

Rubber Baby Perishes In Attempted Rescue By Sweaty Journalist

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Rubber Baby Perishes In Attempted Rescue By Sweaty Journalist Some things are harder than they look.

Such was the case this week after I bugged the Tyler Fire Department to let me preview one of their newest projects - a smokehouse.

The training center allows firefighters to polish their skills in a realistic "home" setting, complete with artificial smoke, furniture and pretend victims.

Overcome with curiosity, I pestered Chief Paul White for a closer look. "C'mon, chief," I urged. "Let me take a run through the tower. It will be fun." Boy, did he deliver.

I arrived at the two-story fire-training center Monday where fire officials provided me with pint-sized bunker gear and boots.

Next came a hood, hat, mask, assorted doo-dads and an air-pack. Forty-plus pounds of gear later, I was ready ... sort of.

"Somebody catch her, she's leaning backward," said District Chief Terry Rozell, pushing my 5-1 frame back into an upright position. "Lean forward."

I did. Somewhat balanced, I clumped toward the entrance. "It's a little warm," I said cheerfully, feeling beads of sweat erupt across my nose. "What do you guys do when it's 110 degrees outside?" "Suffer," said firefighter Brent Hail. "A lot."

And that's when the exercise became interesting. "Take a deep breath," instructed training Capt. Les Schminkey, pushing my face mask into place. "This is your air."

Air? Eyes wide, I took a breath. So far, so good. Almost like scuba diving, I thought. "Now," Schminkey said, handing me a large flashlight. "There's a baby inside and you have to find him and rescue him. Mama is out here screaming for you to do something and you don't have much time. Good luck."

And with that, he opened the door. Smoke billowed out, revealing nothing but darkness and a blanket of white fog. "Oh, and don't forget your tool," he said, handing over a 25-pound metal pry bar. "What's this for?" I asked, gazing into the smoky darkness.

The tool is useful if you get lost and need to chop a hole through a wall to escape, the captain explained. My confidence suddenly faded.

In the interest of fair play, officials sent firefighter Terry Hawkins inside to trail along behind in case things went bad.

Fighting fear, claustrophobia and heat, I stepped inside. "It's best to crawl," Hawkins said, dropping to his knees. "Go along the walls." I couldn't see the walls.

Heck, I couldn't see him or anything past my facemask. The flashlight was of little use, as it would not penetrate the darkness or thick wall of production smoke.

And somewhere inside, was a baby. (Actually, it was a rubber CPR baby, but you get the point.) Huffing and puffing, I started to search. Behind furniture, under tables, anywhere a frightened little one would go in a real fire. Inch by inch, room by room, nothing.

We moved toward the staircase to search the second story. Halfway through the upstairs area, the unthinkable happened.

"What's that noise?" I called to Hawkins as a noise, similar to a lawn mower sounded. "You're running out of air," he said. "You can continue to search a few minutes longer, or you can turn back. It's your decision, but the air's almost gone and you've got to find the way back out."

Frustrated, I just stood there, staring through my mask, which was now foggy from my incessant huffing. Where was that kid? This was fair?

That's when I realized how easy it is for rescuers to become victims themselves. "Let's go," I said, my voice filled with disappointment. "I've done all I can." But where exactly, was out?

Concentrate, concentrate, I told myself, where was that blasted exit? Fueled by adrenaline and a growing sense of fear over the air, I felt our way down the hall, back down the stairs, through the living room and to the exit, fortunately without taking a wrong turn.

Call it blind luck. But there was no victory in our return. I was empty-handed and the rubber baby was still inside.

"You're out of air?" Schminkey asked when we emerged into the sunlight. "You should have about 17 more minutes left on that tank. You must have been breathing hard." That was an understatement.

Hence the importance of physical conditioning. Hawkins, who is also a member of the TFD Combat Challenge Team, was less than halfway through his air supply when we emerged. And so it was that the sweaty, humbled journalist got a tiny taste of what real firefighters endure ... sort of.

Ironically, the experience was as much a mental challenge as a physical one. After the smoke cleared, we went inside to retrieve the baby. It was about two arm lengths away from where I stopped searching.

Bummer. As a consolation prize, the chief promised to let me take a trip through another one of their new projects - the burn building. But next time, he said, they'll add a little fire and a 250-pound charged hose line.

I can hardly wait.