

# **IFPO Surefire Technical Trophy Competition 2009**

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## **Defensive Fire Fighting?**

Perhaps someone can explain the reasoning behind the implementation of Defensive Fire Fighting. I must admit that I can see the advantages of employing this particular tactic; however, I feel that the disadvantages far out weigh the advantages.

I have long since retired from the Fire Service, and obviously, my knowledge of this particular tactic is based on my personal observations and attention to news items. This may not be the best way to construct an argument against Defensive Fire Fighting, but I shall try.

First, what are the advantages of using this tactic? There is the obvious fact that by employing this method of fire control, casualties to the Fire Service personnel will be reduced. Then there will also be a reduction of fire crews needed to attend any incident.

It does not require as many crews to watch a fire as it does to extinguish a fire. Litigation against the Fire Service from Fire Service personnel will also be reduced. As far as the government is concerned this is all good stuff and totally in line with the government thinking of reducing the cost of the Fire

Service. There must be a few more advantages, but I cannot think of any, and if there any, they will certainly not benefit the public or service personnel.

There are many disadvantages, first and foremost non fire service casualties will increase. This is because fire crews will have to travel further to incidents, due to closure of stations and reduction of fire crews. Most non fire service casualties occur before the fire crews have left their stations and most rescues occur within the first vital few minutes of the fire crews arriving at the incident. The extra time spent travelling to the incident and the time taken to complete the risk assessment means that these people that were once rescued now become casualties.

The cost that the Fire Service managers and Fire Authority executives had hoped to save will now be washed away in a flood of litigation from the insurance companies and non fire service personnel. Most of these managers and executives will try to hide behind the rulings of the Health and Safety legislation. I should like to point out to these people that the Health and Safety legislation is not set in stone. It is for the guidance of wise men and the strict adherence of fools.

Morale in the Fire Service is at an all time low and this is because most of the men and women in the Fire Service have been trained to a very high standard of proficiency. They have gained valuable experience over a long

period of time and now they are prevented from doing their job by managers and executives that do not have the experience or training to know how to deal with the situation. The fault is not entirely theirs, this lies fairly and squarely with the government. It has reduced the Fire Service to a level where it is only allowed to carry out the most basic of tasks, such as installing smoke alarms and even this menial but important job has the ogre of the Health and Safety rearing its ugly head, some of the restrictions laid down are laughable and an embarrassment to the Fire Service. I believe that abuse of and assaults upon fire crews will increase due to the general public not being satisfied with the standard of fire fighting that is now provided and evident for all to see.

The sooner that this Defensive Fire Fighting tactic is consigned to the waste bin the better for all concerned. To continue with this tactic will result in the gradual privatisation of the Fire Service. This privatisation by the back door is already well under way by some Fire Authorities who are now entering into leasehold contracts to provide the vehicles and equipment used by the Fire Service. The insurance companies will have to provide their own fire services in an attempt to reduce the astronomical cost of Defensive Fire Fighting. The excellent service, provided by the Salvage Corps was maintained by the insurance companies and I believe they would also be capable of maintaining a first class fire service. The Salvage Corps was disbanded in the 1980s mainly because, at that time, the Fire Service was providing a reasonable standard of salvage work. Both the Fire Service and

the Salvage Corps used to take pride in their ability to limit the damage caused by the fire and the process of extinguishing the fire and return the premises to normal occupation and use as soon as possible. This is not the case today. It is obvious that the corrosive effect of Defensive Fire Fighting has far reaching repercussions, not least of which will be the terrible cost in casualties and damage to property.

Defensive Fire Fighting should be put in its correct place and used as a fire fighting tool, to be used only in exceptional circumstances, and not used as a basic tactic to cover every eventuality. Once this has been done, attention must be turned to the Health and Safety legislation with a view to issuing good sensible guide lines of how to apply them to the fire ground. It also follows that good sensible training be employed by the Fire Service in the implementation of these guide lines. Fire Service managers and Fire Authority executives should stop looking at the fire ground as a site of possible litigation and start looking out for the very real dangers that are always present and could possibly involve the public and their personnel alike. Again good sensible training in this field should be a priority. Then let us all get back to fighting fires intelligently and safely and not stand idly by watching fires develop to the point where the fire is allowed to burn itself out.

Should the use of Defensive Fire Fighting be accepted as normal practice, then I suggest that the question must be asked; "what do we need a Fire Service for?"

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