

# Fire Engineering

## Understanding Rapid Intervention Communications, Activities, and Deployments at Structural Fires

By MIKE MASON

In the dynamic world of fireground operations involving aggressive firefighting concentrated in offensive procedures, rapid intervention crews (RICs) and their operations sometimes need understanding, revisions, and additional considerations. This is based on training and input provided by many members at seminars and hands-on training throughout the country. Many questions are asked of our national lecturers and instructors on how certain things work for one department vs. another; one size does not fit all departments regarding the many scenarios presented to them at incidents. There are many misconceptions of terminology, and we are asked consistently regarding departments' abilities in protecting their own.

These grey areas have to be discussed among firefighters everywhere through an understanding of proactive behaviors, Maydays, rapid intervention operations, and their recues to prevent the unthinkable. Even since the inception of NFPA 1407, *Standard for Fire Service Rapid Intervention Crews*, we are still left with unanswered questions, confusion, and our abilities in meeting the needs of this standard.

Following are recommendations regarding proactive behaviors and philosophies in and out of NFPA 1407 as well as our research and teachings throughout the country in firefighter rescue and survival. This, along with improved policies and procedures, may improve function and understanding for any department reviewing its rapid intervention operations.

### **TWO-IN/TWO-OUT AND INTERMEDIATE RIC (IRIC)**

Because of limited staffing in many departments across the country (which may have 12 or less members arriving sequentially at working structure fires), IRIC and two-in/two-out could be considered one and the same. Two-in/two-out is a very translucent, fluid-like movement of the initial firefighters on scene involved in offensive procedures. This tactic should always be present at the beginning of each and every firefight, even though many times its fluid incorporation may not always occur as planned. Operations involving an arriving company of three or less men should commit themselves cautiously to any interior firefight while trying to provide this needed guideline. Departments supplying a four- to six-member advance on interior attacks will fare much better providing the two-in/two-out and IRIC procedures.

Many departments with reduced staffing should keep the guideline enforced by establishing the pump operator, along with another firefighter, as a turn man on the exterior to assist in hoseline advancement. Is this considered an IRIC? Some would say—borderline—Yes; it is the pump operator's responsibilities that make this a less than ideal IRIC and a better suited two-in/two-out role.

The IRIC concept surfaced a few years ago and has been misconstrued ever since. In simple terms, establishing an IRIC is establishing your two-in/two-out mandate; nothing more, nothing less. Its design and interpretation is built around the arrival of a minimum number of firefighters preparing to engage an aggressive interior attack at structural fires; it not an established, dedicated RIC.

The arrival of a second and third company can alter the safety of the two interior firefighters at residential structure fires; they can replace the initial IRIC or two-in/two-out at the original turn man position on the advancing hoseline initially held by the first-arriving company member on the structure's exterior. This first-arriving member can now move to the interior to continue the line advancement with his company. These tactics can all happen within minutes, even seconds, of each other.

Every scenario poses a different approach, but members' safety is our foremost responsibility and the reason for providing the two-in/two-out and IRIC guidelines. Obviously, when the rescue of civilians in immediate peril occur, establishing two-in/two-out or IRIC may be negated when it comes to risking a lot to save a lot (a human life).

The remaining second and third company members will pull the second line while still observing interior and exterior members as they proceed with tasks that may involve second hoseline advancements, rescue, ventilation, and so on. We advocate for the officer with a thermal imaging camera to monitor interior crews but also be prepared along with his crew to join the firefight. This is known as a transient fluid movement of IRIC to maintain the two-in/two-out requirement.

With precious time passing, a formal RIC needs to be established to truly have the coverage and safety of our members on the inside as more companies arrive and involve themselves in additional fireground tactics such as search, vent-enter-search (VES), ventilation, and forcible entry. The best advantage of establishing sound rapid intervention coverage is to provide a dedicated RIC within the first-alarm assignment while making sure all fireground members know that it is not only en route but also announcing its arrival and activation.

## **UNDERSTANDING RICs, RITLOs, AND RIC CHIEFS**

Commanding and controlling rapid intervention operations at structural fires are stressful and challenging. RICs and chief officers receiving Maydays can only provide the best possible outcomes for their members through preparedness. Handling these stressful, dynamic events involve coordination between those involved in the Mayday; the RIC; the rapid intervention team leader/officer (RITLO); incident commander (IC); and, if assigned, a RIC chief. Recognizing the following categories can improve our outcomes:

- **Well-trained RICs.**
- **Strong and decisive radio communications.**
- **Strong and flexible operating rapid intervention guidelines.**
- **Established training in Mayday and self-survival procedures.**

Understanding, planning, and training in Mayday actions along with rapid intervention preparedness involves several key areas for departments to consider which in turn will provide them with a solid foundation to react off of if the unthinkable were to happen.

- **Establish RIC in dispatch procedures within the first alarm level.**
- **Establish the RIC at the offensive action areas; not at the command post.**
- **RICs should take proactive measures in and around the structure.**
- **RICs should have the right tools and equipment with them.**
- **Establish radio procedures, channels, and radio discipline.**
- **Keep another RIC in reserve.**

In many offensive procedures that are rapidly moving into the interior firefight, the ability of a formal RIC to have a RIC chief officer present early on is highly unlikely. A formal RIC and RITLO will be responsible for all proactive behaviors needed for interior firefighters, and these members should be trained in all these behaviors for them to be effective. The need for a RIC chief is essential, but his importance should not be misconstrued as to the need for RICs to function in an aggressive proactive manner.

A RITLO should not perform proactive functions off of a checklist. Instead, he should perform according to conditions happening in the moment. Departments that employ checklists on the fireground at this level should consider removing them and train RICs and RITLOs according to sound, continuous size-up of fire conditions; interior/exterior firefighting members; and the needed proactive behaviors. RITLOs are expected to update all information to first-in commanders and RIC chiefs when these positions are firmly established. When immediate, formal first-in RICs arrive at residential structure fires, they should not report to command face-to-face for briefings. Instead, they should establish themselves at the point of the offensive procedure such as the hoseline advancing through the front door on the A side or at near a VES procedure at the C side. The exception to this would be larger operations such as high-rise, industrial, or hazmat operations where such briefings are a must for safe and efficient operations because of the incident's magnitude. Quickly establish the RIC on the fireground through disciplined radio communications to the IC, letting command know you are in position and activated in your proactive procedures.

## **RIC DEPLOYMENTS AND RADIO COMMUNICATIONS**

Another area of great debate is RIC responses and radio communications during RIC proactive behaviors; Mayday/firefighter distress calls; and the communications relationship to command, chief officers, sector officers, or scene safety officers. RITLOs and their RICs should never to monitor have more than two radio channels at a time on the fireground during offensive and defensive procedures; in some cases, only one channel is needed. Some departments incorporate up to three or four radio channels into their RIC operation procedure; this is a disaster waiting to happen unless they involve a larger scale incident.

The confusion for many department policy writers is defining and explaining how, when, and where multiple radio channels are to be used. In my travels training across the country, I have seen policies that use up to four radio frequencies, yet some departments operate with one frequency and do just fine. The idea of proper radio usage regarding RICs and chief officers comes down to training, accountability, and keeping it simple.

Through several instructors' training and lecturing experience as well as their discussions of communications policies, here are some recommendations for radio communication policies, which should be written in such a way as to break down time frames for radio frequency assignments and to whom they are assigned.

Let's start with an example of an assigned, incoming RIC. RITLOs must be reminded that only two channels are ever needed on which to switch back and forth during a structure fire. Notice I said a structure fire—not high rise, hazmat, or a large incident at which multiple layers of chief officers are assigned branches; it all depends on an incident's command structure. The RIC will not stop off at the command post to engage a commander; the commander should already know his assigned RIC through response procedures as long as the assigned RIC acknowledges it is en route coming in. When the RIC is en route to the incident, it will monitor the operating fireground channel and the main or dispatched channel. It will also acknowledge its assignment on the main channel when responding, especially when policies assign RIC through dispatch procedures as stated previously.

When the RIC arrives and has established its proactive position in the prominent offensive task area, it will announce his presence to dispatch on the main channel as well as to command, which may be the fireground channel. This identifies the company assigned as RIC to all incoming as well as firefighters and command in the firefight.

Now, here is where problems usually begin. Once the RIC has communicated by the main channel, the RIC members will leave that channel for good unless a Mayday is transmitted on that channel. Thus, only the RITLO needs to monitor both channels. The fireground channel is now the focus for the RITLO and his team members.

What we have learned about RICs communicating on the fireground channel is that their communications should be prominently directed at the fireground commander on the same frequency until a RIC chief officer becomes present. More common is that communications will take place with a first-in commander, not an overall IC. For smaller departments, one individual may fill both roles. Nonetheless, all benchmarks on proactive behaviors and safety concerns should be directed to those that need to know such as interior members, IC, RIC chiefs, scene safety officers (SSOs), and sector officers. The RIC establishes firm disciplined radio communications, listening more than it talks.

If departments invoke a third operational channel so RIC members and their sector officers can communicate with each other, then conscious discipline is needed. RICs must monitor the fireground with firefighters and their activities and orders coming in to them as well maintaining communications with RIC members and officers. Many times, the third channel is used for communications between RIC members and the RITLO and their RIC chief, SSO, or sector officer. When we incorporate a third channel, the RITLO must stop monitoring the original dispatch channel or main channel as well as the first assigned fireground channel where all the action is taking place. We cannot expect a RITLO to provide adequate listening coverage by juggling three or more channels and expect to possibly pick up or not pick up a Mayday from a noise congested fireground.

We must consider the way we train firefighters when dealing with their Mayday communications; if the distressed firefighter doesn't reach someone on their operating fireground channel, they will switch to the strongest frequency—the first, main channel—with many ears outside their compromised area. The reason for this is that most fire departments provide their first channel on their portable radios positioned consecutively from that point, while other departments may position them all the way right; fireground channels are many times positioned all the way to the right, which is usually red, then worked back counterclockwise to white, then blue to accommodate a firefighter's gloved hand.

## **MONITORING, COMMUNICATING, DISCIPLINES, AND PITFALLS**

RICs working under department policies that enact the use of monitoring and communicating on three radio channels may encounter serious problems in fast-moving dynamic firegrounds unless they are extremely disciplined through training. Even with RICs monitoring and communicating on three channels, each RIC member should monitor the fireground channel predominantly, possibly while using this third channel to talk amongst each other, their RITLO, and a chief officer. On a fast and dynamic fireground with precarious interior operations such as hoseline advancements and aggressive searches, we may not be doing members justice. We must have the RICs undivided attention during the firefight on the fireground channel.

Through my teachings across the county, I have learned that RICs, RITLOs, RIC chiefs, SSOs, and whoever else may be in charge use predominantly the fireground channel for listening and, when needed, have the RIC and its RITLO communicate through the fireground channel in fast-moving fireground dynamics and only when necessary. Work and communicate face-to-face as RIC members, and communicate with RITLOs when using proactive behaviors and tasks whenever possible. A RITLO communicating with the first-in commanders, RIC chiefs, or SSO's can be accomplished as well on the fireground channel by using good radio discipline in providing only necessary, urgent, and emergency traffic information to chief officers. Always remember, in communications and policy procedures, the importance of the RIC and RITLOs directly communicating to interior crews to help and warn them of dangerous situations and provide information points for rapid egress, if needed. If a third or fourth channel is needed or desired by departments, RITLOs and their chief officers must be disciplined in their use. Do what needs to be done regarding proactive behaviors and stay off the radio. Listening while knowing where interior members are, their assignments, and where they are going is the key to RIC operations, safety, and hearing a Mayday.

The multiple channel-changing act that many departments put in their policies are of major concerns in regards to their true proficiencies performed under fast-moving dynamic fire environments. When RICs are “playing hopscotch” with radio channels, they are not truly listening to firefighters on the interior, let alone hearing their Maydays. A key is learning to work on the fireground channel without interrupting suppression communication operations.

When well-trained RICs discover serious fireground situations, they should use the fireground channel like any other member involved in the firefight. Their purpose, as our protectors, is to let you know of a precarious situation that—in seconds—could turn into something ugly. Fumbling around with a gloved hand, trying to switch over to other channels to communicate during dangerously occurring action to a chief officer must be done, but it should be done after the RIC has alerted those first-in the most danger.

## **MAYDAY! MADAY! MADAY!**

One more situation discussed at our hands-on and lecture seminars regards Maydays that can force all fireground members to switch to another channel except the member in distress. This is only partly true. This action, which is necessary to a degree, carries with it grave responsibilities and accountability for all members, especially those involved in the firefight, primary searches, VES, and roof operations. This is not as easy as most of us think; it adds another channel into the mix and attempts to move everyone to an existing channel originally being used for another aspect of the fireground.

In many cases, a Mayday is called by the distressed firefighter or another member for that firefighter or, maybe worse, an entire crew. All those surrounding the distressed firefighter or firefighters will react and involve themselves in many ways not stipulated by radio guidelines and their well-intentioned philosophies. We will need to keep those affected by and reacting to the Mayday on the original fireground channel, which is where the RIC will be communicating as well as providing rescue efforts. Fire advancement and suppression efforts may also need to remain on the fireground channel instead of attempting to move them to another channel. The RIC may very well be the ones who are protecting the rescue effort or, even worse, having one of their own being the Mayday somewhere in the structure.

Remember that the variables are many, and radio communication policies, despite their good intentions, will need to be modified and creative when presented with different types of Maydays and their challenges. We need radio communications in our policies to provide accountability and information that enhances all proactive behaviors along with rescues by RICs, RITLOs, and chief officers as well as our firefighters that are experiencing the unthinkable..... the Mayday.

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