



GEORGE SKENE/SENTINEL

Reporter Karen Pankowski takes a breather after sampling firefighting exercises at fire academy.

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Firefighting — it's hot, dangerous and a thrill

By Karen Pankowski

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

It is an eerie feeling to crouch in a dark room and watch a raging fire climb a wall and race across the ceiling toward you. The blaze seems to overtake the room until a powerful burst of water cuts through the heat and smoke and beats it back.

Not a second too soon. I was ready to get out of the heat.

As the daughter of a Washington, D.C., firefighter, I grew up hearing my dad's war stories — from the heat that melted helmets to smoke so thick you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

I recently learned a little bit about what it was like to battle blazes when I trained with Winter Park firefighters at the Central Florida Fire Academy in Orlando. In short, it was unbearably hot, hard work with all the makings of a disaster even in the best of circumstances. But it also was thrilling once you conquered your initial fears.

To start with, you have to get dressed.

To a novice, that alone can be intimidating. On a muggy morning, the last thing you want to do is weigh yourself down with heavy, fire-protective gear. We're talking boots, pants, hood, coat, mask,

Copy of Winter Park Fire Department file

Firefighters suit up in gear like a spacewalker's

NOVICE from K-1

air bottle, helmet and gloves.

Firefighters can suit up in 30 to 45 seconds. I struggled like a 3-year-old. Then I fought to keep my balance when they dumped the air bottle — not an oxygen tank, although it looks like one — on my back. With the harness, the whole thing weighs 35 pounds.

That's a heavy load when you're wearing what feels like a space-suit in 95-degree heat and you are about to enter a room that at eye-level can be 700 degrees.

On top of that, I was unprepared for the claustrophobic feeling most newcomers get when they strap the breathing mask on. It must fit tightly to keep air from escaping. But it also covers your entire face, limits your vision, and, when you're already weighed down like a pack mule, makes you feel all the more smothered.

Now that I was fully dressed, I was wondering how firefighters could do anything in their bulky gear. But I also knew that in the most intense heat or steam, I

could get a second-degree burn if even an inch of skin was showing.

Still, even the heavy clothing would feel like little protection in the face of a fire only four feet away. My knee felt as if it were burning under my pants, until Winter Park Fire Chief Dennis Sargent suggested I turn my body the other way "just like roasting a chicken."

Later, in another exercise, too much water caused the entire room to black out with smoke. I had watched firefighters climb through an open second-story window, and now there was nothing. This is how it must feel to be in an oven, I thought, as sweat trickled down my back.

It is also easy to see how fighting a fire, even in a controlled situation, demands calmness in the face of confusion.

The masks muffle voices, and with the hose blasting and the fire crackling, it is almost impossible to talk to one another. Warning bells — alerting firefighters that they have about five minutes worth of air left — add to the chaos.

You have to stay down low to see underneath the smoke and avoid the most intense heat while trying to do strenuous work — either controlling the nozzle of the hose or dragging out a victim. And you must also stick with the others or risk becoming separated and lost.

It is a job where you cannot hide. Other firefighters are depending on you.

By the end of my four-hour training, I was drenched in sweat, and my adrenalin was pumping. I enjoyed the camaraderie and teamwork and the thrill of being in a fire. I could see how firefighting could be such a satisfying job, especially when you save a life.

My father's career as a firefighter was cut short during an attempt to rescue children from a burning building in 1968. He fell two-and-a-half stories into a concrete stairwell, saved only by the air bottle on his back.

At 25, now I can understand why my dad was so proud to be a firefighter, why he still talks about it, and why he misses it so. I would, too.