

"Truss Truce"

by Libby Maurer



Has the fire service's animosity toward the truss industry finally run its course? Find out why a "Truss Truce" has been declared.

Are members of the fire service tired of carrying on the tradition of contention with the component industry? Recent events indicate they may be ready to bury the hatchet, replacing years of hostility and finger-pointing with facts and education.

Yes, exposing the history, structural function, design, and installation of trusses and other structural components seems to be a growing trend in fire service education. According to John Vardian of the Phoenix Fire Department, it's about time. Vardian, who spoke at the Illinois Society of Fire Service Instructors Conference in October, believes building classification training is the key to saving firefighter lives. Vardian told the group, "That building is telling you everything you need to know," noting all it takes is three to five seconds prior to entry to size up a building and identify its features. "Building construction is our life and death, but it is barely covered in basic firefighter training courses," he said.

In addition to supplemental building structure training, Vardian urged fire instructors to adjust the way they fight fires according to the trends in building construction since the 1950s. "We can't keep fighting fires like we did in the 1950s," he said matter-of-factly. "Building construction has changed, and we need to change our techniques accordingly." Vardian explained that the most effective way for firefighters to classify structures is by considering big leaps in construction technology and the introduction of new materials. For instance, from the 1930s through the late '40s, building construction primarily consisted of reinforced masonry blocks, he stated. From the early to late '50s, conventional framing (or "stick-built") replaced reinforced masonry as the most popular method.

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Vardian isn't the only one extending the olive branch. Career firefighter Mark Emery's article printed in the June 2004 issue of *FireRescue Magazine* speaks for itself: "Truss Truce." His opening paragraph reads:

Trusses are strong, efficient reliable and predictable, and once you get to know them, pretty cool. For too long the fire service has vilified this structural engineering marvel. In this article, you'll discover what's really the most reliable, unpredictable and dangerous factor at any fireground operation.

Wow, "vilified." But it gets better. Emery plays the affordable housing card to make a case for building components:

...you must acknowledge that without lightweight building construction, particularly trusses, many communities couldn't afford to have a modern fire department. Because of the high cost of conventional building construction, it would be too expensive to build strip malls, warehouse stores or multi-family complexes. Without lightweight building construction, most of us couldn't afford to buy a home. It's quite possible that the structure you're sitting in while reading this article wouldn't exist.

Could this be true? Yes, he means it. The body of his article contains a litany of facts from the anatomy of a truss, the engineering behind it, the flow of loads

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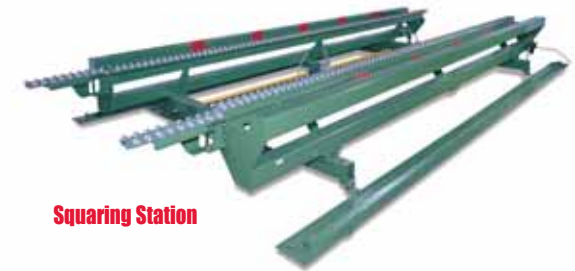
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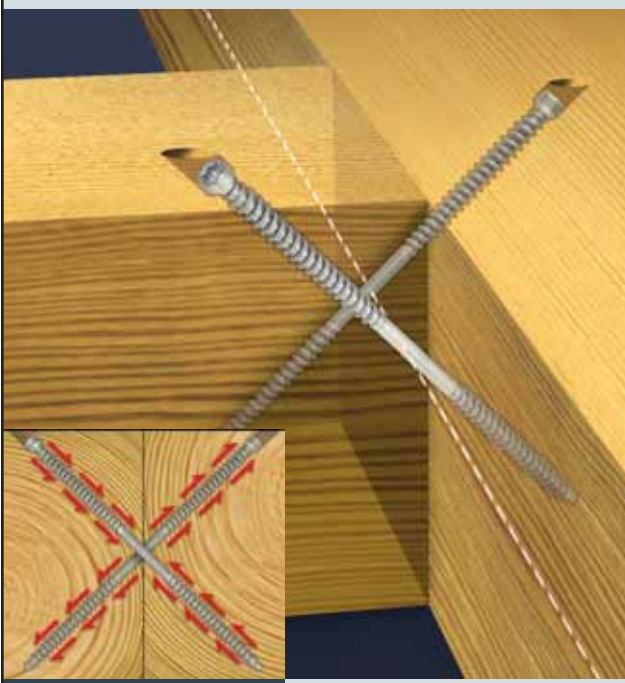


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through a structure, and a reality check about what presents the most dangerous to a firefighter during a structure fire. He concludes with, "Is it rational to blame the building if a firefighter is killed by a failing structural component? Buildings don't think or make decisions."

It's a great time for a truce. Positive progress can never be made when one group demonizes another. Structural building components have never been bad actors in this play and now with the door open to working together, they can begin to be seen as the asset they are and we all can work toward minimizing the high risks that exist on the fire ground. Happy are the peacemakers. **SBC**

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WTCA-Illinois Participates in Fire Service Conference

John Vardian wasn't the only guest at the Illinois Society of Fire Service Instructors Conference that fall day in Peoria. Mike Karceski, President of WTCA-IL was granted permission to attend the seminar to build relationships and offer literature. Karceski didn't know what to expect. "I was prepared for them to be very critical of me and the organization I represent," he said.

Karceski was pleasantly surprised when the attendees approached him en masse, requesting information about plant tours and asking for a copy of *The Fire Performance of Wood Trusses* CD produced by the Carbeck Structural Components Institute (CSCI). "Being a truss manufacturer you are the enemy; some firefighters are very negative toward any construction, but the reality is that trusses and components are the predominate materials used in building construction," he said.

Karceski concurred with Vardian's opinion that firefighter training must catch up to modern building construction technology to save

lives. "[The fire service] has to adapt, but they are not educated on trusses and components," he said. The instructors at the seminar seemed starved for any information Karceski could offer. "They were glad to learn anything because any information they can get their hands on is dramatically better than what they've gotten in the past," he said.

The positive response was a welcome change for Karceski, who hopes to continue to work with the Illinois fire service. "It is important that we keep in contact with these organizations because once you get your foot in the door, you start to develop relationships and work together," he said. And at the end of the day, Karceski was grateful to have observed the fire industry's culture. "I am mystified by all the different roles (firefighter, trainer, inspector, chief) and how they fit together. It is all very complicated, which is why it is important for WTCA chapters to continue their involvement and advocacy with them," he said. **SBC**



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