



## Fire Investigators and Detectives Working to Build an Arson Case

*Presented by*

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for the*

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State Police Message Center

24 hr Callout #



**800.842.0200**



OR

**860.685.8190**



## Initial Steps

- Modes of Entry
  - Exigent Circumstances
  - Verbal Consent
  - Written Consent
  - Administrative Warrant
  - Search Warrant
- Brief observations of the scene
  - Before you speak with witnesses
  - Interviews (Should Police be Involved..?)



## Rolls of a Fire and Police Investigator

- Fire Investigator
  - Origin
  - Cause
  - Document the Scene
  - Locate and Identify Witnesses
- Police Detective
  - Assist at the fire scene (if suspicious circumstances exist)
  - Conduct a Criminal Investigation
  - Interview Witnesses and possibly Interrogations
  - Apply for Search and Arrest Warrants



## Conducting the Fire Investigation Role of Fire Investigator

- Get assigned the fire investigation
- Arrive at the scene and begin documenting
- Speak with the Fire Chief and Fire Fighters
- Locate and interview witnesses
- Conduct your scene investigation \*
- Make a Cause Determination \*



## Conducting the Scene Investigation (Cont.)

- Investigate systematically from areas of least damage to those of the most
- Determine an Area of Fire Origin
- Systematic Layered Examination
- With the Area of Origin in mind, identify ignition sources
- Identify which fuel package was the first ignited



## Conducting the Scene Investigation (Cont.)

- From identified ignition sources determine which are competent for the identified first fuel ignited
- Hypothesis = ignition source + fuel package
- How did they come together
- Peer Review (NFPA-921)
- Conclusion / Cause Determination



**Document, Document, Document**

## Cause Determination

- **Accidental**
  - May be picked up by an Insurance Investigator or the Insurance Company may just pay the loss
  - Police aren't normally involved
- **Natural** – Police Aren't normally Involved
- **Undetermined**
  - Need to show evidence that it's believed to be Accidental or Incendiary
  - Police maybe involved
- **Incendiary**
  - Start of the Criminal Investigation
  - Police are involved



## Conducting the Fire Investigation Role of Police (certified)

- Get assigned the fire investigation
- Observe the scene
- Interviews
- Follow-up, IMMEDIATELY...or **SOONER!**
- Police should be familiar with the scene and circumstances before they interview



*The clock is ticking as soon as you are called, with each passing minute, so too slips away your chance to recover leads AND a successful outcome.*

## Witness/Suspect Interviews - Interrogations

- When an Arson is suspected or proven, Police will locate and talk with witnesses
- When a suspect is located, Police will conduct the Interview and/or Interrogation
- Polygraph if applicable
- Physical evidence found at the scene;
  - Evidence (K-9 samples, matches, tools, vehicles, etc..)
  - DNA
  - Finger Prints



## Fatal Fires (Police Involvement)

- Police will help identify the victim(s)
- Police will interview and take statements of witnesses and family members
- Conduct a 24/48 hr. background on victim
- Locate building owner(s)
- If ARSON, take over the investigation as an Arson-Murder or Murder-Arson



■ State Attorney Notifications

## Norwich Task Force

- Collection of approximately 5 years of fires
  - No Police Involvement – Lack of follow-up.
- All case files were scrutinized for any similarities
- Fire locations were plotted on maps
- Exploited the best of Norwich Police, Norwich Fire and State Police – Fire & Explosion Investigation Unit and Eastern District Major Crime Squad resources

## Norwich Task Force Results

- Task force duration -4 months
- Resulted in the re-investigation of 29 fires from 05/25/2005 to 04/24/2010
- Netted 32 separate arrests of 10 individuals.  
Cleared 15 total Arson Cases
- Resulted in Plea
- Ring Leader – Walker -15 Years incarceration

## The Arrests

- Top row: left to right; Laura J MacDonald, James Vanech, Michael Baker, Steven LaMotte and Victoria Ercoli.
- Bottom row: left to right; Timothy J. Gahner, Hamilton Gavitt, Ramon A. Ortiz, Kevin Walker and Keith Mutch.

## 143-145 Rockwell Street Fire Investigation

- Apartment of Origin –vacant
- Gypsum Missing from ceiling in the kitchen
- Non – Furnished, layered exam rules out accidental and natural causes
- Incendiary Causation
- Accelerant Detection Canine Alerts
  - Laboratory Confirmation
  - Medium Boiling Range Petroleum Distillates



## 143-145 Rockwell Street Police Investigation

- Intensive investigation
  - Everyday for two weeks plus to follow leads
- 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor tenant had significant drug use history
- Tenant had recently kicked out his roommate
- Bottle of charcoal lighter fluid missing from deck
- Roommate was seen walking from fire scene with a garbage bag of personal effects



## 143-145 Rockwell Street Police Investigation

- Lack of cooperation from those involved resulted in multiple interviews being required and a large amount of information developed
- Witness tampering
- FULL Commitment of resources of Norwich PD



## 143-145 Rockwell Street Investigation Results

- Out of bond at time of fire for Bank Robbery
- Serving 58 mo. sentence for Accessory to Robbery at time of arrest
- Arrest of Marwan O. Chankar:
  - Arson 1<sup>st</sup> Degree
  - Criminal Mischief 1<sup>st</sup> Degree
  - Attempted Murder



## 143-145 Rockwell Street Investigation Results

- Chankar reject's 10 year Plea Deal
- Case goes to trial in October 2014  
(important things learned)
- Conviction for First Degree Arson and First Degree Criminal Mischief
- NOT Guilty of Attempted Murder
- Sentencing – 17 Years



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