



Why I Believe in Angels

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I believe in angels because that is the only way I can answer some questions that I have about the fires that broke out on Baltimore Ave. in College Park on November 29th 2004. I was not there and surely this looks like Monday morning quarterbacking. I may be in charge of a fire in the future that looks like this one did and it too may generate some questions. My search is not for somewhere to place blame I think there is plenty of that to go around. My search is to find out what it is in the minds of firefighters that allows them to read NIOSH report after NIOSH report and still commit the same errors. What allows a firefighter to see his friends lying in a burn unit and still continue to make the same errors?



There are errors of procedure and errors of judgment. Then thank God there is luck. Because besides the angles floating over the fireground that morning I can think of no other way to explain how I am not writing a eulogy for a friend of mine.

This fire begs of me some hard questions and I aim to ask them not as a insult to the people who were there, not to undermine or to point fingers but as a way to help us prepare for the day when

the angels take off and we are left to defend ourselves against well entrenched bad habits.

Before I get going I have to point you to the Kentland website www.kentland33.com . On this site you can find links to the Beltsville, Bladensburg, Hyattsville and West Lanham Hills, Fire Departments. Beltsville has a link to video and some pictures. Each of the other sites has some pictures of the scene. I have to thank Shawn Coleman of the College Park Vol. Fire Department; the first three pictures and the last two are his.



Questions:

1. Why are those guys climbing that ladder in picture #1? Where are they going and what do they plan to do once they get there?
2. Why does the supply line on the pumper in picture #2 not go anywhere?
3. Why are they running handlines into the windows?
4. If you listen to the video on the Beltsville web site you hear the “roof sector” call command numerous times, up until the point the air horns were sounded for the evacuation. Look at the type and amount of smoke being generated by that fire and explain why there was a roof sector and what they hoped to accomplish.
5. Look at picture #1 and picture #2 and explain why all those windows are still in place. The building was not opened up. But there was a roof sector, hmmm?
6. FOR WHAT?

Answers:

The answers are somewhat complicated. Few of the units on the original box-alarm would have been due on the box alarm on a normal day with everyone in quarters. Units were clearing a second alarm fire a few blocks south of this incident when it occurred. Almost the entire box alarm arrived within a few seconds of one another. Few of the units were familiar with the occupancy and the fact that there was no access to the upper floors from the Alpha side of the building.

But then the rest is all evidence of bad behavior such as:

- ❑ Some units did not lay a line into the fire
- ❑ Lines were operated from the outside while crews were inside working
- ❑ Truck crews were inside ahead of the hose lines
- ❑ Ventilation was poor, almost non-existent
- ❑ Lines were operating from the Delta side of the structure, not aware of lines operating from the Alpha side of the structure
- ❑ Interior crews did not recognize the potential for flashover, even though there were signs that flashover was imminent

- There were people operating alone inside the structure
- There was an intentional PASS activation that no one heard, the person self-rescued

I think things went this way for two reasons lack of discipline and luck.

Discipline:

We have no discipline! Officers do not feel compelled to do their jobs, and complete their assigned tasks. Officers do not feel compelled to get assignments from command and report to command once those tasks are complete. The average firefighter is like a moth to the flame and moves without thinking to the source of the fire. On 98% of fires* this works out ok and because it does work for 98% of the time the average firefighter leaves the fire ground with a false sense of security and accomplishment. They believe that their aggressiveness, an aggressiveness unmediated by common tactical sense, resulted in a positive outcome.

I have come to believe that our fire department is great when there is a “room or two off” when the fire is a quick one line bread and butter operation. The mistakes that we make are not so evident because the fire is out so quickly. We can run the cross-lay into the interior, find the stairs and put water on the fire pretty quickly. And unfortunately this gives us confidence.

Where the fire department falls to pieces is on the non-standard buildings and non-standard fires; the buildings where a single three inch line and an 1 3/4” attack line are not enough. This is where a true understanding of needed fire flow, fire ground coordination, and line placement theories are necessary. These are the times when one hand line just won’t do the job and we need to coordinate the attack using multiple companies flowing lines. We can’t do this and we prove it every time we have a non-standard fire.

The fire fighter who was lost and disoriented in that building did not have a radio, was separated from his crew, was wearing a different pack than the one he usually wears, and was riding along with a fill-in crew. He did not realize that he was separated from his crew until he heard the air horns sounding from the outside and needed to get out. He was not aware of his available exit points when he needed them. He was a walking NIOSH report!

The crews that entered in the Alpha side second floor window found that there were already people inside from a truck crew. They knew that they had heavy fire in the rear. They encountered heavy heat and thick smoke with little visible fire. They had a small hand line. What they had was a recipe for disaster and all the clues were there.

The reason I bring up these points is because I have made similar mistakes in the past. I have been in some bad situations for a few seconds too long. I walk a lot more slowly now because I realize that things can go from bad to worse in an instant and I need to be aware of this at all times and constantly be scanning for the change that signals it is time to exit quickly. Even so I still am not immune to the finding myself in a bad situation. I

write this because we need, as a group, to become more aware of the danger around us and become more aware of our mortality.

Luck:

Luck is the angel that was flying over that building on the 29th and made sure that all those guys went home. It was not skill on anyone's part, not on the part of command, not on the part of individuals; it was just plain luck.

Luck is the ability to make multiple catastrophic mistakes and not die. Luck is having a "roof sector" operating on that roof up until the evacuation tones were struck. Luck is getting separated from your crew in an unfamiliar building with no hose line and heavy fire** and still walking away. Luck!

The sad thing about luck though is that it tends to run out eventually. Everyone rolls their eyes when I say this. They call me a dooms day prophet, they call me a Monday morning quarterback. They say that I am just mad because I missed the fire. I accept all of those labels and will continue to do so as long as people listen when I talk to them afterwards. I will continue to predict doom on the off chance that one person will hear me and change their ways; stop taking crazy chances on the fire ground!

For those people who narrowly escaped death that morning there should be no high-fives. There should be nothing of a celebration or bragging because they "caught the big one." For those people who were in imminent danger this should be a time of reflection. They should sit at home one night and think about just how close they came to having their luck run out.

Over the past year I have taken and taught numerous rapid intervention classes. I preached my gospel, **which is to avoid ever needing the RIT team**. In these classes I try to impress upon people that the RIT operation will necessarily be difficult and is a long shot at best. Then I went to the site of this fire the day after and took the following pictures.



This is a picture looking into the Alpha side, Alpha Quadrant of the building. The beams and rafters you see are the second floor folded into the first floor. RIT team go!



This picture is looking into the Alpha side, Delta Quadrant of the building.
RIT team go!



This is what the Charlie side looked like when it was all said and done.

RIT team go!

I do not declare myself an expert in rapid intervention but I know a little more than the average Joe running around out there. What I have to tell you is that with the volume of fire in that building and the amount of structural damage it suffered, I don't know the names of the people who could have made a RIT operation in that building a successful one.

The answers to my questions are simple. We do not train for the day when we will be faced with non-traditional challenges. We thumb our noses up at seminars and classes, thinking that our basic fire classes are enough. We don't listen to the Chiefs who chastise us for "little mistakes" because they are just being picky. We continue to charge head first into bad situations because we do not believe it possible that our names might one day show up on a NIOSH report. We take close calls and wear them as a badge of honor when they are really a badge of shame. We hide our mistakes because we don't want to look bad instead of sharing them freely so no one else makes the same mistake. When other companies fail on the fire ground we point fingers and laugh at them instead of taking a hard look at ourselves to see if we are capable of the same mistake.

It hurts to sit at the table in front of the Chief and be told that you are a screw up and could have gotten someone killed but I think getting scrubbed with those brushes at the burn center hurts even more.

This fire was not a tragedy; it was a near tragedy. However, our failure to address the issues that led to this near tragedy only works to ensure that my predictions will some day come true.

FYI as of 1700 hrs on December 2, 2004 two short days after the fire only one wall of the fire building stands. The building is being completely torn down and re-built. The plans for the new building are almost done already. Had someone died in this fire it is likely that the new building would be up before the death benefit paperwork was all ironed out but surely before the funeral expenses were are paid off. If that is an exaggeration it would certainly be built long before we were able to explain why it was okay for someone to die fighting that fire.

Side Bar



Why do we continue to fight defensive fires @ 500gpm, surely there was more water available than that. The water main on Baltimore Ave. is enormous. The fire department surely did not affect anyone's ability to flush their toilets. I think the answer has to do with habit. That is the size on the piece when we charge the line so that is the size that we use.

** I made this number up but it has to be close to the truth.*

*** When the evacuation tone was sounded the interior crew had their hand line yanked out of their hands by a crew on the ground. I guess the ground crew was trying to tell them it was time to get out. There has to be a better way than taking the protection of interior crews away.*