



# 'It got hot, dark and very intense'

**F**ighting a fire is part mental and part physical, part team effort and part individual achievement, somewhere between tearing down a house that's aflame and winning a football game where you risk dying if you're not careful and sometimes even if you are.

On Friday, we followed Engine 106 to a fire at 3037 W. Belmont and met a few of the firefighters from Battalion 7, and if you missed it, you might find today's column more rewarding if you read Friday's first, perhaps through the miracle of Internet technology.

As the column ended, a resident who had fled the building begged firefighter Rich Irwin to "Save my baby!" If you expected Irwin to immediately bolt up the stairs and snatch the tot, you've seen too many movies.

Remember, Irwin was on the street — there were a dozen guys in the building already, working a hose up the stairs to the burning third floor, cutting holes in the roof and feeling around in the smoky second floor with their hands. To be honest, news about the baby caused "a surge in adrenaline" and not much else. "Either way, we're going in for a primary search," said Irwin.

A reminder that, more than even heroism, firefighting requires strategy. You might have wondered, for instance, with flames pouring out of the back staircase, why didn't the firefighters park themselves behind the building and hurl water on the fire directly from there? Why sneak up on it?

"We always come from the unburnt part to the burning part, always," said Lt. Frank Isa.

Fires are not so much extinguished as they are beaten back. Had Engine 106 come in from the rear, they would have merely pushed the fire into the rest of the structure and lost it.

"In Chicago, we do what's called an 'interior attack,'" said Isa. "We go to the seat of the fire. A lot of suburbs will hit it from the outside."

That's a point of pride among Chicago firefighters. They do not stand around pouring water on the roof of a building while it burns to the ground. They grab their axes, strap on their masks, and go in to fight a fire face-to-face.

"It's all about being aggressive," said Scott Musil. "And pride. We're not in the suburbs."

"[The suburbs] do an exterior attack," said one firefighter. "That's why they lose most of their buildings. If we stood back and put water on, we'd feel like we weren't doing anything."

"It's the Chicago way," said Larry Langford, the Chicago Fire Department spokesman, and isn't it nice to see that "the Chicago Way" doesn't just refer to Rahm Emanuel cussing out clerks but also to the more aggressive, perilous and effective approach to fighting fires?

So where were we? Tino Durovic kicked in the door on the third floor, a wave of heat and steam hit him, burning his face and ears, even under his mask and hood. He instinctively

## ONLINE VIDEO

### SEE THE FIRE

Watch the video from the scene at [suntimes.com/news/steinberg](http://suntimes.com/news/steinberg).

tively dived face first to the floor (General Fire Tip: It's safer on the floor; many people who died in a fire standing up would have lived crawling.)

The heat melted the reflectors on Durovic's helmet — not necessarily a bad thing; a firefighter wants his gear sooty and scarred. Firefighters will sometimes take a new turnout coat into the alley and drag it around a bit, to give it character and avoid showing up at a fire gleaming like a newborn babe.

Durovic didn't stop advancing when he got burned, by the way. Nor when his low-air warning alarm went off. (Firefighters carry a bottle containing 30 minutes of compressed air — regular old air, don't call it "oxygen," oxygen would be ignited by a spark at a fire and burn your face off. But that's 30 theoretical minutes of air; if you're working hard, breathing fast, with your adrenaline up because you're trying to save a baby, you can easily run out in 15).

"It got hot, dark and very intense, but we had to hold that stairway," said Isa.

"There was no time to get out," Durovic said. "We'd lose the whole thing. I yelled to Frank, 'Gimme more line!'"

A brave thing for him to do?

"Anybody else would have done the same thing," said Durovic. "Any other fireman."

In fact, others did, when they finally pushed the fire back, the nozzle spraying 250 gallons a minute, Durovic, his air gone, handed the nozzle over to Eddie Lashley, who held until his air went, then handed it to others. Fighting a fire is far more complicated and requires far more firefighters than I can mention here.

"We're in the third floor, thanks to everybody," says Isa. "Once we made the third floor, we beat it. It's simple as putting it out. Now we can attack it. We meet it face-to-face and say, 'You're done; it's over.' We call in [and say] 'Battalion 7 — the fire's knocked.'"

There's still work to do, and still danger — knocking holes to drain hundreds of gallons of water to keep the floor from collapsing under you, for instance.

Durovic, I should mention, when he finally went down to get more bottled air, collared the lady with the baby. Exactly where, he asked, had she left that baby?

Oh, she said, her baby goes all over.

Her baby was a cat.

If you feel deceived, imagine how the firefighters felt.

Actually, they took it in good humor. All part of the job.

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