



So you're driving down Camelback during rush hour. It's tight, slow and oh yeah, hot as Hell since it's August in the "City of Dry Death". Your mind is thinking of that cool beverage waiting at home, as your cell phone buzzes with tantalizing offers of being "anywhere but here." Like everyone else in this worker bee world, you're doing your best to carve a path to the hive, when your stupor is disrupted by the sounds and sights of a bellowing beast looming large in your rear view mirror.

The piercing sound of its siren wail, the earth-rumbling reverberation of belching air horns and angry dances of flashing red lights signal that its time to make way, because somebody somewhere is in a world of hurt. You scurry to the edge of the road, lurch to a stop as the big, red blur rumbles by, and think aloud how you hope that's the last fire truck you see behind you today.

This scenario happens dozens of times a day in our Valley and every motorist out there probably doesn't want to be the one to have to get out of the way. But, think of the Engineer driving that 39,000-pound truck through heavy traffic. While the fire truck may be the only one you see that day, the Engineer will have to literally deal with hundreds, if not thousands of motorists just like you every time they head down the road to a call. Add distracted and confused drivers, traffic, weather, pedestrians and the sheer size of a fire truck or rescue rig, and things get downright challenging. This doesn't even begin to account for the many other things that are running through the Engineer's mind such as the type of call they are responding to, the best route, operating the fire apparatus within

policy and the responsibility for the safety of many other personnel on the rig. So, as a fire agency working in the fifth largest city in the United States, how do you take new firefighters who are used to driving small economy cars, and train them to be proficient in operating a rescue rig carrying paramedics and injured patients, an 80,000-lb. ladder truck, or a tanker carrying 5000 gallons of water?

In order to find out, we spent an afternoon with Wes Patterson and Marc Santa Cruz at Phoenix Fire Department's new driver training facility in south Phoenix. At the time of our interview, Patterson was the Division Chief overseeing driver training, and Santa Cruz the Captain and Driver Training Officer at the facility.

The Phoenix Fire Department is unique in the Valley, in that all of the training is conducted in-house, and all of the fire and rescue rigs are owned and operated by the agency. By contrast, other cities in the Valley typically own their fire apparatus, but contract out their ambulance service. Because of this, Phoenix Fire has developed a new driver training facility that features more than 27 acres of concrete and asphalt to drive on. All new firefighters are

KEEP RIGHT >>

SITTING IN THE HOT SEAT

DRIVER TRAINING WITH THE PHOENIX FIRE DEPARTMENT

Story and photos by JP Molnar

Thanks to Division Chief Wes Patterson, Captain Marc Santa Cruz and Engineer Mitch Finley for their time and assistance in making this story possible.

Engineer Mitch Finley (left) of the Phoenix Fire Department demonstrates driving exercises taught during departmental training.





required to attend driver training as part of their academy training. Patterson says that this starts with experience in the rescue rig (ambulance) over a period of 20 hours. It begins with a four hour classroom session that covers department policy and Code-3 driving (lights and siren). The cadet then spends four hours with a driver training instructor on a 1:1 instructor/student ratio, conducting a series of EVOC (Emergency Vehicle Operations Course) exercises. All of these are performed in a department rescue rig which is typically based on a heavy-duty pickup truck chassis.

According to Santa Cruz, the first exercise is the Serpentine, which teaches the cadet how a vehicle the size, weight and height of an ambulance handles. Many of their cadets are used to driving small vehicles, so climbing behind the wheel of an ambulance with its limited visibility and larger size can be eye-opening. The Serpentine allows them to get used to the "feel" of the truck and work on proper

start to realize that even a larger vehicle can avoid collisions if proper steering and braking are applied.

Skid Control on a polished concrete surface is next. This shows the drivers just how much these trucks weigh and how important it is to adjust speed for prevailing conditions. Patterson says this exercise really points out the importance of knowing how heavy a vehicle they are driving. The rescue rigs weigh between 10-20,000 lb, with pumper trucks tipping the scales at about 39,000 lb. Tankers and ladder trucks weigh much more, so it's critical that cadets learn these concepts with the rescue rigs, as they will see them again if they decide to become Engineers for the department.

A Backing Course in a serpentine manner is also included. Rescue rigs and fire trucks have a lot of blind spots, and many in-service crashes for fire agencies occur while backing. Patterson says that, as a rule, spotters are always used when backing any fire rig, but the new driver must get proficient

Safety begins with the training personnel receive at the academy, but it continues with your role as a driver on the same streets they travel. You don't have to be a mathematician to know that an 80,000-pound fire truck is going to need a lot of room to stop and won't turn on a dime

hand placement, while beginning to push vehicle limits in a controlled environment.

Once the new firefighter becomes more comfortable with the rescue rig, they move on to the Evasive Exercise. Here, the driver negotiates a coned course where they are required to evade a simulated hazard by using the steering wheel only. This shows that drivers can avoid collisions through steering rather than braking. Different scenarios are introduced that allow drivers to see they can maintain control under a variety of conditions.

The Controlled Braking Exercise follows, where drivers learn how to apply maximum braking and evasive steering to avoid a collision. Santa Cruz says this really "opens the eyes" of cadets because they

with mirrors and positioning in reverse.

Once the new driver completes the closed-course training, they continue with a minimum of 12 hours of in-field training with an instructor. Non-emergency and Code-3 driving is evaluated, with the goal being as many Code-3 calls as possible with an instructor in the rig. Safety checks and regular maintenance protocols are also taught.

Once graduating from the academy and driver training, a new firefighter will be certified by the department to drive a rescue rig. If the firefighter wants to move up in vehicles, they can attend a special academy to become certified as an Engineer. A 40-hour Engineer course includes classroom and practical exercises, plus over-the-road observation on public roads. This

includes the above EVOC exercises, but in the new, larger apparatus. Those Engineers who want to get trained on the "big dog" ladder trucks attend an additional 24 hours of training for those. In total, an Engineer becoming certified to drive all of the department's trucks will have completed a minimum of 100 hours of training.

Patterson says that the department's driving course was adapted from GM Proving Ground training regimens and police departments. The department self-certifies their drivers and Patterson says that Phoenix Fire exceeds minimum standards of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) for driver training. The agency also recently introduced driving simulators, which allow for Code-3 practice and hazardous situations in a controlled environment. Captain Santa Cruz is in the process of developing scenarios that accurately reflect the typical driving environments that fire personnel will encounter while running Code-3 to a call.

So it's clear that when it comes to driver training, the Phoenix Fire Department is serious about making sure that their personnel get to calls safely. It begins with the training they receive at the academy, but it continues with your role as a driver on the same streets they travel. You don't have to be a mathematician to know that an 80,000-lb. fire truck is going to need a lot of room to stop, and it won't turn on a dime like that little sports car in your garage. The Engineers in these rigs have a lot on their minds, most of all the safety of their personnel and the motoring public. Arizona law requires that vehicles yield to the right for emergency vehicles approaching from behind with lights and siren activated. But let's think of it in more practical terms: if *YOU* were that person waiting for that fire truck or rescue rig to show up, wouldn't you want every motorist to be aware and get out of the way so that help could arrive in time? Think about it. In the meantime, watch that rear view mirror, and do your part to help our heroes from the Phoenix Fire Department and other agencies do their job safely. ■

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