

Only a drill-

But the flames are real enough

Imagine yourself taking a driver's test. Only imagine a different set of rules. You have to not only pass the test, but destroy the car also.

You're right, it's crazy. But that's a little like the dilemma facing firemen. They want to be able to practice, but there's just no getting around the fact that the object of their practice is going to wind up a little bit the worse for wear.

So firemen are prone to keeping an eye peeled for the vacant or condemned house, somewhere they can practice their craft and only bother the bugs that have taken up residence.

Since January the Sandy Fire Department has had the good fortune to have a fine, two-story derelict virtually on their back porch. After weeks of drills on breaking and entering, smoke evacuation and search and rescue the grand finale came Sunday, when 20 firemen from the department took part in a six-hour drill during which the house was at times nearly totally enveloped by fire.

And as if the scorching flames weren't realistic enough, the men were grouped in the fire hall, then dispatched randomly as if they had actually just come in.

That way, a fireman may wind up manning a hose with someone he hardly knows while the officer in charge might have any combination of experienced and inexperienced men on his crew.

"It's a problem to get actual experience and doubly a problem to give an officer actual experience," said Chief Bob Rathke. "So we threw in simulated problems."

In one case, the officer in charge of a crew was told that a nearby water hydrant was "out," requiring him to find an alternative water supply.

"That puts pressure on an officer," said Rathke. "But it's the kind of thing a guy would normally face at a fire."

And sometimes, the planned problems produced an unplanned result. One fire designed to set one room and the attic ablaze ended up engulfing almost the whole house before Lt. Ed Hanning's crew arrived.

"By the time Hanning got there, he had just one hellacious fire," said Rathke with a laugh.

Hanning's crew, one of the first to drill Sunday morning, found that efficiency has its one punishment. So effective were they and the other firemen at putting out the lit fires that the house survived the equivalent of three large conflagrations before finally collapsing during the afternoon.

Because they were packing up and going back to the fire hall for each "alarm," that meant a total of three complete repetitions of the set-up, attack and clean-up cycles—exhausting work on a warm day.

"They did a super job, but they were beat when they were finished," said Rathke.

For folks out for a pleasant Sunday stroll, the drill right in the middle of town was like having an episode of "Emergency" live on the front porch. The towering pillar of smoke drew a crowd from miles, many of whom (this writer, for one) didn't realize for some time that it was a drill.

The roaring flames, the hoarse shouts and the grimy, tired faces of the firemen all gave the scene a sense of very real urgency.

Only the small knot of firefighters

casually munching hamburgers while watching another crew gave it away.

By 4 p.m., little more than a bed of ashes and a charred and naked chimney were left.

It's a can't win proposition. "We sure got our money's worth out of that house," Rathke said. "but I hated to see it go."

To paraphrase an old cliché—I guess you just can't have a fire drill and keep the house, too.



FIREMEN DAVE SENN and Dave Bejarano direct a fountain of water at a roof fire during a realistic fire drill last Sunday.



FIRE WATCHING Sandy style.



A FIREMAN struggles to pull a hose into the burning house.

Text and photographs by Douglas Gantenbein