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The Right Stuff

It was the last day of training at the fire academy. It was the middle of May and it was blistering hot under an azure sky. My partner throughout the academy was around the same age I was and had a lot of similar interest. Both of us were from the southeast and both of us were second generation firefighters. That is, if we made it through this training exercise. His name was Sean and he worked for a fire department about thirty minutes away from mine. One evolution through the tower was all that stood between us and our dreams.

Shortly after lunch we met up in the engine bay of the academy's fire station to put on our gear and prepare for the call that we knew was coming. Our instructor was a tall, fit, middle aged man with more fires under his belt than we ever thought of. He entered the room and took a long look around, being sure to make eye contact with everyone in the room. With a harsh and gravelly voice he gave us our scenario. "This is going to be an apartment fire," he placed his hands behind his back and began to pace the room. "It's unknown if anyone is inside. Follow me to the tower, when we get there, you and your partner will wait until it's your turn." As he was walking passed me he stopped and turned to look me in the eyes. He leaned in so close to me that our noses were almost touching.

"Any questions?"

A loud and uniformed "NO, SIR!" reverberated through the room and we were dismissed.

We exited the station through a large bay door and began our walk toward the drill grounds.

The view from the station was impressive. To my left you could see two sedans almost on top of each other and smashed to pieces. That was where we were trained in vehicle rescue operations. To the right was a two story brick building that was used for structural firefighting. It had smoke and flames

bellowing out of it and firefighters waiting to attack it. Straight in front of us in the center of the facility stood the tower. The tower was six-stories of white cinder block that was scorched black above all the windows and doors from the smoke. There was a fire escape on the right side and a large garage at the bottom. The left side of the tower had windows on every floor just wide enough to climb through.

Looking straight at me, our instructor yelled, “You! Get your partner, pack up and get ready, you’re up first.”

I looked at Sean who had a very uneasy look on his face and asked, “You good, bro?”

“Yea man, I just didn’t wanna go first,” he replied.

“Yea, we’ll just have to try not setting the bar too high for everyone else,” I said with a grin.

In front of the garage at the bottom of the tower were tables with air packs laying on them in neat rows. Our masks were assigned at the beginning of training and were already hanging around our necks. Sean and I approached the table and grabbed the first two air packs. After Sean put his on I checked him over to make sure everything looked good. Satisfied, he did the same for me. On the ground beside the table was a large blue tarpaulin with an assortment of tools. I grabbed a haligan bar and Sean chose a flathead axe. We slung our tools over our shoulders and walked together to the side of the building with the windows where we waited for our orders from the instructor. While we were waiting, two other candidates carried an extension ladder to the side of the building and extended it up to the fourth-floor window. “When you hear the alarm go off, that’s your cue,” he told us.

I reached back and turned the valve that opened my air-line allowing air to flow to my regulator. The bell on my air pack went off letting me know that I had air flow and at the same time I heard a hissing sound as air entered my line. Sean looked at me and nodded that he was satisfied and ready. Together, we approached the ladder. Smoke bellowed from the window six-stories above casting a shadow over us as it blocked out the sun. Seconds later, the alarm sounded. Sean and I pulled our masks over our faces

and pulled the four straps tight. After checking for a good seal, we hooked up our regulators, pulled our Nomex hoods over our heads and donned our helmets. Heart pounding, I stepped to the ladder, looked up, and started my ascent.

"*One rung at a time,"* I told myself with every step. Reaching the top of the ladder, smoke and heat engulfed me. This being a training exercise there was no actual fire for us to fight. After all, we were being trained to put fires out, not set them. Bails of straw were set aflame on the floor below us and the smoke filled our floor above with toxic, black smoke. That aside, the smoke, the heat, the anxiety, and the sweat from both fear and excitement was still there and very real. At the top of the ladder I took my haligan and simulated clearing the glass from the window. Unable to see a floor because of all the acrid, black smoke, I put my haligan through the window and hit the floor to make sure it was still there. Feeling confident the floor would hold us, I climbed in. After getting through the window and taking a quick look around, I turned and grabbed Sean's gloved hand and pulled him into the darkness beside me. Once we got inside, we turned on the flashlights mounted to our helmets and I said in a muffled voice, "Let's do a left-hand search. I'll take the lead." He gave a thumb's up letting me know he understood and we began crawling into the room.

Although it's a cloudless summer day outside, inside we can't see our hands in front of our faces.

Suddenly, the wall we were following disappeared. "Doorway," I called out to Sean who was close behind me. I made a series of sharp turns and found Sean crawling out of the darkness toward me. His breathing coming from the darkness reminded me of Darth Vader. We had gotten into a closet and due to the sharp turns, we had lost our sense of direction and became disoriented. A serious and deadly situation for any firefighter to find their self in. Sean began breathing like he had just finished running a marathon and I could see the terrified expression on his face. "*Don't panic,"* I thought. "Sean, it's a closet. A right-hand search will get us outa here. Take the lead, I'll be right behind you." I said, as calmly as I

could. We came out of that room only to find ourselves in another one minutes later. My knees were aching from crawling on concrete and the sweat from my face was stinging my eyes but we kept pushing forward.

Out of nowhere my PASS (Personnel Accountability Safety System) device alarm went off almost giving me a heart attack. It's only supposed to go off if it stops detecting movement for a set amount of time. Then an ear shattering alarm sounds to alert other firefighters that you are down or trapped and your location. *"Battery must be low,"* I thought, shaking the device on my shoulder to silence it. As we exit that room we enter into a larger room about the size of a living room.

Continuing our right-hand search, we get halfway around the room when I hear a loud bell similar to an old alarm clock. It was the low air warning bell on Sean's air pack, hearing it as well, he began to panic. I grabbed the straps on his air pack and pulled him as close to me as I could. "You're good." I said reassuringly. His breathing was steadily increasing and his eyes were wildly searching for an exit. "You have a good five minutes of air left when that bell goes off. We're almost out, we got this!" He gave me a sharp nod and turned to continue our search for both a possible victim and an exit.

As we got to the back of the room something caught my eye. On the floor to my left was a doll about the size of an infant. *"What the hell is that doing in here?"* I thought, and then it hit me. I pat Sean on the leg and signaled to him that I had found our victim and to hold on. I reached out and remembering my training I unbuckled the straps at the top of my bunker jacket and placed the doll inside. I then rejoined Sean who was anxiously waiting to take us out. Although this is only a plastic doll, the reality of the situation and the natural instinct to protect took over.

Almost on cue, my low air warning bell went off and Sean looked back at me. The smoke was not as thick this close to the exit. So I gave Sean a thumbs up and he took us to the door and out into the fresh air and sunshine. Our instructor was waiting for us just outside of the exit and was eager to help us

to our feet. "Great job!" he said, with a smile that seemed genuine. I had to peel off my Nomex hood that was soaked from sweat before being able to remove my face mask. After fumbling with it for what felt like forever it finally came off and the breeze hit my face like an arctic blast. I unbuckled my bunker coat and mustering every ounce of energy I had left, removed the doll and handed it to my instructor. He had a look of both disbelief and pride as he stood silently for a moment and watched Sean and I remove our jackets in a desperate attempt to cool off. "Find some shade fellas and get some water. You've earned it."

Sean and I picked up our equipment and descended the fire escape. At the bottom of the stairs we found a shady spot to sit and consume more water than either of us thought possible. We sat there for a little while and listened to the bells and alarms of other candidates as they went through their evolutions. After a few minutes Sean finally spoke saying, "I'm sorry man."

"For what?"

Looking disappointed, Sean lowered his head and said, "I panicked, I know better than that. If this was a real life situation, I could have gotten us hurt or worse."

"Don't be so hard on yourself bro. That's why we train."

Sean turned to make eye contact and said with a shaky tone in his voice, "I'm glad you were there brother. Thank you."

"You know our ethos, two in two out. We go into the fire together, we come out together." I got up and extended him my hand and pulled him to his feet. After picking up his gear Sean began to walk toward the tower and I said to him laughingly, "By the way, you're welcome."

As I stood there gathering my gear I started to think about everything I had just done. What makes a person run into a building that everyone else is running out of? Is it courage, bravery, selflessness? All

of that plays a part to some extent but that wasn't it for me. Going through the tower taught me the importance of teamwork, trust, responsibility and staying calm no matter the seriousness of the situation. But it also taught me how fragile life can be. With a smile that I couldn't shake, I slung my bunker jacket over my shoulder and began heading back to the tower to meet up with Sean and prepare for our last evolution. After being one out of only three teams to locate the victim so far that day I knew Sean and I would be better prepared and more confident this time around. I was going to earn the title of firefighter today and nothing was going to stop me.