Introduction to ***Responding to 'Routine' Emergencies*** by Frank Montagna

As firefighters, we repeatedly respond to certain types of incidents. The routine calls aren't the most exciting runs that we go on, nor are they the kind that we sit around and discuss at social gatherings and in bull sessions. Sometimes we don't even give much thought as to how to handle them or to the threat that they pose. Much has been written about structural collapse, backdraft, confined spaces, and hazardous materials, but where is it that we spend most of our time? The main portion of a firefighter's professional life is spent putting out car fires, removing burning pots from stoves, and shutting down malfunctioning oil burners.

A simple mattress fire is nothing compared with a multiple alarm in a paint factory that results in structural collapse and a river of burning paint flowing down the street, but which scenario will we experience more frequently? Most of us will never even see a burning paint factory, but mattress fires occur in every community, sometimes with deadly results. You've probably received training in building collapse and exposure protection, but have you trained recently on mattress fires? Preparing for the major events is essential, of course, but we must also take the time to analyze and train on those calls that we respond to over and over, day after day. How much water should you use at a mattress fire? Should you leave the mattress in the building or remove it to the street? Should you take it down the stairs or throw it out the window? Have you ever even thought about what you do at a mattress fire and why you do it?

As a young firefighter, I regularly responded to several car fires a tour, as well as to an equal number of food-on-the-stove incidents. I rarely gave a thought to the dangers posed by these and other routine responses. I can't tell you how many electrical emergencies and gas leaks that I have confronted that were truly minor incidents, but every so often, one would turn into a major incident with the potential for doing structural damage and even causing injury or death. The question is whether we are alert to the potentialities of such a routine response or whether we remain complacent until the situation gets out of control and overtakes us.

As my time in the department grew longer and as promotions increased my responsibilities, I became more and more aware of these hazards and potentialities. Gradually I developed a more cautious approach to such incidents. The young firefighters that I now supervise, as well as some young officers, exhibit the same cavalier attitude toward routine responses that I once did. Undoubtedly they consider my caution to be an annoyance. I understand such an attitude, for I once felt the same way. One chief with whom I worked early in my career routinely made us stand by for what seemed an unreasonable length of time at odor-of-smoke incidents, until either the truck company found the source or he was satisfied that there was no threat. Often that meant missing a meal or a TV show, or, worse, missing sleep. I couldn't understand why, if there was no fire, we had to stand fast in the street. Why not just send us home and, if absolutely necessary, have one company search for the source of the odor? Now, as a chief, I am undoubtedly just as annoying to the firefighters who work with me. Although most of these smoke-odor calls turn out to be nothing, I have, after a prolonged search for an odor, discovered potentially dangerous situations that might otherwise have resulted in hazards to the occupants. Now when I am tempted to give up on the source of an odor in a home, I look at the occupants and think what the consequences might be if a fire breaks out after we leave. What if they have gone back to bed and are asleep at the time? What if there is loss of life? Could I live with that? Could I explain it in court? In March 1995, Fire Engineering magazine published my article "Odor of Smoke." Shortly thereafter, I was asked to testify (I declined) against a fire department that had responded several times to an odor of smoke in a commercial occupancy. Each time they responded, they found no cause for the odor. Sometime later

that night, after the occupants had closed up and gone home, a fire broke out that gutted the structure. The cause was determined to be electrical, and it was believed that the same electrical problem had caused the odors detected earlier in the day. Luckily, this was a commercial building and not an apartment house full of sleeping residents. No one was killed, but the chief and the department had to answer in court for their actions and inactions.

I wrote this book to heighten firefighter awareness of these routine incidents, to point out that a hazard potential exists at them, and to open a discussion on the standard tactics used for them. It doesn't matter whether yours is a paid or a volunteer department, nor does it matter whether your department is large or small. The potential hazards will be present in any case.

The topics discussed in this book aren't as exciting as backdraft, collapse, hazardous materials, or a host of other subject areas. Still, you'll find yourself at more food-on-the-stove incidents than backdrafts, and at every food, gas leak, or heating response, you'll be put at risk of injury. Doesn't it make sense to spend some time discussing and training for what you do most?

In truth, your "routine" response is not routine. No response is. Every type of response should be discussed and dissected, and you should develop appropriate plans for them. This way, you can minimize the dangers to firefighters and the public alike as you effectively, professionally perform your job.