

Baptism by fire â€” so it goes

by Jason_Love

Iâ€™ve always been attracted to fire. When I was twelve, my mom caught me torching the lawn, and I saidâ€™true storyâ€™â€œDonâ€™t worry, Ma. Itâ€™s a controlled burn.â€•

The butt-whooping I got that day taught me to respect fire, but only recently, when firemen trained in my neighborhood, did I find out why: Fire is evil!

Training took place at five houses condemned because they were built sometime during the Mesozoic Era. Firemen poured in from every direction, five battalions worth. Their mission: Burn down the houses and learn as much as possible along the way.

Neighbors might have been worried if it werenâ€™t for the 16 jillion firefighters on hand. Battalion Chief Michael Estrada oversaw the affair with a stoic air like Constantine or John Travolta.

I attended the sunrise briefing with baggy eyes and coffee. I felt like a freshman in senior gym class: These guys were built. The department sets aside time each day for Nautilus, basketball, swimming, and on this day, lugging heavy equipment through 1,200-degree heat.

Captain Tom Law addressed the group in a language I didn't understand. Something about PSI, GPM, and EMS. From all accounts, they would be burning things. Fortunately, the others understood and were quick to answer the captain's pop questions!

“And will we be using fog spray inside these structures?”

No. 75-pound nozzle pressure, steady stream. Duh.

The captain assigned the men to ventilation, support, and “gulp” laying down inside the houses waiting to be rescued. He referred to that person, appropriately, as the “dummy.”

Crews would be observing flame-over (fire above your head), flash-over (fire from ceiling to floor), and thermal balances (the point, for instance, when water turns to steam and scalds everyone in sight).

Law's friendly face turned grim: “It's not macho when someone melts their helmet. Injuries do not

impress me. I want you down, and by that I mean on your belly.â€•

Finally, Chief Estradaâ€”Constantineâ€”praised the men who had worked overtime to prep the location. It must have been a big deal because everyone clapped. With that, the firefighters marched to their stations, and I focused on getting out of the way.

After lots of radio crackle, a bullhorn finally called, â€œFire in the hole!â€•

I braced myself for an explosion, because I watch too many movies. The Ignition Group calmly walked inside and torched the â€œclass A combustiblesâ€•â€”haystacks, plywood, kindling. Hazardous chemicals were removed from the scene, and no animals were harmed in the making of this fire.

I caught up with Battalion Chief Scott Schuster, who was good enough to chat with me between infernos. After 16 years of service, Scott had seen it all. He exuded a sense of well-being, the kind of guy you want around during an earthquake or, say, a fire.

â€œThe nice thing about a situation like this,â€• he said, â€œis that itâ€™s an excellent training opportunity, a real lab setting.â€•

“You mean like dissecting frogs?”

Scott laughed but only to be polite.

“It’s a win-win for everyone. We get to train our crews, and the folks who own this property sweep away the ashes.”

And then he dashed away.

Captain Phil Corsi waved to me from the roof of Building Three. I looked around to make sure he wasn’t crazy. Yes, he nodded, come on up. Did I mention that the neighbor’s house was on FIRE? I scaled the ladder with that giddy feeling you get when your first-grade teacher announces a field trip, only this was more exciting than the post office.

Across the street, people gathered to watch as on the Fourth of July. A teen glided by on his scooter, saying, "Cool." Interesting choice of words: The radiant heat could set fire to curtains 100 feet away.

Phil and I watched the men chainsaw around support beams next door. They call this "rolling the rafters." You would know that if you hadn't missed the meeting. Ventilation helps the crew to see. Even then, the smoke is so dense that firemen use thermal imaging to find the seat of the fire. It beats the old way "waiting till your ears got hot."

The crew pulled a flue from the roof, and flames leapt out, licking at all that oxygen. The smoke was so thick you could hardly breathe (like my grandpa's house minus the smell of bourbon). The heat literally curled my eyebrows.

Phil was not perturbed. He chuckled beneath his handle-bar mustache as he fielded my little-kid questions:

"Why did the truck blast its horn three times like that?" I asked.

“That was a last call for anyone left in the structure.”

“Why do you run the hydrant to the truck and not to the fire?”

“The truck controls the water pressure.”

“What if I spontaneously combust from this mind-boggling heat?”

“We’ll put you out.”

I took in the blaze a moment longer, knowing I would never again, with any luck, be so close. The flames devoured Building Two in a hurry to some other fire. The beast crackled and hissed, spitting cinders at the sidewalk.

“Once it gets like that,” said Phil, “we just surround and drown. It’s all over.”

Until that moment, I had always imagined that I could run into a burning house and save someone’s life. Now I would have to at least know what kind of person it was.

I bowed to Phil for the tutorial and climbed back down to reality. Across the street I spoke with Mickey Metcalf, a local who was spellbound like a moth at Lamps Plus. He was taking footage with his camcorder.

“I’ve never been this close to a fire,” he said. “Can you feel that heat?”

I showed Mickey my eyebrows.

“Awesome,” he said.

So it goes.

Mickey and I watched the firefighters run their drills like Packers for Lombardi. Everyone knew their role, quick but not hurried.

“I have friends who went into the fire academy,” said Mickey. “I myself became a painter, which is kinda the same thing.”

I made sure he was joking before I laughed.

Finally all that remained was a chimney so wearied by the heat that, with the spray of a hose, it crumpled like so many pieces of Jenga. Eerie to think of the memories that glowed in that dust—the skinned knees, the bad jokes, Christmas dinners. In the case of these old homes, the advent of electricity.

Chief Estrada called it a day and told the men to strip down (sorry, ladies, he wasn't talking about a nude calendar). The firefighters removed their coats and air tanks and plopped down beside a cooler filled with Gatorade.

That is where I cornered 25-year-old Aaron Arledge, a firefighter-slash-paramedic. While he refreshed and de-sooted, I asked what he had learned.

“Well, I learned to communicate with other crews, which is important because everyone works a little differently. It gets dark in there. We have to rely on each other.”

Aaron jiggled his radio to underline the point. Of course, I knew about radios because I watch too many movies. Aaron comes, in fact, from a family straight out of Backdraft. His father is a Battalion Chief, and his brother Kyle just finished Academy. Talk about nervous grandmas.

Chief Scott Schuster recalls barbecuing with the Arledge family when Aaron was just a boy. He chuckles at the memory.

â€œIt was kind of strange to be in a fire with him.â€•

We all envision the force of a fire, but until we get close we simply donâ€™t know. Itâ€™s a different kind of scary. Dragons are alive and well and waiting to be born with every careless spark. At full-size, they can only be conquered by a team of highly trained slayers like the ones I met on this fantastic day.

At dusk a few men stayed behind to baby-sit the hot spots. Left unattended, the powder would glow for a week. Finally snapping out of the dream, I could only shake my head and think, â€œDonâ€™t worry, Ma. Itâ€™s a controlled burn.â€•

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