



GEORGE REMAINE/SENTINEL

Paramedic Jeff Hudson finishes arduous trip through the maze.

Firefighters put skills, fears to the test in training maze

By Yvonne C.T. Vassel

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

One way to get a feeling of what it's like to be a firefighter is to go through the maze.

The maze is a wooden obstacle course in a trailer behind Winter Park's fire station on Lakemont Avenue.

During a training exercise Thursday, firefighters crawled into its narrow opening, up slopes, down steps, around corners and through its narrow, dimly lighted tunnels while wearing their heavy protective clothing, air tanks, masks and helmets.

Under the watchful eye of fire department trainer **Chip Gaines**, the firefighters go through progressively difficult trips through the maze, all designed to prepare them for the real dangers of a blaze.

The first one is a breeze. Wearing only protective rubberized coats, pants, boots and helmets, the most the firefighters have to worry about while crawling along belly-down is how to avoid snagging their helmets on overhangs and corners.

After crawling about 80 feet there is

relief in returning to sunlight and fresh air.

Phase two is a little tougher.

This time each firefighter adds a 20- to 30-pound air tank and airtight face mask to his gear.

This is when those with even a mild case of claustrophobia begin to get jumpy.

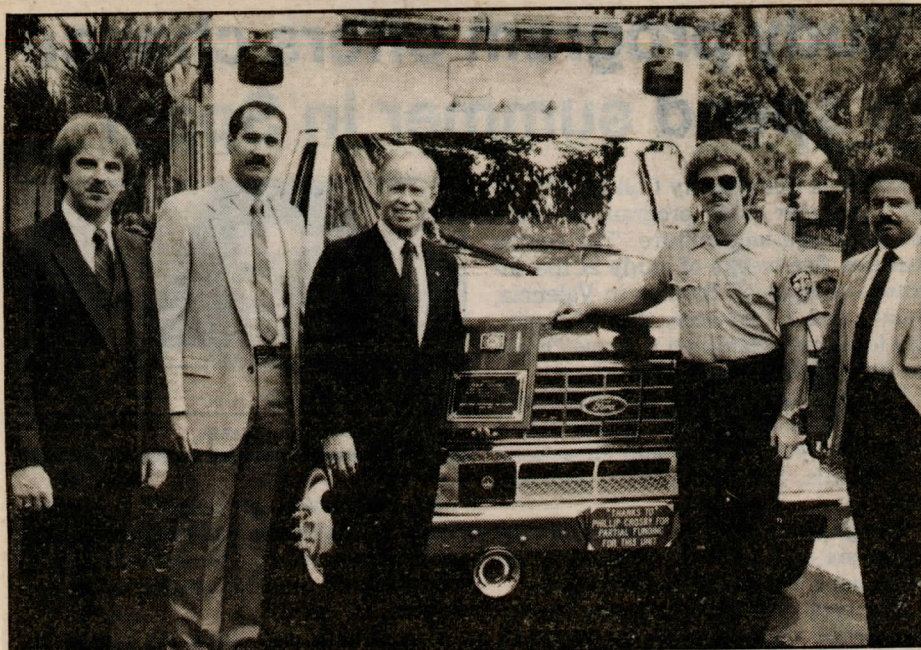
Up the ladder and head first into the

upwardly sloping tunnel. Things are okay.

There are three in the tunnel and the leader's voice is muffled by his gear as he calls out to the others to keep their heads down and watch out for a drop.

The first difficulty comes when the tunnel narrows and the air tank catches on the overhang. There is some maneuvering to turn sideways and slip through the opening. By the time that is done, sweat begins to bead. The face heats up under the mask and all the protective gear feels too heavy to tolerate.

The bulky helmet, coupled with the air tank, restricts head movements. Pushing along on elbows, one can see only a few feet ahead. Breathing becomes more labored, the mask feels tighter, the helmet heavier and, sud-



Philip Crosby (center) and Winter Park fire department officials stand by the new rescue ambulance Crosby helped pay for with a \$20,000 donation..

denly, there is simply not enough air.

"You would be surprised how often that happens. Even firefighters with years of experience hate that feeling of a tight mask and being in a small space," said Gaines.

In the third phase, the trailer doors are closed and two firefighters go through the dark maze with a flashlight. Often during a real fire, the smoke is so thick that firefighters have to navigate by touch alone, Gaines said.

That is not the only hazard. One firefighter's tank malfunctioned during Thursday's exercise and his air cut off. Continuing with the drill, he resorted to the "buddy" method of sharing air from his partner's tank and the two finished the course together.

Red-faced and sweating, they emerged from the trailer and their performance was praised by Gaines.

Each firefighter will go through the maze several times. In recent years there have been few major fires in Winter Park, and exercises like this hone a firefighter's skills.

Crawling through a wooden tunnel

that is much smaller than spaces firefighters will encounter in most burning buildings reduces the likelihood of panic in a real fire, Gaines said.

This week a new wrinkle will be added to the maze exercise. This time, firefighters will have a body to drag out. The first body that has volunteered to be manhandled is Fire Chief Duane Mehl.

■ Philip Crosby donated \$20,000 last year to help pay for a fire rescue ambulance. Paramedics and firefighters had been asking the city for one with little success until Crosby made his pledge.

Two weeks ago, the Winter Park Professional Firefighters Local 1598 gave Crosby, president of Philip Crosby Associates, a plaque thanking him for the donation. He also got a look at the vehicle he helped buy.

A plate has been attached to the front of the ambulance to remind everyone of Crosby's gift.

Yvonne C.T. Vassel is Winter Park bureau chief for The Orlando Sentinel.