

“Where’s the command post?”: Placement and positioning of incident commanders during structural fireground operations

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A lesson learned

At approximately 23h00 on Thursday, 20 February 2003, sparks from a pyrotechnic display ignited the ceiling of the Station Club in West Warwick, Rhode Island in the US. The fire spread rapidly throughout the building and within minutes flames engulfed the entire structure. A police officer who was working a security detail at the Station Club that night made the first emergency notification at 23h07. The intensity of the blaze, combined with the number of victims who needed to be treated and evacuated from the scene, required a huge response. Approximately 575 fire, police and emergency medical

personnel from over 35 agencies responded to the incident.

Early on in the response, the chief of the West Warwick Fire Department arrived on. He assumed overall (incident command IC) and established an incident command post (ICP) near the front entrance of the building, converting the trunk of his vehicle into a makeshift worktable. The IC chose to establish the command post at this location because the proximity to the incident allowed him to observe both fire suppression and rescue operations.

The incident command post’s location, however, presented certain

problems at the site. The IC’s proximity to the scene allowed responders to bypass the normal chain of command and to communicate directly with him. This created confusion because many responders were unaware of the decisions and orders coming from the IC. Here was some concern that the location of the command post unnecessarily placed the leadership in harm’s way because of the potential for the wall to collapse on the ICP.

The incident after-action report recommended that ICPs should be located close enough to allow the IC to observe operations but far enough away to provide safety and shelter from the noise and

Photograph 13: Picture taken of the Knysna fire in progress in Kruisfontein plantation. Note how the backfire spreading down slope presents an opportunity to control this fire line by means of a counter fire, down slope of this fire line (Picture taken by unknown photographer).



► (regional) level for the Garden Route region.

I did not perform a fuel model spread survey for the region because this survey still has to be conducted by the future fire management staff. However, a basic regional fire hazard map for say the year 2020, will have to be used to assess and check regional buffer zone specifications (see photographs 9 and 10) and then to adjust these buffers accordingly.

Remember that the Garden Route regional buffer zones will have to be mapped first, before the five-year (detailed) fire prevention plan is considered and drawn up. The regional fire prevention plan will likewise have to be drawn up before detailed year plans are developed and produced for the region. ▲

confusion that accompanies normal operations. A command vehicle is often ideally suited for this purpose

The placement of the incident commander (IC) and incident command post (ICP) on any incident is one of the crucial first steps in determining the direction that the incident will follow for its duration. Although incident command may have taken longer in this country to establish itself and for fire fighters to get comfortable with its principles and procedures, I think we have reached a level of maturity in our services that the concept of having a single person 'in charge' of the incident and directing the flow of activities, is well ingrained. The entire incident command system as we know it, is a highly structured system that allows for proper command and control, from the smallest incident all the way to a major disaster. The utilisation of work sheets, support

staff and related tools are meant to guide the incident commander from the very early stages of an incident all the way to its (hopefully successful) conclusion. Another aim of the ICS is to prevent commanders from 'freelancing' and making decisions outside of the incident action plan. This succeeds most of the time, however, there will always be the possibility that events on a fireground could change and cause the IC to make decisions outside of the original plan.

It is not my intention to provide a lesson in incident command here. I also don't intend to rehash many of the things that have already been written and said in this publication regarding incident command. I merely intend to share some thoughts on the placement of the command post in various scenarios. I can quite simply sum up everything I want to say in the following few

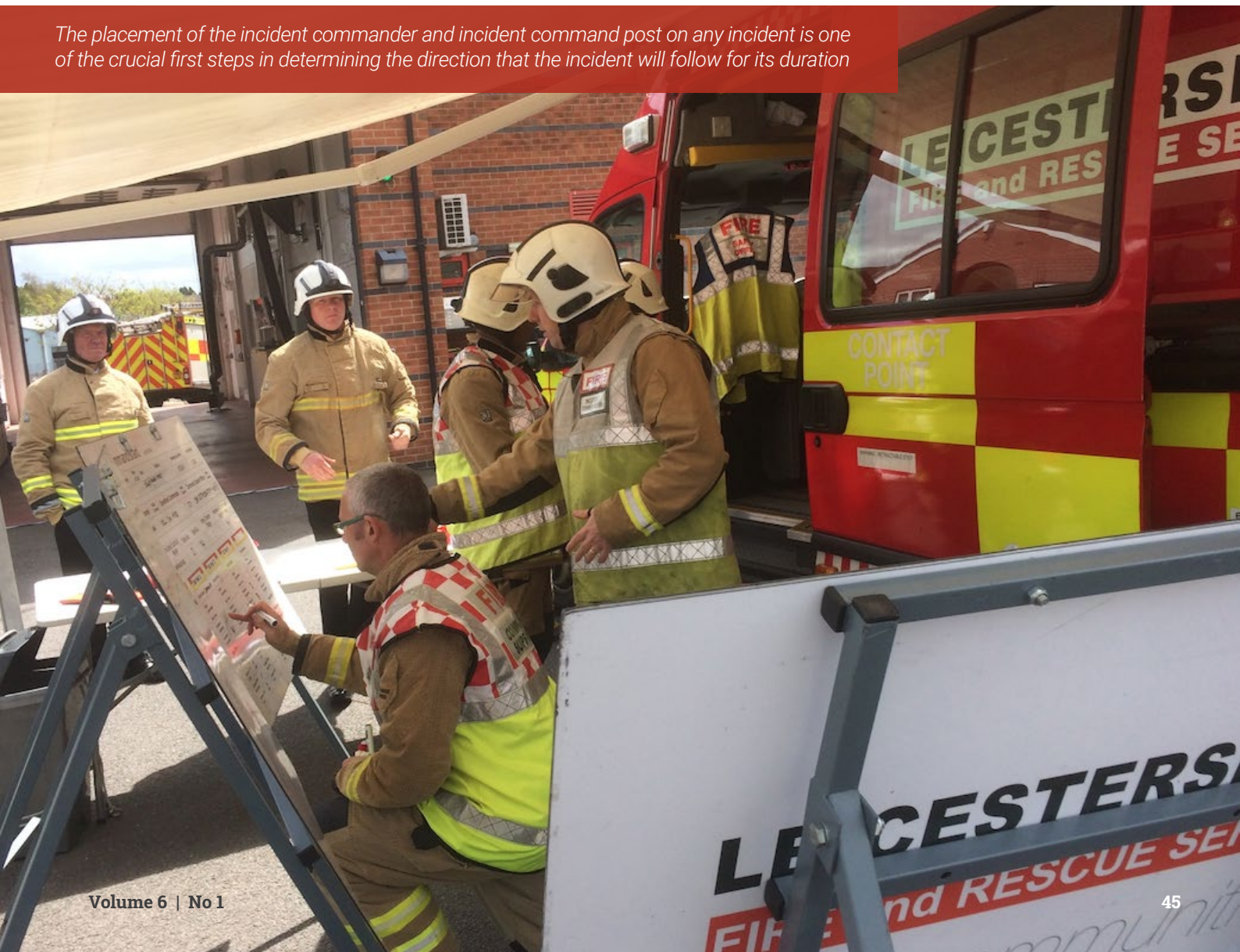
sentences: Incident command posts should be located close enough to allow the incident commander (IC) to observe operations but far enough away to provide safety and shelter from the noise and confusion that accompanies normal operations.

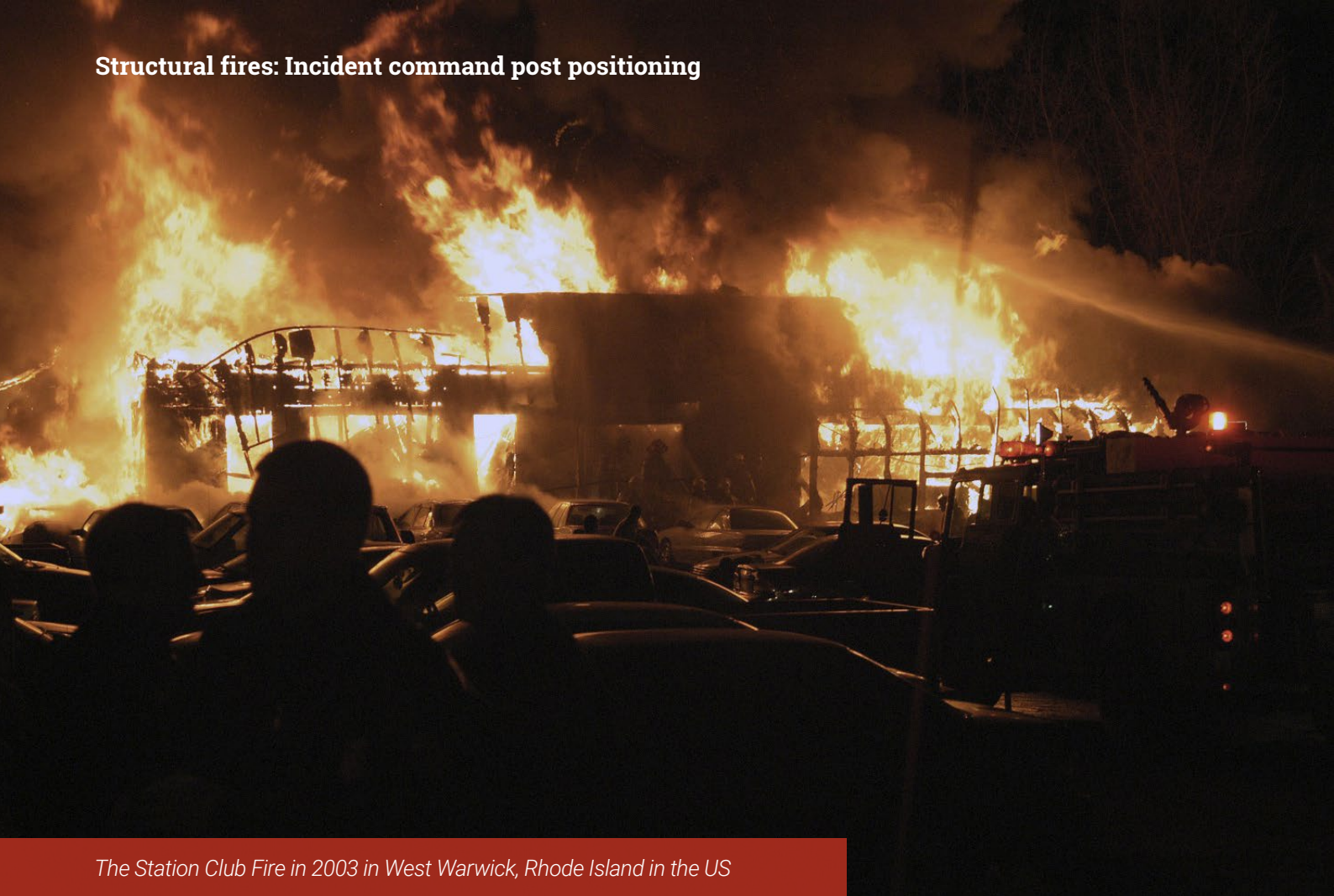
Let's break up the above statement a bit and examine its main points. The statement speaks to 'observation', 'safety' and, although it is not mentioned, 'communication'.

Safety

As always, the first thing we start with is safety. The incident commander must be placed in such a position that he/she can observe command from a safe position. A number of factors must be taken into account when the decision to place the ICP is made. This will include the type of incident eg if it is a hazmat incident gradient and wind direction might be your most

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The Station Club Fire in 2003 in West Warwick, Rhode Island in the US

- ▶ important consideration. Depending on the product involved the blast radius might be vital.

Often ICPs are placed as close to the incident as possible. Although this might give the IC a 'feel' for the events taking place, it could easily lead to the command staff becoming fixated on events in their immediate vicinity and could lead to other important events being ignored or missed.

It is very important for the ICP to be in a fixed location and for that location to be made known to all arriving units. These units will be required to report in to the ICP and this becomes hugely problematic if the IC is continuously moving from one area to another. It is for this reason that the incident is divided into sectors that will be responsible for keeping command informed of events as they happen.

I am a firm believer in developing an Incident Action Plan (IAP) and benchmarking your objectives as you proceed through the incident.

The benchmarking should be set and made known to all sector commanders. "How far have we progressed in the last ten minutes?" is the question you should be asking often. This will provide an indication of how effectively you are moving to the successful completion of the operation. This does not require the command team to be observing every event but rather good feedback from sector commanders who are better positioned and are aware of the specific objectives in their designated sectors.

It might be required of the incident commander to escalate the level of command or to hand over command to another arriving officer. It might not be necessary to change the position of the ICP in the second instance, however, the escalation of command usually means that the incident has escalated and the command system must adapt accordingly. This may very well require a change of position to accommodate a larger command staff and to manage larger numbers of resources.

During the initial response to a structural fire, the departmental standard operating procedures (SOPs) should include the pre-determined attendance (PDA) to the type of incident you are responding to. I have frequently advocated the 2+1 philosophy (two engines and one ladder truck). The ladder truck must have the priority of the front of the structure while the first-in engine should be placed in such a position as to be able to deploy the attack lines optimally. The first-in incident commander will usually be on that unit. The second engine must be placed in such a position as to be able to provide a sustained water supply to the first engine and to provide whatever back-up is required. It is understandable that in the cut-back environment we work in it is very difficult, if not impossible, for many departments to deploy three fire fighting units to one structural incident. This unfortunately leads to a situation where the engine responding is limited to the number of personnel as well as the equipment it can carry and therefore it is not able

to perform the range of activities that are required to enable the fire fighters to operate in a safe manner.

Communication

The first-in IC, assuming he/she was on the first responding engine or responded in a command vehicle, should, after the initial placement of the resources, identify the ICP and communicate it to all responding units. Command should designate a geographic title to the command post eg "Command is located on the corner of East Street and 24th Avenue".

The ICP should, if they anticipate an escalation of the incident, identify and designate a secondary staging area for units following on from other stations or districts. The location of the secondary staging areas should be made clear to these units and they should proceed to that location before reporting to the ICP. The last thing the IC needs is to be overwhelmed by emergency vehicles of all descriptions at the ICP. This would be akin to General Custer calling for more Sioux and Cheyenne warriors at the battle of Little Big Horn.

Ideally a staging officer should be designated by command who will then record the types and capacities of all incoming units and deploy them as required.

It goes without saying how important the communication of the IAP and alerting sectors to any changes in fire conditions will be. Sector commanders will adjust their own strategies to these reports and it is equally important then for them to report back to command if they have changed their location or if they have had to tweak their tactics. You don't want the IC to be thinking that a specific sector is doing one thing while they are doing something different, which might have a different impact on the fire.

Placement guidelines

Clearly there are so many different situations that could require different approaches to locating an ICP. It would not be possible to cover them all in this article. Certain high-risk facilities in your area of jurisdiction may already have a



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pre-determined location in their emergency plan. This is advisable as it will in all probability also guide the specialist advisors at the site on where to go to make contact with the fire department. Allowance should, however, always be made for the relocation of the ICP should the identified one be compromised.

Below are a few pointers to guide incident commanders in determining the ideal location for their ICPs:

- Adequate space for all command staff and specialised advisors
- Ease of accessibility
- Ensure personal hygiene facilities (especially under current COVID-19 conditions)
- Adequate shelter from natural elements
- Ensure suitability of existing communications resources (phone, radio and/or internet connectivity)
- Ensure suitability of briefing facilities
- Identify command post security requirements, safe location
- Notify other units of command post location; provide maps/driving directions
- Determine staging areas and incident base locations
- Identify future need to relocate, upgrade facilities

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to provide some advice on the location of incident command posts (ICPs) at structural fires. The most important

consideration in all of the above is the importance of the first-in IC arriving at the same time as the initial units.

It is in these first critical minutes that the direction of the incident is determined. It has unfortunately become a culture in many fire departments in this country that officers employed to take the role of ICs, are forced to work office hours and therefore respond (often in their private vehicle) from their homes to the incident. This is an unacceptable practice.

An IC arriving at an incident already in progress will have to catch up on an already rapidly moving incident, where his/her resources have most probably already started working the fire. The establishment of command is well-nigh impossible at this point. Surely he/she can't expect the fire fighters to stand around and wait for his/her arrival before committing to the incident.

A few years ago I was speaking to a fire chief, who shall remain nameless for the purposes of this story, who told me that his department was placing all their officers on day shift. When I inquired as to the reason for this I was told that headquarters was concerned that the administration at the stations was suffering as a result of the station commanders not being available during office hours. My reply to him, "That's interesting. I thought they were employed to fight fires".

Until next time, stay safe. ▲