



DISTRICT FIREFIGHTER HARRIS COUNTY ESD #28

ESD FACTS

- Fire is the third leading cause of accidental death in the home; at least 80 percent of all fire deaths occur in residences.
- About 2 million fires are reported each year. Many others go unreported.
- Careless smoking is the leading cause of fire deaths.
- In the first six months of this year, PVFD responded to more than 700 fire, ems and mutual aid calls.

HCESD #28

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Up Close and Personal... Going Inside a Residential Fire

by Eric Aikin

A fire starts in a corner of a bedroom in a North Houston house. Within minutes, the 2000 or so square feet of the house are filled with dense smoke. Smoke so thick walls are no longer visible and orientation is impossible.

Outside, I prepare to enter the house. I am wearing nearly 40 pounds of protective clothing, including an air tank. The outside temperature is already in the 80s. My mask is fogged over. I can't see. I twist the respirator valve into place and take a breath. Cool air enters my lungs. The air defogs my mask. We're going in. I take a deep breath and follow the firefighters to the door.

Smoke rolls out as they open the door. We are swallowed in a cloud as we enter the house. Even though I am barely a foot through the front door, I may as well be ten feet. Visibility is near zero. Perception immediately disappears in a smoke-filled environment. To my right, I see the dim light of a small fire. The fire crew quickly douses the blaze and its orienting light. I follow the team forward, into the smoke. I was told to use the wall as a guide. I can't tell walls from doors. I inch forward. My guide grabs me and pulls me into the smoke.

Visibility worsens as the



1960 SUN Staff Writer, Eric Aikin, suits up under the watchful eye of Junior Capt. Mitch Hubbard in preparation for getting up close and personal with a real fire situation.

smoke gets thicker. Flashlights reflect eerily. The screeching of a smoke detector mingles with muffled shouts and warning alarms from the firefighter's air packs. The sounds blend into a cacophony, adding to the surreal atmosphere inside the house.

I get hustled into a room away from where the team is fighting the fire. Although the smoke there is less dense, it is still difficult to see. Among others with me in the room is a firefighter who fell entering the house. The fireman

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From the Chief's Desk...

Lending a Helping Hand...

Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department's Chief, John O'Gorman, has acknowledged that he and his fellow firefighters had a "warm and fuzzy feeling" after lending a helping hand to a very deserving group of volunteer firefighters in the Ozark Mountains. After purchasing some new equipment, the Chief had been looking for a way to "recycle" some of the used pieces.



Burl Adams (left) from LPVFD and Brandon Huffman, PVFA.

"We discovered a remote Arkansas volunteer fire department that really needed some equipment where each of thirteen volunteers are everyday heroes," O'Gorman said. When a firefighter has nightmares about the conditions under which he has to work, he visualizes terrible weather, no water source and rough terrain," he continued. "The Lurton-Pelsor Volunteer Fire Department has these conditions on almost every

call they make."

"These volunteers work in snow, sleet, fog and freezing temperatures, and almost every fire is fought with water they have to haul to the site. The terrain in which they work is steep hills, thick underbrush and primitive log roads," O'Gorman explained. "The area is sparsely populated and is a Mecca for hikers, horseback riders and campers. Since the fire department also provides the Search and Rescue and EMS services, their calls often require hauling people off steep cliffs and through dense wilderness."

The Ozark firefighters are very creative in their fundraising, O'Gorman pointed out. These valiant volunteers work with equipment purchased from funds raised at Pie Suppers, Cakewalks, Fish Fries, and Auctions. Raising a hundred dollars from any one of these events is considered a good night's work.

Some of Ponderosa's used bunkers and air packs were also donated to the Whitton Rural Volunteer Fire Department, which is

located in Van Zandt County near Canton, Texas. The department was incorporated in 1984 and has been steadily growing ever since. They started out mainly fighting grass fires with just a few men and two trucks. The department has since purchased some more sophisticated equipment, but Chief Bill Beverly says the area is growing so fast that — with the equipment they have — their twenty firefighters can barely keep up with the calls. The community of Whitton supports the department as much as possible for the residents (mostly elderly folks living on low incomes), but since they are not a taxing district, funds for equipment is tight. Chief Beverly reports that the donated equipment will certainly be put to good use.

"We are proud to be able to extend the life of our equipment by putting it in the hands of these fine departments," O'Gorman said, "and I wasn't kidding about that warm and fuzzy feeling, either! All our firefighters feel great about being able to do this." ■



Whitton firefighters getting familiar with the donated air packs during a training class.

Up close and personal...

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went down in a puddle of water on the linoleum floor. The team continued forward until they realized they lost a member. They immediately radioed the Rapid Intervention Team (RIT) waiting outside. The RIT wastes no time. Inside the room is a well-rehearsed chaos. The RIT is trained for this sort of chaos. They enter the house, using hand-held thermal imaging devices. They locate the missing firefighter. The RIT exits the house just as quickly, taking the firefighter with them.

The hose crew continues their search of the burning structure. They operate with the expectation of finding somebody trapped inside. Once they determine a room is clear of people and fire, it is closed off to prevent flare-ups or spreading. I stand as far out of their way as possible - a difficult task in the cramped hallways and bedrooms.

In the corner of a bedroom, the team locates the fire's origin. The temperature in the room is dramatically higher than the other rooms. I can feel the heat though my protective gear. The heat is similar to that from an open oven: it surrounds you, engulfs you. It is hotter than any oven I have felt.

There are almost visible thermal layers in the room. Near the floor, the temperature is less than half of what it is just six feet higher. A thin layer of air still exists at floor level. Enough air for a person to breathe if they had to. Higher, the smoke would cause suffocation.

The crew has two options of addressing the fire. They can spray the water directly onto the fire or they can use an indirect method. In the indirect method, a

wide stream of water is directed above the flames. The heat from the fire turns the water to steam. The steam essentially smothers the fire.

The indirect method minimizes water damage and prevents "splashing" the fire, but is potentially deadly to anyone in the room because of the intense heat generated by the steam. I stand back, behind the crew, outside the room. The firefighters conclude the room is clear of other people. They use the indirect method. As quickly as it started, the fire is out.

The sound of a generator breaks through the smoke. A high-power fan forces air into the house and forces smoke out. The air thins and walls slowly come into focus. I follow the firefighters out of the house. The entire operation took less than 15 minutes.

My venture into a burning house came the weekend of July 6 and 7. Mitch Hubbard, Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department's (PVFD) junior captain, agreed to allow me to suit up and accompany his men and women into the house so I could experience, firsthand, some of what a firefighter sees when they go inside a burning house.

The actual training started June 29, the week before the house fire. In the PVFD training room, Mitch fitted me with complete firefighter's gear: insulated pants, jacket, gloves, everything. Standing inside an air-conditioned room, I practiced putting everything on.

First the boots and pants, then a protective hood, then the jacket. After the clothing was on, I slung the self-contained breathing apparatus over my shoulders and cinched it in place. Next, I donned the mask, pulling the four straps

tight to make sure I had a snug fit. Otherwise smoke would penetrate the mask, negating its purpose. Last, I pulled on a pair of gloves. I now had on nearly 40 pounds of gear. It had taken me several minutes to get dressed. Mitch told me the average firefighter could put everything on in less than 80 seconds.

Mitch turned on my air tank and showed me how to fit the valve onto the mask. I clicked it into place, isolating myself from the outside world. I took a breath. The air flowed in. There is a slight claustrophobic feeling inside the gear. It takes a while to get used to. Despite the air conditioning, I was sweating profusely inside the heavy clothing. As I pulled the gear off, sweat dripped from where it had puddled in my mask.

The night of July 6, I joined about 20 firefighters at a safety briefing. Firefighter Gerry Matthews opened with words about search and rescue techniques. "This is about saving your own," he said.

PVFD Capt. Donny Lively elaborated on *search and rescue*, the theme of the weekend training session. Lively stressed right- and left-handed wall searches, where the firefighters follow walls during a search in a zero-visibility environment. This creates an organized system that allows firefighters to check for people trapped inside a building. It also provides firefighters with a sense of orientation: if they follow a wall around a room, theoretically, they will end up back where they began. Should they get completely separated from their crew, firefighters are told to follow the hose. Following the hose will lead them either back to their crew or out of the building.

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PVFD: TRAINED AND READY FOR ACTION

You never can tell when your training will pay off...as any of the hundreds of volunteers who offered assistance during the awesome "Flood of '01" will confirm...

The Ponderosa VFD is prepared to handle many kinds of water emergencies. This includes heavy flooding (1996, 1998 and '01) and when people are trapped in the various streams and creeks in the area.

The Ponderosa VFD maintains water rescue equipment and boats that are equipped with outboard motors. This equipment is used by the department's Swiftwater Rescue Team, which consists of members who have received specialized training at various water rescue schools.

The team also has a full range of individual gear, including wetsuits, personal flotation devices, helmets, gloves and many other items. Six rescue rope throw bags are provided for shore or boat based rescues. These are bags that contain either 35' or 75' of rope and can be thrown to a person in distress, while the rescuer holds onto one end of the rope.



Photo by Tommy Christopherson

Residents float down a flooded street in the Westador subdivision near I-45 and F.M. 1960.

A significant emphasis has been placed on flood rescue and evacuation, since we have several subdivisions that are prone to flooding during severe rains and tropical storms. Our water rescue gear includes an extra 18 life jackets that can be placed on people while we are evacuating them.

Our water rescue team has assisted several of our neighboring departments with rescues and evacuations during the past few years. The PVFD is constantly working to improve our water res-

cue capabilities, purchasing additional equipment and sending team members to more advanced training.

In 2000, we purchased our newest rescue boat – a 14' inflatable made by Zodiac at a cost of \$5,000. In total, the PVFD has invested about \$25,000 in equipment and training in order to protect our citizens against the dangers of swift water and floods.

Jim Luplow
Ponderosa VFD

THE AWESOME FLOOD OF '01...

Statistically speaking, Allison may not have been the "worst" storm to ever hit the Houston area, but the Flood of '01 will certainly go down as one of the most expensive -- after causing more than \$8.4 Billion in damages. According to the Houston Chronicle, Allison dumped rainfall of 15 inches or more over 2,180 square miles, and covered 74 square miles with

30 inches or more. It "maxed out" at 35 inches in east Harris County.

Approximately 65 of Ponderosa's volunteers were on duty doing what they could to help their neighbors in trouble. Between 11 p.m. Friday, June 8 through Saturday, June 9th, they assisted in more than 54 high water evacuations in Ponderosa, 74 high water evacuations in Westador and other nearby neighborhoods. They per-

formed four major swift water rescues along Cypress Creek, as well.

"Once again," said Chief John O'Gorman, "our team of volunteers worked selflessly to help others even though many had high water problems at their own homes. They worked efficiently and professionally to provide the necessary assistance during this emergency, and we thank each and every one of them."

Why do firemen wear red suspenders and other important questions...

Q. OK, let's get this one out of the way first...**Why do firemen wear red suspenders?**

A. For the obvious reason...to hold their pants up. The heavy-duty fire resistant pants are made to fit over regular clothing, and therefore tend to be loose at the waist to allow them to slip into them easily.

Q. What is the average response time for Ponderosa VFD?

A. On the average, less than 6.5 minutes.

Q. How does that compare to other departments?

A. That is better than nearly all neighboring departments, including fully paid departments.

Q. Is response time measured from the time of the call to the time the first person arrives on the scene?

A. No, from the time of the call to the time the first apparatus arrives.

Q. How can you respond so quickly?

A. For the most part, our drivers live close to the station and several of our members go directly to the scene and are ready to go into action when the first truck arrives.

Q. Ponderosa is a volunteer fire department. Does that mean that your firefighters are less capable than paid, career firefighters?

A. Absolutely not! Career and volunteer firefighters obtain essentially the same training, just under different circumstances. All firefighters have continuing education requirements, as well. And, all firefighters have the option of pursuing specialized training in a wide range of areas -- hazardous materials, water rescue, and so on.

There are also various levels of certifications available.

Q. How many firefighters does Ponderosa have?

A. Currently, we have 80 firefighters, most of whom are certified. Anyone interested in becoming a volunteer firefighter should contact the office to learn about qualifications and training opportunities.

Q. How many stations does PVFD have?

A. We operate out of three stations -- Station 61, 62 and 63. All three stations are equipped with Automatic Defibrillators (for treating heart attack victims) and other emergency medical service equipment used to assist Cypress Creek EMS as a First Responder agency. Many of our members are EMS certified as paramedics and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT).

At Station 61, there are two Pierce Saber fire engines, each with a 1500 gallons per minute pump, a 100 ft. aerial platform for use with commercial and apart-



ment fires, and a 750 gallon water tank. There is also a rescue truck for vehicular rescues, hazardous materials, and a breathing air replenishment system for the firefighters' self-contained breathing apparatus.

At Station 62, there is a Pierce Lance 1250 gpm pumper and a light Rescue truck, along with a haz-mat mitigation supply trailer. At Station 63, there is a 2001 Mini-Pumper Light Rescue, a 1992 Pierce Dash 1500 gpm pumper, and an "ultra-light" airplane motor and propeller on a trailer to remove smoke from large facilities. There are also water rescue inflatable boats. ■

What is an E.S.D.?

An Emergency Services District (E.S.D.) is a political subdivision of the State of Texas. It is a taxing district for the purposes of supporting emergency services such as fire. It is governed by a board of five commissioners that are appointed by the County Commissioners Court. The commissioners must be 18 years or older, and be a resident of or own property in the District. These commissioners must meet once each month, all their meetings must be posted, and all are subject to the Texas Open Meetings Act.

The E.S.D. Board is responsible for collecting taxes and expending them on emergency services. E.S.D. #28 contracts with the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Association, Inc. for fire fighting services. Your E.S.D. owns the property and new fire station. All assets owned by the E.S.D. would be sold to the City of Houston at a fair market value if the area were ever to be annexed, if the Board so desires.

The Board meets every third Monday of the month at 7:30 p.m. at the Headquarters building, 17061 Rolling Creek. The public is welcome to attend. ■

Wyoming Firefighters Participate in Ponderosa VFD Exchange Program

“Fighting fires in northwest Houston is light-years away from fighting grass fires in rural Wyoming,” explained **Jeff Wagoner**, a volunteer fireman from Campbell County Fire Department in Gillette, Wyoming. A certified wildland firefighter for 13 years, Wagoner, along with colleague Dale Izatt, traveled to Houston to spend a week with his counterparts at the Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department to learn first-hand what it’s like to fight fires in a totally different kind of environment.

The Wyoming visitors brought with them some impressive credentials. Wagoner, who is married with two children, is Captain for the Gillette Station 1 and a Fire Cadet Coordinator. His training includes Fire Officer 1, Haz-mat Technician, Safety Officer, Wildland Engine Boss, Type IV Wildland, and EMT-Basic. **Dale Izatt**, married with four children, is a Spanish teacher and coaches girl’s basketball in his “day job” and has been a volunteer with the Campbell County Fire Department for about three years. Izatt is a Certified Firefighter 1 and 2, a nationally certified EMT, and has completed Haz-mat and wildland training, as well.

The exchange program is based on an innovative concept that was started by the Volunteer Chief’s Section of the International Association of Fire Chiefs. The program is designed to provide an opportunity for “seasoned” firefighters to work briefly with their peers in other parts of the country, and to bring back information about successful firefighting strategies and techniques that they can incorporate into training efforts for

their own volunteers. Last summer - while the west was ablaze with wildfires — four Ponderosa firemen traveled to Wyoming to experience wildland (woods/brush) fire fighting in an area that encompasses 5,000 square miles.

In Wyoming, as Ponderosa’s exchange firefighters Jim Luplow, Dustin McDonald, Richard Reeg, and Ray Palcic soon discovered, travel time alone to fight a medium-sized brush fire was three hours. During their visit, they were deployed to fight a large brush fire in the middle of a cattle ranch that had already scorched 100 acres when they arrived at the scene. When the fire was finally out, it had consumed 4000 acres and had been fought by over 75 firefighters.

The contrast for the two visiting Wyoming firemen was dramatic, and the fact that there were few fires during their visit was a mixed blessing. Ponderosa’s team of volunteer firefighters covers 13 square miles — a relatively small, but highly populated residential and commercial area. The Department’s three stations, which are strategically located through-

out the service area, respond to approximately 120 calls each month. Some are to fight serious, high profile fires like the recent church blaze, others range down to thankfully minor, quickly extinguished kitchen fires. Ponderosa’s excellent response record — an average of six and a half minutes from the time of the call to the first arriving apparatus — is a matter of significant pride to the Department.

The exchange program is one of a number of training programs that has enabled Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department to maintain its long-standing reputation for innovation and community service. Recently Ponderosa VFD received the 1999 Life Safety Achievement award presented by the Residential Fire Safety Institute for recording zero fire deaths in structures during that year.

“No matter how highly trained and experienced our firefighters are,” explained Ponderosa Fire Chief, John O’Gorman, “we can always learn from others who have developed special and sometimes unique skills in fighting different kinds of fires. This exchange program provides an excellent way to accomplish this interaction.”



Dale Izatt

Jeff Wagoner

The Dollars and Cents of Operating a Fire Department

The Ponderosa Volunteer Fire service is funded by an ad valorem tax of \$0.06 per \$100 evaluation on the residents' property. For the owner of a \$150,000 home, that translates to a \$90 tax bill per year.

The annual cost to operate the PVFD is just under \$1 million per year. That includes \$151,000 debt retirement for the new building as well as fire trucks and equipment, and it works out to be approximately \$18 per capita, per year. By way of comparison, the City of Houston per capita is over \$110 per year, and it doesn't include debt retirement or capital expenditures, as our does.

Every year, the Emergency Services District tax commissioners set the tax rate. Currently, the maximum rate for Harris County is \$0.06 per \$100, but at some point it will probably be necessary to seek legislation to raise this rate to fund additional paid firefighting personnel. No one likes to pay taxes, but last year alone actions



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MEET YOUR PONDEROSA FIREFIGHTERS...

Patrick Casner, known around the station as "The Warden" because he is the coordinator for community services, has been with Ponderosa for about 14 years. "My brother knew someone at PVFD back in 1981, and he asked if we wanted to join up. I found it exciting and rewarding, so I'm still here," Pat explains. These days, he says he leaves most of the firefighting to the "younger" firefighters. With plenty of experience and training in pumping techniques and equipment, he has the critical responsibility for all truck and apparatus maintenance, and says he now does what he does best -- "I make water go from point A to point B." Pat is especially proud to have been asked to be an assistant instructor at the Texas A&M Fire School for Harris County for the last 4 years. When he talks about his 20 year old daughter, Tiffany -- "my pride and joy" -- Pat's grin extends ear to ear. Pat says the love of his life is Stacey, who gives him lots of support. Casner's regular "day job" is with Sear's Automotive department.



Scott Windisch, PVFD Deputy Chief, has been affiliated with Ponderosa for more than half his life. During the past 18 years he has had special training in Hazardous Materials, Technical Rescue, Vehicle Rescue, Terrorist Training, and as a Fire Service Instructor. Scott is currently working toward an Associates Degree in Fire Science, and is a Master Certified Volunteer Firefighter and an Advanced Certified Career Firefighter. He comes by his passion for firefighting quite naturally; his dad is Fred Windisch, now the Harris County Fire Marshal and formerly chief at Ponderosa.

He says firefighting was fun when he started and it's still fun now. If you ask Scott what is the best thing about him, he'll quickly say his family -- wife, Kendra and their energetic young son, Cody. Kendra is the Community Relations Coordinator for Cypress Creek EMS so the talk at the dinner table is likely to focus on Cody's exploits or on how community emergencies were resolved. In addition to his volunteer hours with Ponderosa, Scott has been with The Woodlands Fire Department for the past eight years, and is now a Lieutenant/EMT. When he does take time off, Scott is an avid fisherman and enjoys a variety of water sports, including riding his wave runner.

Dollars and Cents...

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taken by PVFD volunteers and staff saved over \$39,405,430 in losses. Over the years Ponderosa Volunteer Fire Department has demonstrated its ability to utilize its resources wisely and to provide superior quality of emergency care.

Ponderosa VFD has the lowest (best) Insurance Services Organization (I.S.O.) rating of any volunteer fire department south of Dallas and the lowest of all volunteer fire departments in unincorporated Harris County. The lower the I.S.O. rating, the lower the insurance rates paid by residents.

The year 2000 was an active one for PVFD. The department responded to 1,385 calls -- 318 fires, 372 EMS calls, performed 65 rescues, responded to 144 hazardous condition calls, 46 service calls, 228 "good intent" calls (someone responded and was turned back or there was a smoke scare but no fire), 8 calls in the "other" category, and an alarming 204 false alarms. There was only one firefighter injury last year.

In addition to responding to alarms, the department's members spend an average of 12 to 24 hours a month training and in

meetings.

Anytime a firetruck leaves a driveway, or a firefighter leaves his or her home on a response, there is risk involved. To minimize this exposure to risk, the dispatch center calls on all automatic alarms. These confirmation calls saved over 300 exposure incidents last year alone, so this practice continues in 2001. There is now a charge for responding to false alarms triggered by alarm systems. Residents are allowed two such calls per calendar year, then there will be a \$300 charge for the third call, and \$150 for each additional call. ■



Up close and personal...

Continued from page 3

The house that would be burned in the training exercise had been condemned and transferred to PVFD through an agreement with Harris County.

The real fire part came early on the morning of July 7. Right away, I suited up and followed Mitch and the four-person team into the house. I came out with a new appreciation for the job firefighters do. I have faced some unruly situations in my life, but I have never been where I could not see my hand in front of my face... or in a situation where I enter a burning house not knowing what I will find inside.

As I soon discovered, a small fire can easily fill a large house with smoke. People inside can panic and get trapped. But training makes the difference. A firefighter enters the burning structure, making sure people are safe, making sure the fire is extinguished and, ultimately, making sure they go home at the end of the day. ■

Eric Aikin, an alumni of Texas A&M, is a reporter for The 1960 Sun. Before moving to Houston in 1998, he lived in California where he was a police officer and an occupational safety specialist.

DISTRICT
FIREFIGHTER
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