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# **When a firefighter dies on duty: 24 hours of life and death for Portland and Gresham's bravest**

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Brandon Norbury's firefighting gear was displayed at his memorial. He died of a heart attack on the first day of a new assignment. Sean Meagher/The Oregonian

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By [Tom Hallman Jr. | The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

[The last day of Brandon Norbury's life](#) began when he clocked in at 7 a.m. for a 24-hour shift at [Station 31](#).

Norbury, a Gresham firefighter for 15 years, had reported for a new assignment that morning, Feb. 3. Station 31, which is near the Portland-Gresham border and responds to calls in both cities, is one of the busiest in the metro area, and [Norbury felt like he was coming home](#). He had worked at the station a decade earlier.

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He was ready to get to work. With his background, he easily could have bragged – he was a former Navy SEAL who'd survived multiple overseas missions, then spent eight years as a Gresham police officer. But Norbury's motto was simple: Do, don't talk.

He turned to firefighting because he'd had enough of confrontations, he told friends. Norbury, who was single and had a daughter, wanted a job that only involved helping others.

His new assignment landed him on Engine 31. He was familiar with the rig, but rules required him to take a refresher course called hose evolution. That meant practicing taking hoses off the rig, hooking them to a hydrant and then attaching the other ends to the engine. Over and over he drilled that morning, speed and efficiency with his team being paramount.

When the training ended, Norbury stowed the hoses. But Norbury suddenly wasn't feeling well. He took a breather on Engine 31's back bumper.

Without a word he toppled to the pavement, surrounded by firefighters and paramedics. He was rushed to a nearby hospital, where he was pronounced dead. The official cause: cardiac arrest.

Within the insular world of firefighting, word spread quickly. Text messages and calls went out to those on duty, those off work and even those on vacation. Within an hour of his death, fire stations in Gresham and Portland lowered their flags to half-staff.



Gresham Firefighter Brandon Norbury died while on duty on Friday, Feb. 3.

The news came as a gut punch to local firefighters, who knew Norbury as a fit, dedicated athlete and cheerful hard worker.

But those who were on duty couldn't stop the day and mourn.

On "B" shift that day, firefighters in Gresham and Portland would respond to 774 calls, which ran the gamut from minor medical problems to raging house fires.

So, it was business as usual at every fire station on that first Friday in February.

No rousing pep talks.

No staff meetings to answer questions for which there were no answers.

Everyone, in every station house, knew there was only one way to honor their fallen brother. They'd react how Norbury would have.

Do, don't talk.

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From left to right: Captain Tom Chipps, firefighter/paramedic Jeff Morin, firefighter Paul Hendricks and firefighter Dave Barsotti at Portland Fire and Rescue's Station 14 at Alberta Park in NE Portland on Thurs., March 2, 2023. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

Capt. Tom Chipps, at Portland's Station 14, took note of the newly lowered flag when he and his team – Jeff Morin, Jack Etherington and David Barsotti – pulled their rig out of the station, lights and siren activated, headed for a house fire.

“On the way, we got an update from dispatch saying that a person was non-ambulatory and stuck in a bedroom in the back of the house,” Chipps told The Oregonian/OregonLive. “I was in the front seat. Me, my driver, and the two firefighters in the backseat started talking about a plan of attack.”

When they arrived at the scene, Etherington and Barsotti ran into the burning house to get the woman out. Morin pulled hose – exactly what Norbury had been practicing hours earlier – and plunged into the home to battle the blaze. Chipps was charged with coordinating the team until a battalion chief showed up.

The plan quickly went sideways. From inside the house, Etherington and Barsotti radioed Chipps that obstacles and flames made it impossible for them to carry the woman out. The only bedroom window had been boarded up, and it

“We’re up against the clock,” recalled Chipps, adding: “a human body ... can only take so much smoke.”

The team had to come up with a new plan. When a second team, from Station 28, arrived and took over attacking the fire, Morin and Chipps used powerful saws to slice the window from the building.

“We made our own door on the side of the house,” Chipps recalled. “The guys grabbed (the woman), and I helped them get out of the house and into the fresh air. She opened her eyes and started to breathe on her own.”

When the fire was out, the four-man crew returned to Station 14, and Chipps noticed, once again, the lowered flag.

A firefighter expects certain dangers on the job – falling through a burning floor, a collapsed roof.

But a heart attack?

Actually, firefighters understand that only too well.

“I know what these shifts do to a body,” Chipps said. “You get a call in the middle of the night when you’re asleep and you go from zero to 100. That puts tremendous stress on the body. Shift after shift, year after year.”

Part of firefighter lore, passed down over the years, is the story of a firefighter’s wife grumbling about how he was always tired for a day or two after a 24-hour shift. He tried to explain, but it did no good. So he told his wife he would give her a small taste of what he experienced. During his next 24-hour shift he’d phone her every time he went out on a call and again when he got back to the station. The phone calls kept coming. Never again did his wife complain.

Inside Station 14, Chipps and his team cleaned their gear and showered, aware of studies showing that being exposed to smoke and burning material can lead to long-term health problems. They got the rig ready, everything just so, knowing seconds on a call are precious.

After getting something to eat, Chipps allowed himself a moment of reflection. He knew he’d be at Norbury’s memorial service.

Then another alarm sounded.

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Portland Fire and Rescue Station 14 at Alberta Park in NE Portland on Thurs., March 2, 2023. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

Station 11 is the second-busiest engine company in Portland. On the day Norbury died, Lt. Rob Hutchens assumed he'd be hustling all day.

"We're up and down all night," he said. "I'm 49 and Brandon was 51. What happened to him hit close to home."

But he had to put such thoughts to the side. A call came in.

Two construction workers had been crushed after a wall weighing more than 800 pounds fell on them. Dispatch said co-workers had managed to lift the wall enough to pull the men out, but they were in bad shape.

"We got there and had a situation," Hutchens said. "These guys were on the third floor of an eight-plex being built. There were no stairs, just the ladders from the ground to the first level that the workers had used to get up there."

Firefighters and paramedics used ladders from their truck to get to the building's first floor, hauling their gear up with them, and then using ladders already on the construction site to get to the third floor. The crew examined the injured men and administered strong pain killer. Both men had potential spine, neck and back injuries. Protective collars were placed around each man's neck.

Soon, an aerial ladder truck – along with more than 20 firefighters from multiple stations – arrived.

Crews put one of the injured men in a stretcher-like basket, keeping him flat and immobile. The operator on the truck lowered the basket, delicately maneuvering it out the building and to the ground. Then they repeated the procedure with the other injured man. On the ground, two ambulances waited to rush the two workers to a hospital trauma unit.

"This was highly technical," Hutchens said. "Absolutely flat. Absolutely still."

Hutchens' head cleared when he returned to the station, saw the flag at half-staff and remembered how the shift had begun. He also learned that he'd be part of a team of firefighters in charge of planning Norbury's memorial.

And then yet another alarm sounded.

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A memorial service honoring Gresham Firefighter Brandon Norbury in downtown Gresham, Oregon, on Wednesday, Feb. 15, 2023. Sean Meagher/The Oregonian

Kevin Pratt, a firefighter at Station 7, once worked with Norbury at Station 31.

“He took his job seriously,” said Pratt. “Sure, he joked, laughed and had his beers. But this was a man you trusted. Look what he brought to the table. Face it, the guy had been on the front line dealing with God knows what (during his Navy SEAL days). He was a man who wasn’t going to back down.”

Some of the realities of the job remain hidden from the public, the details kept away from even those closest to a firefighter. They don’t want to explain what they sometimes see at horrific traffic accidents, what flames do to flesh or the primal scream of a parent who’s just lost a child.

The only ones who truly understand are those who do what they simply call The Job. Not that they talk about it much.

During a shift, firefighters eat together. They get irritated with each other. They get bored with each other. They joke with each other. There are ranks, and bosses, but in the thick of it, everyone is equal. There is no place in their world for pretenders.

All of which to say that firefighters have a strong bond – it’s fine to call it love -- that exists in few other careers. It’s an earned relationship. Norbury’s death – even to those who did not know the man – hurt because he was one of them.

“When a firefighter dies on duty, we don’t leave him alone,” said Aspen Breuer, the Portland captain at Station 31, which also has a Gresham captain. “We stand watch, 24-hours a day, until that body is in the ground.”

They were in the hospital emergency room.

They were in the medical examiner’s office.

They were at the funeral home.

They were at the Gresham church.

Twenty-four hours a day, from the time Norbury died until 12 days later when they bid him farewell. They watched over him for 288 straight hours. Even at 3 a.m., it was solemn and dignified. No one there joking or talking about sports scores.

“We literally stand there at attention,” said Breuer. “We’re there until it’s time to say goodbye.”

Firefighters from agencies throughout the metro area signed up for shifts, volunteering to watch over Norbury’s remains.

“I took a couple shifts,” said Breuer. “I’d finished a 48-hour shift and went to watch over him. The night before his funeral, his remains were at Station 71, headquarters for Gresham Fire. I worked my shift at Station 31 and then came to 71 to stand at attention from 10 to midnight and watch over his urn.”

Breuer was off duty on February 15. Even so, that morning he went to Station 31, the station under his command, the place where Norbury should have been. After talking with crews on the shift, he left, attended Norbury’s funeral and then went home.

“My wife can tell when something from the job is bugging me,” he said. “She gives me space.”

Two days later, Breuer was back on the job at Station 31. He clocked in, checked the rigs and the equipment and all the tools. He gave himself a moment to reflect. Not as a fire captain. Just Aspen Breuer, husband and father of two.

He thought about Norbury. Breuer’s crews were there at the station, but he didn’t have anything to say to anyone.

Like firefighters everywhere that day, he was preparing – mentally, emotionally – for the call he knew was coming.

Do, don’t talk.

— Tom Hallman Jr

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