

Just A Routine Column
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Last month, while I was putting together a seminar on firefighter tragedies around the country I noticed something very interesting. During my research I watched dozens of videos from local news bureaus and national firefighter video programs, and read all too many magazine articles on firefighter death and injury. There was one common link to each and every story. Someone being interviewed on the scene always said that the incident seemed “routine” until...

Unfortunately, nothing we do as emergency service workers can be categorized as routine until it’s all over and sometimes not even then. The National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) and U.S. Fire Administration tell us that the majority of firefighter deaths and injuries occur at single family dwelling incidents, not industrial buildings or high rise or the so-called “high risk” fires. Plenty of bedroom & contents fires...you know, the routine ones...have become killers in just seconds. It becomes very easy to let your guard down after dozens of “routine” jobs, but nobody ever said this job was going to be easy.

Buildings don’t really suddenly collapse without warning. We see them collapse because they are on fire, or have been damaged by fire. That car that hit our firetruck didn’t “come out of nowhere,” it was coming from that spot all the time. Everything that happens at a fire scene can be traced back to an origin. Instead of looking into the past during an accident investigation, let’s look forward to prevent the need for that investigation.

Each and every response must be considered unusual and potentially life threatening. The terms “routine, average, everyday call, bread and butter fire” lull us into a false sense of security. We will all be much safer when we understand that there are no routine calls. What we do is inherently dangerous, nothing is routine.

When I was a probationary firefighter over 30 years ago, I remember the words of an instructor, “always expect the unexpected”. That bit of advice is as true today as it was then, and well worth remembering.