

# Firefighters stay kindled even when flames aren't

By Yvonne C.T. Vassel

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

WINTER PARK — In one year, the city fire department can expect to respond to about 3,000 calls of which about 2,000 will be for emergency medical services.

Although that averages about eight calls per day, some days may see fewer than that and others many more. Firefighters often talk about the days when they're on the move so much they have little time to sleep and are dazed by the end of the shift.

A typical shift for the city's 44 firefighters, who work out of three stations, is a combination of boring hours spent on routine housekeeping, training classes and the adrenaline high of an emergency call. At 6:30 a.m. on a recent Thursday, the activity room of Winter Park's main fire station was bustling with firefighters preparing to go off duty after a 24-hour shift.

Sitting or standing crowded in the station's small kitchen, they nursed cups of coffee, washed dishes and cleaned counter tops, talked and glanced at the news on television.

An electronic alarm sounded and voices hushed when a dispatcher announced over the radio: "Signal 29, 200 N. Lakemont, Winter Park Hospital."

An alarm at a hospital is considered high priority.

Firefighter-paramedic Louis Salado and firefighter-EMT Tim Notartomaso rushed out of the room and scrambled into the department's new red-and-white rescue ambulance. As they raced through the streets with lights flashing and siren sounding, the dispatcher gave additional details over the two-way radio.

"We have an explosion in the boiler room ... We have numerous victims down, smoke and some fire. We're advised it is a simulation." But even a drill is taken seriously by the firefighters and they respond with the same urgency as for a real emergency. Evaluators measure their performance on drills such as this one.

At the hospital, the rescue-pumper from the Lakemont Avenue fire station was already on the scene and so was the shift commander, the department's training officer and Assistant Fire Chief Larry Grainger.

The firefighters quickly donned their heavy, protective gear complete with air tanks and masks. White smoke billowed from the boiler room as they entered to find bodies lying on the floor or draped across machinery.

The "victims" were decked out with realistic looking injuries. Some were simply dragged to the outside while a



YVONNE C.T. VASSEL/SENTINEL

In full protective gear, firefighters treat victim at simulated blast.

woman was wheeled out on a gurney, a long metal shard protruding from her abdomen.

"The hospital has to run about 10 to 15 people twice a year into their emergency room to test their response. We are helping them out and doing training at the same time," said Grainger.

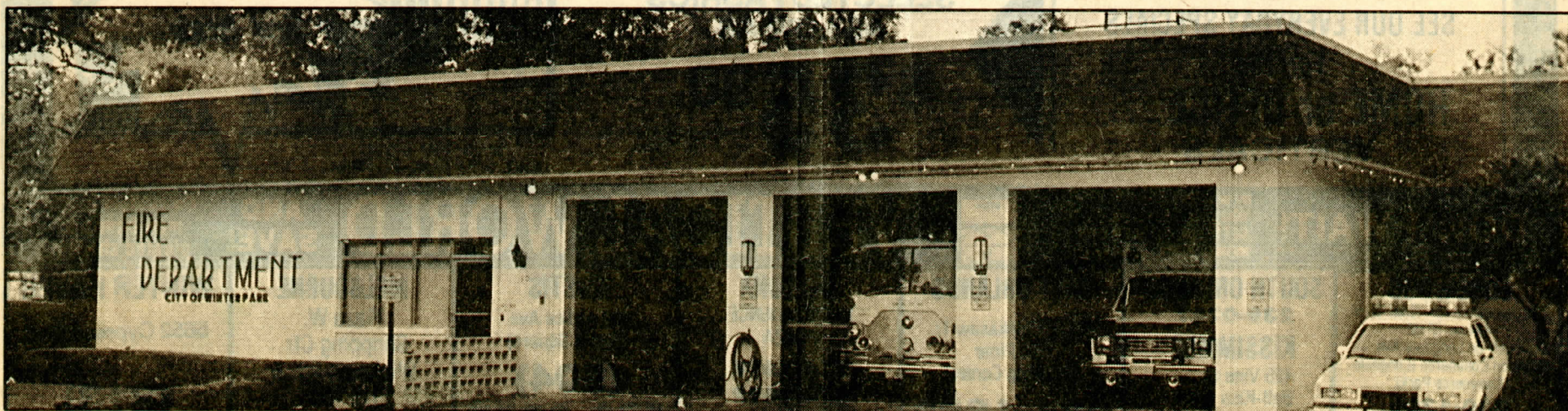
By 6:53 a.m. all the "victims" evacuated from the building had been taken to the hospital's emergency room. The tired, sweaty firefighters pulled off their gear and began the laborious task of refolding fire hoses in the smooth

pattern necessary to prevent them from tangling.

By 7:25 a.m. the units had returned to their stations and the firefighters who started work at 7 a.m. took over and began the daily routine of checking the vehicles and putting their own gear into the compartments.

For paramedic Pat McCabe there also was the task of checking supplies in the drug box, for which only paramedics have keys.

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GEORGE REMAINE/SENTINEL

Between calls, firefighters remain on alert, battling boredom with chores and training sessions at station at Lyman and New York.



# FLAMES

From 1 part 2

At 8:50 a.m., with the equipment and vehicles checked, it was time for more coffee, hot chocolate and doughnuts. Firefighter Roger Mobley's gift of a 5-pound tin of cookies was opened.

With everyone providing their own food, breakfast was a study in contrasts. While one firefighter settled for coffee and cookies, another had milk, soft-boiled eggs and muffins. Mobley's cereal with lowfat milk was offset by a large wedge of fruitcake.

The morning had the makings of a slow one so McCabe and EMT Brian Dean washed the rescue truck and returned to the station to sporadically read the paper and discuss recent calls. Twice within the next two hours the ambulance was used to transport a driver to pick up a fire engine either being taken out of service or brought in from the city garage.

At 10:52 a.m., Salado, who put in another 8 hours as a paramedic trainer after his 24-hour shift, conducted a critique of the department's response to an emergency a few days earlier.

A woman bicyclist had hit a car at Morse and Denning and been dragged several yards by the car. When paramedics arrived at the scene the cyclist's left foot was caught under one of the car tires and there was a lot of blood under the right side of her head. But once firemen freed the woman and tried to assess her injuries, she began fighting them.

"She fought us all the way," said McCabe. "What amazed me was there was so much blood on the scene and it all came from inside her ear. I kept looking for a head wound."

Salado said it is not unusual for someone with a head injury to become violent. In this case the woman also had a fractured neck.

At about 11:30 a.m. Mobley's lunch creation, a pot of beans, was complet-

ed. But as he prepared to serve himself the alarm went off and he and two other firefighters immediately left to check on an automatic alarm at Rollins College. They returned from the false alarm and Mobley began eating, only to be forced away at noon by a second false alarm at the campus.

He was able to gobble down his meal before another alarm at 12:45 p.m. sent firefighters out to the Rollins stadium on Orange Avenue. That too was a false alarm caused by a mechanical device.

At 1:25 p.m. McCabe and Dean rushed to the scene of an attempted suicide at the Orange County rehabilitation center on Orlando Avenue. Enlivened by the speed of their response and the prospect of action, they arrived and followed a trail of blood and pointing fingers to an open doorway. McCabe followed the trail to a bathroom off a bedroom and a young man walked out with a towel wrapped around his wrist.

There were tears on the youth's face and he sniffed as he spoke.

"I'm going to keep trying till I do it," he said.

"You ever try to do this before?" asked McCabe.

The 17-year-old said he tried to hang himself six months before and made another suicide attempt a few months before that. McCabe inspected the three superficial razor cuts on the youth's wrist while Dean took the boy's blood pressure.

After bandaging the wrist, McCabe turned the youth over to Rural-Metro ambulance personnel. During the drive back to headquarters McCabe and Dean spoke about the youth and speculated that they had met him before.

"I think he's the one who tried to hang himself off a light fixture and it came down and hit him in the head," McCabe said.

The pair returned to the station to spend the remainder of their shift in training and responding to routine calls.