



GAS EMERGENCY BY RAY DOWNEY

In most departments many responses involve emergencies. Anyone who has worked in a busy area can attest to the large number of emergency responses that at times are considered nuisance runs.

Water leaks, flickering lights, blown electrical fuses, unusual odors, and gas leaks often will be cause for alarm among residents of multifamily dwellings. Most often these emergencies can be corrected by a building maintenance employee, but the residents think that by calling the fire department some type of punitive actions will be taken against the building owner or superintendent. Some residents actually believe that these are the duties of the local fire department.

In most cases it's probably best just to change the fuse or shut the water or gas supply to be available to respond to the next alarm. At times it may take a great amount of patience to accomplish some of these minor tasks.

I remember quite vividly an early morning response: We were up most of the night fighting fires when we answered an alarm for a gas leak on the 12th floor of an apartment building where the elevators were out of service. After we knocked on the door

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to the apartment, a young mother opened the door. When we asked if she called the fire department, she replied nonchalantly, "Yes. I wanted to heat the baby's bottle, but I can't get the stove to light." I calmly asked her, "You called us to light your stove?" She replied, "Yes. My building manager told me always to call the fire department if I had any trouble with the gas." We quickly resolved her problem, and a number of members could be heard muttering about gas leaks, motherhood, and the time of day as they wearily made their way back to the apparatus.

NOT AN ORDINARY GAS LEAK

On December 28, 1990 a gas leak in an apartment in the same building complex left firefighters muttering—but a completely different tune. Response to buildings in this complex usually involves food on the stove, rubbish in the stairwells, incinerator and compactor fires, and occasional bedroom fires. The responses are frequent enough that most members know the addresses and locations without having to refer to a map of the building complex.

The explosion and its force could be heard and felt in the firehouse three blocks from the scene, where members are used to loud explosions—mostly from 9mm gunshots late at night. On this day it was 10 minutes before the 6 p.m. change of tours when members opened the apparatus doors to investigate the source of the noise. Within 30 seconds the teleprinter spit out a re-

sponse ticket for the report of an explosion and fire at the already familiar building complex.

The officer of the first-arriving unit immediately transmitted the signal for a working fire to the radio dispatcher, indicating that heavy black smoke was pushing from numerous windows on the top floor of this 14-story building. Another unit responding from a different direction confirmed the first report and added that fire could be seen showing out of eight top-floor windows on that side of the building.

It didn't take long for the units still responding to the scene to realize that this wasn't a routine response to the building complex. As first-arriving members entered the lobby, they were met by excited occupants hastily exiting the building. This would add to the problems rescuers had to overcome during the operation.

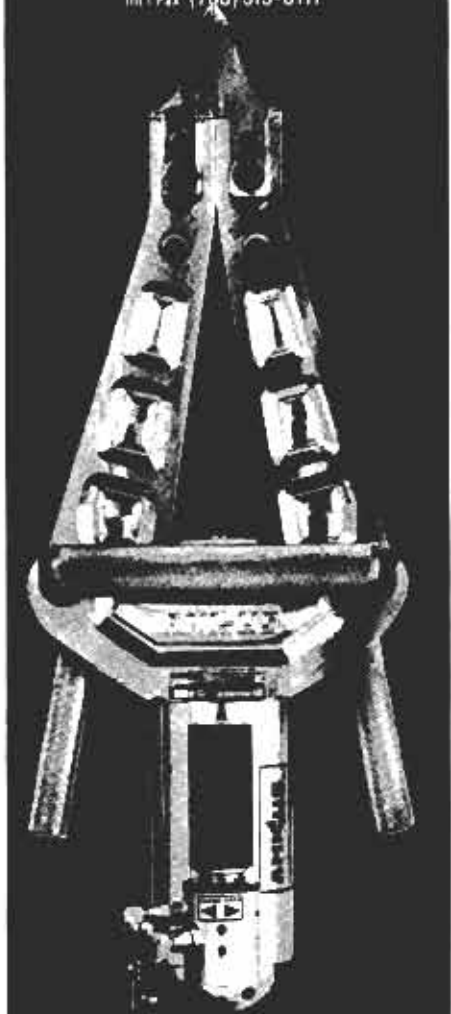
Although there were two elevators in the building, based on past experiences firefighters started directly toward the staircases as their primary means to reach the 14th floor. (The possibility of the elevators being affected by the explosion was another consideration in deciding to use the stairs.) The staircases were crowded with occupants. Many, despite their state of panic, were able to make it clear to firefighters that a serious explosion and fire had occurred on the top floor.

CHILDREN RESCUED

After climbing the 14 stories, firefighters were met by two hysterical mothers screaming that their children

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GAS EMERGENCY

were trapped inside their apartments. The layout of apartments was the same on all floors. There were 10 apartments on each floor, lettered A thru K (the letter "I" was not used to avoid confusion). The apartments encircled the two elevator shafts and the two staircases. Fortunately, the apartments in which the children had been reported trapped were adjoining—14A and 14K.

The first firefighters to reach the 14th floor were unaware of what had caused the explosion and fire, yet they accomplished the successful rescues under extraordinary conditions. Due to the extreme heat condition in the public hallway, firefighters had to crawl through the debris to reach the apartment doors. Visually checking for the correct apartments was impossible because of the heavy smoke condition on the fire floor. As luck would have it, firefighters searching for an entry point found an opening that had at one point been the door to Apt. 14J. Fire was rapidly spreading

from the point of origin in Apt. 14J, and the screams of young children could be heard coming from an adjacent area.

Firefighters, without the protection of a hoseline, entered through this opening and made their way to the area from which the voices were coming. They found what appeared to be the remains of a wall covering three children. The wall had been the partition wall separating Apt. 14J from 14K. This wire lath and plaster wall had been blown down from the force of the explosion, entrapping the children. The wall also protected the children from rapidly spreading fire. Rescuers had to remove the debris and then lift the wall off the children. They then quickly removed the children to an area of safety.

Other firefighters found the door to Apt. 14A ajar and, hearing screams coming from inside, were able to make their way into the apartment and rescue another trapped child. In all, four children were successfully rescued from apartments directly affected by the fire and explosion.

As the rescues were taking place,



This Brooklyn, New York gas explosion reinforces the need to be prepared for every response, however routine it may appear to be. Firefighters had been called to this building for reports of gas leaks on numerous occasions, but this one was quite different: The explosion ripped through the 14th floor, turning five apartments into one big apartment full of debris—and trapped children. (Photo by author.)

engine company members, who also had to climb the 14 stories—but with rolled-up lengths of hose—were busy hooking up to the standpipe outlet on the floor below. In addition to water from the gravity tank on the roof, the siamese connection at the street level was supplied to provide water to hoselines being operated on the fire floor.

As operations were taking place, the incident commander was notified that a gas line in the building was being replaced by a contractor who was still at the scene. The IC quickly notified all units via portable radio of the possibility of leaking gas fueling the fire. A company was immediately dispatched to the cellar and ordered to shut down all gas service to the building.

Engine companies using a coordinated attack were able to extinguish all visible fire in the apartments as truck company members continued to search for possible victims. Additional units arriving on the transmission of a second alarm were used to check all apartments on the lower floors. In addition, a triage area was set up on the 12th floor, and victims were treated prior to their removal to the hospital.

DETERMINING CAUSE

An initial investigation revealed that a contractor was installing new gas lines in the building. The authority responsible for this building complex said that it was policy to install new gas lines after the buildings reached a predetermined age. Each building in the complex had 140 apartments, and on this particular day the gas lines were being installed in the "J" line of apartments. The procedure was to install the new line up from the cellar through each apartment in that line. When the entire line was completed, the stoves were disconnected from the old line and hooked up to the new line. The old lines were to be purged and capped prior to starting up the new lines. Apparently this procedure was used regularly without any problems.

On this particular day all lines had

been switched over with the exception of the line in Apt. 14J. A follow-up investigation revealed that the contractor somehow missed Apt. 14J, and when the new line was turned on the apartment filled rapidly with gas. The stoves in all the apartments had electronic ignitions (no pilot lights), and when the occupant of the adjoining apartment (14K) turned on her stove, a massive explosion occurred. The occupant of 14K stated that she did smell gas, but the tenants began to expect it since the contractors had been working in the building for some time.

The force of the explosion and ensuing fire killed one occupant, who appeared to have taken the full impact of the explosion while in the public hallway outside of apartment 14J. Identification of the victim confirmed that he was the occupant of Apt. 14J and may have been approaching his apartment just as the explosion occurred.

The force of the explosion blew down all the partition walls in Apt. 14J and the partition walls separating Apt. 14J and 14K, 14K and 14A, 14H and 14J, and 14G and 14H. The result was that five apartments now looked like one large apartment.

Fire spread rapidly to all apartments and was extinguished by a well-coordinated attack by engine companies. A total of 40 windows had been blown out, some of which landed almost 150 feet from the building.

* * *

The potential of this gas leak was enormous; the actions of all firefighters operating at the scene were extraordinary. Although one life was lost, many were saved. Considering the task firefighters faced, had it not been for the superior teamwork and heroics of all those involved, a much higher loss of life certainly would have occurred.

When you file this in your computer (the one under your helmet), think of all those pain-in-the-neck gas leaks and be prepared for the one that doesn't fall under the routine response. ■

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