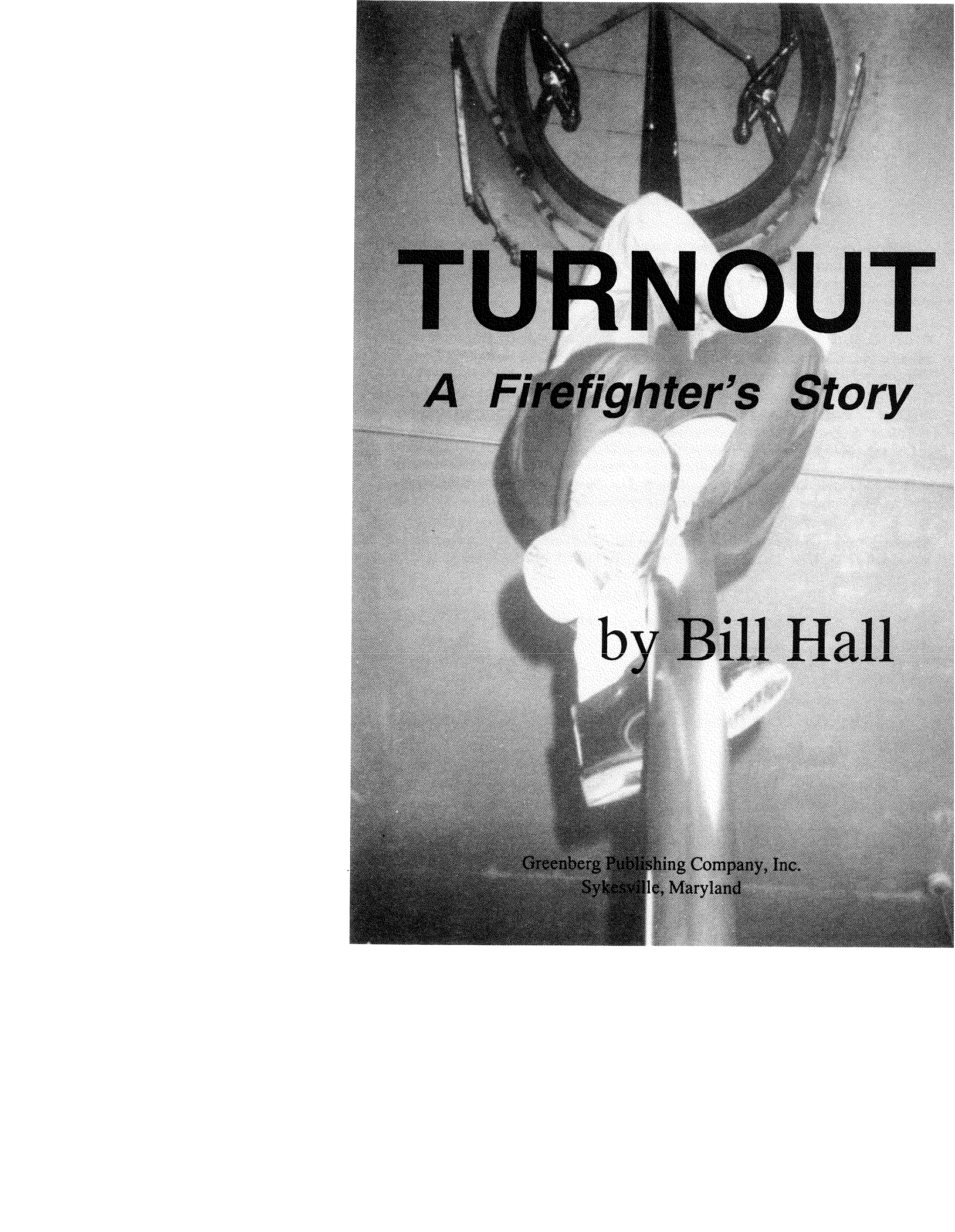




TURNOUT

A Firefighter's Story

by Bill Hall

Greenberg Publishing Company, Inc.
Sykesville, Maryland

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*This book is dedicated
to God
who has continued to protect me as a firefighter;
to the thousands of firefighters
throughout the world
whose fortitude and commitment
protect their communities
and loved ones;
and to those firefighters
who gave their lives
in the line of duty while on their final
turnout.*

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*Bill Hall
July 1991*

Introduction

Fire kills with excruciating pain! Flame causes a person's skin to peel like the layers of an onion, damaging nerves and inflicting torturous pain. Intense heat in the air surrounding a blaze can cause the body to swell like a water balloon and turn as red as a cooked lobster. In severe heat exposure, the body will explode. Fire produces smoke and toxic fumes which can kill, stealing oxygen, searing raw the lining of the lungs and tearing apart the bronchioles with sandy granules of dust like small pieces of broken glass. Death from fire may take seconds, minutes, hours, days, or months.

So, what kind of madness makes someone run into a burning building when everyone else is running out?

As a Baltimore City firefighter, my job is to save people and property from being destroyed by fire or fire-provoking conditions. My home base is a "super firehouse" known as Steadman Station, sometimes known as the busiest firehouse in the nation. It is here that I have been privileged to work with the heroes of modern firefighting. I've responded to over 15,000 emergency calls since my first "turnout" nearly twenty years ago.

"Turnout!" is fire talk for "Let's go!" The term describes how a firefighter *turns* over to roll *out* of bed and into his boots to respond to a call.

Through a mixture of curiosity, luck and persistence, I've experienced many facets of firefighting. I've been a Fireman, a Paramedic and a Rescue Technician. Rarely does a firefighter have the opportunity to serve as all three. It is an experience I would not have traded for any other. Like a long-distance runner, I believe I was "designed" to be a firefighter.

Baltimore was where I grew up, mostly on the South Side, in the Locust Point area near historic Fort McHenry. This is where the red glare of rockets and fiery bomb blasts inspired Francis Scott Key to compose the national anthem.

As a boy, I often visited the fire station, one block from my home, that housed "17" Engine and "19" Truck. My dad or John Gould, a family friend, would accompany me and lift me up to sit at the wheel of the mighty red truck and ring its proud bell. Sometimes they found me standing alone in the station house,

gazing up at the long brass pole that disappeared into the darkness above. Whenever a fire call came in, I raced over to watch the men slide the poles, slip effortlessly into their giant suits, and leap onto the noisy fire trucks which seemed to bound like powerful lions out into the tranquil streets.

I waited patiently until the fire trucks silently returned to the station and rolled unnoticed into their berths, like sleepy old dogs. I marveled at the hook and ladder truck, which seemed to be going in two directions, and stood captivated watching the tillerman and driver work in tandem to glide the apparatus backwards into the station.

As a young man, I remember when my dad, sisters and I piled into the family car one rainy night to see what neighbors said was a serious accident at Fort Avenue and Light Street. We pushed through the crowd to discover that a fire truck had careened into the corner drug store, killing a firefighter and the store owner. I grieved for the fireman who never made it to his call, and envied the courage of men who went to work not knowing if they would return home at the end of their shift. These were men who cared enough about their communities to defend them, men who risked their lives for those of total strangers.

Little did I realize then the impact of these experiences. One incident that served to propel me to a career as a firefighter happened in 1971. I was 23, living in the heart of "the Port City" and serving my last six months in the U.S. Coast Guard, while assigned to a tug boat at the end of Pratt Street.

As friends and I walked to the movies one night, we heard fire engines approaching. We turned a corner to see flames blowing from the windows of a rowhouse. The engine company shot past us, and almost as soon as they pulled to a stop attached the hoseline to a hydrant and aimed a torrent of water at the front of the house. Then incredibly, with only the hoseline as a shield, they walked into the flaming building! They seemed to step fearlessly into the mouth of a fire-breathing dragon with nothing but water for a weapon! Other companies arrived to back them up, and soon the inferno was quelled. The effect of that fire was overwhelming. It rekindled my childhood dreams, and I walked away knowing that I wanted to be a firefighter. On April 3, 1972, I entered the Baltimore Fire Academy.

Why am I writing this book?

To many people, firefighters are a bunch of "backyard bums" who deal cards, tell bad jokes and play pool both day and night, that is, when they are not watching television or sitting in front of the station making comments at passers-by. Not true.

I want people to know what a firefighter feels and experiences; what it is like to work with 70 pounds of protective equipment on your back; to breathe

through a mask while straining to lift people and objects heavier than yourself; and to do your best to control your adrenaline and pulse while carrying tools, ladders and people through hell-like conditions when you cannot see, hear, smell, talk or breathe and, where your only exit may flash-over in flames instantly, trapping you in a fiery torrent.

Imagine being responsible for keeping someone alive as his vital signs weaken, or smoke or water has filled his lungs, or compression has stopped his heart.

As a medic you hope you are administering CPR effectively or giving the correct dosage of drugs, and wonder whether you should challenge a doctor's advice on the radiophone.

As a rescue technician, you know that when freeing a trapped person in a mangled vehicle, one wrong move may paralyze him for life or even kill him.

Everyone in the Fire Service encounters trauma regularly, and certain incidents make you want to leave your job.

It takes a special kind of person to *want* to do this job. It is a job of life-saving, property-saving and life-loving. It is a job of total satisfaction and incomparable frustration.

These stories are based on actual incidents. The firefighters portrayed in this book are actual firefighters in Baltimore City. However, the names of the victims, as well as some of the firefighters, have been changed to protect their privacy.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the unsung heroes of this profession . . . the spouses and children who know that when their husband or dad goes to work, he is not going to a neat, clean office or desk job. He may never come home again.

Your understanding and support are a firefighter's strength. As you read this book, place yourself in the front seat and ride with us. Charge into burning buildings and homes and help us rescue victims. Lean next to us as we splint the broken leg of a fall victim or give CPR to a badly burned child. Climb into a wrecked car and see what we see, feel what we feel. Let the euphoria of saving someone overwhelm you, as it does us. Experience the same despair we feel when a patient dies.

"Turnout!" for the next emergency call.

*Bill Hall
July 1991*

1 Alarm!

The concrete monolith stood in the heart of the city, a testimonial to the innovative design of America's fire-resistant office structures. It embodied the latest fire prevention technology regulated by law. Its one flaw was that most floors lacked sprinklers. Sprinklers were not yet required in new building construction, although lobbyists were actively pursuing a change in state law.

Nearby, at the city's largest fire house, the firefighter on watch duty lazily turned off the television set after listening to the Star Spangled Banner announce the end of the broadcast day. He yawned and stretched as he scanned the apparatus floor, eyeing the red and white steel guardians in their bays.

Tuning the AM-FM radio to a popular station, he sat back in his chair and began the predawn ritual of watchmen in firehouses the world over: he picked up the newspaper, reached for his coffee cup and began routinely checking the clock on the wall above him. Several calls had come in throughout the night for single engines or trucks, but none had been for his station. His watch duty progressed slowly. After what seemed like hours, the clock showed only 3:00 a.m.

Just four blocks away, on the sixteenth floor of the monolith, sparks crackled from a computer terminal. Curls of smoke began to rise. In the console beneath the terminal an orange flame appeared and grew, rapidly filling the small work station. Soon the flame lapped at the carpeting and the cloth-covered desk chair. Within moments, the chair burst into flames, igniting boxes of paper nearby. Heavy, black smoke engulfed the room.

Back at the station, the firefighter on duty came out of the bathroom rubbing his eyes, wishing he was asleep like his comrades. He checked the clock again . . . 3:49 a.m. What an unusually uneventful evening, he thought.

At the sixteenth floor of the high rise, a smoke detector screeched its alarm. It triggered an automatic signal which alerted the security guards on the first floor to the danger above, while simultaneously transmitting an alarm to Fire Department headquarters downtown.

The heat in the computer room rose dramatically as the fire charged forward like a roaring army with no one to stop its advance. Flames rolled out and greedily consumed the fragile contents of the room, causing the burning furniture to expel toxic fumes. Suddenly, the tempered glass in the room exploded from the heat and smoke allowing the superheated gases to escape and envelope the sixteenth floor.

At the droning tone-signal of the incoming call, the firefighter's sleepy eyes widened. He jumped to his feet, nearly knocking over his chair. As the dispatcher called out the responding units, the fighter quickly wrote them down on his watch sheet. Without hesitation, his adrenalin pumping, the watchman turned out his companies: "TURNOUT! Engine 23, 38, 15, 27, Truck 1 . . ." Instantly, lights came on, speakers coughed out unit numbers and street address, and large metal doors rolled open from their sleeping positions. Blankets and sheets were tossed aside as human legs found boots standing at attention next to each bunk. Buttons clicked and suspenders snapped as turnout clothing was donned.

In less than 60 seconds, ordinary men were transformed into soldiers of superhuman courage and compassion as we slid down gleaming poles of brass to our waiting chariots. Diesel exhaust filled the bays of the huge station as engines revved. Slowly at first, then faster, the giant rigs slipped from the station, each carrying four men. Air horns blared, sirens wailed, rotating beacon lights threw eerie patterns on nearby buildings, while headlights stabbed into the darkness of the nearly-deserted streets.

Hours later as I drove home, the fire now out, my mind replayed the events of early morning. I remembered turning the corner in the fire truck and seeing in horror the flames in the bulging windows of the building I had pointed to frequently as the architectural pride of the city. I thought of the tactical fire command center set up on the fifteenth floor of the burning building, and how methodically everyone worked together to do his job in the middle of the blinding chaos. I saw George White and me pulling the 2-1/2-inch hoseline down the smoke-filled hallway to bring it upstairs. I remembered the lump in my throat when I heard someone yell, "We've got a man down!" I recalled the valiant efforts of the truck company men as they tried in vain to revive their fallen friend. I reflected on the confusion that followed while officers attempted to get an accurate head-count of the firefighters.

Much later, a formal investigation revealed that the fire service key to the

elevators had been turned off but that Firefighter Sam Karnicki was aboard. The heat-sensing elevator call-buttons, activated by the temperature of the sixteenth floor, called the doomed elevator to that level. When the doors opened, Sam was greeted by heat estimated at 2000 degrees — enough to turn heavy steel building girders into twists of ribbon. The doors were, in turn, frozen open by the smoke blocking the light sensors. Sam didn't suffer long.

When I arrived home, my wife Carol was busy hustling the children off to school. We exchanged hugs and kisses without saying anything. I watched the turmoil and listened to the predictable excuses of kids resisting the start of another school day. Quietly, I drank a cup of coffee. How strange it seemed that some lives come to a crashing halt while others go on and on, caught up in an endless routine.

After the kids left, Carol came over and sat next to me.

"What's bothering you?" she asked. I put my cup down and forced back the tears, "We lost Sam Karnicki this morning."

Carol looked dumbfounded. We both knew Sam. In his forties, a family man and an experienced firefighter assigned to Ladder Truck 2, his Southern drawl seemed to belie his quick and easy humor. I had come to enjoy his friendship in the two years we had worked together.

Carol got up, propelled by some inner remote control that takes over in moments of intense shock, put her arms around my neck and stood silently hugging me. As a firefighter's wife she knew that was as much as she could do. That day, one of our worst fears had become a reality. We cried for his family.

At Sam's funeral, the long row of firefighters in blue snapped to attention at the command of the senior officer. An engine bearing Sam's flag-draped casket in its hosebed slowly moved down the street from the funeral home on its way to the cemetery near the city line. In the midst of their pain and grief, Sam's family in the black limousine felt the consolation of pride that Sam was so nobly honored in his death. But as the engines approached the gate to the cemetery, tears flooded their faces and their voices quivered.

At the entrance to the burial grounds, two companies had fully extended their aerial ladders to touch each other and form an arch. As the casket was born through, a firefighter clanged an engine bell for his comrade.

An honor guard made up of several hundred men lined the field at the tent where Sam's family awaited his eulogy.

Every firefighter seemed transfixed. Only those in the Fire Service can truly comprehend a moment like this. We pay tribute not to the way our fallen comrade died but to the way he lived — to serve the public and the people. Sam paid the ultimate price for that honor.

It is for love of fellow man and the honor of the profession that we answer each call, no matter how dangerous. We know that, at any time, it could be our last alarm. We and our families live with that possibility daily. It may sound strange but at times like these, when the reality of our mortality is strongest, we are proudest to be firefighters.

The nearness of death makes a man look at himself in a new perspective. We realize that we are not immortal. We can die in a second. Things that are trivial take on new importance — like a simple kiss from your wife as you leave for the station, or making time after a grueling shift to help your kid with homework.

Life in the Fire Service is many things. Above all, it is unpredictable. Some calls actually leave you with a smile on your face.

On a bright, sunny day Engine 38 responded to a call for a water leak in a low-income high rise. As the engine arrived, the firefighters spotted a woman on the tenth floor, waving her arms frantically and screaming for them to hurry because her baby was being drowned. The captain, suspecting foul play, grabbed his radio and called for police assistance. Because the elevators weren't working, the crew anxiously ran up the long stretch of stairs to the hysterical woman.

Finally, they reached the tenth floor, their legs rubbery from the long ascent. The mother, clad only in a wrinkled housecoat, pushed them into the apartment and toward the bathroom. As the crew cautiously approached, the sound of rushing water became deafening. Disregarding their own safety, they barged into the bathroom, followed by the weeping mother. They stopped cold.

In the bathtub stood an 11-year-old "baby" trying to quell the flooding waters from the broken faucet. The tub was overflowing and the "baby," roughly 250 pounds of him, clad only in undershorts, turned to the firefighters and said, "Will somebody please help me?"

At the sight of the samurai wrestler-sized boy, the entire crew shook with suppressed laughter, barely able to contain themselves.

The apartment manager said the water couldn't be cut off without shutting off all water to the 110 units. So the firefighters ended the crisis by coaxing the baby out of the tub and reattaching the faucet with equipment from their toolbox (much to the pleasure of the mother).

Have you every wondered what happens when a hearse catches fire? Engine 23 responded to an automobile fire at one of the West Side's biggest intersections.

It was a sweltering summer day. As they approached the scene, they observed a hearse spouting flames and smoke from under its hood. The crew immediately pulled off their booster hose and pried open the superheated hood. The driver stood by as they turned their hoses on the engine, silently watching with a resigned look on his face. Through the thick black smoke it was apparent that the engine was demolished.

When the fire was extinguished, the acting lieutenant questioned the driver. But the driver seemed more concerned about getting the body out of the hot car and to the City Morgue, two blocks away. As the firefighters put up their equipment, the driver of the still-steaming hearse promptly turned, opened the back doors and pulled the body bag out onto a wheeled stretcher. While the firefighters watched flabbergasted, and stunned pedestrians and motorists looked on, the driver wheeled the body through the traffic and down the street to the morgue.

As a paramedic, one of the most unnecessary calls I ever responded to was during my detail to Medic Unit 4. The Baltimore City Fire Department runs an emergency ambulance service. At present there are 18 units assigned for first-line service to a city of approximately 800,000 people. Needless to say, the emergency ambulance service receives a great many calls which are clearly *not* emergencies. Whether out of ignorance, loneliness, laziness or hypochondria, some people clearly “abuse” the service. They dial 911 for everything from toothaches to taxi rides.

At 4 o’clock, early one morning, we were dispatched to a dilapidated high rise building to aid a person suffering from a seizure. Surprisingly, the elevator worked. Most of the time, elevators in unkempt buildings are broken and we have to carry people and equipment up or down several flights of poorly lighted stairs — often in rough areas. In the elevator, the stench of urine was overpowering. But at this hour of the night, it was worth taking the elevator, especially for a call on the seventh floor.

When we arrived at the door, I knocked and was greeted by a hulking, black man in a torn T-shirt who led us inside the darkened apartment. “He’s over there,” the man pointed. Sitting in the corner in a tall-backed chair, with a glass of red wine on the floor next to him, was a 15-year-old boy.

“How do you feel?” I asked. “I heard you had a seizure?”

“I’m okay. I feel fine now,” the boy replied.

I took his vital signs and asked, “Do you want us to take you to the hospital? It’s 4:00 a.m. We’re already here.”

The large man interrupted, "I'm his guardian." Turning to the boy, he urged, "Go ahead. Let 'em take you!"

The boy shook his head sheepishly. "Nah, I don't want to go now. But if you come back in the morning, I'll go with you!" he smiled.

"Okay," I agreed, careful to contain my irritation, "you do that." Sure enough, the boy's guardian called back at 9:00 a.m. for the free ride to the hospital.

Fred Ehrlich, a feisty kind of firefighter, served as my driver on ambulance duty one wintry day when we received a call for a "sick case" on the southwest side of town. We entered the house and raced up a long steep, narrow staircase.

This was particularly difficult for Fred, as he is rather short and round. He resembles Danny DeVito in the TV series *Taxi* and has about the same cynical sense of humor.

At the top of the stairs, he brushed the sweat from his balding head and looked inside the doorway. Then he put his hands on his hips and frowned at me. Before us stretched a scene reminiscent of the *Sound of Music*. A woman in her forties lay propped up in a large bed, surrounded by nine children ranging from four to 18 years old, standing in order of age.

"What's wrong?" I asked her.

The woman, her face twisted in anguish, began:

"Well, I've only got one good leg and the other one hurts. I've got a heart condition and high blood pressure. I'm also a diabetic. My kidneys are bad and I've got stones in my gallbladder. My left lung has cancer and my right lung has emphysema. I've got glaucoma in my right eye. My good leg's got phlebitis and might have to be amputated. My stomach makes too much acid, and it makes me feel terrible." Fred shifted his feet.

"How long has all this been going on?" I inquired.

"Oh, my, I'd say about 10 or 15 years!" she replied.

I struggled to keep my composure. Fred bit his tongue. "What made you decide to call an emergency ambulance today?" I asked.

She looked at me stone-faced and said, "I feel sick."

The room was filled with bottles of medication. A bell sat at her side that when rung would bring at least four children running to her bedside. I looked at Fred, who quickly turned his eyes to the floor. Calmly, I took the woman's vital signs. They were normal.

"Ma'am, you don't need an emergency ambulance," I said. She looked frustrated. Fred mumbled all the way down the steps about his back and his feet

and the cold air. We could hear her bell ringing angrily in the background as we headed for the next call.

Ted Belt, a no-nonsense paramedic, received a call for a seizure patient at a busy downtown intersection. As the sirens wailed through the crowded downtown traffic, the dispatcher advised Ted and his partner that police were on the scene.

When the ambulance arrived, the men found a group of passers-by crowded together in football huddle formation. Ted grabbed his kit and pushed through the crowd. A police officer knelt over a white man in his forties.

The patient lay prostrate on the cool concrete with his eyes closed, seemingly unconscious. Ted took his vitals and found they were normal, so he asked the crowd, "Did you see this man have a seizure?" No one answered.

The man's eyes began to flutter. Ted tried to open them with his fingers, but the man seemed to be holding them shut. Ted realized that the man was only pretending to have had a seizure. The patient closely resembled a street person that frequented the area, one who had been known to call for ambulances for non-emergency situations. Medics refer to such people as "regulars." They fake seizures hoping to be admitted to a hospital to get food, a clean bed and maid service, or simply to draw attention from passers-by who might offer them help.

"Regular" calls are especially frustrating to medics who rarely have enough time to handle real emergencies. Some street people pull this stunt several times a week, despite repeated failures.

When the man continued to fight Ted's attempts to open his eyes, Ted decided to have some fun with him. He reached down and opened his medical box.

Paramedics in Baltimore have a nickname for ammonia capsules, or smelling salts. They call them "silver bullets."

Ted pulled two silver bullets out of the box, cracked them, and inserted them into each of the man's nostrils. He saw the man's eyes suddenly open wide, welling up with tears.

Quickly, Ted stood up over the man, held out his hands, and yelled, "HEAL!" Instantly, the patient jumped to his feet, snorting the two silver bullets out of his nose and gasping for breath. The crowd erupted in laughter as the sniffling man stomped his feet and wiped away the tears that were streaming down his face.

The medic and his partner called to the dispatcher as they drove away, "Medic one, place us back in service. This call will be handled by police."

A firefighter never knows when he'll end up leaving a chunk of himself back at the scene.

One of the most heart-wrenching and helpless situations I have ever experienced in the Fire Service occurred during a high rise apartment fire in an affluent area of Baltimore.

A young police officer on foot patrol was making his usual rounds on a quiet street, twirling his nightstick with precision. He turned the corner and gasped. Directly in front of him, a 10-story apartment building stood aflame. Fire leaped out of the eighth, ninth and tenth floor windows. Smoke the color of asphalt rose from the fifth floor and up. People hung out of the windows screaming for help. Luckier residents scurried out of every lower access onto the sidewalk.

"419 to dispatch — URGENT!" yelled the young officer.

"Come in 419," dispatch replied, "all units standing by."

"Send fire units to the Bach Apartments," his voice quivered. "The building's on fire! People are hanging out the windows. I'll try to assist. HURRY!"

"Roger, 419", the dispatcher said coolly.

Officer 419 barged through the main doors as more panicked occupants streamed out around him. He saw one body bounce on the hard concrete outside the doors, and he was determined not to see another.

His adrenalin pumped madly as he raced up the stairs to the fifth floor and ran down the halls yelling and banging on doors. Some occupants heard him and made their escape. He found a woman overcome with smoke, and dragged her to safety outside. In the distance he heard the telltale wail of fire department sirens. Finally! To 419, it seemed he had struggled alone in the inferno for an eternity. He rushed back into the burning building and vaulted up the steps.

At the end of the fifth floor hallway, a blast of intense heat and heavy smoke suddenly forced him back. The fire, it seemed, was winning the battle.

As he backtracked to the opposite end of the hallway the stairwell collapsed, sending sparks and waves of smoke rolling toward him. Choking and flushed, he realized he was trapped. There was only one thing to do . . . the one thing he had been drilled not to do. He punched the elevator button and waited.

The smoke and heat were nearly incapacitating. Finally the elevator opened. In desperation, 419 stepped inside, praying to make it to the fresh, night air. The doors closed and he began to descend. As he passed the fourth floor, he realized something was wrong. The elevator began jerking erratically. Suddenly, it dropped three floors — to the basement. He hammered at the "door open" button,

but the doors remained steadfastly shut. He reached for his portable radio.

“Dispatch, this is 419. I’m in the north elevator at the fire. It’s disabled in the basement and I can’t get the doors open.” He began to cough as smoke entered the cracks of the door.

“Easy, 419. We’ll get the fire units to you quickly,” the dispatcher crackled.

“Roger,” 419 replied.

The heat in the elevator was getting worse. Without any warning it was jolted by a large thud, followed by several smaller ones, as floors collapsed onto the elevator. Tears flowed from his eyes as he realized he might not make it out. His thoughts turned to his wife and little girl.

At the fire command post, the police colonel was talking with the deputy fire chief. They listened with helplessness as 419’s voice pleaded over the radio, “Somebody, please help me! It’s getting so hot! I can’t stand it! Help me out of here!” Concerned police officers in the area, alerted to 419’s cries over the radio, began to gather near the fire scene. Suddenly a woman rushed toward the building, crying hysterically. A police officer restrained her, as she screamed that she was Officer 419’s wife. She had heard his impassioned pleas over their home radio scanner. I have never seen such raw fear as I did watching her eyes as she gazed into the flames hoping, praying, pleading.

With all the occupants accounted for, the fire units concentrated their efforts on the basement. The city-wide channel broadcast 419’s last words: “Help me, please. I can’t take it anymore!” Another rush of falling floors covered the north elevator shaft, and the radio went silent.

When we finally cleared the rubble and reached the elevator shaft, our sense of failure was overwhelming. We pried open what had become a tomb for 419.

His body had swollen from the searing heat. Gently, it was covered and placed on an ambulance stretcher. When the firefighters carried him past the police command post, Officer 419’s emotionally drained wife collapsed in the arms of the police colonel. Each officer saluted the body as it passed by. A firefighter closed the doors of the ambulance and raised a final salute to the heroic young officer. We turned away to begin the arduous task of overhauling the fire — checking for hot spots, clearing out the debris, and somehow getting on with life.

Big cities grow slowly and die slowly. Sometimes the dead sections are around for years before new growth emerges. Large city blocks of vacant buildings and abandoned houses bring their own special kind of firefighting horror. One case in particular gave me the shivers. It was the closest thing I’ve

seen to premeditated murder — of firefighters!

It was a clear, crisp fall day. At mid-day an arsonist peered down the trash-strewn streets, looking for possible witnesses. He knew he would be less obvious by blending in with the daytime crowd. He turned quickly and entered the open doorway of a decaying, empty building. He ran up the stairway to the top floor, clutching his tools tightly. There he set up shop and began his perverse work.

Meanwhile, at the Steadman Firehouse the firemen sat in the kitchen talking and drinking coffee. As they laughed, joked, cursed and poked fun at one another, the room took on the air of a high school cafeteria.

Suddenly, the station intercom double-beeped an alert, and the kitchen fell instantly silent. The dispatcher reported a building fire just down the street from the station. Racing to their poles, they slid to their units and burst into the heavy morning traffic. They could smell the smoke, but when they turned the corner they could see nothing but a light eerie haze.

The arsonist shot out the open door and mingled with the growing crowd in front of the building. He flushed with excitement as he saw the fire apparatus careen around the corner.

Unit by unit the firefighters jumped from their apparatus and entered the building. Following the smoke, they ascended the stairs six stories to the top floor. There, several tables, abandoned by the former tenant, stretched from one end to the other. Shreds of cloth, trash and paper were scattered about the room. The men began their search. Although the scent of petroleum was in the air, the fire load was small, so the men scattered to find the source.

The firebug watched intently as more firefighters entered the building. He rubbed his sweaty hands and wiped them up and down his thighs. His mouth went dry as he unconsciously began to pant. "Soon," he thought. "Soon!"

Without warning the room erupted with balls of fire, followed by heavy, black smoke. Panic struck the firefighters as they scattered, desperately searching for an exit through the flames and tar-like bellows of smoke. A few of the 25 men were fortunate enough to make it down the stairwell, but most were forced to scramble to any opening, even windows.

The arsonist watched with glee as smoke poured from the windows. "What a show," he thought, wiping his oily hands. "What a wonderful show!" He licked his parched lips and smiled as the firefighters began swarming out of the blaze like ants.

Firefighters Augie Stern and Captain Frank Rainey leaped out of a window to a fire escape. They shouted for help as the smoke snaked around them. They could not descend because of the blinding smoke and intense heat.

Lieutenant Carrabeau wasn't as fortunate. He, too, dove out of a window, but was only able to grasp the bottom rung of the fire escape. Flames shot out of the window at his hands and face. The lieutenant's hands clung desperately to the rung, as he dangled six stories above the asphalt and summoned strength he never knew he had.

Both Stern's and Rainey's faces burned from the heat. Their hair had been singed and their faces were blackened from the smoke and soot. But the sight of the lieutenant, suspended in mid-air, propelled them into action.

Rainey held onto Stern as he descended the fire escape ladder. Stretching out as far as he could, his hand grasped the lieutenant's wrist. After nearly 15 minutes, Rainey and Stern together were able to pull Carrabeau to the relative safety of the fire escape, which seemed to appear and disappear in the smoke.

By now, the fire engulfed several floors. The fire command officer directed all of his efforts to the three men trapped on the fire escape. Ever so slowly, an aerial ladder was raised to the fire escape. The men, exhausted and burned by the intense heat, painfully pulled themselves onto the truck ladder and made their descent down its long frame.

First and second degree burns covered Lieutenant Carrabeau's face and hands. Augie Stern and Frank Rainey suffered first degree burns on their faces and necks.

The arsonist stood proudly surveying the leaping flames when a strong hand clamped his shoulder. Within seconds he was handcuffed. The arson investigator, well-trained in his art, had witnesses, evidence and telltale signs of the firebug that showed this man to be responsible for the blaze.

Arson costs untold billions of dollars in damages to homes, property and businesses each year. Countless lives are lost. It is a hideous crime. The arsonist, like a premeditating murderer, is a professional criminal. He knows exactly how to achieve the desired result. Here, the arsonist had not only destroyed a building but had almost killed an entire first alarm assignment of 25 men.

The arsonist laughed as the door of the police cruiser closed. Would he ever have to pay the price for his actions? Was it an obsession? Was he planning the delayed fireball eruptions to trap firefighters? Or was he working for someone else with a vendetta or a motive who would get him off without punishment? We would never know the answer. All we knew was that it had been a very close call for many firefighters. Too close!

2 Firehouse Life

What is it like to live half of your life in a cement-block building with a group of men who think a good day is charging up and down the stairways of hell in 70 pounds of gear carrying, dragging or pulling people weighing up to 200 pounds in temperatures well above 90 degrees?

In a word: Fantastic!

While some aspects of station life are best left unmentioned, I'll do my best to provide an accurate picture of what goes on inside the "home" of this tightly knit brotherhood.

There are three essential areas in every firehouse: the bunk room, the kitchen, and the coffee pot! Like anywhere else a group of men congregate, you'll find swearing, raw humor and prank-playing that would make television's *MASH* unit look like *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*.

At the beginning of a shift, firefighters hang around the kitchen drinking coffee. Story-telling and joking occupy most of the time and help take the edge off between calls. Occasionally, towards the end of a long shift, an argument about the showers or a missing candy bar breaks out.

The transformation from juvenile jokester to seasoned rescue worker still impresses me after almost 20 years. Firefighters may laugh and argue at the top of their lungs while the Fire Department radio chatters in the background. But as soon as their unit numbers are called out for a response, their mouths shut and their ears perk up. In less than a heartbeat, they shoot like darts from the kitchen, bunk rooms and offices to their apparatus.

Civilians find it hard to understand the apparent nonchalant attitude of firefighters in the face of a tragedy. Witnessing a fireman extinguish a fatal blaze or drag a body from a gruesome accident, and then watching him laugh and