

Chapter

3



Hey Kid Can You Drive?

Life was very good back in 1972. I was 20 years old and had successfully completed one year of faithful fire service. I was able to become a permanent employee after completing the required probationary period. I had visions of no longer be called “probie” or any one



of a dozen rookie names that seemed to fly at me fast and furiously. My annual evaluation was nearly perfect, with only one small blemish. The Lieutenant pointed out that I wanted to wear my hair near the extreme edge of the grooming standard operating procedure (long). He went on to say this was a reflection of my youth and that I would likely grow out of it in time. Boy did he know what he was talking about! Since that was my first annual evaluation, I have kept it for all of these years, and look back on it time and again. It is fun to reflect on the way it was back then.

As it would turn out, the good Lieutenant was right on the money. I now get regular haircuts and short hair is my preference. That long hair he pointed out for behavior modification was actually a shorthaired wig. When a very restrictive hair policy was enacted, a fellow firefighter (who shall remain nameless) and I purchased the very popular shorthaired wigs for men. We got information from other firefighters who had made similar purchases to help them meet their military commitments (grooming regulations). Trapped under my near regulation wig's synthetic locks was much longer than allowable real hair. Stop laughing for a minute and remember that this was the "flower power" era in America, and I just had to have the latest style.

To close the story on the wig, I must jump ahead to 1977. At that time, I was working for an almost legendary fire lieutenant assigned to Washington D.C.'s Truck Company 13. We'll call him Lieutenant Jones. He was the only guy I know who could smoke a big, thick cigar during a working fire. That's right. He would light up most anytime and would not wear an air pack at a fire. I can remember crawling down a long hallway into a burning living room smacking into fire in every direction. Needless to say, I was pumped up and trying my best to work toward the front windows of this joint. I learned very early in my career that when you are making an interior structural attack, you look for trapped people first. Next, the idea is to find the windows. Then work toward them, ensuring your path of exit. Finally, you spray water to put the fire out. The first two steps take only a few seconds to complete and the last one is usually the hard part. Once the thermal balance goes haywire it is difficult to do anything that requires vision at a working fire.

As I made my way into the inferno, I could hear a voice. Lt. Jones was very clearly giving me directions as to where to attack the fire next. "Hit it over to your left," he yelled. I was shocked that the voice was so

clear and so loud. It did not make any sense that anyone could speak through a SCBA face piece this effectively. After a few more minutes, I was able to get over to the pre-selected window and start ventilating the old fashion way. The 1½" nozzle went out the opening on wide fog. The hose could move 6,000ft³ of air per minute, which equaled the performance of a 16" smoke ejector. In just a few minutes the thickest, blackest smoke was mostly gone. There stood my Lieutenant, with no air pack on and puffing on a stinking stogie. Go figure. I feared for my well-being while he was having a smoke at the office, never mind at the fire scene.

This Lieutenant was also as bald as a cue ball. I wonder if the heat, smoke, and gases got to his hair follicles? Anyway, there came a time when he was promoted to the rank of Fire Captain, and transferred to Rescue Squad #3, which was a bittersweet event to have lived through. I was glad to have seen him go up the chain, but I did not like losing a peach of an officer. In his honor, an all-hands gala was planned to celebrate this joyous occasion. The event unfolded at my apartment in the community party room. As the final preparations were made, Richard Smith (the driver of my company—we'll talk about him later) noticed the shorthaired wig sitting on a foam head in my closet. He mentioned it would be a good joke to present it to the new Captain. I could not resist. I had not worn this smallest of rugs in a long time, so the offering seemed right (if you know what I mean).

As the party revved up and the keg of beer got lighter, out came the gifts. Somewhere in the middle of his booty was the wrapped hairpiece. As the gift wrap fell to the floor, he did a double take to make out what this furry thing was. Then he plopped it on to his head. Everyone laughed and laughed. The crowd told him how good it looked on him. And it did! He did not remove it for quite some time. In fact, he wore it most of the time. He really got some mileage out of what was believed to be a gag gift. That just goes to show you, one man's trash is another man's treasure. The joke was on us.

Now back to the driving story. My probationary year was over and I could finally start the driver training process. I was allowed to drive home and to non-emergency details. I enjoyed stemming the big rigs and, I must admit, was pretty good behind the wheel. After a few months of this routine, I felt I was ready to be cut loose for the emergency stuff. The Captain did not see it the same way, however. He was very conser-

vative and felt that recruits needed more time before taking on this huge responsibility. So the thrill of being the driver/operator would just have to wait for the Captain's word. Our Captain gave the final approval for all new members to be able to drive on emergency calls. He kept the lieutenants informed of his decision as to when it was time.

A great job benefit at this time in my career was the ability to work in someone's place. A member could pay you cash to work their tour of duty. This payment would count as if they were present at work. In other words, this process saved on valuable annual and holiday leave. Being a single man and at the bottom of the pay scale, I was a high priority choice to be a "work for pay" replacement. One Firefighter in particular, Buddy, had a growing nursery business and liked his weekends off. During my two years at Bailey's Cross Roads, I worked almost every Saturday or Sunday (or both) every weekend. The extra money was spent on my brand new 1972 gold Monte Carlo.

One weekend, Buddy asked me to cover his shift for the usual \$50 fee. After pausing for a millisecond, I eagerly agreed to replace him for the upcoming Saturday shift. He was assigned to the "B" platoon and Lieutenant Bobby Diamond was the boss that day. It was like winning a small lottery. Great money to do what I loved on a day that I had no plans, and working for a quality officer. Lieutenant Diamond was a renowned cook (at least by firehouse standards) and I enjoyed eating. What a super opportunity. The Lieutenant would collect \$5.00 at the beginning of the day, and would put two great meals on the table. Because this was a day work shift, it would be an all-star breakfast and lunch. The shift schedule was four days of day work (7:00AM to 5:00PM) followed by four nights of night work (5:00PM to 7:00AM) and then four wonderful days off. It was known as the 4-4-4. (I need to mention another recruit schoolmate at this point, Charles Fern. Charlie's badge number was 444; the jab was that Charlie would have to look at his hat badge to get the shift schedule correct). I lived about 45 minutes away from Fire Station 10. Therefore, I would always get an early start to ensure a timely arrival. Being late was an intolerable offense that was easy enough to avoid by applying a little bit of self-discipline.

At 0630 hours, I was walking through the rear door, near the hose tower entrance. The only other B-shifter that was in quarters was Lt.

Diamond. With a wide smile he offered me a cup of coffee. Positive that he had just brewed the java, I grabbed up a white ceramic mug and gladly accepted his offer. Just about the time my cup was filled, the loud speaker announced, "... An alarm of fire for 4949 Manitoba Drive. Report of heavy smoke on the second floor. Engine Companies 22, 9, and 11; Trucks 22 and 11; Battalion 1 respond. Time out: 0632." Lieutenant Diamond said this could be a very serious incident. An early morning fire at a high-rise apartment building for the elderly just might be disastrous, he said. His estimation would soon be proven true.

Wagon 22 reported on location to heavy smoke showing from the upper floors. In compliance with our standard operating procedures, the company officer requested that a second alarm be sounded. "We might be due on the second alarm," the Lieutenant said. With this comment made, I started toward the turnout gear rack to get my running gear organized. Before I could get to the storage racks, the dispatcher began, "... A second alarm is being sounded at the request of Wagon 22. Engine Companies 26, 5, and 10; Truck 5. Respond to 4949 Manitoba Drive. Time out: 0636." My steps got much quicker and I grabbed my coat and boots in one arm and placed the leather helmet on my head. Not having a riding assignment, I looked to Lieutenant Diamond for directions. He said, "Hey kid. can you drive?" Without hesitation I answered, "Sure."

An interesting aspect of life at the Bailey's Crossroads Station was the staffing of the apparatus. At this time in history (1972), six career members were assigned to the station. Two people were always on the ambulance, one firefighter was assigned to drive the vintage 1958 Ward La France ladder truck, and the remaining three (one officer and two firefighters) would be assigned to one of the three pumpers. Talk about a confusing situation, you needed a program to determine which fire truck would go where. Bailey's Wagon 10 responded to all first due fire calls and Engine 10 responded to assist calls in Fairfax County. This left Bailey's Reserve Engine 10 to take on out of County mutual aid calls. If the call were out of the first due district, only a driver and an officer would go, leaving behind a member for the Wagon. The hope was the remaining member would protect the hometown. Our station was on the border of Arlington County and City of Alexandria, so we responded to a lot of mutual aid work. The radio designation of "Bailey's" preceding

the unit number was due to the high volume of out of county runs, and the fact that Arlington had a Station 10 as well. Confused? I stayed that way if I was assigned to an engine.

Because this was an assist call, it would be the Lieutenant and me hitting the road; just a little more good luck on this “cash cow day.” Diamond was a cab driver during his off-duty time so he knew just about every street in Fairfax, Arlington, and Alexandria. This address was a cakewalk for him. He gave very detailed directions for me to follow. Thank goodness, because my heart was racing and my pulse was pounding, I probably could not have found my way home.

I was very careful to upshift and downshift the five-speed “Spicer” by the book. The gasoline continental engine hummed and I never missed a gear. In about 15 minutes, I saw the red brick high rise coming into sight. What would our assignment be at this big fire? As Lieutenant Diamond radioed on location, the battalion chief assigned our unit to ventilation on the second floor. No worries with pumping the standpipe system at this building. However, by this time in my career, operating a fire pump was second nature and would have been welcomed.

We put on the rest of our gear, including SCBA. Then, we grabbed the small smoke ejector off our rig. I had an electrical adapter that would hopefully power the fan. If the building’s current was still on, we would be in luck. If not, we would have to hoist a power cord upstairs from one of the ladder trucks. We were happy to find that the outlet worked just fine to start up the ejector. After securing the fan in a window near the fire area, we went to check with the hose line crew. Just a few feet away from where we were working was the seat of the fire. A large, commercial-type clothes dryer had caught fire. The situation generated a lot of smoke, but the fire was moderate. The biggest problem was evacuating the building, getting rid of the smoke, and making sure that the fire had not extended. We moved the 1 1/2" into position, providing additional ventilation.” Soon, the smoke was dissipating and the situation was under control. Within a half of an hour, we were on the road back to Bailey’s.

I was beaming with pride as I climbed back behind the wheel of this 1968 Ward La France pumper. After years and years of waiting, I had reached yet another important milestone. On the way home, however, I had a mild panic attack. I realized I was not a qualified apparatus driv-

er. Captain Smith most certainly would find out about my driving excursion. I sheepishly began explaining to the Lieutenant that I may have just violated one of the Captain's house rules, because I was not officially turned over to drive. Bobby Diamond gave me a very stern look and said something like "...what did you just say?" I thought for sure I was busted at this point and was pondering what punishment I would receive. Again I told him I was not turned over by the Captain to drive on emergency calls. At my restatement of the situation the Lieutenant broke into a wide smile. Now, I was really confused. Would he take joy in dropping the axe on this almost rookie driver? Then he started in with something sounding like "did I think that he would let me drive if I were not released by the top dog"? I could hardly stand the guilt trip I was receiving. He went on to inform me the Captain made a special effort to let all three of the Lieutenants know I was officially a pumper driver. Because I had not worked a weekday tour in a while, I had not gotten the word. He congratulated me on completing my first time at the wheel. All I could think was "I'm glad I'm part Irish."

Some of the lessons learned in this chapter were:

- Extensive training and education are a must for being turned loose with a fire truck.
- Official communications must be placed into a written process and not just passed along by word of mouth. Special orders, general orders, memorandums or SOP's would be the likely ways that this type of important information gets out to the membership.
- Apparatus operators should meet minimum state certification requirements as well as station level policy before being considered to drive.
- Always have a license background check system in place.
- Review driving transcripts every six months for all drivers.
- Provide plenty of initial and ongoing training for drivers.

- Ensure that there are strong rules for operating your apparatus.
- Fire/Rescue Apparatus should be inspected annually by an outside agency, such as the state police vehicle inspection stations.

Chapter Review Questions

1. List the NFPA Standards that impact the driver/operator position.
2. Review the state laws that must be followed by your department while operating under emergency conditions.
3. Determine if your state training agency offers a driver/operator certification. If so, how can you and other drivers obtain this certification.
4. Can apparatus drivers be used as part of the “2-in/2-out” procedure?
5. List your department’s requirements for driver/operator and compare the results to the NFPA Standards. Is there a gap? If so, how can it be best addressed?

Rube's Rules For Survival

1. Only qualified members can drive the big rigs.
2. Always stop at red lights, stop signs, and any other negative right-of-way intersections.
3. Drive a little slower rather than faster.
4. Everyone must be seated and belted *before* the rigs get underway.

