

PROLOGUE: A Fire at 3:00 AM

By Richard Ornberg

Excerpted from his book, "*10-24: A Firefighter Looks Back*"

The fire started as a small spark from the electrical outlet behind the couch. In the newly remodeled basement family room, several plugs were jammed into the small multi-plug adaptor allowing two lamps, a stereo, a clock radio, a small refrigerator and a dehumidifier to be powered from a single source. Together, the current overload collectively heated the aging and brittle plastic connector to the melting point – releasing flammable fumes that were soon ignited by the generated heat.

Within the first few minutes, the flame strained to take hold and began slowly consuming the fabric of the sofa until the dark basement corner began to glow. Once hot and burning free, the generated heat coaxed more fumes and gases from the materials nearby and the flame nourished itself further.

Increasing in size geometrically every 60 seconds, the entire basement began to fill with thick black smoke. The temperature at the ceiling started to climb toward 1,100 degrees Fahrenheit, as the heat and smoke began to stack, inching down toward the floor.

Flames now totally engulfed the sofa and embraced everything that was near. Tables, carpets, draperies, bookcases and record albums melted or ignited. Flames rolled up along a new wall and along the ceiling extending gusty jabs up the stairway leading to the rest of the house.

The top of the wooden hollow-core basement door leading to the kitchen quickly darkened and decomposed. Super heated air and smoke shot through the new opening into the kitchen while additional oxygen drawn from the upper floors provided a path to feed the growing furnace below.

The avocado green plastic kitchen phone hanging on the wall began to melt until the receiver drooped as if made of putty - soon it was over a foot long. Light bulbs burst and the kitchen windows darkened with soot. Drapes began to burn and dropped onto the counter. Smoke thickened even more and moved further into the house, snaking along the ceiling, marking areas that would soon be consumed by the flames that followed. The kitchen cabinets popped into full flame in a single instant.

Awakened by a frightened dog who heard the basement windows breaking, the family of three escaped out of first floor bedroom windows and ran next door for help. The first alarm was called in and shortly, as the family watched their home slowly eaten away from the inside, they could hear the sirens approaching in the distance.

As the first fire equipment arrived, firefighters already wearing protective gear and air masks left the running boards before the engine came to a complete stop. Armed with axes and lights, two firefighters lumbered across the lawn toward the house. Others grabbed nozzles and hoses from the rear of the engine and followed, leaning into the weight of their burden. A nearby fire hydrant was quickly tapped as water pulsed through a five inch feeder to the pump on the second-in engine, which fed inch and a half hand lines feeding toward the house.

"Is everybody out?" yelled one firefighter, his voice muffled by his full-face mask as he ran. After hearing the entire family was safe he joined another firefighter already at the kitchen door. At the same time, a nozzle attached to a still limp hose was played out to assure enough length was available for an initial attack. Within seconds, water pulsated through the hose toward the nozzle.

Finding the front door locked, the first firefighter raised a heavy boot next to the doorknob. The combined weight of his boot and a significant dose of adrenalin obliterated the door and the jam that held it. Dropping to their knees, the firefighters moved into the doorway, straining to see or feel the direction of the fire.

Even with a powerful light the nozzleman couldn't see deeper than a few inches into the smoke, so he moved in again, now on his belly to avoid the searing heat above. By using his partially exposed ears as heat sensitive radar, he could detect a flame licking around the basement door to his left. Reaching up for the knob, he opened the door slightly as the firefighter behind him fed more hose line from behind. As the door opened, he felt a blast of heat slap him hard on the left side. Hearing the crackling sound of his own sideburn hair burning, he recoiled and grabbed an ax.

Two heavy but precise strikes of the fire ax removed the remaining splinters of the kitchen door and the lower half of the basement door. The seat of the fire was below them, and the heat of the upper floor was still bearable enough near the floor to allow more movement inside. As the first two firefighters inched their way further into the doorway and toward the top of the stairs, others outside removed basement and first floor windows to allow the now superheated smoke to escape.

With the nozzle first set to spray a broad fog pattern, the firefighters slowly descended the stairway — it now seemed more like a chimney. Sitting on each step, one at a time, they tested each step below for strength and proceeded further down. Halfway down the stairs, with the heat of the fire turning most of the water spray into steam around them, they spotted a glow barely visible through the smoke across the basement. Narrowing the spray to a stream, they aimed a short burst at the source and moved further down. At the base of the stairs the two firefighters were connected to the safety of the outside by no more than 25 feet of inch and a half hose line. Most of the air in their tanks had been consumed, but they knew that a too-early retreat could give the fire a chance to take another hold.

On their knees and resting back on their haunches, they played the nozzle high toward the ceiling and then in a semi-circle for a few seconds for some measure of protection, then tried to pierce the darkness again with a narrowed stream of water - trying to eliminate the other random glows that would puff up throughout the still unknown floor plan.

Warning bells on both air-packs sounded at the same time. Only seconds of air remained — time usually reserved for making an escape. Other firefighters who had followed them in took hold of the nozzle to finish the battle, and the two exhausted firefighters made their way back up the stairs, following the hose line to the outside air.

10 minutes after the first engine's arrival, the fire was almost completely extinguished, with only small embers and hot-spots left for the crew to seek out and smother. Ceiling tiles ripped down with hooks revealed more embers, as did pried-off door jams and wall boards ripped away from their studs with axes. More lights were brought in, and the clean-up and salvage operations were underway. Care was taken to avoid disturbing too much for the eventual investigation to determine the cause and origin of the fire. The firefighters were exhausted, even though they had been working for less than an hour.

Within the first few moments of a working fire, a firefighter's pulse rate may leap from 70 to 80 beats per minute to 150 or more for a sustained period, accompanied by a severe jump in blood pressure and respirations that can consume a rated 30 minutes worth of compressed air in half that time. This rapid change can occur within 3 to 4 minutes immediately following a period of deep sleep. During the first hour of a fire, the average firefighter may exert more energy than an average laborer in a full day.

One firefighter had red, sunburn-like streaks on his neck and around his wrists. His eyes were red and puffy from smoke, heat, and the salty perspiration that had drained into his eyes. His entire uniform, contained under a heavy firefighting coat and boots, was drenched from his own sweat. Those without air packs were coughing up black phlegm and wiping black sooty mucous from their noses. Each firefighter eventually made a trip to an open engine port for a few gulps of cold water to replenish lost fluids and to help cool their insides.

As one firefighter sat slouched on the engine tailboard attempting to recover enough strength to return to work, another pulled his coat off, allowing clouds of steam to rise from his soaked clothes into the cool night air.

Now hoses had to be rolled, equipment gathered and accounted for and at least two more hours of work awaited them back at the station. Every piece of equipment had to be cleaned. air-packs refilled, fresh and dry hose repacked and vehicles readied for the next alarm. Every roll of hose used at the fire would be unrolled, washed off and hung in the stations' hose tower to dry.

One rookie firefighter wondered to himself how he could have had such a different idea of what firefighting was like. Imagined glory and adventure melted slowly to a realization that his was just a dangerous and dirty job. He silently questioned his own motives and sanity. *After all*, he thought, *running into a building that everybody else is running out of is not a logical act.*

But he felt good. Very good. No feeling he had ever experienced before compared to the feeling he had at this moment. Now with his first fire under his belt, he understood.

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