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Hundreds bid final farewell

Firefighters from region honor fallen comrade

By Phillip Yates
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 Amarillo Globe-News

LUBBOCK - The clarion call of two bagpipes rang out, and the Amarillo Fire Department's 1922 Brockway fire engine followed.

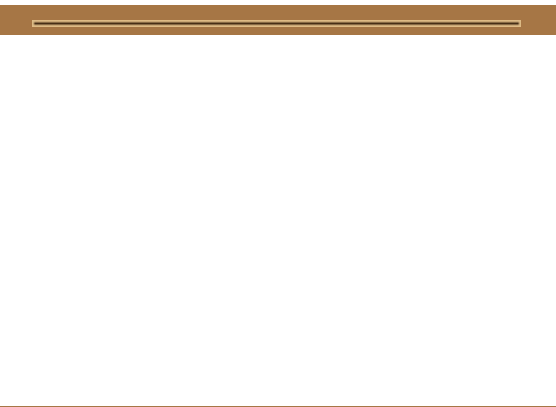
Leading a march that spanned several city blocks, the engine led a procession of family, 180 Amarillo firefighters and several hundred other firefighters from the area as the Brockway carried the body of Christopher Brian Hunton, 27, to First Baptist Church of Lubbock.

There his comrades eulogized their fallen brother and gave their deepest sympathies to Hunton's family.

In a celebration of life service marked by many tears before he was buried in Resthaven Memorial Park in Lubbock, Amarillo firefighters honored the memory of Hunton, who died Monday after he fell from a truck while responding to a structure fire Saturday.

Although the memorial service echoed with the sound of laughter as firefighters recounted some of their favorite memories of Hunton, speakers shared tears with the audience as they told Hunton's family how much he meant to them individually, and also how much he meant to Amarillo's firefighter family.

"I want to thank the Hunttons for sharing Brian with his other family," said AFD Lt. Mike Kelley, who choked back tears as he remembered the many fishing trips he made with Hunton, whom he affectionately called "Shrek." "It will be a long time before I can



Burden of Brotherhood: Firefighters carry Brian Hunton's casket as they arrive Thursday at Resthaven Memorial Park in Lubbock.

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go fishing when my thoughts don't return to Shrek."

Although Hunton is gone, Kelley said, his fellow firefighters will see him again in heaven and on another fire call with the crew from Amarillo's Central Fire Station.

"You boys at Central, you will get to ride that truck again, and we will put that fire out on Polk Street," said Kelley, referring to the fire to which Hunton's crew was responding when he fell from the truck.

The Rev. Mike Schaffer, who led the memorial service, said that after talking with Hunton's family he learned many things about Hunton's life, even that one of his favorite memories as a firefighter was carrying a 400-pound pregnant woman out of danger.

"But what I heard most was this man was passionate about life and passionate about firefighting," Schaffer said. "We lost a guy who wanted to serve others. Brian's life challenges us to do more."

Hunton, who was reared in Lubbock and graduated from Lubbock Cooper High School in 1995, attended the Amarillo College Fire Training Academy. He volunteered for two years as a firefighter with the Randall County Fire-Rescue Department before going to work for AFD in March 2003.

About 10 p.m. Saturday, Hunton was in the back seat of a ladder truck leaving Central Fire Station, 400 S. Van Buren St., headed for a fire in the 2600 block of South Polk Street. Two blocks from the station, the ladder truck turned east on Third Avenue, and Hunton fell to the street after his door came open, according to the initial police report on the accident.

The Texas Fire Marshal's Association is leading its own investigation into the death. Preliminary autopsy results released Tuesday revealed that Hunton died of a head injury.

Before the service, a caravan of firetrucks from Amarillo, Randall County, Potter County, Pampa and Dumas gathered at the Amarillo Civic Center before heading to Lubbock. Along the way, fire and sheriff's departments from Amarillo to Lubbock, along with Texas Department of Public Safety troopers, stood on the side of the road and saluted the passing convoy.

Although many in the caravan never worked with or knew Hunton, they all felt the sorrow that the Amarillo Fire Department and Hunton's family was feeling Thursday, said George Samples, Potter-County Fire Rescue's assistant chief.

"It is hard for everyone out here," Samples said. "Some people knew him better than others, but he is a fallen brother to everyone here. I was hoping to go through my whole career without something



Notes of Farewell: L.R. Collins Jr. of Lubbock plays the bagpipes and leads the procession with a firetruck bearing the casket of Brian Hunton from the funeral chapel to First Baptist Church of Lubbock.

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For the Ages: Amarillo firefighters carry Christopher Brian Hunton's casket on a 1922 Brockway firetruck Thursday as hundreds of mourners follow to First Baptist Church of Lubbock for funeral services.

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But when the firefighters finished reminiscing at the service, AFD's honor guard began to ring a bell in three sets of five tolls, signifying Hunton had answered his final call.

"All hands, hand salute," said Lt. Steve Barrera as the bells pealed and Hunton's flag-draped casket was carried away.

Putting their lives on the line

Here is a list of Amarillo firefighters who died in the line of duty:

- Austin M. Williams: Died in 1936 while fighting a blaze at a central Amarillo warehouse.
- David L. Loar: Amarillo's 59-year-old district fire chief died in 1973 of injuries sustained from a fall from a 25-foot overpass.
- Kenneth Caldwell: Died in 1982 after receiving second- and third-degree burns over 60 percent of his body while fighting an apartment fire. He was 29.
- Christopher Brian Hunton: Died Monday at age 27 from injuries caused by a fall from a firetruck Saturday.

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