

# Puttin' on the Blitz

## First-in structure fire tactics for the understaffed rural company



Story & Photos  
by Keith Klassen

When I joined my local fire department in 1985, it was a small, rural volunteer department with about 15 members and one station. We've since grown into a much larger combination department, covering five stations with career personnel supported by volunteers. But two things have remained constant over the years: The first-due engine on a structure fire is often staffed with two personnel, and the second-due engine is at least 5 minutes out.

Although this is less than ideal, the fact remains that many rural and volunteer departments struggle with adequate staffing. To remain safe and effective despite this, departments must employ safe and proven tactics. In our department, we respond to most structure fires with what we call a "blitz attack." It's proven very effective in allowing the first engine company to make a quick assessment, lay the proper groundwork and make a fast attack on the fire.

*Note:* This tactic is designed primarily for a two-person engine company. Some fires may require the first-arriving engine company to immediately adopt a defensive strategy and employ an exterior attack to provide for firefighter safety.

### THE BLITZ ATTACK

Here's how it works: Upon arrival, the officer gives a first-in report and establishes incident command. He then dons his SCBA and sets up the positive-pressure ventilation (PPV) fan at an appropriate spot on the windward side of the structure, which will be the point of entry for the fire attack. Next, the officer takes the thermal imaging camera (TIC), selects an appropriate forcible-entry tool and begins his walk-around of the structure. As he goes, he'll identify and open a leeward vent for PPV operations; secure utilities, if possible; and identify possible life-safety issues.

Meanwhile, the firefighter/driver-operator, after appropriately spotting the apparatus, engages the pump and establishes scene lighting, if needed. He then dons his SCBA and pulls a preconnect line to the entry point identified by the officer's placement of the PPV. The size of the preconnect line is determined by the fire conditions, which will also be a factor in determining whether an interior attack is a viable option. If a line larger than your usual preconnect is required, based on staffing and available resources, an interior attack will likely not be necessary nor worth the risk. The firefighter next charges the line and meets the officer at the entry point.

### EXCEPTIONAL CASE

At this point, the crew must determine life-safety issues. If a confirmed life-safety issue is present, the officer will inform the alarm center and notify them that he's taking exception to the two-in/two-out rule. He will pass incident command to the next engine and establish the rescue group. *Note:* This is an exceptional tactic and *should not* be the general tactic of any fire department.

The rescue/fire attack will then be made using a transitional attack method that will begin outside the structure and move in through the entry point. The transitional attack begins as an exterior attack and moves through the entry point, transitioning into an interior attack. This works exceptionally well, as our department uses compressed-air foam systems (CAFS) exclusively. CAFS will knock down most of the fire and remove much of the heat before the crew enters the building, creating a safer environment as they search for victims and locate the seat of the fire. ▶

Unfortunately, short staffing is a fact of life for many rural departments. Working with a two-person crew requires plenty of training, preplanning and a readiness to go defensive as conditions change. Thankfully, ventilation fans, thermal imagers and foam can greatly assist in our attack.



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## RURAL FIRE COMMAND



Working on a two-person engine requires understanding your role. The blitz attack facilitates an overwhelming attack that can knock the fire down quickly, but you must work as a team and remain on constant look-out for signs that might suggest an exterior attack.

### PROCEED AS NORMAL

When no life-safety issue is identified, the officer will transfer command of the incident to the next engine as they arrive, establish the fire-attack group and begin an exterior attack of the fire with CAFS. The advantage of CAFS used from the exterior: Fire control can be gained quickly without pushing fire through the structure. This is due both to the fact that compressed-air foam is flowed in a smooth bore stream and its ability to absorb heat and disrupt the fire tetrahedron.

*Note:* The first-in engine doesn't address water supply. In our rural district, there are few hydrants, and the local private water company doesn't guarantee a fire flow. Interior attack crews must be mindful of limited water and acknowledge that they must not attempt a prolonged interior attack.

Water tenders are the primary water source at our department. A tender will typically respond with the second- or third-due engine to establish a water supply to the first-in engine. Our Type 1 structural engines carry a minimum of 600 gallons of water, which, when used with CAFS, allow us to maintain an effective fire fight until the tender arrives.

### CONCLUSION

Because of our limited resources, rural fire departments often have to think out of the box to find ways to accomplish the job. By anticipating our limitations and planning for them, we are able to provide a safe and efficient fire attack.

In our department, we've employed technologies, such as PPV, TICs and CAFS, which allow the first-arriving engine company to accomplish more with fewer personnel. This, coupled with standard operating guidelines that reflect local circumstances and regular training, can make all the difference on the fireground. ☺

Keith Klassen is a career captain with the Summit Fire District, a rural combination department bordering Flagstaff, Ariz. He has 33 years of volunteer and career experience in both structural and wildland firefighting, and a background in mechanical and vocational education. Klassen serves as the CAFS instructional program manager for Waterous and is an international fire service instructor.