



Responding TO THE 911 Call

by Bob Norton

(Note: While the actual events described below did not occur, the details of how calls are dispatched and responded to are based on shared experience and very real.)

It's 7:30 p.m. Several members of the Haddam Volunteer Fire Co. have just returned to Station #1 after a 5K run to stay in shape. They start chatting with several other members who are watching television in the Ready Room. Suddenly the fire tones set off, followed by the ambulance tone and the loud bells that ring throughout the fire house. Blood pressures and pulses rise.

All is quiet, no one speaks a word—several members move slightly and hold their pagers to make sure the message about to come out is heard clearly. “Valley Shore to Department 13 and 13-4 personnel, you’re responding to Saybrook Road in the area of River Road for a reported structure fire.”

While Valley Shore repeats the message, all members at the fire house begin running to get their gear—some hanging on specially designed holders kept in the bays of the firehouse, some in their cars. They are talking amongst themselves, figuring out what drivers they have, and what crews they

should make up as first out. Around town, fire company members at home with their families hear the same call on their pagers and are scrambling to their personal vehicles. Some will head to the closest station to go on a truck, while others will respond directly to the scene.

The officers have established a rolling-out order of apparatus at each station based upon the type of call, so members are using that guide to determine what rolls first, second, third etc. Ideally, trucks will leave the stations with full crews—but many leave with open seats hoping to make up the crews when they arrive on scene.

Suddenly the **fire tones** set off, followed by the **ambulance tone** and the **loud bells** that ring throughout the fire house. Blood pressures and pulses rise.

Back at Station #1, the three returning runners are donning their gear—bunker pants and boots first, followed by Nomex hoods. They remove their highway reflective vests from their turnout coats and slip into the coats—already feeling the pressure of the just-completed run and adrenaline from the call. Once inside fire engine 1-13, the lieutenant sits in the right front seat and begins to get his air pack on. All of the fire engines have air packs built into the seats so they can be strapped on prior to arriving at the scene. The crew of five plus the driver pull out of the station heading south on Saybrook Road. In the meantime, other members are pulling into Station #1, (Higganum), #2 (Rt. 154 Haddam) and #3 (Route 81).

Officers are signing on the air from their personal vehicles. Valley Shore gives an update:

“Chief, we’ve taken multiple 911s on this. It appears to be a house fully involved in the front left corner.”

The crew of Engine 1-13 discusses what job each will be doing upon their arrival. The driver and lieutenant discuss truck placement, whether they will be the attack engine which operates the hoses at the scene, or will be part of a

Responding to 911—cont'd

complex water supply system known as “rural water supply,” as our town has no fire hydrants common to cities.

The radio is constantly squawking of officers talking with trucks and back to Valley Shore. First reports are of a heavily involved front part of the house with possibly one person still inside.

Engine 1-13 transmits to Valley Shore that they are on scene, and is promptly directed to bring a hose line to the front door and establish a separate search team. The lieutenant and another crew member advance a hose line to the front door. Prior to entry, they give ID tags to an officer who has been tasked with the accountability function—a system that tracks the whereabouts of each firefighter within an IDLH (Immediate Danger to Life and Health) environment. The hose team encounters free burning flames coming from the front and left side corner of the house. They move in to push the fire outside and not farther into the house.

At the same time, other firefighters from Engine 1-13 give their tags to the officer at the door and begin a systematic search looking for a disabled resident who has not yet been accounted for. These firefighters perform their search largely by feeling their way through the house. Visibility is very poor, with thick dark smoke banked down to the floor. They use a thermal imaging camera to assist in the search. Going room by room in the same direction, they keep their bearings but always look for other means of egress should conditions worsen. Inside the house, both teams communicate with portable radios. They are kept updated on structural conditions from officers outside. Should there be evidence of the structure becoming compromised, an order to evacuate will be given—both over the radio and long continuous blasts of all fire truck air horns on the fire scene.

“Valley Shore to
Department 13 and 13-4
personnel, you’re
responding to Saybrook
Road in the area of River
Road for a **reported
structure fire.**”



Scared and hysterical from the emergency, the resident is located in a rear bedroom by the search team. They radio to the operations officer that they have a victim and will bring her out the rear of the house, while the hose team knocks the fire down up front.

Haddam Ambulance treats and transports the patient complaining of difficulty breathing, while other crews ventilate the house and continue to extinguish the fire.

While this is going on inside the house, crews from Engine 6-13 and Engine 3-13 cut holes in the roof to remove the smoke and hot gasses to protect the Engine 1-13 crews inside. A large diameter hose line has been laid to an engine drafting water from the Connecticut River at the marina. Another engine is mid-line to relay the water, boosting the pressure to reach Engine 1-13 on scene.

The entire call takes approximately two hours on-scene, and involves approximately thirty Fire Company members. Back at Station #1, all trucks are pains-

takingly inspected and repacked, then washed to be ready for service. Firefighters are hydrated and nourished by the Haddam Volunteer Fire Company Auxiliary. Any firefighters that were in the IDLH environment also must go through a “rehab” station, usually at the scene, to be screened for elevated blood pressure, pulse levels, or anything else abnormal physically, due to the tremendous stress their bodies were under.

About an hour after almost everyone has left to return to their families, the tones go off again. This time the message is as follows:

“Valley Shore to Department 13 and 13-4 personnel you’re responding to Higganum Center for a party experiencing chest pain in a motor vehicle.”

The Fire Company is designated by the State Department of Health as the R1 (first responder) agency for the town. Two firefighter/EMTs jump into the small engine 7-13, and respond. Arriving within minutes, they find a 55 year old male patient attempting to drive himself to the emergency room but can no longer make the drive.

While one EMT advises Valley Shore that a paramedic from Middlesex Hospital will be needed, the other EMT begins a high-flow oxygen treatment to the patient and takes various vital signs.

As a second small vehicle from the Fire Department arrives, another Firefighter/EMT starts writing down all the important information that will be transmitted to both the ambulance and paramedic when they arrive. A defibrillator is set on the hood of the vehicle—ready for use in case the patient goes into full cardiac arrest and firefighters need to deliver a resuscitating shock.

After high-flow oxygen and much reassurance, the patient is loaded onto the ambulance stretcher and transported to the hospital with the paramedic riding

along. A member of the Fire Company, who rode on one of the trucks, drives the Middlesex Paramedic Vehicle back to Station #1 for safe keeping until after the call. Also back at Station #1, crews replace all of the medical equipment—oxygen masks, oxygen tanks, gloves etc. that were used during the call. Had

a defibrillator been used, it would be plugged into a computer and the entire call downloaded and sent along to the hospital to become part of the patient's medical record.

Both of these calls—the structure fire and the medical emergency—represent

time that volunteers take to respond, often putting themselves in danger to help others. The time given at these calls is but a fraction of the time these everyday heroes give on a regular basis.

Being A Firefighter

FIREFIGHTERS TRAIN several times per month. Most are certified to the Firefighter I level—a 120 hour course. Many are certified to the Firefighter II level—a 75 hour course.

During the first week of June, six firefighters will be trained at the State Fire Academy on rapid intervention—skills used to rescue downed firefighters who become trapped or disoriented inside a structure fire. Also that week, several members are going through the state's flashover training course. They will be inside of a specially designed building during a live fire exercise where the conditions actually allow a flashover, the primary cause of firefighter fatalities from inside burning structures.

Other Responsibilities

Many Haddam firefighters are certified to the Emergency Medical Responder or Emergency Medical Technician level and must recertify regularly. Trucks and all the equipment must be inspected regularly and kept clean and up to date.

And if all of these hours aren't enough, the HVFC officers must handle all of the day-to-day managerial functions of running the organization, including recruiting, correspondence and scheduling. Required OSHA training, medical examina-

tions, etc., must be performed and documented. All purchasing and expenditures must be put through the town's purchase order system.

Recruiting

Recruiting is one of the most important functions of volunteer emergency service organizations. While many towns have needed to supplement volunteers with paid staff in both ambulance and fire departments, the Haddam Fire Co. is still staffed completely by volunteers—around the clock.

But this may not last for long if a supply of qualified members cannot be maintained. A recent recruiting open house was held that brought in approximately six individuals who are presently going through the process of background checks, physical examinations etc.

During the open house a question was asked by a resident, "What type of calls other than fires and medical emergencies do you respond to?"

The answer is that the Fire Company responds to all emergencies that involve life safety and property and environment protection. Calls can range from looking for missing boaters on the river to propane leaks;



Testing out the 24' Zodiac rescue boat.

carbon monoxide detectors going off inside of a house; live electrical wires down; spills of hazardous materials, and all types of fires and medical emergencies.

In addition to emergency calls, the Fire Company visits schools and preschool centers providing many hours of fire prevention education.

Another question asked at the open house was: "What do you get out of being a member of the Haddam Volunteer Fire Co.?"

This was answered by several members saying that a simple thank you or knowing that we made a difference in someone's life at one of their greatest times of need was sufficient.

More information on the activities of the Haddam Volunteer Fire Company and ways you can get involved can be found on our website, www.HaddamFire.com.