

Finally, I found the pylon.

Well, finally I bonked into it with my helmet in the pitch black on my hands and knees scuffling forward with my right hand on the wall and my left searching the floor in front of me for the drop into the bottomless pit I was sure had been overlooked by the organizers when they set up the search and rescue maze.

The pylon marked the exit door. I heaved myself up in my bunker gear, heavier-than-you-think helmet, air tank and mask and exited into the Richland sunshine with my shadow, Seattle Firefighter Steve Borgstrom. I was finished with station 4 of Fire Ops 101, an exercise for elected officials and other government decision makers. The Washington State Council of Firefighters organizes Fire Ops 101 annually and it is a brilliant lobbying tool.

As far as understanding what firefighters and medics really do and what they need to do it well every time, as a policymaker I might as well be in a pitch black room. We all watch television (“Backdraft” and “Rescue Me” or grew up with “Emergency!”) and we have smart advisors and analysts, but few of us understand that firefighters have to be the ultimate jack-of-all-trades. A little building construction expertise, a little fluid dynamics, a little medicine, a little endurance athletics and all under a merciless clock.

So, every year Fire Ops 101 puts people like me through a series of exercises meant to challenge you mentally and physically and, coincidentally, demonstrate the equipment and personnel numbers required to save lives and preserve property. Six stations, six different situations that firefighters encounter regularly – a ladder climb to the top of a six story building to ventilate the roof; putting out a fire on the first and second floors of a building; freeing victims from a car wreck; search-and-rescue in a dark building; heart attack response; and a gas tank fire.

Having a councilmember, mayor, commissioner or city administrator expire would be an example of poor lobbying, so each of us gets shadowed by a member of our local department. I couldn't have hoped for a better shadow than Steve. Especially when Steve accidentally found the light switch in the first part of the search-and-rescue maze. If only the monitors of that station would have let us keep the lights on.

Firefighter Sally's results:

I seized the chance to be first up the **ladder** because of my intense fear of heights just to get it out of the way. I made it up! However, you get to the top and then can't figure out a safe, simple, elegant way to get from the ladder to the safety of the roof. I was sure my heavy air tank would cause me to flip over like a beetle just at the wrong moment. And before you can step off? The guy tells me I have to pound on the roof with an iron rod a real fire fighter would have held while climbing the ladder (probably with an ax and chainsaw, as well). This is perfectly reasonable, but I am calculating in my mind how much longer I can be at the top of the ladder without swearing at him.

The **burn building** is the first station for wearing the mask and breathing from the tank. My mask fogs over immediately when I crawl forward with the hose into the burning room. I can see nothing and hear nothing, but I know it's hot. Going up to the second floor I lose my footing with the hose, get stuck and do a good job of flooding the landing before one of the monitors puts me out of my misery by helping me shut off the hose and sending me back down the stairs.

At **vehicle extrication**, I go through multiple saws-all blades as I persistently attempt to cut the roof at the wrong angle. We lose one fire district commissioner at this station as it is sunny and hot by this time and we are wedged into small spaces in wrecked automobiles with heavy hydraulic equipment and no leverage. Ultimately, we saved the baby mannequin!

At **search-and-rescue** we're greeted by Seattle's Theresa Purtell who is running the station. This station seems to be about memory games. Right hand on the wall all the

way, “tracing” your way through the building. Steve and I go first and I lead us immediately into what is most likely a closet with a folded wheel chair on the floor, but it takes me what seems like forever to get past the wheelchair. An object! I hadn’t counted on objects to throw us off, but why wouldn’t there be objects? Fire fighters crawl around everything from living room furniture to cubicle-villes in highrise office buildings. Ultimately, I found a “victim,” but wasn’t very effective at dragging the dummy to safety. The dummy has Steve to thank for surviving my search-and-rescue attempt.

At the heart attack **medic response** I realize I will never be a medic because I get car sick if I’m not sitting facing forward.

The **liquefied petroleum gas** exercise is a new one for Fire Ops 101 and they wanted to know if it was helpful. You stand as a team of three and create a protective curtain of water as you step forward together, in unison, far enough so that the middle team member can reach out through the curtain and turn off the gas valve. It was the most visually dramatic of the stations as the fire shot 40 feet in the air (controlled by a staff person at a control box a dozen yards away). I couldn’t hear a thing because of the roar of the fire and I couldn’t see much because of the water spray against my mask. Precise teamwork and non-verbal communication was the only way to get to the valve.

All through the day firefighters volunteering their time explained the importance of responding with the right equipment, the right people and responding quickly. I know Seattle can always use more rigs, newer equipment and the best new recruits, but I felt lucky to be from Seattle where we have four-person crews on engines already. Mostly, I felt very lucky to be allowed to experience a little of what we ask fire fighters to do every day, multiple times a day. I know I have a responsibility to hold up my end of the work of smart policy and budget decisionmaking.