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Report Cites Poor Communication In Firefighter's Death

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Illinois - Federal investigators concluded poor communication was among the contributing factors in the death of a veteran Chicago firefighter during a fire last year. Capt. Herbert Johnson was killed Nov. 2, 2012, while fighting a blaze in an apartment building. When he and other firefighters arrived, only some small flames showed from the roof of the building but the fire spiraled out of control as they entered the structure, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health reported.

A scene commander outside the home alerted Johnson to a plan for firefighters to ventilate the building's roof. Johnson never acknowledged the order but the plan was enacted anyway, the Chicago Tribune reported.

As firefighters began ventilating the roof, Johnson suddenly ordered the other members of his team on the building's second floor out of the structure, though it isn't clear what prompted him to give the order.

Thomas Ryan, president of Chicago Fire Fighters Union Local 2, said "all hell broke loose" and Johnson's "first instinct was to tell the members to get out. He looked out for the safety of his fellow firefighters. Unfortunately he didn't make it out."

A firefighter-paramedic found Johnson unconscious and badly burned, the Chicago Sun-Times reported. He was not wearing his gloves or face mask for reasons that were not known, though the firefighters' union, which has reviewed the NIOSH report, hypothesized Johnson removed his gloves to use his radio and the mask was knocked off when he fell to the ground.

The first man to Johnson was firefighter-paramedic Mike Imparato, who was not outfitted with a radio at the scene -- it was on order pending a departmental directive that all firefighters be outfitted with a radio and would arrive two weeks after the West 50th fire. Imparato was relegated to shouting the distress call "mayday!" for anyone who could hear.

The NIOSH report, as was the case in a fatal 2010 fire, was critical of the lack of radios for everyone on the scene, though Imparato told the Chicago Tribune it only took about 10 seconds for help to arrive after he began shouting.

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