

How to Become a Fire Photographer

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So you want to become a fire photographer? Meaning, someone who takes pictures of firefighters in action, at structure fires and other incidents. Basically, a combination fire buff and photojournalist.

For the purposes of this document, we're presuming that these are civilians. They might have prior experience as a responder—or agency affiliation therein—but they're not presently active as one.

What about active responders who are taking pictures on- or off-duty? Much of this information is applicable, but there are probable gaps. Such as the policy and legal considerations for someone taking pictures of their own department in action, and how they use or share those photos.

Also worth asking, is anyone with a camera at a fire automatically a "fire photographer?" Of course not. The label applies to someone with a set of demonstrated skills and practiced standards. They're adept at getting good shots, telling a good story, and sharing appropriate imagery. They're agile on scene and know where to stand and where not to stand. They work with the responders and their community and not against them.

Does that still sound interesting and exciting? Then let's proceed with what we'll call a direct download of Mike's brain.

You have been warned.

Short Version

How to become a fire photographer

Three easy steps:

1. Visit fire scenes.
2. Take pictures
3. Post pictures.

Or with slightly more explanation:

1. Visit fire scenes.
2. Take pictures from public perspective.
3. Post pictures/share pictures with fire department.
4. Develop relationship(s) with firefighters and fire department.
5. Develop mastery of technical skills for photojournalistic techniques required for shooting fires.
6. Learn about fires and fire departments, to better choose what you're photographing.
7. Learn and demonstrate how to edit and parse pictures, to respect privacy of victims and promote positive image/actions of firefighters.
8. Learn and demonstrate how to conduct yourself at a fire scene, to minimize impact on operations.
9. Earn permission to take pictures from "inside the tape."

Considerations:

- Will you be posting your pictures using social media? If yes, become familiar with technologies, practical, ethical, and legal considerations.
- Will you be submitting your pictures to local news media, as citizen contribution?
- Will you be selling your pictures to local news media?
- Will you be using your pictures in other commercial contexts?

- Will you provide copies of your pictures to responders, as a rule or by special request?
- Etc.

Very Long Version

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About This Document

- Notes and advice from the perspective of Mike Legeros.
- He's a fire photographer in Raleigh, NC, with ten-plus years of experience.
- He's been shooting in the city and county and alongside a second and longer-serving fire photographer. Thus, the responders in this area were already "camera friendly" to a degree.
- He's had official credentials from fire and EMS for most of that time. He also had prior experience as a city firefighter (from long ago) and existing relationships with local responders from that and prior book and historical work.
- His pictures have always been publically posted on the Internet, on a personal web site. In recent years, they've also been published via social media.
- Mike freely gives copies and permission to produce his photos to the responders depicted therein. His images are frequently used for local, regional, and even national purposes, ranging from internal training documents to city/county annual reporters to the Responder Safety Network.
- His pictures have also appeared in a few industry text books and a number of industry magazines.
- He does NOT submit his photos to local news agencies, either as a "stringer" or as a "viewer photo." However, he'll occasionally submit (and craft postings) for fire news-based web sites.
- Mike takes pictures at both fire and EMS incidents, as well as training and special events. Plus stock picture needs, typically for printed or bound materials.
- He rarely "holds back pictures" intended solely for the emergency responders. (Thus doesn't photograph deceased persons, wounds on patients, blood stains or splatter, etc.)
- He is NOT a forensic photographer, though his pictures are provided to arson investigators as needed.
- Raleigh is not a burning city. Most of his fire scene photos are "after control" or during overhaul. When he shoots a working fire, they are often quickly controlled. Multi-hour conflagrations are extremely rare. Just a couple times for him. Nothing like the "big workers" in northeastern cities, for example.
- His web site is www.legeros.com/firepics. Or see his "best of" annual compilations at <https://www.flickr.com/photos/legeros/collections/72157600578692511>.

There are other types of fire photographers, of course. They include:

- Photogs who shoot only structure fires or fire-related incidents, but avoid vehicle accidents or medical calls.
- Photogs who take pictures exclusively for agency use, and don't publically share their images.
- Photogs who post a portion of their pictures, per incident, but provide copies of all shots to the responders.
- Photogs who sell their images to news agencies, or use for other commercial purposes. They may post their pictures, most, some, or just a couple.

- Photographers who serve in a forensic or investigative capacity. Their pictures are rarely publically shared, but used for internal or legal purposes.
- Etcetera.

Mike's tools and techniques?

- Pair of Canon DSLR cameras.
- iPhone 6.
- Shoots still images almost exclusively.
- Occasionally shoots video clips, typically one or two 10/30/60 second clips. Sometimes he compiles multiple short clips into a single video file for posting.

Mike has presented or participated in workshops on this topic twice, for the North Carolina State Firemen's Association annual convention. [See his slides.](#)

Minimum requirements

These things are probably are the minimum that's required, to get you started or ensure a good path that's followed:

- Start with passion. Fire photography (and fire buffing) is a niche vocation. The more burning desire (pun intended) that you have, the farther you'll probably go.
- Know those who you're photographing and who will be seeing your photos. Forging a strong connection with your local responders will prove very useful.
- Have or develop the technical skills to create good pictures, from lighting and exposure to composition to post-processing.
- Be sensitive to what you're shooting, and what you're representing through the pictures that you make. Not every photo needs to be shared with every person.
- Get the shot. Strive for the best position possible while not endangering yourself or others, nor impeding operations. (The best fire photographers are assets and not liabilities.)
- Walk away as needed. There's always another incident, for those times that social pressures or legal questions (or issues) or personal (or official) confrontations present themselves.

Technical camera skills

- First and foremost, how are your camera skills?
 - Are your pictures in proper focus and with proper lighting and exposure?
 - Can you capture faster-moving action and without blur?
 - Do you understand flash techniques, such as fill flash for daylight shots?
 - Can you create depth of field effects, such as close and far objects both in focus?
 - Etcetera.
- Do you understand the modes of your camera?
 - Automatic, Program Shift, Shutter Priority, Aperture Priority, and Manual?
 - Disclaimer. Mike doesn't use manual mode and still hasn't learned how.
 - His Canon DLSR cameras are always on "Program Shift" with the occasional switch to Aperture Priority, for night shots with low lighting.
- What's the best way to learn or improve camera skills?
- Take tons of photos.
- Anywhere, everywhere.
- Day, night, rain, shine, up high, down low, facing light, deep in shadows, up close, far away.

Compositional skills

- Can you create a well-composed photo?
 - Meaning, are the "things in the picture" arranged in a way that produces the best shot or the best intention of what the shot is trying to show?
 - Google "composition and photography" for more detailed explanations and advice therein.
- What's the best way to learn composition?
 - Again, take tons of photos.

- Also, look at lots of other people's photos.
- What do you like or not like? What works or doesn't work?
- Also try revisiting your own photos.
 - Return to a set of pictures taken X weeks or months ago.
 - Quickly skim through them.
 - Stop at any those that jump out at you.
 - Not because they're associated with the experience of what was happening in the shot, but because they strike your eye.
 - Those pictures are the ones that are likely well-composed.

Photojournalism skills

- Next is the ability to tell a story through pictures.
 - Combination of shots and shot elements.
 - Setting and context.
 - Major players.
 - Minor players.
 - Before, during, after.
 - "Money shots."
 - Colorful or unusual details.
 - People and their emotions.
 - Etc.
- Which translates to such skills as:
 - Ability to capture action (and often fast-moving action) as it happens.
 - Having your camera ready (and pointing in the right direction) for when action is about to happen.
 - Analogous (a bit) to sports photography.
 - Ability to perform in varied conditions: heat, cold, light, dark, sun, rain, smoke, etc.
 - Ability to perform in changing conditions, within a situation that's dynamic and saturated with excitement, movement, danger, emotion, exertion, exhaustion, and more.
- Let's take a house fire.
 - The "thing" is the burning building, right?
 - Point in the direction of the flames and fire away, right? Yes and no.
 - What's happening before, behind, or around that burning building?
 - Who is fighting the fire versus watching the fire versus reacting to the fire?
 - What does the larger picture look like?
 - Is the house alone on a huge lot, or sitting in a row of clustered dwellings?
 - Etc.
- As for action, it's just the guys and gals with the hoses, right?
 - Stop for a moment and look around.
 - There's other that's happening, from pump operators at the trucks to chief officers at the command post to law enforcement officers directing traffic.
 - Over there are spectators, pointing to and talking about the fire.
 - Over here are the firefighters in rehab, being tended to by medical personnel.
 - Etc.

Fire photography skills

There are also some technical issues specific to photographing fire and flames. They include:

- Flames at night.
 - Worst case scenario?
 - Bright flames amid surrounding darkness.
 - Have to control for differences in exposure, between the bright object (fire) in the frame with dark objects (everything else).
 - Compensate by adjusting metering, exposure.
 - Compensate by adding more light, to brighten surroundings and reduce contrast.

- Best case scenario?
 - Street lights or scene lights (from apparatus) have brightened surroundings, and contrast is reduced.
- Reflective stripes and surfaces.
 - Most noticeable at night, when using your flash.
 - Stripes on coats and helmets (and apparatus) glow much brighter than surroundings.
 - Can also happen in daylight photos, if using fill flash.
- Hazy smoke
 - Can interfere with camera's ability to focus.
 - Can become opaque when illuminated by flash.
 - Can obscure what's being seen in the shot, though can be improved in post-processing.
- Rain
 - Fires happen when it's raining.
 - Mike uses a large umbrella on scene, held in crook of arm.
 - Alternately, he'll hold with one hand, and operate camera with other hand.
- Weather sealing
 - Weather sealed cameras and lenses are less likely to experience damage from atmosphere elements on the fireground.
 - They are also more expensive.

Processing and posting skills

- Once you've taken those photos, you'll do things:
 - process the pictures (to make them look better, if needed)
 - post the pictures (so other people can see them).
- Processing
 - More appropriately called post-processing.
 - Means any alterations to the image, after it's copied from the camera.
 - Once you press the shutter, the "raw" digital information is stored on the memory card.
 - If your camera saves images as JPEG, the camera will also perform processing on the image.
 - Check the camera's settings to control components of the processing.
 - If your camera saves images as RAW, no processing will be performed on the image.
 - Once copied to your computer, RAW images require at least some processing to match the quality of a JPEG image produced by the same camera.
 - Why save images as RAW? Google for an explanation.
- Once you copy the pictures to your computer, how do they look?
 - Do they need to be lightened or darkened?
 - Does the tint or colors in the image need adjustment?
 - Does the entire image need any slight rotating, to straighten same?
 - Are you cropping the image, to improve the composition?
 - Are there defects in the picture that you want to "digitally airbrush?"
 - (There are two notable approaches here.
 - Be a bit sloppy when you shoot, then correct later.
 - Or be more exact as you shoot, to minimize or negate any "after work.")
- Create second versions for sharing
 - Will you be sharing (or posting) the high-resolution originals?
 - If not, you'll create second versions of each image.
 - Smaller dimensions and lower resolution.
 - Smaller file size as well, which helps with sharing.
 - When to share high- versus low-resolution versions?
 - High-resolution is best for printing photographic prints, as well as usage in printed materials like books and magazines.
 - High-resolution is also best for viewing small details in photos, which will be blurred in lower resolution versions.
 - Lower resolution is better for viewing on web pages, downloading as screen savers, and printing on paper.
 - Google can help here with "resolution," "DPI", and other concepts.
- What does Mike do?
 - DLSR photos are saved as Canon RAW.

Second set of images is created for web posting.

- JPEG format.
- 800 pixels wide on longest side
- 200 DPI.
- This is unsuitable for producing photographic prints, however.
- For people who want photographic prints, Mike provides full-size versions (with 300 DPI).
- Also, Mike never uses a watermark.
 - Some people label their fire photos, either in the corner or the center of the image.
 - Mike has never done that.
 - Google for examples.
- Finally, you'll want to post your pictures, e.g. making available for public viewing on a web site.
- Couple ways to approach this.
 - Use a photo posting web site, such as Flickr.
 - Mike uses same for some of his photos.
 - Easy to use, both for uploading and for browsing.
- Or, if you already have a web site, add "photo album functionality."
 - Mike does this for most of his photos.
 - Program called Jalbum.
 - Creates individual photo albums for each incident or event.
 - Generates the HTML, which Mike incorporates by hand.
 - Posted to www.legeros.com/firepics
- Facebook is another option
 - Mike does this as a secondary means of posting photos.
 - Such as teaser images.
 - Or subsets of an album, but with people-centric photos.
 - Benefits?
 - Insanely easy to post photos to Facebook.
 - Viewers can also comment upon and easily share photos.
 - Limitations?
 - Privacy settings, depending how "open" your Facebook page is.
 - Though you can create a "public link" to any given album that does not require the viewer to use Facebook to view.
 - Long and unwieldy URLs to albums.
 - Bit clunky to view albums and photos therein.

Picking and choosing photos

From snapping to posting, that's the entire life cycle. Soup to nuts.

- But let's press pause and talk about an intermediary step.
- This belongs between "processing" and "posting."
- (Though it also applies on the fireground itself, and when you're choosing whether or not to take the picture.)
- What pictures should you keep or discard?
- What pictures should you share or withhold?

Part I

- First, let's talk about quality versus quantity.
 - Mike has evolved over the years, and his number of "keepers" is fewer and fewer after a particular fire.
 - To his ever-improving eye, the shots just don't look as good.
 - For example, he's not a fan of blur.
 - Thus rarely post photos that are notably "soft" or outright fuzzy.
 - Same with poor composition.
 - Such as "merging lines." Google for explanation.
- Do my viewers have an eye as discriminating as mine? Probably not.
 - They'd probably love a slightly fuzzy shot of themselves in an otherwise good action pose.

On the other hand, what would someone with a "really good eye" think of the my photos?

- He'd probably see a handful of really strong shots and that's about it.
- Different philosophies.
- Share everything that's not awful, dozens or hundreds.
- Share only the best/good/not bad, a few dozen or several dozen
- Shoot only the best of the best. Maybe a dozen or fewer "great shots".
- Mike's thoughts on this?
 - As a fire photographer, he's doing a couple things at once.
 - Attempting to create art, but also producing documentation.
 - For the purposes of "showing what happened," that means a lot of "suitable" photos.
 - They're fine for what's needed, but won't win any prizes.
 - That's okay for him.

Part II

Next, let's talk about the content of your pictures. Some questions to ask yourself:

- Does this photo make the responder look good?
 - Does it make them look bad?
 - If the latter, what purpose is being served by sharing the picture?
 - Mind you, there are gradations of "bad".
 - Charged supply line spilling out of a hose bed is BAD.
 - One person out of several without a safety vest is bad.
 - Wait, what about the ethics of photojournalism, you say?
 - Shouldn't the visual truth be told, regardless?
 - Not necessarily.
 - You're functioning as a fire photographer and not a news photographer.
 - You're serving a purpose that is aligned more toward "value to the responders" than "value to the general public."
 - Feel free to debate.
- Are correct procedures and safe operations depicted?
 - Or do they demonstrate cut corners or outright unsafe practices?
 - This relates to the prior point.
 - And yet... pictures of "wrong things" can also add value.
 - Yes, they often embarrassing or "trouble getting" to the person or party involved.
 - But they're also excellent as a warning or teachable moment to others.
 - What does Mike do?
 - He tries to sweat the small stuff, and adjusting his shooting (or posting) to eliminate "personal mistakes" (if you will).
 - But, say, larger operational oops are going to be captured, across the scope of many pictures.
 - Also, he sometimes learns of "oops" after the fact, or even long after the fact.
 - Mike's primary focus on scene is taking pictures.
 - He's not a chief officer nor safety officer, and isn't necessarily watching for all things and all ways those things are performed.
 - Comes with the territory.
 - You'll hear later, sometimes years later, about how someone "got in trouble" because of a photo that showed them doing X or not wearing Y.
- Will the pictures be distressing to the public?
 - Are you showing (or preparing to show) blood 'n' guts, or other things that may shock a lay person?
 - Yes, yes, the audience for your pictures is the responder community.
 - The general public is not necessarily the intended audience.
 - But if posting the pictures anywhere even quasi-public (like Facebook), exclude such photos.
 - That's Mike's opinion.
 - There are just too many potential problems that can result.
 - It's a bit like Murphy's Law.
 - If there's a chance that the "wrong person" will find a posted photo, they probably will find the photo.
 - Don't expend your energies on the control and distribution side.
 - Instead, "do right" from the start.

- What does Mike do?
 - That's easy.
 - He never takes pictures of blood 'n' guts.
 - Meaning, if there's an injured or deceased person on the scene, he composes his shots to exclude any gore.
 - What about, say, bodies under sheets?
 - Those may be included in shots, but will likely be omitted from posted versions.
 - Other things that Mike treats as sensitive:
 - strong displays of distress or grief in people, particularly in close-up;
 - smiling or laughing responders in the context of emergency scenes;
 - displays of flesh, such as victims or bystanders who are wearing minimal clothing.

Other considerations:

- Will your pictures cause distress to the responders?
 - - This is a little different, and relates to special subject matter.
 - Such as, say, a vehicle accident that injures or kills a responder. Or responder's family member
 - Even as tastefully shot, the entire set of photos may be too distressing to warrant posting.
 - Mike notes, this is fairly rare, if not exceptionally rare.
 - More common are "run of the mill" and occasionally serious emergency vehicle accidents.
 - Because he knows or has personal relationships with all local fire and EMS chiefs, Mike usually will ask ahead of time.
 - "Hey, I took photos at that accident. Do you have concerns about me posting photos?"
 - Etc.
 - Are you concealing information that can identify any patients, in the interest of medical privacy, HIPAA, et al?
 - This is something that Mike does.
 - He hides the faces of patients receiving treatment, either through framing or blurring added in post-processing.
 - This is not a requirement of photojournalists, mind you, whose photos are published by news media.
 - There's a longer and more detailed conversation to have here, for responders taking pictures on scene, and what they should or should not share with the public.

Familiarity with emergency services

Another piece of the puzzle is understanding what happens at emergency scenes.

- Such as...
 - What are the vehicles used for, and how are they positioned?
 - What do the various people do, in their various roles?
 - How is equipment used?
 - What tactics are performed?
 - Etc.
- Having work or buff experience in fire and EMS greatly helps in this regard.
 - You'll already understand the sequential flow of actions and activities on scene.
 - You'll also know better versus worse places to be physically present.
 - e.g., how to stay out of the way, and, more importantly, out of danger.
- Danger?
 - There are a couple classes of danger, or physical risk, as we'll call it.
 - Direct contact with fire and flames and collapsing walls should be exceptionally rare, for new or seasoned fire photographers.
 - Don't be that close to the building!
- More likely are collision hazards, if your physical person gets too close to moving people or vehicles.
 - Firefighters carry heavy objects around the fireground.
 - Wear a helmet as you watch your surroundings.
 - Long pike poles and long ladders are obvious hazards. For example.
- Also, the more familiar that you become with emergency services, the better you'll understand what responders value in photographs.
 - Those things worth showing and sharing, versus those things best left "un-shown."

Radio monitoring

How do you learn about emergency calls, so you can respond and take pictures?

- There are a couple ways.
 - You can hang around the fire station, and follow the trucks in your personal vehicle.
 - If the department uses a siren to alert its members, you can listen for the big blow, and head in that direction.
 - If the department uses pagers AND you are affiliated with them, you may be given one and have ready access to information about calls.
- For more new fire photographers, however, you'll be "listening to the radio."
- Meaning, listening to a scanning radio (or scanner) that monitors the frequencies used by the department(s).
- In recent years, scanning applications for mobile phones and computers have become available.
 - These let you listen live (and for free) to radio calls, via an Internet connection.
 - These are a great start but have some limitations.
 - Notably, you can only hear one broadcast and on one channel at a time.
 - And if someone is talking on a "tactical channel" (about activities happening at an incident), you won't be able to hear any traffic on a "dispatch channel" (used to announce calls).
 - Also, you cannot click a SCAN button, to bypass the current transmission and continue scanning for other transmissions.
 - Such as firefighters directing traffic on one talkgroup, while you're waiting to hear the first arriving engine at a reported structure fire on another talkgroup.
- Having a physical scanner can help.
 - You can program the dispatch channels to override the tactical channels, as a "priority."
 - The upside? You won't miss any dispatched calls.
 - The downside? You might miss important tactical information, while "less interesting" calls are being dispatched.
- Another solution is multiple scanners.
 - Mike uses three scanners at once.
 - One monitors tactical channels only.
 - One monitors city fire dispatch only.
 - One monitors county fire dispatch only.
 - He does NOT monitor EMS dispatch, because Raleigh and Wake County have first responder programs.
 - Thus fire units are dispatched to all priority (and, for him, notable) EMS incidents.
- How much do scanning radios cost?
 - The VHF-only radios, for city and county fire dispatch, are available in the \$100 range each.
 - The 800MHz "digital trunking" radio required for tactical channels costs \$350-\$550 or so.
 - You could also bypass the last step, and use a scanner application for tactical channel monitoring.
 - That is, provided there are live scanner feeds for your area, that included tactical channels but exclude dispatch channels.
- Dispatch versus tactical traffic?
- Dispatch traffic: "Wake Forest Engine 1, respond to a vehicle fire at 100 Main Street."
- Tactical traffic:
 - "Wake Forest Engine 1 is responding"
 - "Engine 1 has arrived. This is a structure fire, not a vehicle fire. Send a full assignment."
 - "Engine 1 has found a fire in the kitchen, and is advancing a line through the front door, with two people."
 - "Fire is under control."
 - "Wake Forest fire units are clearing the scene on Main Street."
 - Etc.

Responding

- Getting to the scene.
- For most new fire photographers, this means in a civilian vehicle and without any emergency lights or legal usage therein.
- Channel the rising excitement and rushing adrenaline from your mind to your body.
 - Slow down.
 - Stop at lights.
 - Don't rush.
 - Don't break laws.
 - Don't be stupid.

- Use the time to think about where you're headed, what you'll be shooting, what will be happening on scene.
- Mike notes that it gets easier.
 - Or calmer.
 - Mostly.
 - But his heart still races when there's a working fire or major fire in the vicinity and he's but minutes away.
 - Even after ten-plus years of chasing calls.

On scene

Some of this was covered in the prior Familiarity section.

Part I - Arriving

- When parking, consider leaving at least two hydrants between you and the structure fire.
 - Reduces your chances of being blocked in, by subsequently laid supply lines.
 - Consider parking a solid block away (or more) from the scene, with plenty of room ahead of your vehicle, so additional arriving units have places to park.
 - Again, reduces your chances of being blocked in.
- Obviously, don't hinder the movements or parking of arriving units.
 - What if you're the first one at a working fire?
 - Flames erupting! Sirens in the distance! What to do?
 - Don't park in front of the house, stupid.
 - Step out of your car, snap a couple pictures, get back in the thing, and move your car a block or more.
- Once parked, grab your gear and go.
 - Have an official vest or coat or uniform?
 - Wear the thing, even if it's tempting to skip it and just run right ahead.
 - Mike keeps a couple things in his trunk, for all-weather fire photography.
 - Pair of sneakers,
 - pair of fire boots,
 - pair of steel-toed shoes,
 - pair of socks, and a
 - jumpsuit.
 - All can be donned over or in place of his shirt 'n' shorts 'n' sandals, during warmer months.
 - Don't forget to fill your pockets:
 - Spare battery or two.
 - Spare memory card or two.
 - Portable scanning radio (if you have one).
 - Etc.

Part II - Conduct

- Again, don't get in the way of the responders.
 - Experience on and familiarity with fire scenes will help you here, as you learn what actions are coming next, and where people will be moving/walking.
 - Mike likes to standing with his back to utility poles. Good spot that isn't (usually) blocking anyone's path of walking.
 - Even easier is putting the responders between you and the incident!
 - For most new fire photographers, being "inside the tape" isn't an option.
 - You'll be limited to "behind the lines" and out of immediate disruptive way.
- Observe a respectful distance between your camera and your subject.
 - This varies based on the person being photographed, and the situation being shot.
 - Seriously injured or deceased persons, notably in vehicle accidents, often produce "camera sensitivity."
 - You'll observe concern from responders, bystanders, and family, friends, or others involved in the incident.
- What about fatal fires?
 - The scope and size of these incidents are larger, and there's usually less camera sensitivity therein.
 - And there's a world of difference between shooting street pictures of a burning building,
 - versus shooting close to the room or part of the building where the deceased person was found, and related activities are

underway for, say, investigation or body removal.

- Move around the scene
 - Don't spend your entire time in Division Alpha (the front of the fire building).
 - Move around to each side.
 - Go behind the structure.
 - Pictures from all sides can help tell a better story.

Agency affiliation

As you develop your skills and practice your craft, you may have the opportunity to become affiliated with one or more fire departments.

- You might approach them, they might approach you.
 - Or, you may prefer to remain unaffiliated.
 - Alternately, you might prefer to remain unaffiliated.
 - Perhaps you're taking fire photos for commercial purposes and it creates (to you or to others) a conflict of interest.
- Agency affiliation can have such benefits as:
 - Official credentials that can help with identification and access at emergency scenes.
 - Closer access on the fireground (e.g., getting "inside the tape").
 - Better personal relationships with their members.
 - Access to information about incidents and events. Such as incident notifications, or news of training events, such as live burns.
- Agency affiliation can also include obligations.
 - Times when "what they want" supersedes "what you want".
 - Such as a picture or entire incident that you've photographed.
 - You're excited about the pictures and want to post.
 - They have other concerns and request no posting.
 - For example, fire apparatus involved in traffic accident.
 - Or when your presence is requested for taking pictures.
 - Such as a major incident or special event.
 - Requires adjusting your current or planned activities on the fly.
 - (Thus the value of having two or even three available fire photographers, for a particular agency.)
 - Or when you're asked to take (or not take) specific pictures.
 - "Hey, will you get some shots of the truck placement" or "this exposure damage over here" or "a picture of our crew."
 - Or the particularly popular "don't take a picture of me because I am
 - (a.) not wearing a vest
 - (b.) not wearing my helmet
 - (c.) not wearing my PPE
 - (d.) not supposed to be here."
 - Mike has observed a magical mystery effect, where helmets and safety vests magically appear at roadway incidents, after he appears carrying a camera. What's up with that?
- What are Mike's affiliations?
 - Raleigh Fire Department and Wake County EMS, both agency and system
 - Provided credentials including identification cards and branded personal protective equipment (notably safety vests).
 - By using and wearing these things, he bears the responsibility of responsible behavior therein.

Social media

Introduction

- Do you plan to use social media to share your photos?
- Are thus experienced using Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or other channel?
- What does Mike use and/or recommend?

Part I - Photos as they happen

- Often but not always, Mike posts a couple "real time" photos at incidents and events.
- Phone photos, typically shot from same vantage point as his camera photos.

- First caution. Phone screen (viewed on scene) is smaller than computer monitor (viewed at home). Check posted photos after you're home, to ensure that they're sufficient quality (not blurry) and showing appropriate content (nothing needing deletion).
- Second caution. Mike has learned to take his camera pictures FIRST, and then his phone pictures.
 - Otherwise, he can become distracted and move into position for the next shot, and without taking the more valuable camera photo.
 - (More valuable because camera photos are almost always better looking and higher quality than phone photos.)
- Mike posts real-time photos to Twitter and Facebook.
 - He doesn't use Instagram.
- Twitter has a limit of four photos per Tweet, so Mike will often shoot (or choose) four representative photos.
 - For larger (or more photogenic) incidents, he'll post a second and even third Tweet with photos.
 - He'll repeat the photos on Facebook, either in a dedicated album that he creates for the incident (occasionally) or for his monthly "Fire & EMS album" (most of the time).
 - He also posts barebones incident details to Twitter, and may copy and paste into the Facebook posting.

Part II – Photos after posted in albums

- Mike also uses social media to promote posted photos, on legeros.com or his Flickr site.
- Posts to Twitter the album title and link, and either a single photo or a 2x2 montage of photos.
- Posts to Facebook a similar announcement. Either about a specific album, or a note about multiple albums newly posted at www.legeros.com/firepics.

Part III – Before you post that fire photo to Facebook

[Read blog posting](#) of mine from March 2015.

Other thoughts

Notification Services

- There are also fire-based notification services in places around the country.
- Such as Carolinas Fire Page (CFP) in the Carolinas.
- Mike is a longtime member of CFP, both for notifications and contributing incident information.
- Highly recommended for anyone chasing calls. Helps augment local monitoring that you're doing (and invariably learning of an incident that you didn't catch).
- Also good for travel or just monitoring what's happening in other geographic locales.

Apparatus photography

- There are a ton of people who focus on fire apparatus and emergency vehicles.
- They may occasionally shoot fire scenes, but specialize in posed truck photos.
- Mike has no advice on this front.
- Jeff Harkey and FireNews.net did a super feature on this subject around 2006.
- [Here's an archived version of same](#), via the WayBack Machine.
- [See also this article](#) by Dennis Maag for Fire Apparatus Journal, from a few years back.

Drone photography

- Mike has not (yet) used a UAV to take aerial photos.
- Maybe someday, and maybe someday soon.
- Don't have much advice here.
- Emergency services and particularly chief officers are seeing increasing value in these tools and aerial footage therein, both as live inputs and for subsequent review and training purposes.
- However, both responders and the general public have strong opinions about "drones" and how such photography relates to privacy.
- Also, FAA regulations are evolving about their legality.
- And on a side note, drones and wildfires don't mix, see this [blog post of mine](#).

Posing people

- Is it gauche to take pictures of responders who are posing?
- Is it bad form for firefighters to pose for a picture?
- Yes, no, maybe. At a minimum, it's probably a puzzlement to property owners or patients, who are feeling the opposite of enthusiasm at that moment.
- (Responders greatly enjoy their work and it always shows.)
- What happens when someone takes a picture, of you taking a picture of smiling, posing firemen?
- (Or worse, picture of a responder taking a "selfie" at a fire or emergency.)
- That's a tough one to explain to those outside the profession.
- What does Mike do?
- When he sees a crew or group of responders standing together, he discretely snaps a couple shots.
- And advises his popular phrase "don't smile."

Storing Pictures

- How should you store all those digital pictures that you'll be accumulating?
- Ideally, have enough disk space from the get go.
- Versus needing to expand after two months or six months of shooting.
- Eventually, you're going to have a massive collection of pictures.
- Do you stored them on a single computer? Do you add one or more hard drives? Do you store them "on the cloud" and/or using a Digital Asset Management system?
- There are a couple needs to address, including:
- File access. Can you readily access the files? Are they are a click or two away, versus, say, connecting one or more hard drives otherwise stored in a closet.
- File finding. Can you easily find images that you're looking for? Are all the pictures in a single directory? Are they stored across folders that are named or organized in a logical or hierarchical fashion? Do the file names contain additional identifying information?
- Metadata. Meaning, information about images, such date taken, location of picture, agencies on scene. (EXIF data stored with the image will help on the time/date front.)
- Protection, in the event of a disk crash, your house burns down, nuclear holocaust, etc.
- What does Mike do?
- For storage, he has a pair of 4TB hard drives on his home computer. They are mirrored, so each is a real-time duplicate of the other. Periodically, he creates a copy of that disk, and stores in a fire safe. He also creates a second copy, and stores off-site, at a second physical location.
- For organization, he has a single folder for all fire photos. Then subfolders for each year. Then subfolders for each incident.
- For identifying images, he uses Flash Renamer. This is a third-party program for quickly renaming files. He renames every photo using this format: date + agency name + street name + image number + initials. Example: 2010-03-03-rfd-main-st-01-mjl. (Why such long file names? So I can easily search on dates, agencies, and street names to find files. My initials are added to help identify one of my photos as one of mine.) See this blog posting from March 2010 for more about [my photography workflow](#).
- For finding images, he uses the standard Windows search. Does a search on, say, "rfd" to find all Raleigh FD pictures. Or a search on a street name, or other descriptor used in his file name.

Legal Issues

- Not a lawyer, don't play one on television.
- Public photography is not a crime.
- Trespassing onto private property is a crime.
- Using photographs in certain ways (such as commercial use of a person's likeness) can be a crime.
- Someone else can address these issues.

HIPAA

- Health Information Portability and Accountability Act.
- Commonly misspelled HIPPA.
- HIPPA is a law that places responsibility specifically on healthcare providers and their associated partners (e.g. record keepers, insurance companies, etc.).
- The law does not apply to people or organizations that do not provide medical care or manage information therein.
- For example, a newspaper is not a healthcare provider, and therefore a newspaper can identify and discusses the specifics of a patient

receiving medical care if they have that information.

- HIPAA does not and never applies to pictures taken by civilians in any place, at any time. That includes at accidents, inside ambulances, or inside hospitals.
- The law absolutely applies to any agency that provides medical treatment and maintains electronic records therein. That means most fire and EMS agencies.
- Are you a volunteer or paid member of such an organization? If yes, HIPAA applies to you and your actions.

Confrontations

- Don't be surprised if you are confronted by others, in the course of performing fire photography.
- Spectators asking why are you taking pictures, or if you'll take their pictures.
- Property owners or tenants or other civilians impacted by a fire, and perhaps not feeling good about having their picture taken.
- Friends or family members of civilians impacted by a fire or emergency, and with negative feelings about your photography.
- Responders (including law officers) requesting that you stop taking pictures, or move farther away from the scene.
- Mike's advice?
- Be polite.
- Explain your purpose and intentions.
- Ask their advice or recommendation, for best/safest place to take pictures.
- Be prepared to leave the scene, if the confrontation becomes disruptive.
- Mike also notes that displayed credentials, such as his "EMS photo unit" yellow vest, likely minimizes questions and potential confrontations as listed above.

Policy Issues

- Are you a responder that's taking fire photos, either on- or off-duty?
- Check your agency's policies and procedures!
- Nothing in writing? Consider talking to the chief.
- Considerations include taking photos, storing photos, distributing photos, and using photos.

Objections

- What should you do, when someone or several people or a group of people object to an image, or an album of photos?
- Apologies are good.
- Explanations can be helpful.
- Removing and un-posting photos can remedy issues.
- Good discussion point for private conversations.

Contributor Tips

- How do we store our massive collection? We were using a digital asset management system called Razuna, but we're moving away from that. Either Google Photos or Flickr. I'm also thinking a dedicated hard drive with internet access (you can get a 4TB Western Digital MyCloud for about \$150 these days.) (DW)
- One thing you might want to mention is that it would be very helpful to become friendly with the people in-charge of a local or regional training academy. I know you mentioned training but I think becoming heavily involved with a training center is one of the best things a fire photographer or prospective fire photographer can do. It provides a tremendous opportunity to learn your craft under all types of situations and conditions and also to meet many people who can help provide access to fire scenes. (JC)
- For interstate crashes, ALWAYS park ahead of the scene (drive past it and park). You'll be protected by the blocking apparatus, but blocked in by the wreckers. Sometimes, the entire interstate is closed. Righting an overturned tanker, for example. You could be stuck on scene for HOURS if you didn't drive past and park. (JT)
- Asking the responders "Where can I park out of your way" really helps me. Also, asking permission of any home or property owner also helps. Asking "Can I stand in your yard with you" eliminates a lot of issues. (JT)
- Always checking in with the incident commander is important in my county. They have accountability set up and if you're on their scene, they want to know it, since legally they're responsible for you if they've allowed you inside the tape. I always tell them, "Hey, I am here. Let me know if I get in the way" and then "Hey, I am leaving, thank you for allowing me on your scene." (JT)

Acknowledgements

Thanks to these reviewers for feedback. This document wasn't created in a vacuum, and your input is appreciated:

- Bob Bartosz
- Jack Carr (JC)
- Phil Cohen
- Jeffrey Hammerstein
- Jason Thompson (JT)
- Doug Walton (DW)

Thank you the these and SO MANY others, for the many earlier conversations and knowledge sharing that we've done of the years. You all have helped me become a better fire photographer.

Mike, thank you for all of this very valuable information! I will adopt this as our Fire Buff Bible or Operations Manual.

Evan Caulfield ([Web Site](#)) - 07/26/15 - 13:16

This is a fantastic guide – I will have to refer back to it often as I develop my skills. Thank you!

Andrew Pang ([Email](#)) ([Web Site](#)) - 07/29/15 - 19:46

Great resource. Glad it's out there now but would have loved to see this years ago. (I may still share with people as a resource.)

I've got a few additional thoughts that I hope will be helpful, but first a little of my background:

- I'm a lifelong fire buff who started taking fire photos as a kid with my father.
- I spent 2+ years in NYC doing freelance work and buffing FDNY fires.
- After NYC, I moved to Virginia and into journalism full-time for 5-ish years and covered many fires and emergency responses and built some good relationships with responders.
- While I loved journalism, it wasn't a sustainable career for me, so I switched careers to the tech world and took on the role as the PIO for my rural Virginia county fire/rescue department in my spare time. I did this for more than 6 years until this past spring when my tech career took me to Texas.
- Some of my photos: <http://thatis.me/~YAiPi>
- Since I recently moved, I'm currently taking some time away from actively buffing or working with emergency services, but intend to get back into it in the future.

Accessing the scene:

- Urban (based on my time buffing the FDNY)
 - Traffic and parking is a huge challenge.
 - I often biked to scene or took subway and walked.
 - More likely to have authorities (police) limiting scene access. The more onlookers they have to deal with, the greater their need to restrict for safety.
- Rural
 - You've got to think about emergency vehicle access, probably more so than urban/suburban incidents. In a rural setting, there's a higher likelihood of narrow single-lane roads and dead-end roads. Expect water supply shuttles to be coming and going. Pulling into a side drive? That might be the spot the engines/tankers/tenders back into to turn around instead of backing down the lane. Expect to walk. Don't be the person that causes access problems.
 - Think about weather and drivability. Can you get there and back safely in mud, snow, ice? Will you be able to get out of your parking place when it's over? Is it on a hill or is it level? Is it wet, muddy, snowy, or icy? I've seen some benign-looking parking spots turn tricky when it came time to leave.
 - Don't overlook the walk back to your parking place. In the winter, it can be cold and dark, especially compared to a well-lit, fire-warmed fire scene.
- Freeway: My personal rule was to avoid the interstate unless an entire direction was shut down and there was a compelling reason to go. It's dangerous, and traffic is a pain. If possible, I looked for a nearby overpass to shoot from with a telephoto lens.

Stand a good chance of beating the first-due units on a call? Think about staging to let them in first, especially if you're unaffiliated with a department. I've been first-in and that can bring good pictures, but it can also make things dicey.

- You'll be the first to encounter hazards. (See below: "Your safety and comfort on the scene.")
- You could be the first to encounter the displaced or victims. Are you ready for that?
- You could block access for responders.
- You could get parked in.
- You risk appearing like someone glorying in other's distress. "Man, that guy was here before the fire department and all he wanted was pictures."

Your safety and comfort on the scene

- Be aware of the weather. Be prepared.
 - If it's hot, have drinking water or access to it. You don't want the EMTs having to treat you. If you're affiliated with a fire department, you should be able to get water from the rehab section.
 - If it's cold, do you have sufficient warm gear?
 - Do you have gloves which offer both warmth and dexterity?
 - Will you stay dry?
 - Keep some chemical warming packs in your gear.
 - Use them to keep you warm. Be familiar with how they work and how/where to put them.
 - Use them to keep your spare batteries from getting drained. At the least keep spare batteries in an inner pocket close to your body heat, but that may not be enough if it's really cold. Keep extra batteries handy on colder calls. (You may be able to revive them by warming them.)
 - If it's stormy, what are your concerns?
 - Lightning: I was on scene of a lightning-caused house fire once and lightning struck nearby again during the firefighting efforts. It was close enough that it made my Nikon DSLR go crazy until I did a complicated reset to discharge the static electricity. I'm glad it wasn't worse.
 - Wind: Does the wind present hazards of falling trees/branches or flying debris? Might there be downed power lines? What about downed poles/trees in the road as you respond?
- Check in with the Incident Commander when you arrive. Mike mentioned something like this. (It may not always be easy to tell early on who the IC is.)
 - Let them know you're on scene.
 - Ask if there's any safety or other concerns you should know about. (Power lines, propane tanks, holes, etc. More below in a bit.)
 - Let them know you're leaving.
- Maintain situational awareness.
 - Don't get tunnel vision. This can happen when pulling up at an active scene as your adrenaline pumps. It can also happen as you spend too much time gazing through a long lens.
 - Watch for downed power lines, leaking fuel, hazardous materials, etc. Assume downed lines have live electricity.
 - As Mike alluded to, watch bystanders. They could be emotionally disturbed because of the incident or they may be part of the reason for the incident.

Familiarity with emergency services:

Take the free FEMA classes online to learn about the Incident Command System and the National Incident Management System. Hopefully your emergency services are NIMS compliant. Sure, there will likely be some regional quirks, but having the ICS/NIMS background will help you understand some of what you might hear on the radio.

NIMS/ICS courses

- Introduction to the Incident Command System (ICS-100)
- ICS for Single Resources and Initial Action Incident (IS-200)
- Intermediate ICS for Expanding Incidents (ICS-300)
- National Incident Management System (NIMS), An Introduction (IS-700)

Further, if you can get the SOGs/SOPs for your department, you'll know more how they operate and what may be "bad form" on the scene.

Legal Issues:

If you're a credentialed member of the media, your state may have laws that give you inside-the-tape access, as long as the incident commander deems it safe or non-impeding to response. For example,

- California Penal Code 409.5(d): <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/cgi-bin/displa..>

- Code of Virginia 27-15.1: <http://law.lis.virginia.gov/vacode/title..>

Other:

- Shoot what you see. Cut later. (Photojournalist hat on here: Don't self-censor as it happens. You can choose not to share sensitive images, but you can never go back and take the next iconic hero photo that you chose not to take.)
- Firefighters are probably more interested in photos of themselves making entry than working a defensive "surround and drown." Of course, you may not have the luxury of being there early enough for photos of making entry.
- Think of unique vantage points to shoot from. In New York City, I talked my way onto at least one rooftop and into an adjacent apartment to shoot the action from above.
- Mike suggests having clothing/gear in the car for use on scene. I'd also suggest having something for after the scene, depending on the weather. A change of shoes is nice, and sometimes clean, dry clothes are good too.
- Hopefully goes without saying, but carry a high-quality flashlight with good batteries, especially for evening and night-time fires. As a journalist, I usually went with a Petzl headlamp that allowed for hands-free illumination. As a fire PIO, I had the department issue Streetlight Survivor LED on my turnout coat.
- More thoughts as soon as I post my comment.

Now you've got me thinking of the website/blog posts I would make on this and related topics.

John Collins ([Web Site](#)) - 08/01/15 - 20:10

AWESOME additions, John! Thank you for taking the time.

Legeros - 08/02/15 - 08:36

Both Fire Engineering and Firefighter Nation publish occasional profiles of fire photographers. Google to find them.

One of them recently contained this advice, which is also good (and which I had forgotten that I had learned so long ago): Don't try to interact with crews as they're working a scene. They're busy, they're focused, and they're thinking (and need to be thinking) about other things than a photographer. Meet 'n' greet at the station. Or away from scenes. When they're working, you should be working. e.g., focused on taking pictures.

Legeros - 08/05/15 - 08:18

Made a new page to this posting, and other related content. And with an easy peasy address: <http://legeros.com/photos/#fire>

Fire Photography Resource Guide. Single page for everything, blog postings and conference slides.

Legeros - 08/10/15 - 22:38

Name: (real name preferred)

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To prevent spam we require you to answer this silly question

What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

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Notify: Yes, send me email when someone replies.

Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.