



Ride-Along

24-hours with Allentown's Central Fire Station

Text and photos by Cindy Ross



The living area in Allentown's Central Firehouse feels like any bachelor or frat house. Men lounge on overstuffed chairs, watching sports on a wide-screen TV or playing computer games. In the kitchen, the cook throws spinning circles of dough into the air to make homemade strombolis.

Central Firehouse is one of six fire stations within the city limits that together serve 110,000 residents. That figure swells during the day when the city fills with transient workers. As the largest firehouse, Central has the most firefighting equipment, receives the most calls, and is centrally located "in the hood."

Life doesn't pick up in this neighborhood until after dark. In the warmer months, the firemen trade their easy chairs and wide screens for a bench chained to a post outside and watch the parade of humanity go by. It's not uncommon to hear gunshots at some point from somewhere in the neighborhood.

For the next 12 hours, I will be joining the Central Firehouse as a "ride-along" and will accompany Battalion 3 on calls. I will see firsthand what life is like for inner-city professional firefighters. Capt. Joe Donmoyer, a friend of mine for many years, did the necessary paperwork to make tonight a reality for me.

The firefighters warn me that their shift is usually mysteriously dull whenever a ride-along is present. But in the next few hours, we would discover that what started out as a slow, routine night would quickly turn into the type of emer-

When heat and danger push firefighters out of the structure, they must turn to their last option of pouring water on the building from the outside. Fires are best fought inside.

I am quickly learning that the calls a firehouse receives often have nothing to do with flames.

gency response that firefighters only experience a few times in their careers.

From Strombolis to Rescue Calls

To prepare for my ride-along, I am fitted with a flame-retardant, reflective jacket, rubber boots and a helmet. I place this equipment by the battalion chief's car, since this is where I will be riding when, and *if*, a call comes in. When responding to a call that comes into the firehouse, whether it's a fire or not, the firemen must dress in their full gear.

Next, Capt. Donmoyer escorts me into the kitchen to meet the guys. Nine firefighters will be working the 4 p.m. to 6:30 a.m. night shift. They typically work four days on and four days off, alternating day and then night shifts. For the night shift duty, the firefighters pitch in \$25 each to cover the cost of four dinners. Menus are planned, food is purchased and the designated chef whips up his specialties. He will cook for the



Flying dough and making stromboli can quickly be interrupted by a call for help at an auto accident or a pipe-bomb explosion.

nine firefighters in Battalion 3 plus the five paramedics who are stationed upstairs in this converted old Chrysler dealership.

The firemen who share this battalion become like a second family to each other. Not only do they live, eat and sleep together, but they cover each other's backs in crucial moments. The closeness is apparent through their easy conversation seasoned with vast amounts of teasing and harassment. I realize that the joking around helps to relieve the stress of an incredibly boring lifestyle that can transform into an adrenaline-pumping, heart-stopping, life-and-death situation in the span of one alarm.

Just as quickly as I think this, the alarm sounds. In seconds, the stromboli dough is left to rise as men race to the truck bay, step into their night hitches (their fire-fighting pants turned down over their boots), pull up their suspenders, throw on their coats and grab their helmets. They clamber aboard the fire trucks as the motors start and the doors roll open. I climb into the chief's Suburban, which is always in the lead.

The dispatcher's voice announces the call as a one-alarm rescue. A worker's arm is caught in a conveyor belt in the kitchen of St. Luke's Hospital. When we arrive on the scene, a firefighter dressed in 60 pounds of full gear rushes in with a first-responder blue bag, which contains rescue tools for trauma, injury, CPR and forcible entry, only to discover that the worker has already been freed and is on her way to see a doctor.

Our next call is a pipe-bomb explosion. We drive the back streets of the south side of the city, looking for the side alley where someone who was making a smoke bomb inadvertently mixed up the recipe and exploded a pipe, causing it to fly 50 yards through the air, narrowly missing a neighbor. The police and the bomb squad have been called in, and as the firefighters help search the area for the pipe's end caps, Bomb Squad Specialist Matt Bainbridge takes me into the squad's trailer for a tour.

He tells me that unlike in other cities, where bomb squads are the responsibility of the police force, in Allentown the job can be held by a firefighter who has spent at least five years in the fire department and has received special bomb training. I also learn that firefighters can be members of the dive and haz-ard materials teams.

Soon after this, we are called to a collapsing building on the main street of Hamilton. When we arrive, we see a corner brick house in such disrepair that the wind is actually causing



a yawning crack to grow wider. Before our very eyes, bricks are dropping to the pavement. Residents in adjacent buildings are evacuated, and the city's housing authority announces an immediate demolition of the damaged building.

More Than Just Flames

I am quickly learning that the calls a firehouse receives often have absolutely nothing to do with flames. Firefighters are frequently called to be "lift assists," or "pick-me-ups," when folks weighing up to 800 pounds fall and need assistance getting up. Firemen help by sliding doors under the patients or removing banisters and front windows from their homes so they can be evacuated for medical care.

"Other times, we may receive calls for foul smells and discover dead bodies that have gone undetected for more than a

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month," says Capt. Donmoyer. "One case was a murder victim who was shoved into a closet until a neighbor detected the smell and wondered why maggots were in *her* closet."

Firefighters called to these scenes will open the windows and use their big fans to circulate the stale air before the coroner and police arrive to investigate.

On the scene of auto accidents, firefighters may have to operate the "jaws of life" to cut victims out of their vehicles, or provide lighting for the police as they conduct their investigations. At a crime scene, the firemen may help with ladders or setup so the police can collect evidence. Often, in volatile situ-



The firefighters search under beds and in closets looking for terrified children who may be hiding. Raging fire meets them in the closets and travels down the walls to the other floors.

On the night of her ride-along, Cindy Ross experienced a fire that sent three firefighters to the hospital for recovery, an extremely rare event.

ations, the firemen are viewed as neutral parties who will keep residents safe from harm.

The firefighters from Battalion 3 have even had to rescue ducklings that were caught in a street grate at Muhlenburg Park. “It’s all part of our job,” Donmoyer explains.

To become a firefighter, a candidate must train for 20 weeks and be able to perform every job on the squad. Every two years, perhaps 200 applicants will test for approximately 10 opening positions in Allentown’s fire companies. Once they are hired, they rotate for three years among the city’s firehouses before they are able to bid on a job with a specific fire company.

During any given shift, the firefighters might respond to trash or dumpster fires, cooking fires or other types of small fires that can be extinguished in about five minutes. Battalion 3 has already had to attend to 38 calls in a two-hour span. On slow days, the firefighters just sit around the firehouse and watch television and stromboli dough rise. But even then, they are always ready for the “workers,” the term they use for the big fires that can affect the lives of the firemen and the residents of Allentown. And that’s just what comes in next.

‘A Worker’

Reported house fire on the 1400 block of Linden Street, possible entrapment,” announces the dispatcher’s voice.

Firefighter Freddie Scheirer looks at me and says, “You better hold on. It’s going to be a wild ride!”

Back inside the Suburban, this time with Freddie at the wheel, I find the siren deafening. Even so, he slows down at intersections to make sure that other motorists spot the emergency vehicles.

“We can’t trust them,” Freddie explains. “They’re talking on cell phones, listening to music and not paying attention. Some don’t know what to do, so they keep driving.”

Battalion Chief Greg Scheirer, Freddie’s brother, is in the front passenger’s seat. As we speed along, they crane their necks skyward, searching for smoke. Suddenly, ominous, dark gray plumes of smoke, billowing 60 feet above the buildings, are visible about eight blocks from the scene.

“This is a worker,” the chief announces as we pull up to the scene. Central’s engines 4, 9 and 10 pull up behind us. While police officers alert residents by pounding on the doors of the four row homes strung together, the firefighters lay the hoses out on the street. Capt. Donmoyer and firefighters Freddie Shrier and Leroy Bachert are the first to suit up. They shoulder their air tanks and enter the building, holding axes and dragging long hoses. Not knowing who could be trapped inside, they enter quickly and apprehensively.

Outside on the street, I stick close to the chief, who monitors the orchestrated fight from below by listening to the radios of each man and making split-second decisions on the next step of action. The firemen climb the stairs with their hoses and scour the smoke-filled house for victims. Within seconds, it is apparent that a second alarm must be made and more forces brought in.

The chief tells me that it is as black as night inside the burning house. To help them see through the smoke, Capt. Donmoyer will hold an \$8,000 thermal-imaging camera in front of his crew. The firefighters grope alongside the walls, searching for windows they can break out to allow the smothering smoke to escape. I watch the glass shatter above me and listen to their breathless, anxious talk on the radio.

Inside the burning building, it is very hot, about several hundred degrees. At that temperature, radiators, electrical switches and carpets melt, and the sticky varnish on the wooden floorboards acts like glue to keep the firefighters

from moving faster. Their hoses become caught on every turn and every staircase.

The firefighters search under beds and in closets looking for terrified children who may be hiding. Raging fire meets them in the closets and travels down the walls to the other floors. The fire is burning behind the electrical outlets. Loose wires fly around like fiery snakes. An electrical box is arching like fireworks, shooting off brilliant blue and white explosions.

“We need a fresh body up here,” Capt. Donmoyer yells over the radio to the chief.

“There aren’t any right now,” the chief tells him.

A third alarm goes out, and soon every member on duty at Allentown’s six firehouses is here—28 professional firefighters as well as some volunteers—and everyone is busy doing a job.

The firefighters realize that the fire is beneath them when the third floor starts to sag and someone’s foot falls through the burning, disintegrating floor. “We’re backing out,” the captain shouts.

From below, the chief calls for a 10-69, the evacuation of an emergency scene. Three deafening honks from an air horn sound, signaling to the firefighters to get out now since the building could collapse. Capt. Donmoyer later tells me that he’s only seen a 10-69 occur three times in his 20 years of service.

The procedure now moves from an internal offensive one to an outside defensive mode. This is not the normal way to fight a fire. Three aerial trucks send gigantic arches of water onto the roof and through the shattered windows. Seven hundred gallons of water a minute are blasted onto the burning building from the three aerials. The water runs down the stairs in a waterfall, impeding the firefighters’ swift evacuation.

Suddenly, the 10 firefighters who were inside the burning building emerge and kneel on the street. They rip off their helmets and sweat-stained balaclavas and mop their soaking heads. They were being cooked in their own sweat. As they stare up at the burning row of homes, their bodies are steaming. For 45 minutes, they had tried to gain control of the fire. To the firefighters, it must have felt like hours. Paramedics hand out bottles of water to the struggling men and check their blood pressure.

The fire is getting away from them. It is traveling down the row of six homes, which are joined together by a common roof. Spotlights are pulled out as the sky darkens and night falls. Water is drawn from four fire hydrants. A crew is sent to the roof of the third building to cut a trench and make an escape route for the flames. As soon as it is opened up, the fire is drawn vertically skyward, as if in a chimney, with flames shoot-

The chief, in the white hat, works with the captains to call the orders of who enters the building, how the fire will be fought and when to call for an evacuation due to unsafe conditions.

Dwindling Volunteers to Fight Fires

More than 10,000 professional firefighters serve in Pennsylvania’s cities, boroughs and townships. The rest are volunteer firefighters. There are 2,345 volunteer fire departments in the state with approximately 72,000 volunteers who fight fires.

Unfortunately, this number continues to decline as dedicated volunteers are becoming harder to find. Part of the decline in volunteer firefighters can be attributed to a more transient population. Fewer people today grow up and remain in a community, and, as they move to other areas, they feel less dedicated to community service.

Getting involved with a local fire company is a great way for men and women to give back to a community. Most fire companies have junior firefighting programs where teens from 14 to 18 years of age can train and assist on fires and accident calls. Women and girls are also welcome. To find out more about firefighting, visit the Web site of the Pennsylvania Fire and Emergency Services Institute at www.pfesi.org. ■





Firefighting is a job that sometimes requires all a person can give, all the more reason the men kid around through the quiet time at the firehouse.

ing 20 feet into the air. If this had not been done, the fire would have burned through all six houses.

A paramedic asks Capt. Donmoyer how he's feeling. I can see that he is pale.

"I feel dizzy, light-headed, anxious, tingly, super-dehydrated and drained," he replies. His vital signs seem normal, but his electrolyte level is not. The paramedics expect the firefighter's blood pressure to be elevated from rushing adrenaline, but they look for it to come down within a given amount of time. Capt. Donmoyer's is staying elevated, and his EKG is poor, probably caused from dehydration.

"I'm telling the chief you're done," says the paramedic. "How about going to the hospital to get checked, just to make sure?"

On the way, an EKG heart monitor is hooked up to the captain's heart. He comments that he was working on his fifth bottle of oxygen while fighting the fire. Although the rule is to get medically checked after two bottles, the firefighters were too busy doing their job to stop and follow this procedure. They simply came out, changed their oxygen bottles, and then re-entered the burning building. Some guys will even go so far as to hide from the paramedics so that they can continue working on the fire.

I keep Capt. Donmoyer company while he waits for his

test results and drains a bottle of IV fluids. Less than half an hour later, Freddie is wheeled into the hospital with the same symptoms. Then, firefighter Shawn Lindenmuth is brought in with a badly sprained foot caused from falling through the burning roof.

"All you guys are wearing the same cologne tonight," a nurse teases. "Smoke."

No Rest for the Weary

Once Capt. Donmoyer sufficiently rests and his systems are stabilized, he is released from the hospital, and we return to Central about the same time the rest of the crew does. At 10 p.m., the firefighters finally sit down to eat their dinner.

Over warmed-up strombolis, they assess the night.

"In the first five minutes, I could tell we weren't winning," one of them says.

The building had no drywall in the attic to act as a fire retardant, the building had no smoke detectors and no fire break until the third row home. Two of the row homes were destroyed, and the next two were damaged from smoke.

Fearful that someone may have been trapped inside, the firefighters say that they entered the building with a sense of urgency, working on a much higher plane that exhausted them

much quicker. It wasn't until 45 minutes into the fight that they determined no one was in the house.

"There's nothing better than rolling up to a fire and hearing someone yell, 'Everyone is out,'" says one of the firefighters. "It's like a weight is lifted off your shoulders. Then we can go in and do what we are trained to do—fight the fire."

A fire that sends three firefighters to the hospital is extremely rare, I'm told. What I witnessed tonight was firefighters pushing themselves way past what they normally do. Because of what happened tonight, the chief announces a new protocol: After two bottles of air, a firefighter *must* get checked by a medic.

Capt. Donmoyer looks at me and shakes his head. "You sure picked some night to be a ride-along!" he says.

"If this were New York City," he continues, "a hundred guys would have been fighting that fire tonight."

Three years ago, Allentown's six firehouses operated with as few as 15 firefighters on active duty. Now, a minimum of 28 must be on duty at any given shift. Allentown's 40-year-old squad is at its highest level ever.

After we finish eating, some of the firefighters relax in their easy chairs before turning in for the night. They have been moving from one call to the next for the last six hours. If

Gear stands ready for quick dressing when an alarm comes into the firehouse. Seconds count: If you forget a part of your turnout gear, you'll likely be left behind.

another three-alarm fire happened, they would have to muster the strength and enthusiasm to go at it again.

At 4 a.m. another alarm sounds—it's a fire in an apartment house. From the sofa in the day room, I am startled awake. I race to the engine house in a sleeping stupor.

"Come on. Get your coat!" they yell to me. I look down at my feet and realize that in my haste I have forgotten my shoes. When I return, mere seconds later, the garage is completely empty. I return to bed, feeling like I had failed.

Over breakfast the next morning, the guys tease me. "Chief says you missed a call last night. Gonna have to write you up," one of them says. The call turned out to be a false alarm though, and they said they wished they could have stayed in bed, too.

But that's not what these courageous, big-hearted firefighters do. They fight fires and perform a thousand other jobs no one knows who to delegate to. As the finest example of public servants, they are willing to put their lives on the line every day to save others, and they seem to enjoy every minute of it. ♣

—Cindy Ross of New Ringgold is a regular contributor.