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Where There Is Smoke There Is Fire

A stressful day in the life of a firefighter

By Dick Naegele

I was pooped, after a long morning of “live fire” training, lighting jet fuel fires in a pit and extinguishing them with our crash trucks. Our crew consisted of “Hodie” (Ed Hodiern) the driver, Bill Newman the “crew chief”, and myself, “Ralphie Cramden” the rookie “nozzle man” on the hand line, and a senior airman name Stewart “Stewie” Thorpe. We were just finishing re-servicing the truck, washing it down, and placing it back in service. We all had nicknames, and I was called Ralphie, after Jackie Gleason’s character, because I drove a bus on my days off. I worked with “fast Eddie, Hodie, Willy, T-bone, Stewie, and our station captains, Jolly Ollie and Ron the Bomb.” Our lives depend on a team concept that makes us a close group.

As I coiled the garden hose back onto it’s wall hanger, Bill said “What do ya think boys? Time for chow? Leave the truck out here to dry in the sun, and we’ll back her inside after lunch.”

I grabbed my goodie bag from the fridge, snagged a Cool Whip bowl filled with leftover spaghetti and tossed it in the microwave. We flopped down at the

tables and cranked up the volume on the TV, to drown out the sounds of a jet engine on one of the KC-135 Stratotankers just across the street on the tanker parking ramp.

Just as I took my first bite of spaghetti, and the weather man on TV tells us what a beautiful sunny day it was in the Mohawk Valley, I was startled by a very loud “Whhummp, sound” and the jet engine noise ceased abruptly. I turned to the window, and saw nothing but black smoke billowing, and bright orange flames lapping 30 or 40 feet in the air. People were running in every direction. As our adrenalin began to flow, the only sound in the firehouse was Bill’s voice, yelling “ Oh shit! let’s go boys, time to earn our pay! Suit up and let’s rock and roll!”

As we rolled up to the nose of the aircraft, there was fire everywhere. The engine had exploded and flown apart. Pieces had ripped holes in the massive fuel cells in the wings, and fuel was pouring onto the fire at an alarming rate. We turned on the regulators on our air packs, pulled on our silver crash hoods, and gloves, and out the door we went. I cracked open the nozzle, and we headed into the fire. It was our job to attempt to cut a path to the cockpit for rescue.

Scared “shitless,” my training took over and I didn’t hesitate. I swept the nozzle back and forth, right and left, rapidly. Stewie held onto the hose line behind me, and there was Bill beside me, barking orders, and guiding me with one hand on my shoulder.

Bill said, “Kkeep that nozzle movin Ralphie! This is one hot son of a bitch, and it’ll blister our asses.”

“I can’t see anything but fire Bill.”

“That’s alright Ralphie, just keep sweeping and moving forward, we are almost there.”

It is like walking down a corridor with a black ceiling and orange walls. My heart pounds and I am breathing so hard I can feel the air pack mask suck to my face with every breath. This is my first major aircraft fire, and I am pumped up to the max.

Suddenly the hose went limp and the foam quit coming out of the nozzle. We dumped 2500 gallons of foam solution on the fire in less than 2 minutes and the truck was out of water and foam.

We are trained to follow the hose line back out of the fire when visibility is bad. We were totally engulfed

now in fire and smoke, walking in burning jet fuel, and unable to see beyond our masks.

I turned and place my hand on Stewie's shoulder. Bill placed his hand on my shoulder, and we head out of the fire.

I can hear my heart pounding and Bill shouting "Don't let go of the hose, don't let go of the hose, follow the hose line, follow the hose line, keep moving Stewie, don't panic, just keep moving Stew!"

We finally broke out of the fire and into daylight and safety

"My damn boot soles are melting and gummy, and my steel toes are so damned hot they are toasting my frigging feet," I told Bill.

The radio crackles, "Crash 5, Chief one, is your crew all clear and safe?"

"10-4 chief, we are back on the truck and heading to hanger 100 to re-supply"

"Hurry back Bill. We have to keep this fire out of the drain system, or the whole damn flight line will go up," says the chief.

"Back up Crash 6, that aircraft is starting to taxi." shouted Chief 1, as a ground crew airman heroically began to move the next tanker on the line, which was parked wing to wing with the burning aircraft. "Use your bumper turret and keep pushing that fuel back from the drains Crash 6. Tanker 11, hook up to crash 6 and pump water. Get someone on top of that crash truck and start passing those foam cans up there. Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

When all was said and done, there was nothing left but one wing and the tail section. Our spirits lifted when we found out the crew members escaped over the opposite wing from where we were stationed, and were able to run to safety. We had all been mourning what we thought to be the lost lives of the cockpit crew, with a sad sense of failure for our inability to affect a rescue. We had watched the skin burn off of the aircraft fuselage like tissue paper, and held little hope for the survival of the crew.

"Crash 6, Tanker 11, Engine 8, stay here and start mopping up his fuel with absorbent. Crash 5, there is a truck on the way to bring you absorbent booms and rolls to the creek at the south end of the runway. Keep

the fuel from getting off base. Rescue 7, Engine 9 cover the creek on the back side of SAC hill, and don't let the fuel get off base," barked the chief, as a well rehearsed and well staffed disaster preparedness team went into action to clean up the mess. People from many agencies on base, as well as help from the Rome Fire Department, assisted well into the night, getting all the trucks serviced, re-supplied, and back in service. The creeks were monitored, and absorbent fabric soaked the fuel from the surface of the water, without soaking up water.

At about 8 the next morning, our shift ended. The firefighters who had not been re-called the day before were reporting for work. As they relieved us, we were allowed to go home. I went home and fell into bed, and slept all day. I was exhausted.

A few months later, the commanding General of the Strategic Air Command came to Griffiss, and we were assembled in the base theater for an awards ceremony. For those of us involved in the initial attack and attempted rescue, as well as for the young airman that had moved the next aircraft in line, out of harm's way, there were letters of heroism. The General lauded our bravery "for selflessly going beyond the call of duty, in the face of a fire of enormous magnitude, burning fuel, and repeated explosions." We were commended for containing the fire to one aircraft, keeping the fire out of the drain system, and saving the Air Force millions of dollars by preventing further potential losses.

That was the day that I received my baptism by fire. It was a sobering reminder that although we had few fires at the base, the magnitude of the fires we did have, and the type of resources we protected, made the job very dangerous. From that day forward I took my training very serious, and instilled that serious awareness in all the young troops I trained over the span of my career as a crash firefighter.

For the duration of my career, even after I moved onward and upward career wise from the fire department, that letter of heroism counted points towards promotional opportunities, and to this day, I still have the letter I was awarded for my part in fighting that fire. I am proud to have received the honor. The honor is rivaled only by my selection several years later, as the "Transportation Civilian of the Year". Selected from 2500 candidates Air Force wide.

Was I a hero?? I was hot, tired, and scared to death! I simply did what I was trained to do. The heroes that

day were the airman that moved the other aircraft, and my crew chief, Bill Newman, who with a steady hand on my shoulder and reassuring voice in my ear, led us to safety when the truck ran out of foam solution.

When you think about bitching about a fire department budget, remember that when the average citizen is running away from a fire, the firefighter is running INTO the fire, to protect your property or save your life!

Griffiss AFB is now an industrial park. My crew chief, Bill Newman, from Oriskany, guided my “rookie ass” to safety that day, and has since passed on. I will always remember his hand on my shoulder, guiding me along the hose line, and out of danger.

To this day, I value the “Letter of Heroism” while adamantly maintaining that I simply did what I was trained to do, and nothing heroic. I reported for work that morning, and thanks to God, and Bill Newman, I was alive and able to go home the next morning, after a very eventful 24 hour shift.

Take a moment today, to say a quick prayer for the safety of those in the fire service, and public safety careers. They risk their lives to protect yours. May God watch over them and keep them safe!

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