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'It seemed like an eternity'

Mayday call met with silence on radio

*By Sharon Coolidge
scoolidge@enquirer.com*

WEST PRICE HILL - A woman was trapped on the third floor of the burning apartment building at 4409 Glenway Ave.

That's all firefighter Kevin Phillips and Lt. Tim Pride knew when they went inside the building that was so smoky, they said they couldn't see their hands in front of their faces.

The woman made it to safety down a firetruck ladder from her balcony before they got to her. Once inside, the two veteran Cincinnati firefighters became trapped by a burning stairwell.

While looking for a way out, Phillips, 39, tumbled face first down six stairs, knocking his helmet and air mask off. He choked in the thick, black smoke, before grabbing and holding the air mask to his face.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday," Pride, 49, called out over his fire radio.

The district fire chief in command of the scene should have responded immediately.

Instead, Pride was met with silence.

"Mayday, mayday, mayday," Pride called out again.

It was so quiet Pride wondered aloud if he was on the wrong channel.

"Is anybody copying?" he asked as both men got critically low on air.

A rescue squad on the way to the fire heard Pride and responded, but it appears from a recording of radio traffic from the Jan. 7 fire that it took nearly three minutes before the district chief on scene set a rescue in motion.

Pride, a 25-year veteran of the force, finally helped Phillips to safety, guiding him to the third floor where they escaped via a balcony and down a fire truck ladder.

"It seemed like an eternity," Phillips said.

That delay is a problem, Phillips, Pride and fire union President Marc Monahan said Wednesday from Phillips' Delhi Township home, where he is recovering from a broken hand and nose.

All three blame the county's digital radio system for what they believe was a missed mayday call and want fixes made. Fire officials are analyzing the incident to see if anything could have been done differently, said fire department spokesman.

Doctors have told Phillips recovery will take at least six weeks.

"For a long time it seemed like we were the only two in the building," Phillips said.

"It's a helpless feeling, a very lonely feeling," Pride added.
