functions perform like activities. For example, one would be assigned to perform ventilation; another, search and rescue; and a third, water supply.

Your department should decide how it will divide geographically such as north, south, east, and west; side one, two, three, and four; front, rear, and interior; or right and left side. Possibly needed functions should be determined and defined. Each position, whether staff, operational, or functional, should be defined and its responsibilities listed.

\* \* \*

The way to make ICS work is to use constantly. Training classes, drill exercises, and even station work can be organized along the lines of your procedures. Soon they will become second nature. Then you can apply them to the emergency scene as routinely as you do water to a fire.

Develop an ICS if you don't currently have one. Once you establish the system, put it in written form and distribute it to all members so they can understand how it works. Then, put it in operation. It will be easier than you anticipated, improve overall incident management, and comply with regulations for responding to hazardous-material incidents. ■

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"I go to 12:30 p.m. Mass every Sunday with my Doris," he said. "But this day I went as soon as I got home. The homily drifted through my brain without much impression. I was praying for the deceased and for the firefighters. Then the church filled with the music of Amazing Grace, the hymn that accompanies many fire service funerals.

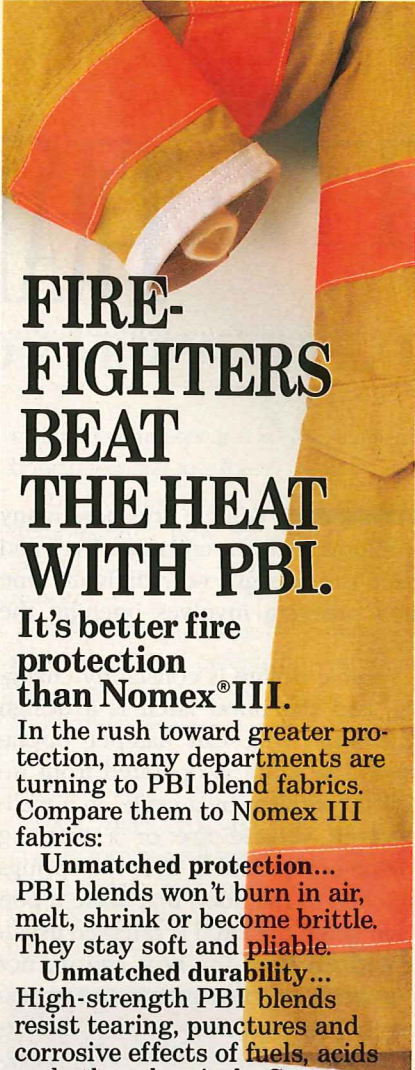
"I began to cry, alone, to myself. I couldn't stop crying until long after the music stopped," he shared.

As I watched through the lens of my camera, I wiped tears from my face. I looked as many, many others did the same. He was them and for that moment, they all were him. The silent impact rocked the room with its great lesson. Here stood a legend, a man who commanded that night the world's largest and busiest fire department. He had a right to be detached, but all his life he avoided it on the fireground just as he avoided it now as a speaker.

The value of humanness in our service was blatant in those moments. In our job it's so easy to get caught up in acronyms, committees, standards, bulletins, and experts who tell us how to operate and who have never laced a body bag. Management styles that fly through industry based on bottom line become buzzwords for speakers at some fire service conferences.

Here was a manager who commanded more human beings and equipment than you could ever imagine. He had dealt with the most trying situation of his career and relied on faith, heart, and concern for the individual. He had found that those qualities were the core of success in his command function. He did more for his fire service audience in 22 minutes than all the books and speeches on incident command could ever do. His lesson was etched into the hearts of more than 4,000 fire instructors.

*Sam Deenen*



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