

Firehouse.com WEEKLY DRILL

DRILL #27: COLD WEATHER OPS - PART 1

Introduction

Winter is upon us and this means that weather will affect the firefighters as they operate at incidents. Fighting fires in general is difficult in and of itself, but add to that the elements of some cold wind and winter weather and the job just took on a whole new characteristic.

The number one priority of all firefighters is safety. This can become a challenge for firefighters in winter due to the extreme cold temperatures and in some areas heavy snowfall. Ice quickly becomes an issue on the fire ground, just by the sheer fact that we still use water to extinguish the fire.

Slippery conditions are going to quickly develop causing firefighters to lose their footing and fall. Companies should carry several five-gallon pails of salt, which can be spread on the forming ice. If you don't have salt, sand will work as will clay absorbent or kitty litter.

Because the temperatures can fall into the subzero range, firefighters need to think about dressing properly when going out on calls. It is not uncommon to put on additional clothing before donning PPE. A good rule of thumb is to layer the clothing.

While we're on the subject of clothing, it is a good idea to carry extra clothes in a gym bag along with you on the apparatus and perhaps even another set of turn out gear. This way, should you get wet at an extended operation; you will have some dry clothes to change into at the scene.

All firefighters and, especially company officers, need to be observant for signs of hypothermia and frostbite. A firefighter being exposed to the elements for extended periods in freezing cold temperatures might begin shivering. This is a sign that they may be suffering from hypothermia. Hypothermia is a condition that affects the body's core temperature when it drops below normal.

To help reduce the firefighter's chance of getting hypothermia, change into the extra clothing as soon as possible. This also goes for getting out of wet turnout gear.



Frostbite, on the other hand, can be just as dangerous if not more so. What takes place is body fluids (near the surface of the skin) that are exposed for long periods of time will actually freeze causing damage to the skin and in some instances to the blood vessels. If left alone and untreated, permanent tissue damage can result, as the tissue will actually die. Don't be fooled by the myth that the skin has to be exposed for frostbite to occur. Many members of the military had to have their foot amputated during the Korean War because they suffered such severe frostbite. Body parts that are more susceptible to frostbite are the hands and feet. Additionally, the face and ears are also other areas that frostbite will impact.

Look for skin discoloration, this is the best indicator that the tissue is being damaged by the cold air. Also, if a firefighter complains of numbness in those areas, it could be a sign that the skin tissues in and around the area is being damaged.

Dress for the weather conditions and stay vigilant to others working around you. Keep in mind that when firefighters are exposed to the elements and fail to take the proper precautions, the consequences can be severe.

-- Prepared by Russell Merrick