

Garage Fire Considerations

By Paul Schuller

Many articles have been written over the years about various methods to initially attack an attached-garage fire in dwellings. Because there are so many variations in building construction, I have found the need to tailor my initial attack depending on the results of the rapid size-up.

We must always remember to follow "RECEO"¹ in our decision-making process. I believe that one action common to all firefighters — once the initial size-up has been conducted and any rescue ruled out — is the tactic of checking the interior and advancing a line inside. Once inside, we must check the integrity of the interior door and check for fire above or below. If fire is present in the attic, we can usually confine the beast from underneath without opening the interior door; this action can minimize damage. Once the interior position has been taken, exterior lines may be used. This type of offensive requires ongoing communication between interior and outside companies.

When we determine the fire has not spread to the interior, fire attack from the exterior has proven to be a very effective first option. Many dwellings have a side access door. This location is my first choice, as access is easier and streams are not apt to breach the firewall. However, in some cases the side-access door may not exist. In this situation, the attack can be initiated from the large garage-door opening. With the interior company still in place and attic exposed, any extension which might develop can be immediately confined.

A few considerations during this type of offensive are as follows:

- Access from the large garage door may be difficult to lift as springs or cables could have failed. Use care to avoid back injuries.
- If the large door is easily opened or already open, you must take safety precautions, which will include the need to prop the door in the open position. An 8-foot pike pole works well. Also, place a firefighter in charge of the door to avoid accidental closure. I recall an incident in San Francisco a couple of years back when a garage door accidentally closed. This happened to be the firefighters' only means of egress. The fire claimed the life of a 25-year veteran lieutenant and critically injured two others, one of whom was permanently disabled. Remember, no fire is routine, and we must always plan ahead to protect ourselves.

Note the garage side access door. If a significant number of locks are present, forcing entry may be time consuming. Consider punching a hole in the door to apply a stream. With a fully involved garage, going indirect may be the only option.



- Electric door openers and exterior locks will require forcible entry. If this challenge is presented, you can consider punching a hole in the door or use a garage window if one exists, and apply an exterior line using the indirect method. As we all may recall, Lloyd Layman explained years ago that applying water in a confined space would create a steam conversion ultimately squelching the fire. Note: If you have the luxury of arriving with an additional company which carries power tools use those resources to cut holes for access.
- Metal or wood roll-up doors with throw bolts may be too labor intensive for the initial company without forcible entry capabilities. If you are confronted with this complication and there is no side access door or window, your attack should be made from the interior immediately.



The window on the left leads directly into the garage. If no side access door is present, consider using garage windows to attack indirectly.

You might be asking yourself: "Since some of these actions seem like too much work, why not attack these fires the easy way, right from the interior door? Well, this tactic is one that is used around the country. However, my reasons for considering the alternate methods are as follows:

One of our responsibilities is to reduce property loss! If no interior extension is present, and we open the interior door to attempt extinguishment, all of the products of combustion flow directly into the interior causing unnecessary damage and reduction in visibility. I have seen this many times. The natural tendency is to put the line into operation from inside because "we were first in and this is our fire." Then we say to ourselves, "We are attacking this from the unburned, just like the book says." This initial line placement may not end up being the most glamorous assignment, but it will play an important role in the operation and preserve property. The owners will be grateful for our efforts to preserve their property, and with customer service being so important these days, we can only benefit from the good press.

Garage fires pose some interesting challenges, especially with regard to extension. Some examples are:

- **Missing Firewall:** Many occupants recognize the abundance of storage space which exists in the attic behind the garage firewall. Since access can be a problem for them, the firewall is removed. If this condition is present, our job is more difficult, as the fire can quickly communicate directly into the living quarters. This potential re-enforces the need to, on arrival, advance a line into the interior and pull the ceiling to check for extension.
- **HVAC System:** These systems are located inside the attached garage of many dwellings and pose a significant problem. The ductwork serves as a direct line for fire travel throughout the fire building. In single-story buildings, duct work runs under the dwelling and/or through the attic space. In two-or-more-story dwellings, it is common to find ductwork running through the concealed joist space of the floors. In any event, we must check for extension in these hidden spaces.

Note the interior firewall of this garage is intact. This may not always be the case. If the firewall is missing or has holes, fire will spread to the interior of the house. A line should be led to the interior of the house and positioned on the opposite side of the door where walls and ceilings should be opened and checked for fire extension. The door should remain closed to prevent steam, smoke, and other products of combustion from entering the house. Note the ductwork from the heating, ventilating and air conditioning system. A failure of the ductwork will provide an avenue for fire and products of combustion to spread throughout the house. Before you leave the scene, check the integrity of the ductwork and ascertain that fire has not entered it.



I remember a fire a few years back in a wood-frame, two-story, single-family dwelling, built in the late '70s. The fire originated in the garage. Following extinguishment, and during the investigation, we noticed a wisp of smoke, with the exact location unknown. Further investigation revealed the fire had traveled through the HVAC ductwork and started various separate fires throughout the second floor. Besides being a total surprise, this turned out to be an extremely labor-intensive fire with an incredible amount of overhaul, the type you would expect from a fire in a building with balloon construction. This house looked like a war zone following our overhaul procedures.

Constantly evaluate the building throughout overhaul operations. Should you have the luxury of thermal imaging capabilities, consider using this tool. All of your efforts will pay off and reduce chances of a rekindle. Remember that a rekindle will neutralize any support from the property owner you may have gained earlier in the incident.