

FIREHOUSE[®]

Weekly Drill

DRILL #147: WATER RESCUES

Introduction

When you think about it, every fire department in the country can be confronted with a water rescue; the real question is, “Is your department prepared to handle it?”

Several of the major departments that are located in areas with bodies of water around them have their own water rescue teams. These teams provide their firefighters with training in swift water, cold water, and open water rescue operations. Many are outfitted with boats and other water rescue crafts, with members being training in scuba diving.

However, there are more departments across the country that do not have these special water rescue teams, but still respond to water rescue incidents. What do they need to handle these type incidents? First, they should have a written policy in place that addresses such an incident. Secondly, establish the Incident Command System and make sure that an Incident Safety Officer (ISO) is appointed. The ISO will be a key function at these types of incidents.

If your department is going to make water rescues as part of its responsibilities then you should provide your firefighters with the proper personal protection equipment (PPE). Entry into any water could expose the responder to harmful chemicals, bacteria, or bodily fluids from the victim. Therefore, PPE is not only used to protect the responders from the elements of the environment they will have to enter, it also should protect them from these other hazards.

The ISO needs to enforce incident scene safety by making sure that all response personnel that are within 10 feet of the water or ice surface have a personal flotation device on that meets the U.S. Coast Guard requirements. Additionally, firefighters should not be wearing their structural firefighting gear near the water

Actions of First Responders

Assess the scene:

- Find the victim's location
- Interview witnesses
- Locate scene access points
- Determine ice/water conditions
- Determine last point seen, if the victim has slipped under the surface



Evaluate the victim's condition (ongoing process):

- Make contact with the victim
- Ability to respond
- Other possible injuries
- State of hypothermia
- Time in the water
- Rescue vs. recovery
- Assess manpower and request appropriate resources as needed

Rescue (Follow the Rescue Sequence):

Victim Self-Rescue

Encourage the victim to rescue him/herself

Shore-based

Reach or throw line to the victim by trained personnel

Boat-based

Reach, throw line, or go by boat, by trained personnel

Go Rescue

Properly protected, equipped and trained Ice/Swift Water rescue personnel will enter the water to remove the victim to safety.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick