



The Use of “Groups” on the Fireground: A Discussion

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The incident command system, firescope, and NIMS, they are all ways by which the fire department attempts to bring a sense of order to the near chaos of the fire ground. Given recent federal mandates everyone who is not using NIMS soon will be. NIMS applies a rational bureaucratic model to the business of life preservation and fire suppression. This model provides for the clear delineation of responsibility and subsequently accountability over the entire scope of the incident while providing positive control over the incident commander’s span of control.

For most fire department applications the full breadth of the NIMS system is not necessary. Typically a house fire uses an incident commander; on rare occasions an operations officer, then numerous branches, groups and divisions. As the NIMS system moved out into the fire fighting world and evolved, it became clear that many were not fond of using groups, especially on smaller scale incidents, like house and building fires. They preferred instead to assign divisions and division supervisors. While this practice is not incorrect I think it denies some fundamental realities, like the criticality of the search and ventilation functions.

For most of us the staffing levels of the big cities are simply a dream. Knowing these staffing levels is important because when the incident commander assigns a division he/she is not just assigning someone to fight the fire. Let’s say the fire is on the second floor of a five-story apartment building. There are four individual units on the second floor. The first engine reported heavy fire conditions in apartment 201. The typical ICS response to this is to create a Division 2 and to place the first two engines, and first truck into this Division. Most times the incident commander assigns the next available command officer to supervise the division, but until his/her arrival this task rests with a unit officer.

Remember please that the assignment of a Division 2 obligates the division supervisor to conduct all fire department activities (RECEO-VS), from fire suppression, to ventilation, to initial searches with very limited resources. In the case of the average fire department this means that the interior crew of two engines and one truck, or six persons is conducting all those activities. This is simply unreasonable, given two or three person staffing. The other factor that must be considered is a ladder truck staffed with three

persons, if they are committed to the interior as part of the Division 2, who is throwing the ladders and coordinating the ventilation process with interior engine officers?

The solution lies in NIMS. NIMS allows for the assignation of functional entities based on a specific task, namely groups. The group can be and should be one of the basic functional units used on the fire ground and here is why. The search as we started talking about earlier is simply too important to be left to a six person crew who is also: trying to stretch a line, force entry, stretch a back-up line, locate the fire, fight the fire, coordinate ventilation, coordinate crew movements, and search properly. Something always losses out when this attempted, and typically it is the quality of the search. How many times have we heard a negative primary search reported in five minutes by a two-person search team searching 4 apartments on the fire floor? A quick report of negative searches from a crew as over-taxed as described above can only mean that the searches were rushed and inefficient.

By assigning a search group the incident commander reaffirms the unassailable notion that the fire department exists primarily for the preservation of human life. We prove that we believe this by assigning a number of people to do nothing else on this fire but look around aggressively for people who might be trapped inside. The search group has no other function, no other distraction, is not interested, typically in throwing ladders or breaking windows. By assigning a search group we use NIMS, the new-fangled way to support our decidedly old school objectives.

There are other functions that should not be left to chance, like ventilation. Even without empirical research we know for a fact that if the ladder truck is breaking windows, or cutting holes in the roof or using an effective mechanical ventilation method, it is easier to put the fire out. More importantly, if the ventilation is right it is also easier for the victim inside on the floor to breath when the smoke lifts off of the floor.

By assigning ventilation group the incident commander is assuring that a single unit, a unit who does no other job as long as this one is necessary, is conducting this critical function. How do you coordinate horizontal with interior engine crews, or how do you coordinate positive pressure ventilation in conjunction with the initial attack (not that I am a fan of that!) if the coordinator of this effort is the engine officer from the first due engine, who is busy humping hose, looking for the fire, and searching behind the line?

I understand the idea of divisions in general, but I believe that the jobs of search and ventilation at least need to be considered the two most important job functions of the fire department and thusly should be distinctly broken out from the rest of the duties.

The search ensures that we are doing what the people pay us to do by searching for them and good, well-coordinated ventilation is one of the best ways to provide for the health and safety of those operating on the interior while making their job easier. Neither of these jobs should be left on the shoulders of a two person attack crew assigned as Division One trying to drag a charged hose line down a hall and around a corner, while searching, venting, and supervising.

The primary argument against the use of groups is that they are too confusing, especially when groups and division must interact. For instance if I designate a fire attack group, that group is responsible for all fire attack in the structure. What happens when I subsequently assign a Division 2? If there is fire in Division 2 is not the Division 2 Supervisor responsible for that? Of course the Division 2 Supervisor is responsible for fire control on the second floor of the structure. However, I think that we might be looking at it the wrong way. Because Division 2 has been established does not mean that the fire and smoke have conformed to the NIMS model and confined themselves to that geographic location. The fire does not conform.

Imagine a fire in a two story single-family dwelling. The incident commander assigns a Division 1 with two engines and a truck, and he assigns a Division 2 with one engine and one truck. The fire started on the first floor and extended via interior void spaces to the second floor. It is not appropriate for Division 2 to cut a hole in the second floor and flow water into the first without first consulting with Division 1 about the impact this operation would have on operations in Division 1. When there is an overlap between the responsibilities of groups and/or divisions, it is the imperative of the supervisors to engage in lateral communication by any means necessary to ensure that the attack, the search, and the checks for extension are conducted in a coordinated manner. Simply put when the search group makes it to the second floor the Search Group Supervisor should meet with the Division 2 Supervisor, and coordinate the search on the second floor.

The search, again, is simply too important to leave to overtaxed crews and the answer is the use of groups. While I have deviated from this belief in recent times, in order that I might more effectively blend in, I am back on the group train. Taking the fire described earlier, I can imagine assigning engine one to the fire attack group along with engine two (fight the fire and worry about nothing else), truck one to the ventilation group, (open the place wide open) and the rescue to the search group (please meet the objectives of our existence). With these vital folks in place the primary objectives are covered. As more resources become available the incident commander can dissolve defunct groups/divisions, and replaces them with more appropriate duties.

At this point some will argue that this is probably a question of personal preference on the part of the incident commander. What I think is important about the use of groups is that you give them a name that coincides with their task; you only task them with one critical thing at a time. This provides for a crucial fire ground ingredient, CLARITY OF MISSION. When the mission is complete you reassign groups, crews, divisions as necessary. This allows the incident commander and all the other operators to have a clear vision of shared expectations. Of course by using divisions you can approximate this level of clarity but only to a limited extent. When the division supervisor is asked what his/her function is on that division the only possible answer is, "all functions." Something is wrong there.

I end this discussion with a quote from the USMC Warfighting Manual:

FOCUS OF EFFORT

Another tool for providing unity is through the focus of effort. Of all the efforts going on within our command, we recognize the focus of effort as the most critical to success.

All other efforts must support it. In effect, we have decided: This is how I will achieve a decision; everything else is secondary.

We cannot take lightly the decision of where and when to focus our efforts. Since the focus of effort represents our bid for victory, we must direct it at that object which will cause the most decisive damage to the enemy and which holds the best opportunity of success. It involves a physical and moral commitment, although not an irretrievable one. It forces us to concentrate decisive combat power just as it forces us to accept risk. Thus, we focus our effort against critical enemy vulnerability, exercising strict economy elsewhere.

Normally, we designate the focus of effort by assigning one unit responsibility for accomplishing that effort. That unit becomes the representation of the focus of effort. It becomes clear to all other units in the command that they must support that unit in its efforts. Like the commander's intent, the focus of effort becomes a harmonizing force. Faced with a decision, we ask ourselves: "How can I best support the focus of effort?" [emphasis added]