

Trial By Fire

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June 8, 2002 - Where had I heard that sound before? The beep, beep, beep was so familiar.

"Do you recognize it?" London fire department instructor Greg Way asked. I racked my brain. Why did I know the chirping alarm?

I was learning to breathe compressed air from a tank at a media session with London firefighters when the piercing beep, beep, beep began. Stay still for 20 seconds and the beeping starts, I was told. If you don't do the firefighter wiggle -- a shake of the hips -- in 12 seconds to turn it off, the full alarm starts to whirl.

The steady rhythm of the beeps, growing louder each second, touched a nerve. Goosebumps raced down my arms. It was the tell-tale beep that threaded its way through news footage of the World Trade disaster. It was the sound of a fallen firefighter.

When the World Trade Center fell, 343 firefighters were buried beneath the rubble of the towers, their personal alarms blaring from the depths, calling for help.

It must have cut to the heart of their colleagues, spared from the crashing twin towers, working to free their brothers. I came to understand that connection at the London fire department's recent two-day media academy, the only one of its kind in Canada.

No one, particularly firefighters, will forget the tragedy of Sept. 11. But the men and women in London's fire department -- and those in fire departments around the world -- face dangers everyday: collapsing buildings, toxic fumes, hazardous chemicals, air bags ready to explode as firefighters struggle to free someone from a mangled car.

Sitting in the bottom of a large metal box, surrounded by fire and stifling, unbearable heat, I had a taste of those dangers. The flash-over chamber is where firefighters learn how to protect themselves from one of the most lethal dangers they'll face. Here they learn how to identify a flash-over about to start.

As a fire gets going, it heats up nearby items which then give off gases. The gases heat to ignition point and burst into flame, filling the room with a ball of fire -- a flash-over.

"The likelihood of survival is low," assistant training director Craig Stevens said minutes before I sat in the chamber's front row. I sat in a lower chamber that heats to 150 C (600 F) and peer into an upper chamber -- where the flash-over occurs -- that heats to 600 C (1128 F).

It was enough to convince me -- after a day of gentle teasing by the firefighters about my heat-conducting nose ring -- to take my piercing out to avoid seared flesh. The chamber's heat was at first bearable because our air tanks let us breathe cool air.

As the fire grew, wood on the walls -- even though it wasn't burning -- gave off gas. A layer of black smoke formed overhead. Then small flashes of fire flickered in the centre of the room, like orange northern lights, a metre away from the blaze itself.

"Look at that. It's beautiful," instructor Richard Hayes said of the terrifying blaze.

A thick blanket of fire flowed out of the upper chamber and above my head. The heat descended. It was crushing.

Not thinking, I'd had my knees bent, forcing them against the inside of my protective pants. The flesh burned. By this point, we were breathing hot air because the tanks on our backs

had heated up. Slowly the energy drained from my muscles. I could barely do the firefighter wiggle. After 30 minutes, the show was over. I threw myself out the door. It was as if I'd been drugged. A firefighter had to unclip my breathing piece because my wobbly arms couldn't.

Several bottles of water later, the back doors of the chamber opened, revealing the inferno. Fire swirled about, brown and black smoke flew through the doors and seeped out every corner. I was exhausted, like I'd been fighting the fire for hours.

The training tower was filled with black smoke. I couldn't even see my hand planted on my face mask. A twinge of claustrophobia sent my heart and breathing racing. Our instructions were to go to the second floor, search two bedrooms and find the victim. In these searches, one person keeps a hand on the wall and one on the second person, so no one gets lost, while the second person sweeps the floor with an outstretched leg.

My partner and I were lucky. The body was in the first bedroom. We grabbed the dummy and headed for the door; halfway out we realized we were dragging it by the head. Arm, leg, head -- it all feels the same through thick firefighting gloves. Just standing in the firefighter's gear is hot. Exert a bit of energy and you're cooking. Struggle to find a dummy in smoke and you're roasting.

After a few minutes in the smoke-filled building, my heart was beating so wildly I couldn't focus on anything but breathing. Instructor John Conley got out of the tower first.

"You must have to get your ticker checked a lot," I said. He grinned and nodded; he knew I was starting to get it.

Standing on the roof of the four-storey tower, preparing to rappel to the ground below, I learned how hard it is to overcome intuitive fear. Each time I was told to let go I tried, but something more sensible inside wouldn't let my white-knuckled hands release the railing. I was reassured the two ropes clipped to me could lift a car, that they're attached to a bomb-proof plate. I believed the firefighter telling me it was safe, but believing and overruling your intuition -- in this case not letting go -- are two different things.

Better safety precautions and awareness add up to fewer fires, but firefighters have taken on new responsibilities and face new dangers. Medical calls are now a key part of the job. Last year, London's fire department answered 3,733 calls for heart attacks compared to 494 structural fires.

I was in the smoke-filled tower only a few minutes. I braved the oppressive heat of the flash-over chamber a mere half an hour. I was in this world only two days. I can't imagine searching a whole apartment building. Sweeping under all those beds, surviving that heat for hours, overruling your intuitive fear day in and day out.

But that's what firefighters do every day.

Some say journalists grow callous. I suspect I had after Sept. 11 because I just didn't feel what others around me were feeling. Nearly nine months after the World Trade Center attacks, at the end of two days of firefighter training, I sat on my front porch with burned knees and aching muscles.

The sound of beeping alarms haunted me. What must it have been like for firefighters to walk past those alarms under the rubble, unable to do anything? I wondered if the ones who died paused -- like I had -- to overcome their intuitive fear before running into the doomed towers.

That's when my tears welled up, tears for the firefighters who, scared or not, ran in to help. Now I know why the Trade Center deaths rattled fire departments around the world, why firefighters here in London went to the funeral of a fallen comrade they didn't know in Barrie last week.

When I see a fire truck speeding by now, it's like I'm watching my brothers head into danger.