

IN DA WOODS

by Melanie B. Fullman, US Forest Service

ONLY US

I just returned from the annual National Fallen Fire Fighters memorial weekend in Maryland. This year, we memorialized 89 fire fighters that lost their lives in the line of duty in 2010. While some were full-time, career fire fighters, more than half were volunteers – just like in our communities. And while some were killed in a burning building, like most of us probably assumed, many more died in accidents en route to fires or were struck and killed at the scene of another accident by an inattentive driver.

Fires and accidents happen in all communities; tragic loss of fire fighters doesn't have to.

Helping Those That Help Us

Reading the biographies of the fallen, their dedication to the citizens they served, their love for their families, and the joy they brought to their friends is abundantly evident. When not responding to fires or other emergencies, they were the fabric of American society: teachers, electricians, mechanics, farmers. Just like the volunteer fire fighters that protect the towns and forests of the western UP, they considered firefighting a calling, a way of life, and probably, their life's highest purpose.

Across America, bells rang in their honor last Sunday. Fire prevention programs have or will occur in schools throughout the county this month. In memory of those that died protecting their neighbors, and in honor of those that walk amongst us every day, please:

1. Create a home fire escape plan and practice it! Remember those fire drills you had at school?! Make sure every member of your household knows how to exit from each room. Designate a place to meet outside to ensure you are all there. Don't forget pets; they are apt to hide (in closets, under beds, etc.) when smoke fills a house. If everyone is out, fire fighters won't have to rush in.
2. Check your smoke detectors this week, replacing batteries or devices if needed. The sooner a fire is detected, the better your chances for survival, the more likely your home can be saved, and the lesser the risk to responding fire fighters.
3. Install, and check, a carbon monoxide detector. Odor-loss and color-less, carbon monoxide is a deadly by-product of incomplete combustion. To prevent carbon monoxide suffocation, have your furnace checked annually too. Leave your house immediately any time you smell gas of any kind, then call for help. Use of a cell phone could trigger an explosion. Many local fire departments now have the ability to detect and identify many types of gases. Safer for you, safer for them.
4. Have at least one fire extinguisher; better to have two, one for the inside of your home and another for your garage. Check it on your fall family fire prevention tour of your house.
5. Clean your chimney. Every fall, western UP fire fighters respond to chimney fires as temperatures drop and last winter's creosote or this summer's bird nest lights up their stack. Chimney fires that spread to a roof threaten the very footing your neighborhood fire fighter needs put out the fire.
6. Don't smoke in bed. Best: don't smoke inside your home. A cigarette can smolder in the seat cushions of a sofa or edge of mattress for an hour or more. The carbon monoxide created by a fire robs the brain of oxygen, putting victims to asleep, not waking them up (like most people assume); see carbon monoxide detector, above!
7. Move to the side of the road and STOP when any emergency vehicle approaches. Fire truck drivers are moving a big vehicle with sloshy water and funky brakes, trying to hear dispatch information in a cab with a

loud siren. Plus, they're probably already thinking about what needs to be done when they arrive. Help them help you safely.

8. Support local fire department efforts to supplement measly budgets with spaghetti feeds, pancake breakfasts, raffles, auctions, etc. Those funds purchase equipment and supplies, and pay for training they hope to never need. But better trained fire fighters = safer fire fighters.
9. Hug a fire fighter.

Proud to Serve

American fire fighters are a unique breed, coming to the aid of their fellow citizens in the middle of night, under the worst conditions, on holidays and during birthday parties, every hour, every day, every year. Most do so for no pay or tangible compensation.

We owe debts of gratitude to these folks, let alone to those that answered their last call. As Smokey Bear has reminded us for so long, each of us can make a difference in fire safety, if Only You....