



Knowledge Is Power

Building Bridges: Spanning the Great Divide

The bridge connecting the fire service industry with the structural building components industry is delicate...learn how to help solidify this bridge and contribute to its strength.

by Ronald Siarnicki, Executive Director of the
National Fallen Firefighters Foundation

editor's note:

The author attended a tour of BMC West's Sherwood, OR truss plant in the spring. A long-time fire service employee, Siarnicki was among a group attempting to transcend myths that separate the fire service from the truss industry. Here, he shares why it is important and what is necessary, in his opinion, to start building that bridge.

Ever wonder how one might begin to understand why a person would willingly rush into a burning building when the occupants are doing everything humanly possible to get out? Or why firefighters put so much time and effort into expressing their concerns over the structural integrity of a building under fire conditions? Or more finitely, why firefighters sometimes come across in a very anti-truss opinioned view when they discuss modern building construction techniques? Well the answer in one context is quite simple and in others highly complex, as we attempt to examine the tradition-based culture of the American Fire Service.

Firefighters are everyday people whose desire in life is to help their neighbors when troubled times are upon them. They will risk their lives to save life and property from the ravages of fire only because it is in their nature to carry on the traditions of honor, courage and dedication to duty that has been protecting our homeland since the first fire service was organized in the United States by Benjamin Franklin. And, unfortunately, on average one hundred firefighters die in the line of duty each year in this country doing just that. That is why the United States Congress created the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation in 1992 to honor these brave men and woman and to assist their families with the rebuilding of their lives. (To learn more about the foundation, visit www.firehero.org.)

The creation of NFFF is a comforting gesture to ensure that these families are helped in dealing with the reality of losing a loved one, but not a motive giving firefighters a reason to take extraordinary chances in the performance of their work. It is more a peace of mind knowing that someone will look after their survivors once they are gone, serving as a reality check of the inherent dangers of performing the duties and responsibility of a first responder in America today.

Thus, some deeper insight for you into the reasons why firefighters are so intensely engaged with all aspects of building construction techniques and believe that structural components used today should be examined. Firefighters are often asked to make snap judgments about the structural integrity of a building on fire while not knowing for sure if any life hazards are present or occupants are inside. Over the years several myths have developed concerning decision models passed on from generation to generation within the fire service. Items taken from past fire occurrences, both tragic and successful suppression operations have served as rules of thumb when attempting to make these judgment calls. Unfortunately, these rules do not always hold true and often result in firefighter injuries and even deaths.

Truss construction has become one of the items the fire service has fixated its mythical psyche on when encountering fire conditions in structures with these engi-

neered products present. Some of these myths have been fueled by a shortage of facts from both sides of the equation and a lack of trust between the industry and the American fire service. The facts are that these products are great solutions to modern construction problems and current consumer demands while having less mass and more potential for failure under extreme fire conditions. The facts speak for themselves. Now the question is what are we going to do about it?

The answer can be found through open, honest dialogue involving both the building components industry and the fire service. By creating educational communication channels between these two groups, a solid bridge can be built to serve both parties very favorably and reduce the divide that currently exists. Countering some of the fiction about trusses and components propagated by the fire service with straightforward non-defensive facts provided by the industry that represents these product lines will assist this effort immensely.

Construction on this bridge has begun through the efforts of a small group of fire service leaders and industry representatives. Several meetings have been hosted through the support of the United States Fire Administration to raise the American Fire Service's awareness on how these products react under fire conditions. More work is needed to complete the tasks assigned to this group as they work on the development of a written fire service guide on truss and component lumber products. A cross sectional representation of the industry, including participation from WTCA, is providing supportive materials for this project.

So the question is, "What can you do to assist in building the bridge?" First, do everything possible to understand the issues from the firefighter's perspective; maybe you could walk in their boots for a while. Visit your local fire service organization and reach out to them in an effort to get their perspective on this topic. Participate in a ride-along program or just stop by the station house to talk with the crew. Granted, building a relationship with you local fire service entity will not solve all of the problems of the world, but it will give you some keen insights into how and why they do the things they do.

Secondly, participate in the many opportunities that are available to provide your side of the story to the fire service. Attend some of the annual fire service trade shows and educational conferences that are held all throughout the country. Offer to provide lectures and training classes to better educate the fire service on the facts, or even assemble your local chapter members to present a seminar and/or a truss plant tour.

And most importantly, be straightforward and up front when presenting your case. Firefighters are much attuned when they are being given a song and a dance and seldom forget when someone is less than forthright with them.

Hopefully you have gained a little more insight into the answers to the questions that were posed in the beginning of the article, or at least built some intrigue into finding out more about the fire service protecting America today. If nothing else, now knowing that with the proper tools and equipment (people, resources and factual information), any divide can be bridged for the betterment of the greater good. Good luck with your efforts to span great distances. **SBC**

Like his father and grandfather, Ron became a volunteer firefighter with the Monessen Volunteer Fire Department in western Pennsylvania. In 1978 he joined Prince George's County, Maryland Fire Department and over 24 years, he became the Fire Chief (CEO). He retired from this position in July of 2001 when he took on the role of Executive Director of the National Firefighter Foundation. It was during this time that he coordinated and managed the 2002 national tribute to America's fallen fire heroes in Washington, DC. Ron earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Maryland University College (UMUC) where he has taught the Fire Science Curriculum since 1997.

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