

What's It Like

## FEELING THE HEAT

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*This is the fifth in a year-long series we call "What's It Like?" giving readers a first-hand look at some interesting activities in the region.*

By RYAN E. SMITH  
BLADE STAFF WRITER

My career as a firefighter has not been particularly impressive.

It is full of episodes like this: One night, I accidentally caught my oven mitt on fire on the stove. I tried to put it out by running outside and stomping on it with my garden gnome. Then I ran back inside and dunked it under the faucet.

This is not exactly standard procedure, so a trip to the State Fire School run by Bowling Green State University definitely was in order.

I had the opportunity to attend a morning of training in Waterville earlier this month, where nearly 30 firefighters gathered for a fire tactics class.

They set up shop just off the Anthony Wayne Trail, where a city-owned farm house was donated to be set aflame over and over again - more than 20 times a day on average.

The point was to remind firefighters what it's like to feel the searing heat of a real fire and make their way through the dense, smoky haze of a burning building. That's something they may not get very often on the job, especially in smaller towns, with the number of fires going down nationally - over 20 percent between 1995 and 2004.

Before I could tackle a fire, though, I had to suit up.

This required quite a bit of effort, starting with a pair of heavy boots and thick fire-resistant pants with fluorescent yellow trim. By the time I was fully dressed, complete with a 30-minute air tank, I didn't have an inch of skin exposed. I also was weighed down by more than 60 pounds of gear.

It took me several minutes to do all of this. Toledo firefighters, starting with their pants and jacket on, have to be able to do it in 45 seconds, lead instructor Jamie Ferguson said.

### MULTIMEDIA

[See and hear Ryan Smith's firefighting experience.](#)



Reporter Ryan Smith's tests his mask during fire school. (THE BLADE)

Walking around was a lumbering, deliberate undertaking, sort of what it must feel like to be an astronaut on the moon. (This impression was only strengthened when I put on my face mask and breathed like Darth Vader.)

Accompanied by Mr. Ferguson, an eight-year veteran of the Toledo Fire Department, we entered the building to watch a team tackle a fire.

Using wooden pallets and piles of straw for fuel, the fire grew until it licked the ceiling, rippling across it in little flickering waves. It was hot and smoky and bright, but by no means overwhelming. I was protected by my fire gear and breathing easy - though a bit more rapidly than usual - thanks to my mask.

We were seated as I observed this with wide eyes, and I could see fairly well (though I was without my eyeglasses, which were incompatible with the face mask).

When we stood, however, everything disappeared in the smoke. The blazing inferno, just a few feet in front of me,

was invisible from this higher vantage point. I cleared my mask with my glove and still saw ... nothing.

This explained why the firefighters who soon appeared at the doorway were crawling on their knees, not running to the rescue as I imagined they would.

Mr. Ferguson and I retreated, keeping a hand on the wall so as to not get lost in the smoke, as the team doused the flames with water and then left.

We stayed and waited. And listened. Mr. Ferguson explained that we couldn't see the fire, but it was still there. We could hear it crackling. Before long, we could see flames tickling the walls again and the team had to return for another spray.

"That was only 400 to 500 degrees," Mr. Ferguson said afterwards, smiling. Some fires can get up to more than 1,000 degrees, enough to melt a firefighter's helmet.

That wasn't scary enough to dissuade Mr. Ferguson, 47, from the profession. He went from a desk job with Guardian Alarm to the fire department in 1998 because, he said, it's something he always wanted to do. As a youngster in Waterville, he would chase after the fire trucks, giving no heed to the time.

"I'd get up in the middle of the night and leave," he said. "As soon as I could ride a bike, I'd leave."

He once saved a 5-year-old girl who set her room on fire while playing with matches and then hid, afraid, in the closet.



Ryan Smith sprays down some flames while at fire school. (THE BLADE)



Ryan Smith breathes in some fresh air. (THE BLADE)

"It's the best job in the world," he said.

But it's not an easy job, and it can be dangerous. Last year, more than 100 firefighters were killed in the line of duty, according to the U.S. Fire Administration. Training of the sort provided by the State Fire School is important in keeping their skills in tip-top form.

On this particular warm, cloudy day, the assembled firefighters gathered in groups of four or five. They rotated duties - one team attacking the fire while others focused on things like ventilation, setting up fans outside to blow smoke out of the building.

They spent the day tackling a variety of fires in the house, each exercise averaging about 12 minutes.

Then it was my turn.

I walked back into the building, a black box stripped of its siding and most of its contents and smelling of charred wood. This time I took a hose slowly up the steps, followed by Mr. Ferguson.

We crouched in the hallway as instructors ignited a fire in the bathroom, tossing in handfuls of straw to get it burning nice and high. Before long, an orange glow consumed the room, crawled across the ceiling, and flames shot out the top of the doorway.

I swiveled around to face the flames and hosed them down, moving the stream of water in a circular pattern as I'd been instructed. The kickback was noticeable but not too strong, since Mr. Ferguson was behind me helping out.

Within seconds, I was able to crawl into the room on my knees - where the fire had climbed up a wall - continuing to spray down hot spots.

Then I stopped and remained quiet.

"Listen," Mr. Ferguson whispered. "Where is it?"

I could hear the crackling, but couldn't pinpoint its location. Then ... there it was - in one corner, along the wall; other embers were lighting up next to my knee.

The whole scenario played out in a few minutes. After I had sprayed it down for good, we slowly backed down the stairs into the fresh air.

Later, I remembered little of the heat or smoke we encountered. But there were other reminders: My shirt was soaked in patches. My hair was slick with sweat. My shoulders ached from their burden. My legs were dark with wet ash.

Then I took off my gloves and touched my helmet.

It was still warm.

Contact Ryan E. Smith at: [ryansmith@theblade.com](mailto:ryansmith@theblade.com) or 419-724-6103.

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