

Tools News Techniques

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Blackout Cover

Pros

- + Durable
- + Inexpensive
- + Easy to use

Cons

- None

Buddy Covers

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The Blackout Cover is a lightweight, water-repellent, form-fitting spandex "sock" that you can use for those training sessions where you want to black out an SCBA.



Blacked Out

Buddy Covers' Blackout Covers allow for safe & realistic training with your SCBA

By Greg Jakubowski

One of the classic, time-tested drills that firefighters like to perform involves covering their facemasks to eliminate their sense of sight, and conducting a room or building search. For the visual impairment part of the task, I've seen people wear a protective hood backward or even place aluminum foil over their facemasks. Of course, the old standby, filling a room with smoke, is the most realistic way to prepare firefighters for what they might experience in a fire building.

The problem is that each of these methods of inhibiting visibility has a drawback.

- Filling a room with smoke can be extremely difficult. To use real smoke, you may need a permit, which isn't even available in many places. And theatrical smoke requires a smoke machine, which many departments don't have; the smoke doesn't necessarily reduce visibility enough; and the area needs to be ventilated thoroughly when finished.
- Turning a hood backward can stretch the elastic, damaging the hood. Plus, it may not fully restrict visibility.
- And aluminum foil? Come on—you're wearing \$1,500 turnout gear and a \$4,000 breathing apparatus. Foil just doesn't work well enough.

Fortunately, the folks at Buddy Covers have come up with a product that can black out the SCBA mask in a simple fashion. Buddy Covers' Blackout Cover is a lightweight, water-repellent, form-fitting spandex "sock" that you can use for those training sessions where you want to black out an SCBA



PHOTOS COURTESY BUDDY COVERS

Buddy Covers' newest model—the Blackout Cover with Air Hole—has a hole in it so users can hook up the airline, blacking out the mask and also allowing firefighters to be on air during the drill to make it more realistic.

facepiece—a great alternative to any makeshift tool.

The original Blackout Covers (\$30) are fast and easy to use, including donning and doffing, and they enabled us to effectively black out firefighters' masks during a search-and-rescue training drill that lasted the duration of an SCBA bottle.

A new model—the Blackout Cover with Air Hole (\$35)—has a hole in it so users can hook up the airline, blacking out the mask and also allowing firefighters to be on air during the drill to make it more realistic.

Interestingly, Buddy Covers products were initially developed to protect sports equipment, such as football helmets, skis, snowboards, baseball bats and golf clubs. But fortunately for us, the company expanded into the first responder market. They actually make a couple of other products for first responders—a Kit

Cover, which is essentially a general ditty bag that separates and protects various tools (\$50), and an SCBA Mask Cover (\$25). A nice, ancillary product that may be worth exploring for anyone who needs to keep boots, shoes or other items dry and insect-and/or dirt-free are Buddy Covers' Boot Covers (\$35). They breathe well, letting air in but keeping moisture out.

The Buddy Covers products are very durable. We actually tried to rip them with our hands with no success—it seemed difficult to damage the products. One nice bonus is that all of the Buddy Cover products are machine- and hand-washable.

So if you like to conduct these drills with your firefighters, the Blackout Cover can simplify the set-up. In short, it's a simple tool that does a nice job.

Greg Jakubowski is a fire protection engineer and certified safety professional with 32 years of fire-service experience. He is a Pennsylvania State Fire Instructor, serves as chief of the Lingohocken Fire Company in Bucks County, Pa., and is a member of the IAFC. Jakubowski is also a principal in Fire Planning Associates, a company dedicated to helping fire departments, municipalities and businesses with pre-emergency planning.

News

The Beginnings of Cultural Change

Fewer LODDs prove safety measures are working, but there's still work to be done

By Jane Jerrard

In January, the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) released provisional statistics on 2010 line of duty deaths (LODDs) in the fire service. The good news: The number of on-duty deaths is the lowest ever since the USFA began tracking fatalities in 1977. The bad news: Many of these deaths were clearly preventable—meaning that firefighters are still dying needlessly on the job.

LOWER NUMBERS, HIGHER AWARENESS

According to the USFA data, 85 firefighters died on scene in 2010. That's a 6% decrease from the previous year. (Note that this is provisional data; the USFA expects to release final statistics on 2010 LODDs in July.)

Fire organizations with a safety mission are examining the provisional data carefully. "Both 2009 and 2010 had a significant reduction to the number of line-of-duty deaths reported," says Chief Ron Siarnicki, executive director of the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation (NFFF). "I truly believe that this is the beginning of a cultural change that the

fire service as a whole has been generating—to work smarter, and work safer."

What are the reasons behind this positive trend? "I can attribute the lower numbers to the Internet," says William Goldfeder, deputy chief of the Loveland-Symmes (Ohio) Fire Department, and a contributing editor for *FireRescue* magazine. "It's through the Internet that the IAFF, NVFC, NFFF and other organizations have been able to get their information out better than through individual fire departments. Lessons learned, close calls, safety training—all of this can be found online." Goldfeder adds, "That said, it takes the local fire department to do something with that information."

Siarnicki agrees that more departments are getting the message. He says, "Everyone Goes Home started in 2004, and I think it is a part of the catalyst that got this change going. Of course, other groups have messages too; it's a system-wide approach to safety." Rich Marinucci is program director of the NFFF's Everyone Goes Home program. He notes, "There are a lot of different agencies that have safety programs; a lot of people are paying attention to this issue—and the National Fallen Firefighters Foundation tries to coordinate all these efforts to make sure we're not duplicating messages."

Marinucci knows his program is working because he gets direct feedback from firefighters who have made changes. "We hear back from some of our participants sometimes who acted on what they learned: 'I went to my doctor and he said my cholesterol was too high, so now I'm on medication and trying to lose weight ...' or 'I remembered what you said, so I wear my seatbelt now and we were in a wreck ...' Those are really encouraging to us. We'll never know if we really saved someone, but it does make a difference," Marinucci says.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

No one is resting on their laurels over the decrease in LODDs. Marinucci states, "I'm never satisfied. There are still some areas that appear to be preventable—I see [in the report] between seven and 11 firefighters who were not wearing seatbelts, for example. We



Tragic Trends

The USFA provisional data shows that firefighter fatalities in 2010 included:

- 51 from heart attacks and strokes (60%)
- 11 in vehicle crashes (12.9%)
- 8 in association with wildland fires (9.41%)
- 7 during training exercises (8.23%)
- 5 struck by vehicles (5.88%)