

THE RESCUE COMPANY

WATER INCIDENTS

"HEY CAP, are we drilling on that again?" "Hey, Lou, we trained on that last week!" Sound familiar? Next time you have a training session on water incidents, ask your fellow firefighters what they know about safe gearing up procedures, pre-dive emergency preparation and planning, line-tended diving, line-tended communications for underwater operations, emergency equipment repair, underwater emergency rigging, recompression chamber procedures, currents and water movement, black water diving and hazards, laws of physics as they pertain to under water, carbon dioxide retention and overexertion in the water, carbon monoxide retention and water problems, hydraulics and cold water buoyancy problems, cold water resuscitation, secondary drowning, hypothermia and cold water exposure, first aid and emergency treatment for victims, rapid deployment rescue, and search patterns (circular sweep, semicircular sweep, straight sweep, grid), just to name a few.

Now that summer is over and children are back to school, the number of responses to water incidents should

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decrease. Departments located in year-round warm climates, however, may only see a small reduction in responses as compared with "seasonal" areas of the country. Regardless of location, rescue units must always be prepared for these types of responses.

What constitutes a "water incident" response? The news is full of very heroic and very tragic incidents occurring in water. Such incidents involve diving, swimming, water skiing, fishing, and boating. In August, a boating accident on the river Thames in England claimed 51 lives to date. On that same day, a two-year-old child drowned in a backyard pool. A young boy lost his life when he fell in an opening that was missing a manhole cover—rescuers found him in eight feet of water. Recently a distraught husband killed his four children by driving his car into a lake; his wife (the alleged intended victim) survived the tragic ordeal and provided police with information necessary to charge him with murder.

The number and types of incidents your unit responds to will dictate the type and amount of equipment you need to carry. An inland unit whose response district includes only private dwellings with above- or in-ground pools wouldn't need a boat and motor, but a unit whose response district includes many bodies of water would.

The key for all units, regardless of location, is preparedness. Being prepared means more than just ready to go. Knowledge, skills, and training go hand

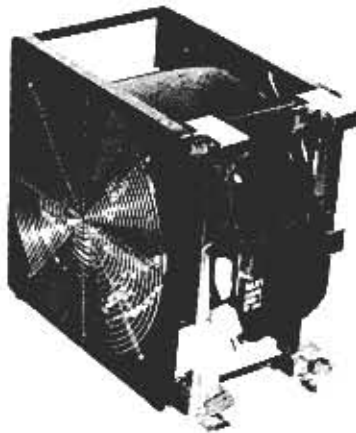
in hand with preparedness. Keep in mind that the reporting of these incidents to units is often delayed due to the location of and distance to phones and alarm boxes. Do not sacrifice safety for urgency, however.

Because of the versatility of firefighters, departments throughout the country are effectively using members to man units that handle water incidents in addition to other duties. One city uses its heavy rescue units for water-related incidents as well as fighting fires and handling emergencies, accidents, and collapses. All officers and firefighters are trained in advanced water rescue and deployment techniques.

Another city uses specially trained divers, who are assigned to various units within the department and respond to incidents with those units. The communications dispatcher keeps a list of the divers' assigned locations. Off-duty members of these units wear beepers and respond by private car to such incidents.

In another department, the specially trained members are assigned to marine units whose response area includes pier fires, boat and ship fires, and other emergencies that occur in their waterways. The members also inspect and maintain their vessels. A number of departments have boats on trailers that they store in central locations and transport to an incident. Many volunteer departments have formed SCUBA teams or dive units within their organization, in addition to their firefighting responsi-

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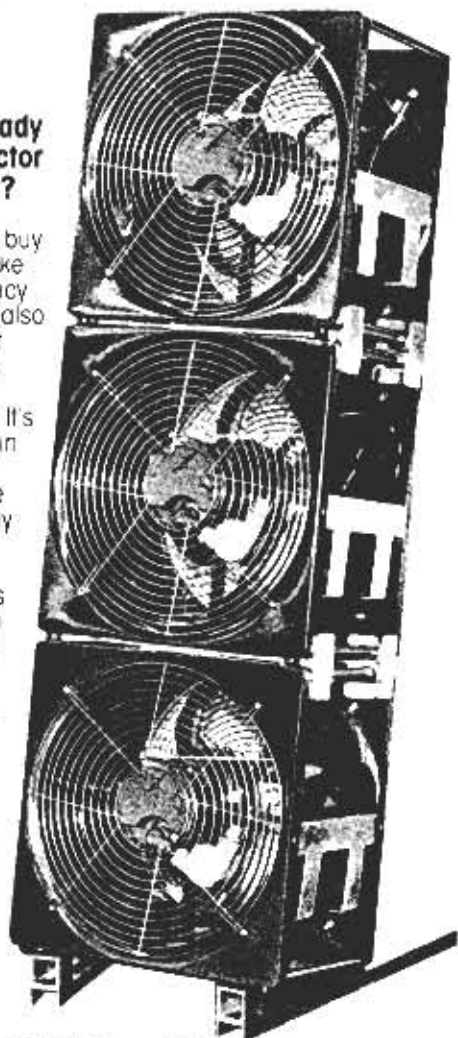
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bilities. Mutual-aid agreements have increased the size of response districts and provided adjoining towns with coverage that often means the difference between life and death.

All members of dive rescue teams require a basic certification prior to advanced training. Basic certification and certain advanced courses, available through the YMCA, YWCA, dive organizations, and dive shops, all use nationally certified instructors who must follow standards these organizations have developed. Specialized training is available from a number of organizations, two of which—Lifeguards Systems of New York and Dive Rescue Inc./International of Ft. Collins, Colorado—offer 2- to 3-day courses geared toward increasing the efficiency of dive teams. These organizations also offer more advanced courses and courses tailored to specific department requirements. The specialized training needed for water incidents requires specialized instructors. If your departments doesn't have them, find them.

Training for water incidents can be accomplished in a number of ways. Some departments have in-house training programs that use sites within their response area for drills and simulations. This training also familiarizes the rescue team members with the area.

Performing with the greatest proficiency requires many hours of drilling and training. Water-related incident training can run the spectrum from teaching members how to approach a drowning victim to a highly sophisticated underwater dive operation that could include numerous divers, large search areas, and specialized underwater communications systems.

In multidrowning incidents, usually at least one of the recovered victims is a well-intended, would-be rescuer who lacked the training and skills necessary for such situations. Preparedness training, drills, knowledge, skills, and equipment are little bodies of water that combine to make up the big ocean needed to respond to water incidents. ■