

POINTS OF VIEW

# Smoke-eater Bill gets fired up over assignment

It's about 7 p.m. and Lt. Tom Shurtleff is showing a group of mostly new volunteer firefighters the floor plan of a house that he's just sure will go up in flames this very evening.

That's because Shurtleff will help make sure it does, so these paid-on-call firefighters can learn from one of only two "training burns" the department has been able to arrange this year.

"We used to have as many as 11 of these a year," Farmington Hills Fire Chief Richard Marinucci tells the group during the pre-fire briefing at Station 3 in the Old Town section of the city. "We only have about two a year now. So pick up as much as you can."

Actually, many fire departments don't do training burns at all. There are just too many concerns about liability and safety.

Shurtleff tells the group to make sure and refill their air packs and to "rehydrate" or drink water as often as possible.

Within about a half hour, an old, abandoned house on property to be developed as a new subdivision on Nine Mile near Averhill, becomes the training subject for the firefighters. For some it is their first fire. For me it is.

### Hot day; heavy clothes

The temperature is in the mid-80s and the air is as heavy as an overcoat. On go the boots, heavy protective pants, coat, hood, helmet with mask and an air pack — about 65 pounds that feels like a ton by the time it's on.

"Is it (the air) on?" asks Lt. Mike Garr, a veteran firefighter who specializes in fire prevention and is my guide through this inferno. I can hear him through our two masks, but it's like we're in a fish tank. Garr says that when he first used an air pack, many of his fellow firefighters snickered, as if

he were less than a true firefighter for using one. Now they are standard, required equipment.

I inhale and it's like air conditioning in my mouth — the only cool place in my body. But the momentary enjoyment of that small oasis gives way to the oppressive heat, as if I'm going through an old-fashioned washer ringer and all my energy is being squeezed out. I'm on fire and we haven't even seen flame one.

It's 8 p.m., time to head into the burning building. Those bulky boots don't lift that easily as we climb a small stairway to two upstairs bedrooms, all the while staying low and pulling a heavy fire hose. Fire marshal Steve Hume starts the fire and it quickly goes out.

"I guess it's against our nature to start fires," quips Garr. Later I ask why they don't use gasoline or starter fluid — like when you fire up the charcoal grill out back.

### What, no gasoline?

Shurtleff quickly reminds me of the training fire in Milford in October of 1987 that claimed the lives of three firefighters when accelerants "flashed over," cutting off their path of escape.

Hume tries again, this time successfully, and the flames quickly climb the wall from the pile of newspapers and pallets meant to duplicate furnishings. Then the flames fan out over the ceiling, like outstretched fingers greedily consuming all before them.

The new firefighters pull off their gloves to get an idea how hot the fire has already become. I do the same and lean against the wall to brace myself before realizing that protective clothing only goes so far — Ouch!

### Watch that airpack!

Then a bell rings. Somebody's air pack is within five minutes of being



BILL COUTANT

empty so it must be refilled at one of the specially equipped fire trucks. But that is an improvement from a time when the air packs had to be refilled at the fire station.

After two upstairs fires, even the younger firefighters are feeling the heat and camping around the water, lemonade and Gatorade coolers between trips into the house.

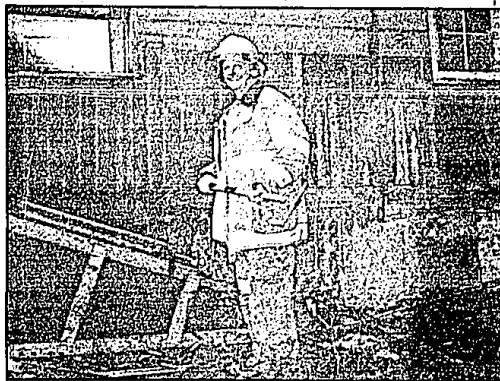
Chad Lyon, one of the newer firefighters, grabs some water and admits that the heat has burned off any adrenalin he had going in, unlike his first fire — a real one in February, which claimed a resident's life and totally burned down a two-story house.

"I went through three tanks (30 minute air packs) before I even took a break at that one," he says. "I had so much adrenalin going."

We go back in the house to fight another fire when I come to another depressing realization — call it a lack of vision on my part. Garr had asked me if I would feel claustrophobic in all that gear. "No," I had told him. "Just as long as I can see what I'm doing."

Wrong answer! I quickly find that once the smoke gets going, I'm lucky to see anything. Then I remember deputy chief Pete Baldwin telling me about a time when he walked up stairs onto a landing and became disoriented.

"Every firefighter who does this very long has at least one of those type of experiences," he says.



MIKE GARR

Smiling and sweating: Reporter Bill Coutant is happy that he's about to get out of some hot duds and take a cool shower after a recent training burn in Farmington Hills.

### House is a maze

There will be several more fires throughout the old house, which because of many additions, is like a maze, even though firefighters know the floor plan. Most times firefighters aren't that lucky.

"It would be like me taking you into my house blindfolded," Garr says. "You don't know where anything is and you can't see. And nowadays, the bedrooms in a house can be downstairs, or anywhere. So finding people inside can be tricky."

Garr tells me that people outside can often tell as much or more about where things are and what the fire is doing than those inside, which is why the officer in charge stays outside.

"I was once going up some stairs,"

Garr says. "They (firefighters outside) told me not to, so I came back down. When I got outside, I could see that the stairs had been burned away. But because of the smoke, I couldn't see that."

I leave the scene before 9 p.m. to get a cold shower back at the station and head off to another assignment. The firefighters don't finish their training fires until about 10:30 p.m. Putting away the equipment and cleaning up the site takes them well past midnight.

There is another entire set of problems firefighters face in the winter months. But I try not to think of that now. Besides, I'm too hot and too tired.

Bill Coutant is a reporter for the Farmington Observer.

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