

Burning

Observer photographer trains with firefighters

By BILL DRESLER
STAFF WRITER

The Farmington Hills Fire Department frequently invites city officials and employees to experience the training burns firsthand. This time the press is invited to go inside and experience what firefighting is all about.

Fire trucks arrive before 9 a.m. Firefighters unroll hoses, put on their protective gear and check and re-check equipment.

The department has had three burns in the last five months. The latest was on property located on 13 Mile Road, east of Orchard Lake across from the Glen Oaks Country Club. The property had two structures: a two-story bungalow and an unattached building that may have once been a garage, at the time of the training, it had been converted to offices. There are two training fires that day. The second building on site is burned the following week.

Inside the office structure, the chief and assistants decide where to locate the fire. The job of the firefighters is to locate the fire in the unfamiliar building and put it out.

Assistant to the chief Bob Rebtzy pulls gear out of the back of his truck. He hands me insulated bib overalls, a jacket, a fireproof hood, helmet and gloves. I struggle to put on the gear without falling over. I'm nowhere near a fire, but I'm already roasting.

Assistant Fire Chief Pete Baldwin gives simple instructions. I'll be in the building within sight of the fire. I have to stay low where the air has less smoke and visibility is better. When the firefighters give me the word, I get out ... period. No arguments.

Chief Richard Marinucci lights the pile of wood pallets and newspapers using a flare. Within a minute the fire fills the room with acrid smoke. It doesn't

smell like fireplace smoke, either. Plastics add chemicals to the smoke that make it even harder to breathe. I don't have to be reminded to stay low because that's where the only breathable air is. The smoke darkens the room to the point where the raging fire is but a glow.

Remember those movie scenes where the flames illuminate the room? Pure fiction. Visibility is close to zero. I crawl out on my hands and knees before I'm told to leave.

Firefighters wait outside until the fire fully engulfs the room. It doesn't take more than five minutes. Windows pop from the intense heat. Fire billows out. Firefighters enter and in a matter of minutes most of the flames are out.

Every so often a warning bell rings before a firefighter's air supply starts to run out. Firefighters begin to search for fire burning behind walls and above the ceiling. Part of the job involves pulling down ceiling and the gray insulation. Pretty soon the firefighters are covered with insulation. As they step out into fresh air another firefighter rinses them off.

The teamwork that is critical when firefighters are in a burning building doesn't end when the fire is out.

The Farmington Hills department is known for using live fires in their training program. New development often means demolition of old houses and an opportunity to burn those structures scheduled for demolition.

Two weeks after I spend a morning with the firefighters in the training burn, there is no trace of the buildings. Bulldozers and surveyor's stakes work the site. All that's left is the knowledge learned that may someday save a firefighter's life: A valuable legacy, indeed.



STAFF PHOTOS BY BILL DRESLER

Quickly: The second fire of the day spread quickly. Within five minutes the intense heat blew out the windows of the structure. The increase in oxygen fed the inferno.



Cleaning up: Firefighters hose off insulation that covered them after pulling down the ceiling in a search for hidden flames.

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Covered: After pulling down the ceiling in a search for flame, firefighters are covered with insulation.

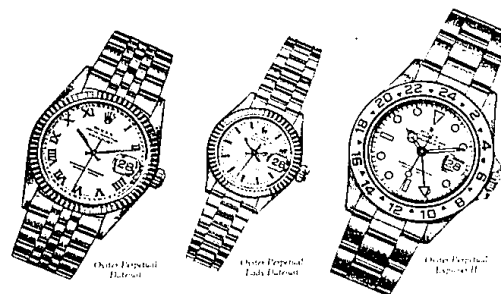


Ending: Firefighters have battled the training burn. Now the flames are gone and only hot spots are left, which firefighters target with water to ensure flames don't start again.

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