

Gear

by [Cheryl McGowan](#)

“Fire fighting and emergency medical services are ultrahazardous, unavoidably dangerous activities.... You can reduce--but not eliminate--your risk of death, burns, injuries, diseases and illnesses through the following:

- a) Proper training and constant practice in fire fighting and emergency tactics and safety;*
- b) Proper selection, maintenance and use of safety equipment;*
- c) Exercising extreme caution at all times. Your protective ensemble will not make you completely safe from death, burns, injuries, diseases or illnesses....”*

Fire Equipment Manufacturer’s Safety Association Official User Information Guide, p. 1.

“You look like a dork.”

Roy DeSoto tried to ignore this remark. He patted the front of his new turnout coat, adjusted his bright, shiny helmet.

“No, I don’t,” he responded, not looking at his taunting partner.

John Gage jumped down off the hood of the squad and examined his partner’s pristine threads from every angle. It had been years since John had worn new gear. He remembered his first set, which initially smelled of sizing rather than smoke. The turnout coat’s stiff collar had abraded his neck. He loved the coat, now. Sweat, water and abuse had made it soft. The arms and neckline felt buttery to the touch. He would no more trade in his old gear than get rid of his ancient sofa. Some things become too comfortable to replace.

Roy eyed his partner warily, awaiting another dig.

“Yeah, you do,” John said, at last. “You look like a dork.”

Roy took off his helmet, buffed the front with his sleeve.

“I look like a Probie, maybe, but I don’t look like a dork.”

John chuckled. “Probie DeSoto! Get down and give me 50!”

Now it was Roy’s turn to laugh. “I would, but these bunker pants are so stiff, I don’t think I can bend my knees!”

Captain Stanley approached carrying a large box, which he set down next to the squad.

“All right, Gage. Don’t say I never did nothing fer ya,” he quipped.

John tore open the flaps with childish joy. “For me? You shouldn’t have!”

Then, recognizing the box’s contents, his expression soured.

“What’s wrong?,” Stanley demanded. “This is the best gear on the market!”

John stared into the box like a boy watching his dead fish floating at the top of the tank.

“You shouldn’t have,” he repeated, morosely.

Anxious to end this exercise in ingratitude, Stanley turned to leave. “Put your old gear in the storage locker. Some movie studio is picking it up tomorrow. They want it for costumes or something.”

Gage acknowledged his captain’s request, then gazed sadly at the new duds.

Roy placed a sympathetic hand on John’s shoulder. “Don’t take it so hard. Face it: Your old stuff is running on fumes. I’m surprised you haven’t lost a sleeve by now.”

John looked up at his partner. “I love my gear, Roy! I mean, just because it’s old doesn’t mean it’s no good. Look, you see people driving around in old cars and people point and say, ‘Isn’t that great? There’s a 40-year-old car that runs like new!’” He pushed the box away with disgust.

Roy pulled down his suspenders and let his bunker pants fall around his boots. He removed the boots, then placed the gear in the squad. His new coat and gloves followed. The coat’s fabric was stiff; he had to push several times to get the garment to stay in the compartment long enough to allow him to shut the door.

He called to John, “You want me to take out your old gear now?”

John looked up at Roy, then back to the box. “Not yet,” he replied. “Maybe I can switch gear tomorrow morning. I have a feeling that my old stuff has at least one more job to do.”

Roy hung his helmet in the squad, admiring its newness.

Chet Kelly entered the equipment bay from the kitchen. “Hey, guys, we’re taking orders for lunch. You interested?”

John was happy to have food to distract him from the pitiful thought of parting with his filthy but faithful equipment. He left the box in the bay, its contents still wrapped in thick plastic.

If your protective ensemble becomes even slightly torn, worn, cracked or abraded, do not use it. Even the most harmless-looking changes to the protective element may increase your risk of death, burns, injuries, diseases and illnesses.-FEMSA Guide, Page 11.

Human skin possesses a certain amount of tension. A small laceration, one that is not very deep, remains more or less closed. A slice through the epidermis into the dermis is rather common. The wound will bleed for a short while, depending on its location. A small amount of pressure usually stops the bleeding and allows clotting blood to seal the cut. A deeper invasion, however, compromises the skin’s ability to hold itself together. In such cases, the incision opens wide, permitting the victim, bystanders and medical personnel to view the inner workings of the human body--the fatty tissue, blood vessels, nerves, muscle and bone.

Roland Garvey had seen the inside of his leg once before, in 1965, when he cut himself with a carpet knife. A neighbor spotted Roland standing on his balcony with blood flowing down the front of his leg, dripping onto his dirty, hi-top sneakers. She called the emergency number on her refrigerator.

An ambulance arrived, bearing two attendants. They assumed Roland had been working on some home handyman’s project. The calm, agreeable Roland showed them the knife.

“So where’s the stuff you were cutting?” one attendant asked him.

Roland said nothing, pointed to his upper thigh, at the damage he had done.

The other attendant smiled as he applied a trauma pad to the large wound. “Sir, he means the rug you were cutting.”

Roland remained quiet. He fiddled with the knife.

The attendant bandaging Roland’s thigh was the first to listen to his sixth sense. When a shiver of unease rattled up his spine, the attendant felt his cheeks become pale. “Sir, why don’t I put your knife over on the table there?”

The second attendant stopped moving the cot into place beside the victim. He looked at his partner and felt his own sudden caution pull acid into his stomach.

Roland continued to examine the carpet knife. He held it up to the light, admired the blood coloring its gracefully curving blade. Then, as if rudely awakened from an afternoon nap, Roland swung the weapon. It sliced through the cot man’s left bicep before both attendants escaped to the security of their vehicle.

The cot man paid a high price for failing to recognize an unsafe scene. He eventually developed sepsis and, after a prolonged surgery to evacuate the wound, could no longer use his arm to carry heavy objects. Ten years after Roland attacked him, the attendant still worked for the ambulance company, but in an administrative capacity.

Roland spent ten years in a mental hospital. In 1975, he was deemed well enough to rejoin society in some productive fashion. He moved from the cold confines of Chicago to Los Angeles. There, he found work as a carpenter’s helper.

Some fire fighters prefer the appearance of well-used, discolored, “salty” and/or dirty protective equipment as an indicator of their experience and status as veteran fire fighters. These individuals are at grave and unnecessary risk of death, burns, injuries, illnesses and diseases. You must keep your protective equipment clean and maintain it as set forth in their labels. This is not merely a question of style, neat appearance and comfort, it is a matter of life and death.--FEMSA Guide, p. 17.

Lunch at a fire station is a convoluted affair. Menus from local sandwich shops are passed around. Person A might have a hankering for Chinese; Person B may desire a cold-cut sub. After the cuisine is chosen, the individual entrees must be decided, followed by side orders, drinks and dessert. All in all, it can take an hour or longer before the medics begin their journey to pick up the food. If the medics are on a run, however, the engine will go.

John Gage chose to drop the subject of his equipment, at least temporarily. He saw that Roy was losing patience with him, so he opined on other topics as the squad rolled its way toward Mona’s Italian Delicatessen.

There are two types of stress: Eustress and distress. Eustress encourages a man to get up for work, to do a good job once he arrives there. Distress is a debilitating, anxious, grinding sensation of dread. It is the kind of stress that disables an individual until they can no longer function. Roland Garvey returned to working

with a certain amount of eustress. For a month or so, he did quite well. Then the familiar insomnia began, along with his life-long habit of cutting himself. Within a short time, he was drawing his own blood each morning after breakfast.

As John and Roy drove to Mona's, Roland Garvey's supervisor stepped into an unfinished apartment unit and began railing at his employee.

"You call that square?" he shouted, pointing to the crown molding. "Take it down and put it up again. This time, do it right!"

Roland momentarily retreated to another room. His boss heard him shuffling around in there. He noted other instances of sloppy workmanship, wondered if his new carpenter's helper was turning into more of a hindrance.

When Roland stepped back into the room, his boss turned to him, ready to fire the man. Instead, he moved back in horror, almost tripping on debris piled up behind him.

Blood flowed down Roland's neck. Without a moment's hesitation, the supervisor left the apartment and called the fire department, indicating that a worker had been injured on his construction site.

Squad 51, injured construction worker, 3459 Vomar Terrace. Three-four-five-nine Volmar Terrace, Apartment 203. Cross street Bestor.

"Oh, man!" John reached behind him and donned his helmet. "I was all set for lunch!"

Roy strapped on his own helmet. "I have no idea where we're going. Stop thinking about your stomach for a stretch and direct me."

John reached into the glove compartment to retrieve the map book. He paged through, found the index and located Volmar Terrace. He forgot about lunch.

The foreman paced at the curb. Thirty-three days on this site without an injury shot to Hell. He mentally reviewed all the procedural crap that Roland Garvey had swung into motion--the Workers' Comp claim forms, the physician's statements, the building inspectors' visits, the OSHA guys would come. What a mess!

Roland quietly considered this suicide thing. His supervisor had rattled him by yelling so much, but was that a good enough reason to end it all? Things were hard, his life was hard. It had always been that way. Blood droplets hit the floor. A siren cried in the distance. Someone was coming to help him. He decided that he didn't want any help. He had cut himself, in public this time. That meant another visit to a mental hospital, years of captivity. Dizziness forced him to the floor. Why didn't everyone just leave him alone? He slid the knife, a filleting implement, under his work shirt. Then, he waited.

Footsteps on the uncarpeted stairs. Muttered comments he could not make out. The door to the unit swung open. Two firemen approached, wearing full turnout gear, carrying medical equipment.

"What's your name?" one of them asked.

"Roland Garvey," he responded. "You guys ready for a fire?"

“Construction site. Have to be prepared for anything,” the fireman replied. He turned to the other firefighter. “Airway’s okay. Let’s get a dressing for his neck.”

The other fireman examined Roland’s gruesome wound. “Jugular, Roy.”

The first fireman nodded. He turned back to his patient. “What happened?”

Roland shook his head.

“You don’t remember how you got hurt?”

The second fireman pressed a thick trauma pad to Roland’s neck. Roland knew that he might be dying. He had cut his own throat with the express purpose of committing mortal harm to himself. These firemen seemed to know what they were doing. He feared that they might save him, and he had to protect himself from that.

“Let’s get some oxygen on him,” one of the firemen said. “Sir, you need to lie down.”

Roland moved to scratch his stomach. It was an innocent gesture, one that would not be taken as threatening. He reached under his work shirt. The knife handle felt familiar and comfortable in his hand.

Roland performed his self-mutilations with great precision. Other people, however, deserved less accuracy. Besides, they moved away so quickly that a slow, cautious approach never worked.

Roy sensed the knife before he saw it. Pulling back sharply, he felt the air move against his face. John looked up at his partner, then ducked his head as Roland’s hand, and the knife clasped within it, passed over him. Both medics scrambled toward the door. Roland rose. The air sang as he flung his arm back and forth, recklessly wielding the knife. Roy made it across the room, yanked open the door. He turned back towards his attacker in time to see his partner stumble over a pile of wood scraps and fall heavily onto the floor.

There followed a moment that Roy never forgot. Roland paused to consider the man trying to lift himself from the floor. He stared at Roy, who stopped cold, torn between the urge to help his partner to his feet and the equally strong inclination to grab a piece of two-by-four and beat the living daylight out of Roland Garvey. John attempted to rise. His boot treads had worn down over the years, providing little traction against the sawdust-covered plywood. Roy and Garvey moved in unison, reaching the fallen man at the same time. Garvey swung the blade at Roy, who paid it no heed as he grabbed John’s turnout coat and pulled. The knife sliced through the stiff outer layer of Roy’s new coat, but could not reach his skin. In a moment, he had pulled his partner up and over the woodpile. Garvey swung again, blindly dragging the honed steel down John’s back. The soft, worn canvas bearing the firefighter’s name gave easily, allowing the weapon full access to the man beneath it.

John felt his coat give, noted a burning sensation. The urgent matter of getting the Hell away from Roland Garvey occupied his attention for a short while longer. Once he and Roy had reached the door, they ran down the two flights of stairs and out into the sunshine.

“Get back! He’s got a knife!” Roy yelled at workers who meandered about, wondering what the fire department was doing there. Reaching the squad, the medics jumped in, locked the doors and rolled up the windows. A furtive request for police assistance brought a patrol car to the site before Roy had replaced the mic in its cradle.

Roy got out to speak with the officer.

“We were in that unit there,” he said, pointing to the top floor. “This guy had cut his neck, so we were checking him out when he just went crazy! Looks like he cut his own throat, jugular vein. He’s probably unconscious by now, but you never know. He has a knife. Swung it at me and at my partner...”

Roy’s voice faded as he gazed at the squad, at his partner, who slowly climbed down out of the cab. The younger man walked carefully to the curb, then unbuckled his coat and let it slide off his shoulders onto the ground.

For the first time in his career, Roy purposefully avoided something unpleasant. He didn’t pause for long--perhaps five, maybe ten seconds--wishing like all get-up that the expression on John’s face reflected stress instead of pain. When he finally approached John, he realized that wishing something could not make it so.

Blood covered the inner lining of the turnout coat that lay on the grass. Blood coarsed down John’s back, spreading with careless abandon across his blue uniform shirt. John said nothing. Even after Roy cut his shirt off, John only mumbled answers to Roy’s myriad questions.

“That’s quite a laceration you’ve got there,” Roy said at last, having applied a trauma pad. “You’re lucky you can’t see it.”

John stretched out his legs, tried to straighten his shoulders. “Yeah, I’m really lucky,” he responded, without joy.

Roy looked at his partner. “Listen: If that guy had cut you side-to-side instead of up and down, he might have severed your spinal cord. It’s pretty deep cut.” He did not wish to go into all of the gory details. From what Roy could see, this incident would necessitate his working with Brice for at least two weeks, maybe longer.

John refused the ambulance. He watched Roy clean blood off the squad’s passenger seat, then gathered the remains of his turnout coat and got back into the vehicle. En route to Rampart, John pondered the impossible ease with which Roland Garvey had gained access to him. He noted the sleeve of Roy’s turnout coat, how the knife had barely penetrated the surface.

John sighed. “I should have put my new gear in the squad when Cap told me to. He’s gonna have my head for this.”

Roy glanced at John. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll just tell him you didn’t have time to switch gear before we were hauled out for lunch duty. Speaking of which, do you think the guys are wondering if we stole their money and drove to Vegas?”

If he had felt up to it, John would have laughed.

Roland Garvey did not survive his self-inflicted wound. He bled to death long before the ever-cautious officers ventured into the apartment. Additional paramedics called to the construction site were released shortly after they arrived. In time, a van from the Coroner’s office pulled up. Roland Garvey received his free ride to the morgue.

Owing to the good fortunes of scheduling and Kelly days, Roy did not have Brice as a partner while John healed up. Nonetheless, he was happy when his partner returned to work almost three weeks after Roland Garvey killed himself.

“I put your new gear in the squad,” Roy said, sipping coffee.

John gulped the brew in his usual hyperactive fashion. Roy wondered whether John and coffee were a good mix.

“Thanks,” John replied. “How about you? Did you get a new coat?”

“Yep! Quarter Master issued it to me the same day you got cut.”

With the mention of the incident, John rolled his eyes. Roy knew what his partner was thinking. There is a certain glory in the physical keepsakes of a fire or difficult rescue. They attest to courage and selflessness. But every Probie knows the meaninglessness of a stupid mistake: Standing up in the midst of an attic fire, where the temperature at eye level reaches over a thousand degrees. Probies learn early that there isn't a shred of glory in a melted visor or roasted skin when it resulted from their own inexperience, from their jejune sense of invulnerability. John felt embarrassment at having denied the reality of his profession. It is hazardous. That is why the gear is so important. That is why when your captain tells you to switch gear, you do it.

“What did you do with my old gear?” he asked his partner, who stood watching him.

“I stuck it in a bag and put it in storage. You can take it home, if you want. Cap says it's no good now for anything.”

The gear lay wrapped in the same heavy plastic his new stuff had come in. John held up the bags, turned them around to view his once-faithful attire. He had loved these things before they failed him. Without regret, he carried the bags to the trash dumpster out behind the station and dropped them in. Tones for another station sounded in the equipment bay. A fire burned on the other side of town. John returned to the bay, opened the squad's gear compartment and, with Roy's help, adjusted his new personal protective equipment.

Roy stepped back to admire the spotless attire.

“You look like a Probie,” he joked.

John paused as he lengthened his suspenders. “You know, Roy, today I feel like a Probie.”

“You'll get over it.”

Squad 51, Engine 51. Injured person. 12912 Arctic Avenue. Cross street Adrian. Time out 08:47.

“I'm over it!” yelled John, above the clamor of diesel engines and hustling firefighters.

Roy nodded as he pulled the squad from the bay and rolled into the street.

“For now,” Roy muttered.

Based on a story told by one of the guys at my station, when I put to him the query: “What is the worst laceration you have ever seen?” Thanks to District Chief Ramsey for ordering my new gear. It is fashionable and practical, and it keeps me safe and warm. It also makes me look like a dork.