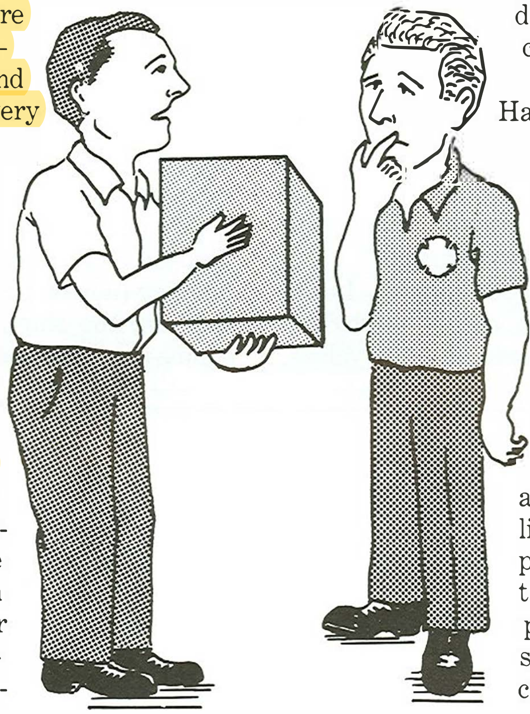
Odd Job: Lucky It Wasn't C.O.D.

by **RAY DOWNEY**
Captain, Rescue Co. 2

On August 29 of last year, the brothers of Hazardous Materials Co. 1 were heavily engaged in a typical Monday morning's committee work and apparatus maintenance. A delivery truck pulled up on the apron and the driver announced that he had a package for Haz Mat 1. Using the intercom, the housewatchman called for "Scotty"—Fr. Scott Kirchhofer—to come to the housewatch.



Scotty is the specialist responsible for the testing, repair, and maintenance of the various protective suits used by the members of Haz Mat 1. In addition, his duties include researching and evaluating the numerous tools, meters, and so on used by his unit. It's common for him to receive a number of packages during a tour, usually addressed to Haz Mat 1, FDNY.

After signing the receipt, Scotty picked up the box and took it to the back of the apparatus floor. Normally he would finish whatever he had been working on before opening the package, but his sixth sense told him this one was different.

As he carefully opened the plain cardboard box, he quickly realized that inside, there was a 12½-gallon overpack drum—a plain steel drum used as an additional, outer layer of packaging. Not too unusual—except this drum was sealed, had been dented, and showed signs of being around.

Scotty's mind raced to the requirements for shipping hazardous materials; he knew it's illegal for haz mats or contaminated items to be sent through the freight transportation system without being labeled hazardous. As he opened the box further, it became clear that this was an overpack drum from Haz Mat 1 itself, and it might hold a hazardous or dangerous material.

The firefighter's training and experience came into play. Before going any further, he suited up in a protective suit. Using test meters, he began following the standard operating procedure that applies when encountering an unknown substance. He evacuated the immediate area, overpacked the 12½-gallon drum in a 55-gallon drum, and moved it to the company's decontamination room (a commercial shower area).

It wasn't April Fool's Day, and Halloween was still two months away. Could this be a practical joke? The shipping invoice listed the shipper's name and phone number, and after getting out of the suit, Scotty dialed the number. After being passed from extension to extension, he finally spoke with an employee who claimed he knew of the package's existence—but that was all. The answer from the other end of the line was, "We always end up with packages that get lost or sent to the wrong location without papers," and the company just sends them back where they came from.

But this bright, yellow drum had *Hazardous Material* stenciled all over it!

Again, mostly evasive answers.

During this exchange, the officer on duty, Lt. John Salka, was busily pulling records and trying to piece the puzzle together. Without paperwork, all 12½-gallon overpack drums look alike. Where next?

As the search continued, notification was made to the Rescue Liaison Unit [with which Capt. Downey was working at the time]. Upon my arrival, I conferred with Lt. Salka and Scotty, noting that all necessary actions had already been taken. A call was put in for a representative from the city's Department of Environmental Protection. This is normal procedure, in that specialists from the DEP evaluate haz mat situations and dictate actions to be taken to alleviate the problem.

DEP specialist John Wuthenow was on duty, and upon his arrival, he was filled in on all the details. It was agreed that we would have to inspect the drum's contents to decide what actions were required.

Operating procedures precluded the inspection being done in quarters. How about in the street? What if it was toxic and created a greater exposure and danger to the citizens of the community? Not knowing the contents, we couldn't assume there wasn't any danger. Was the material shock-sensitive? Well, it had been shipped via air and truck, without creating any additional problems. Scotty had performed all possible tests for leakage, flammability, and radioactivity, and we still weren't sure what was inside.

Next step: Find an isolated area where the danger to local residents would be eliminated. After a number of phone calls to chief officers in Operations, Support Services, and the Division of Training, a plan of action was set into motion. A flat-bed truck from the Shops would be used to transport the drum to an isolated area at the Division of Training.

After members protected by entry suits loaded the drum aboard the truck, a convoy consisting of Haz Mat, DEP, and the Rescue Liaison Unit proceeded to the Division of Training. Awaiting the convoy's arrival was Engine 83, which had been special-called and was standing by. A handline was stretched. Haz Mat members and DEP Specialist Wuthenow, donned in protective suits and masks, opened the drum.

No, a pop-up doll did not jump out at them. Inside they found a leaking, five-gallon can of methylene bisphenyl isocyanate, a clear, liquid or light-yellow, solid chemical used in polyurethane resins and sp dex fibers for bonding rubber to rayon and ny Exposure can be damaging to the eyes, respira system, and skin.

On April 24, 1988, Haz Mat 1 had responded to United Air Lines terminal at Kennedy Airport. incident had involved the leaking, five-gallon can now was the cause of a second haz mat incid starting in Haz Mat 1's quarters. At the orig incident, Haz Mat 1 packed the drum, and DEP m arrangements with United Air Lines to hav shipped to a disposal plant. Somewhere, somehow, paperwork got lost. Because of a pre-printed la addressed to Capt. J. Fanning, Haz Mat 1, FDNY, drum was shipped back to Haz Mat 1.

In the end, a serious incident was replayed different members involved. The expertise and pro sionalism displayed by Haz Mat 1's members were key elements in successfully resolving the incident.

The airline was contacted and required to hir contractor to remove the drum once again. C Fanning [now in the 15th Division] ordered that, f then on, the shipping labels be removed as soon drums are delivered. And, no, it was not C.O.D.

Firefighter Deaths on the Rise Nationally

More U.S. firefighters died in the line of duty last year than during any of the previous six years, according to the National Fire Protection Association. The 1988 figure, 131, was up from 127 in 1987. Forty percent of the deaths were the result of heart attacks and almost one quarter were caused by motor vehicle accidents.

The NFPA stresses that increased health and safety awareness would help turn the trend around. For example, at least 8 of the 52 heart attack victims were known to have had prior heart problems; 2 others evidenced severe arteriosclerosis, 4 suffered from hypertension, and 4 were diabetic.

Most of the 34 firefighters killed in motor vehicle accidents were the occupants of vehicles; 5 were struck by vehicles.

In all, 38 deaths occurred while the victims were responding to or returning from alarms. Nine happened during training, 11 were at nonfire emergencies, and 11 were other on-duty deaths, such as heart attacks in the firehouse.

Sixty-two deaths (almost half the total) happened on the fireground. Two incidents took a toll of 11 fireground deaths: the truss roof collapse at an auto dealership fire in Hackensack, New Jersey, and the explosion of a trailer filled with ammonium nitrate and fuel oil in Kansas City, Kansas. Incendiary or suspicious fires claimed the lives of 23 firefighters.

Besides heart attacks and vehicle accidents, ot major categories of fatal injury included:

- Internal trauma (37 deaths);
- Asphyxiation (13 deaths, including one firefig who died as he tried to rescue a trapped workma the tank of a ship); and
- Crushing (14 deaths).

Four firefighters were killed during search and res operations on the fireground; two were electroc when they tried to retrieve cats from the top of po poles.

The nation's 243,000 career firefighters accou for 27 percent of the deaths, the smallest share in 10 years the NFPA has been collecting the statis By extension, volunteer firefighters' share of deaths was the largest in a decade. Since 1979, firefighter death tolls have ranged between 112 1983) and 137 (in 1980).

Correction to "The Rabbit Tool," 1st Issue o 1989: Based on an error in the distributor' product literature, the article incorrectly identi fies "Rabbit Tool" as a trademark of Clemen Industries. No trademark has yet been issue for the tool, and Clemens Industries is no longe the distributor.