

Being Legislated out of Rescuethe Public Perception

Ade Scott rants

The strap line on our website homepage contains a statement from myself and Jim Segerstrom to the effect that as rescuers, Health & Safety is legislating us out of a job....."TRM will continue to promote common sense in an industry being strangled by politics and legislation".

Jim was no stranger to conflict with senior management and my own run-ins with underqualified officers with no real knowledge of special rescue gradually convinced me that the days of 'thinking on your feet' were numbered. Take a good look at the main picture here and relocate these 'government employees' to the incidents on the preceding pages. Notwithstanding that you can't trust a thing you read in the newspapers to be accurately reported and if there's a way to add to the drama they'll find a way, the bottom line with this and the notorious other incident involving two police officers who weren't qualified to swim to the rescue of a drowning child is that not only is legislation strangling the rescue industry, it seems that basic human nature has also bowed to nonsensical commands from on high. It's not my place to criticise the personnel in either of these incidents because I'm sure there was immense frustration on the part of those on-scene and livelihoods can be at stake when you cross certain types of officer but..... Even allowing for poetic reporting one has to wonder why a 'bystander rescue' wasn't implemented by somebody on-scene. I have witnessed and been involved in a number of idiotic incidents where we, as the emergency services, either have or could have been made to look far less than heroic. A recent televised 'fly-on-the-wall' incident was virtually a carbon-copy of the Lincolnshire incident with the exception that the victim survived prolonged exposure lying face-down in moving water. In the case of trauma incidents it's been my experience that having a full-blown trauma doc on your team focuses the minds of officers more to the task in hand than a telling-off about health & Safety! A less obvious non-trauma related TRU incident a few years was the writing on the wall for me -It involved 3-storeroys of scaffold that had come adrift from a prominent high street building in gales and was swaying dangerously from pivot points at the base. The Technical Rescue Unit assisted by local fire crews was tasked with stopping the inevitable collapse and after some vary precarious manoeuvres from the roof top succeeded in capturing some key load points on the wall of scaffolding that was now several feet away from our roof access and swaying 3 to 5 feet in the winds. We started a multi-point haul to bring it back into line without buckling the mid-section. Although the police had closed off the high street they hadn't

evacuated the shops and offices opposite which of course had substantial glass frontage behind which the workers were watching the 'drama'. We later learned that a film crew was also filming from the end of the exclusion zone. Our hauling-in hit a snag when some scaffold poles half way down butted up against a window lintel. I abseiled down between the building and scaffold to clear the jam and on arriving back at the top was informed that we had been called off the incident because it was deemed too much of a liability issue to continue when there was no direct threat to life. I begged to differ. This decision was taken by a senior officer at HQ despite being advised by the station officer on scene that this was unwise since the scaffold represented a significant hazard to shops, buildings and occupants. At the time I asked what on earth the general public would think seeing us all turn up in a dozen fire and rescue vehicles and then drive away with the road still closed and scaffold about to collapse! Prior to promotion the on-scene officer in charge had actually been a member of the Technical Rescue Unit and was therefore well acquainted with the procedures we had adopted. Despite being a fireservice Unit staffed primarily by firefighters I was a contracted rescue specialist and as head of the Unit opted not to stand down. The OIC backed my decision and got my firefighter 2ic to sign a waiver stating that the Unit was now a detached entity effectively working as an unpaid contractor rather than as the Fire Service. Not one of the Unit firefighters had any doubts about the validity of the task and opted to stay, two firefighters attending while on-duty and released from their crews for the incident booked off duty with Control in order to continue with the incident. My local fire crew didn't have the luxury of that decision and were disgusted at having to leave us in the lurch. With reduced manpower it took us another couple of tense hours before we succeeded in fully capturing and securing the entire scaffold and handing the scene back to the scaffolders who had been advising us throughout. The point of this humdrum sojourn is to demonstrate that nonsensical decisions are nothing new in the UK fire service and that public perception of the service is not given enough regard. The next day a half page article and photograph praised the efforts of the fire service and TRU -if the scaffold had collapsed AFTER we had arrived and then left it would have been a very different headline. With regard to the Lincolnshire incident I have to say that *rescue* in the sense of extraction of persons from a position of peril is not necessarily the job of ambulance or police personnel despite public perceptions so they cannot be held entirely to account for inaction

at a scene that is usually under the direction of the primary rescue services' officers. Except for some specialist sections they signed up for law enforcement or treating injured and ill persons not jumping into water, off cliffs /buildings or down a sewer. In contrast a firefighter and any other rescue service personnel have signed on knowing that there is an acceptable degree of risk attached to their job. Any of you out there now muttering about any rescuer life lost is one life too many and if health and safety measures can improve rescuer mortality that's a good thing are in the wrong job.....

If health and safety measures protect rescuers at the expense of the lives of people needing rescue then something is badly wrong.

In the Jordon Lyon case that initially highlighted the Health & Safety row - if there was no identifiable casual-

ty on the surface of the water then the decision by the two PCSOs not to go in was probably quite right. Had there been a child thrashing about and they had failed to take action that would have been a different matter.

The general public think that rescuers face death and danger on every shift. Actually there are some services and stations in certain countries and certain cities or areas that actually DO face danger and death on every shift but I can assure you that nowhere in the entire UK faces this problem. Taxi drivers and rubbish/garbage collectors have a more dangerous job than firefighters in statistical terms. In fact, if cardiac arrest, which is particularly prevalent in US fire dept deaths were taken out of the equation the figures would be even lower. If the dangers faced by rescuers continue to be mitigated in the same way as industry protects it's workers then the traditional image of a firefighter or rescuer as being a heroic figure commanding respect will truly be lost. My parents recently came across an elderly dog owner in some woodland who's jack russel terrier had chased a rabbit down a hole and become trapped. After an hour of his

pet's whining and howling the owner figured the fire brigade was his best option. An officer was duly dispatched to assess the situation. My parents waited with the owner and reassured him that the fire brigade would soon have his pet out. The officer arrived, surveyed the scene, noted that the dog was indeed wholly entrapped and apologised that he was unable to call in a crew because he didn't know who's land he was on. My parents were dumbfounded and despite being pensioners themselves proceeded to take it in turns to dig out the terrified dog with some tools they had in their car. My father in particular was further outraged that the officer stood by and watched the entire process without offering to help. What kind of perception do these members of the public now have of firefighters having met this one, hopefully non-representative individual? Scathing to say the least. I know that most of you will be saying that this simplest of incidents couldn't possibly happen in your service but the damage done to the image of all emergency services from these reports and experiences is immeasurable - respect is being eroded and the more the public read or personally witness safety legisla-

tion being enforced on the one hand while reading about the death and danger faced by troops on the other the less respect there will be. Pretty soon you may have to sign up as a mailman to get the adrenaline rush that attracted you to an inherently dangerous job in the first place. Firefighters in the UK were banned from performing the fireman's lift because of back-injury risks - can you imagine a soldier in Afghanistan failing to carry out an injured mate due to concerns over back injury. Frankly it's all unnecessarily embarrassing.

How the public sees it.....CONTINUED FROM PAGE 15

Too late for the victim and family now , but I am in despair to keep reading articles and reports that indicate the EMERGENCY services are seeming to take more time looking out for themselves before assisting persons in desperate need of help..... 18 inches of water ... not even knee depth and a young man face down and injured. What equipment did this specialist team use when they eventually rescued the victim.. AQUALUNGS and FLIPPERS ? H & S gone mad .. what s the next excuse for the EMERGENCY services for not attempting their jobs ? ... fires too hot / water too wet / patients too ill PS.My nephew is a fireman and WANTS to help
- Eli, ex-pat , France,

The bottom-line guys, if you're not brave and prepared to take a risk, then Joe Public does not want you in the fire or police services. go and find another job.
- Barry, uk,

Aren't these people paid by public taxpayers money to SAVE LIVES. Absolutely disgusting.
- M Appleton, Wilts, UK,

Shame on them all. They are a product of our namby pamby state. God help us our emergency services are wimps not a back bone between them. Can you imagine that lot in an national crisis like the blitz! Oh lets do a risk assessment. Get rid of the lot and get some real men in post.
- ray, Manchester England,

For once I back legal action in this instance and hope this family receive a big payout. Maybe then those in the higher echelons of the Police and Fire Brigade will realise they face a huge payout if they don't do their job and try to save lives, rather than simply being worried about the perceived well-being of their staff.
- Susan, Chelsea, England,

Absolutely disgusting. Typical health and safety gone mad has resulted in a tragic death.
- Emily, Oxford, UK,

This is terrible: how many more people have to die before someone in authority comes to their senses about all the health and safety laws. So, okay, the bank of the ditch was deep - 15 feet - but I really can't understand why someone at least couldn't have been lowered into the ditch, having first being secured round their waist with a rope or perhaps a harness of some sort. Otherwise what is the point of having rescue services?
- Judith, King's Lynn, Norfolk, England,

Why don't we just disband the police and fireservice they seem to have lost the plot, becoming just a bunch of wimps. As for those non job half & safety their on an empire building ego trip. Useless lot.
- ann, london UK

an absolute disgrace, sack them all !
- Steve, Warwick, AND IT WENT ON.....