

Taking a Fresh Look at an Old Problem



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On the very same day as I sat down to start writing this article, I returned from a four-day run teaching the members of the Seminole County Fire Department in central Florida on fireground operations. One of the many topics in the course was the procedures of why, when, and how to call a MAYDAY.

Unfortunately, I have had the displeasure of being on three separate incidents in which a true MAYDAY was called out over the radio. Two resulted in favorable outcomes, and one resulted in tragedy that forever changed my thoughts and actions in our world of fighting fires.

Back in 2005 while I was attending the National Fire Academy for an unrelated course, an iconic person by the name of Dr. Burton Clark presented a concept to our class. That concept was the notion of calling out a MAYDAY over the radio if a firefighter's well-being is in jeopardy. I did not know it back then, but that same concept from that day would help to save the life of one of my fellow firefighters the very next year. Her life was spared because I



brought that concept back to my own fire department and trained every single member to fully understand the concept of why, when, and how to call a MAYDAY.

A document that is a must read for every fire department and every firefighter is a document called **Project Mayday**. This document is a comprehensive report including audio and video recordings, and interviews of over 3,000 actual events involving a MAYDAY to our fellow firefighters across the country. All the material in the document was reviewed by Mr. Don Abbott and his panel of experts from Command Emergency Response Training (CERT). The Google address for that document is www.is-project-mayday.net.

There are 16 phrases commonly heard

preceding a MAYDAY callout that should alert the Incident Commander on an incident and the Dispatcher(s) working at the console to prepare for a possible MAYDAY event.

1. "We have zero-visibility conditions" 59% occurrence in mayday recordings
2. "We have fire above our heads" 81% occurrence
3. "We have fire below us" 56% occurrence
4. "We need more line to reach the fire; extend our line" 36% occurrence
5. "We have not found the seat of the fire" 67% occurrence
6. "We are running out of air" 73% occurrence
7. "This is a hoarder structure" 54% occurrence
8. "We have had a flashover" 37% occurrence

9. "We have had a ceiling/roof collapse" 37% occurrence
10. "We have lost multiple windows" 29% occurrence
11. "It's really getting hot in here; we are backing out" 44% occurrence
12. "Our exit has been blocked" 21% occurrence
13. Interior: "We are sending a firefighter out with a problem" 19% occurrence
14. "We have a hole in the floor" or "we have had a floor collapse" 56% occurrence
15. "Command has lost communications with multiple crews" 19% occurrence
16. "We have a lot of sprinkler heads going off in here" 54% occurrence (commercial structure-rack storage)

Some other information that was discovered during their research has significant correlation that lends itself to a potential threat to our well being is that at 52.9% of incidents a size-up was not performed, 20.5% an incomplete size-up was done, and in only 26.4% of the total incidents was a thorough size-up completed. We are neglecting our basic responsibilities on the fire scene far too frequently!

Another area on the fire ground that is neglected is the formation and utilization of a Rapid Intervention Crew/Team. It is very disturbing that the document reveals that a R.I.T. was in place only 27% of the time. This may be in part to the time when a MAYDAY was called out, from the first due units prior to a R.I.T. getting established by later arriving units.

There has been much discussion on the procedure for a firefighter to call out a MAYDAY over the years. Two common acronyms that are taught to our personnel about the radio procedure to

use when necessary are L-U-N-A-R and/or P-L-A-N.

MAY DAY acronyms

L = LOCATION
 U = UNIT
 N = NAME
 A = ACTIONS
 R = RESOURCES NEEDED
 Or
 P = PERSON
 L = LOCATION
 A = ACTIONS
 N = NEEDS

A fresh look to broadcasting the needed information out from the person in need to the Incident Commander is simply WHO, WHAT, WHERE. **Who** is calling the MAYDAY, **What** the situation is, and most importantly **Where** the individual(s) location is?

Example – let's assume for a moment that I am on the second floor with my partner performing a search for a trapped victim and the fire has now cut off our egress to get back down the stairs.

"MAYDAY, MAYDAY, MAYDAY! (Command acknowledges) This is the search group (WHO), and we are cut off by the fire (WHAT). We are on the second-floor to the left of the stairs (WHERE)".

The R.I.T./R.I.C. should immediately be deployed and the Incident Commander should then try to ascertain more information in the L-U-N-A-R format from the individual(s) calling out.

The Project Mayday document is divided into 2 main areas that sepa-

rates the data collected from career and volunteer fire departments. This is mainly due to available resources and response times. Some other statistics that are in the 157- page volunteer section of **the Project Mayday** report revealed the following information abstracted from the interviews of firefighters needing rescue. Most stated that inadequate fire experience, inadequate survival training and inadequate fire ground organization & management were contributing factors for them getting into trouble.

Every member of your fire department needs to be trained properly on recognizing the warning signs preceding a possible MAYDAY event, the MAYDAY calling procedure, managing a MAYDAY event from the person(s) requiring rescue perspective and the Incident Commander perspective, and solid R.I.C./R.I.T. procedures. The only way to guarantee a successful outcome of a MAYDAY is to prevent it!

Stay Safe my Friends!

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