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Strategic and Tactical Realizations

Observations

After reading several abstracts and model studies over the years on firefighting tactics, preplanning, decision-making, risk management and fire safety from this country and overseas I began to develop different views and understandings of the strategic and tactical evaluation process. This is attributed to talking, experiencing and participating in hands on situations with my own department as well as many urban departments throughout the country. What this has shown me is the wide variances of strategic and tactical modes being employed producing both successful and unsuccessful outcomes. Most officers and incident commanders are faced with sometimes making quick detrimental decisions that affect the rescue or fire suppression operation into its inevitable offensive or defensive posture which results in the consequences of the risks taken and the safety provided.

Over time I began mentally and physically taking notes on the offensive, defensive or marginal operational decisions made at several different types of fires both residential and high rise. Being an officer and having had the experience in making less than optimal decisions when being first to arrive on an engine, truck or squad company it became very important to me to understand good and bad decision-making. On the fire ground the repercussions can affect everyone in their capacity to provide positive outcomes in fire suppression activities. In order to do this I begin to realize that the evaluation and the consequences of the fire's position played a key role in the strategic and tactical requirements for the offensive or defensive operation and its outcome.

In order to understand and determine our capacity at any given incident it became clear to me that I needed some flexible guidelines in sizing up specific strategies and tactics in offensive and defensive operations. I also needed to acquire a better understanding why certain offensive operations increased risk and safety to personnel while at the same time failing to reach their goal only to end up as defensive postures and exhausted resources. In some cases in many parts of the country the decisions made were responsibly connected to the ultimate price to be paid, the death of one of our own.

Pros and Cons of the Operational Mode

Attacking a fire is more demanding than trying to contain a fire in a defensive posture. The true realization is that the offensive attack probably requires more resources than a defensive mode. The nature of an offensive firefight requires us to provide a great expenditure of energy in manpower, risk and equipment than the defensive position which could require much less. The first five to ten minutes of an offensive maneuver could well ultimately decide the process and the results of the next several hours on the fire ground. This includes the ultimate probabilities of injury or death.

The earlier the response and decision process is directed to the event taking place will result in whether the fire suppression efforts will be successful. In some way or another there will always be a relationship between the operational mode chosen and the resources available that will enable the success of the choice being made. Any mode of operation chosen that becomes marginal or changing during the suppression efforts should still be considered an offensive position demanding even more resources than would be required than if the operational mode chosen stayed constant. The defensive and offensive mode definitely provides differences in their actions. In the defensive position fire suppression efforts are directed toward stopping the fire spread and allowing the fires fuel to be exhausted. Offensively the ultimate goal is to intervene, combat it, and put the fire out depriving it of its available fuel.

Philosophy and Risk

The philosophy and thinking for all fire operations should be to protect our members, civilians, property and the environment in that order when preparing for a fire fight. Justification of risking firefighters lives during fire operations should be measured through education and resources available, along with an understanding of the actions of fire safety on the fire ground. High-risk and unsafe conditions of fire suppression efforts in the offensive mode will result in injury or death. In the end this may require tremendous resources which may be unavailable to remedy the situation at hand. Competent officers and prudent incident commanders should know when to protect the health and safety of the fire fight and let the building burn and pullout. This applies to the beginning actions involving size up all the way through and including the actions of overhaul and salvage.

Strategy, Capability and the Suppression Effort

The strategy of the fire operations chosen for a given situation should have a realization as to what is to be saved in order to determine the tactical maneuvers to accomplish the task. The capabilities of fire suppression efforts should consider the different measures that will be needed in the actions of rescue, suppression, ventilation and containment. These considerations should be measured in their respects to time, the fires position and rate of growth. The firefighter's ability and capacity to put the fire out should always exceed the potentials determined by the fire's growth. Any effort that is not measurable enough in size and endurance can allow fire to return or rebuild itself into a larger foe creating a defensive posture.

Extinguishment, Power and Resources

All operations whether they are offensive or defensive should arrive at positive outcomes as long as the right power and resources are present over the duration of the incident. If the power and resources are not generated or available than you should with conviction address containment and a defensive posture. All officers and incident commanders should realize the correlation of available resources to the tactical operations being utilized. If the knock down power and resources are not capable in suppressing the fire's rate of growth than a defensive operation should be employed. Extinguishment correlates directly to the capabilities of heat absorption. The fire's ability to absorb heat and reduce the rate of heat release directly relates to whether an operation can be conducted offensively. The strategic and tactical realization involves the available resources in accordance with the demands of the incident which in turn results in strategic and tactical decisions.

Strategic and Tactical Decision Process

After reading an engineering study on approaches to firefighting tactics from Lund University out of Sweden and my experiences on the fire ground I was essentially able to recognize 4 strategic and tactical situations or possibilities. These realizations will ultimately affect the decision process and requirements during fire suppression activities. At the tactical level as a line officer I was able to create if you will a tactical ideal for myself which I could share with Chief Officers regarding the offensive or defensive posture taken at any given incident. In this way I'm now able to recognize the resources needed as they apply to the tasks on the fire ground at every point in time during suppression efforts. If the striking power is not there or positioned incorrectly the fire will regain its strength, ultimately putting lives on the line and a suppression operation that will inevitably fail. The 4 strategic and tactical situations are as follows.

1. A large fire or incident with small resources present will require a tremendous amount of strategic and tactical requirements.
2. A small fire with small resources present will be far less imposing on the strategic and tactical requirement process.
3. A small fire compartmentalized within a larger building with the potential for fire spread and little resources present will require a tremendous amount of strategic and tactical requirements.
4. A small fire with unlimited resources present will be far less demanding on the strategic and tactical requirements.

Lieutenant Mike Mason is a 23 year veteran of the fire service. He is a Certified Instructor III and Fire Officer II along with being a staff instructor for the Downers Grove Fire Academy, Romeoville Fire Academy, Southwest United Fire Academy and other academies throughout the state of Illinois.

Lieutenant Mike Mason is the co-author of Rapid Intervention Company Operations (R.I.C.O.) on Thomson/Delmar Publications which is recognized as the largest and most comprehensive text available on Rapid Intervention.