



SIRENS

Fall 2023

News & Information for Albemarle County Fire Rescue



CHO's New 2023 Rosenbauer Panther

BY Larry Andes, Police Officer/Firefighter/EMT-B CHO

In March, Charlottesville-Albemarle Airport took delivery of its brand new 2023 Rosenbauer Panther 4x4, Phoenix-96. Effective fall of 2023, it will be the primary unit of our four-truck front-line response to any ARFF calls on airport grounds; with our oldest truck being converted into CHO's dedicated HazMat unit.

Phoenix-96 carries 1,500 gallons of water, 200 gallons of foam, and 450 pounds of dry chemical agent; all of which can be flowed through hand lines or its bumper turret, which can be lowered to two feet off the ground to get under the belly of even the smallest of light aircraft. Its roof turret can flow water and foam and is equipped with a 360° FLIR – Forward Looking Infra-Red – camera, controlled from inside the cabin. Both turrets can deliver 500/1,000 GPM at low/high flow. It also comes equipped with front and underbody water nozzles, so it can drive away any aviation fuel from underneath it and get very close to the fire while staying cool. P-96 has a remote light tower, a complete set of ladders, and battery-powered extrication tools. Its Volvo D16 engine can get its 57,000 pounds up to over 70mph and it can do 0-50 in under 25 seconds.

Feel free to stop in and ask for a tour of our new unit, we'd love to show it to you.



NEWS BRIEFS

New Hire

Welcome
Jacob Roland,
EMT Instructor



Recruitment

CARS is looking for driver-only applicants to run two twelve-hour shifts per month (or more if desired)! Fill out the form at rescue1.org/volunteer/ or email join@rescue1.org if you're interested.

Calls for Service

January 1 - October 8, 2023

EMS	8,903
Fire.....	2,330
HM	425
Rescue	885
Other	413
Grand Total.....	12,956

In This Issue

- Beyond the Call1
- Letter From the Chief.....2
- Compliance Corner.....2
- Active Shooter Training3
- 911 Stair Climb.....3
- 2024 Upcoming Events3
- Fire Marshal Plans4
- Fire Incidents4
- Promotions/Releases.....5
- Rowing for Responders.....5
- Spotlight.....6
- Smoke Eaters7



Letter From the Chief

I'm pleased to announce that our department was recently awarded a \$7.1 million Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) grant to hire, train, and deploy 30 full-time firefighters.

The SAFER grant was created by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide funding directly to fire departments to help increase or maintain the number of trained, front-line firefighters available in their communities. The goal of SAFER is to enhance local fire departments' abilities to comply with staffing, response, and operational standards established by the National Fire Prevention Association (NFPA).

This grant allows Albemarle County to take a noteworthy step forward in fulfilling our commitment to the safety and well-being of our community. The grant will fund a total of 30 positions - 14 of those will be used to implement 24/7 coverage in the southern portion of the county. The other 16 positions will staff a ladder truck based at the Monticello Station. This unit will be staffed with specially-trained personnel to address more complex incidents that arise in our community including wa-

ter and technical rescues. By basing this unit at a centrally located station, it allows for this company to respond quickly and efficiently to intricate incidents throughout the county.

The hiring process to fill these new positions, as well as existing vacancies, is well underway, and we are excited by the breadth and depth of experience reflected in the applicant pool. The new hires will begin recruit school in January 2024.

I want to thank the staff for their dedication and hard work which was instrumental in securing this significant funding opportunity. With the support from the Board of Supervisors and County leadership, our department is proactively identifying and addressing ways to deliver professional and consistent services to the people of Albemarle County.

—Chief Dan Eggleston

Active Shooter Training

On July 14, 2023, a significant milestone in Albemarle County's commitment to safety was achieved when nearly 200 individuals from local government departments and the Schools division came together for a full-scale exercise drill. This event marked the culmination of 10 months of dedicated efforts led by the Office of Emergency Management. The primary objective of this comprehensive exercise was to assess and enhance the preparedness of staff in responding to active threat incidents, with the ultimate goal of maximizing life-saving capabilities.

During the 10-month preparation period, reviews, updates, and exercises were conducted to refine policies and procedures. The journey began in January 2023, with 80 individuals attending a seminar and workshop featuring subject matter experts from across the United States, who shared best practices for active threat incident preparation and response. From January to April, the bulk of front-line public safety personnel engaged in virtual and in-person training sessions to strengthen their response tactics. In April 2023, 80 local government and school personnel participated in a tabletop exercise to assess policy coordination and identify areas for improvement. The July 14th event represented the culmination of these efforts, providing a real-world evaluation of readiness and necessary enhancements for effective response to similar scenarios.

The commitment to safety extends beyond this exercise, as training and ongoing process/policy improvements have been incorporated into the operational plan for fiscal year 2024. It is essential for the community to be aware that dedicated men and women are preparing and training to ensure the safety and security of Albemarle County.



Never Forgotten

Each year participants pay tribute to FDNY firefighters by climbing the equivalent of the 100 stories of the World Trade Center. For the third year, we honored the 343 souls by climbing the stairs of Monticello High School's football bleachers. As has occurred the last couple years, bagpipers play Amazing Grace to begin the morning's event. At exactly 0846, we take a moment to silence to recognize when the first plane hit the North Tower (1 WTC). We begin our climb only a few minutes later when the first arriving pieces of apparatus began to arrive.

Throughout the climb we stop to announce significant time markers that occurred that day. After each announcement, we pause for a moment of silence to honor those that lost their lives. All 343 of those heroes are honored by participants carrying each firefighter's photo with them as they climb.

When all 100 stories have been ascended, each person exits the stairs and heads to ring the bell. The ringing of the bell signifies a firefighter's end of duty or passing. Ringing the bell is a solemn sound as participants finish their climb. Although the day has the heavy weight of tragedy, we are grateful to have the capability to honor those that were taken from us on September 11, 2001. Nothing is taken for granted.

Compliance Corner

Who is ACFR's ambulance compliance officer?

Caslynn Franklin

What is the purpose of an ambulance compliance officer?

To make sure your organization is operating in full compliance with state and federal laws as well as the organization's internal policies.

When should you report to your organization's ambulance compliance officer?

When there are concerns of misconduct with management, co-workers, and others within the organization.

Where can you find your organization's compliance policy?

The compliance policy is located in Lexipol and can also be obtained by reaching out to Caslynn Franklin for a copy.

Why should you self-report?

Self-reporting avoids legal issues and helps foster accountability.

How should you report concerns?

Contact Caslynn Franklin | cfranklin2@albemarle.org or leave a message in her mailbox.

Compliance Policy – WHO? WHAT? WHEN? WHERE? WHY? HOW?



Works Cited:

NAAC. "3C - Compliance mistakes and misconduct." 2016. National Academy of Ambulance Compliance. PowerPoint document.pg.2 2019. <ambulancecompliance.com>

2024 Upcoming Events

Course/Event	Location	Date
Fire Officer II	ACFR Training Room	January 6 - 27
Firefighter I Hybrid	Monticello – Station 11	Jan. 8 – May 11
Haz. Mat. Ops	Monticello – Station 11	Jan. 26, 27, 28 & Feb. 3 & 4
EVOC	Seminole Trail – Station 8	February 13, 15, 17, & 19
Rope Technician	Hollymead – Station 12	March 14, 15, 16 & 17
17th Annual Walker Sisk Memorial Truck School	Church of Our Savior Training Center	March 15, 16, & 17
Decision Making for Initial Company Operations	ACFR Training Room	March 16th & 17th
NFA: Strategy & Tactics for Initial Company Operations	ACFR Training Room	March 16th & 17th
Confined Space Technician	Scottsville – Station 17	March 16th & 17th
Mayday Ops	Seminole Trail – Station 8	March 16th & 17th
Tactical Emergency Casualty Care	Monticello – Station 11	March 16th & 17th
Fire Instructor I	Albemarle Co. 5th St. Bld.	March 16, 17, 23, 24 & 30th
Basic Pump Ops	Hollymead – Station 12	April 13 & 14
Rural Water Supply	Hollymead – Station 12	April 20 & 21
EVOC	Seminole Trail – Station 8	April 23, 25, 27 & 28
Emergency Medical Technician	ACFR Training Room	May 23 – August 8
Haz. Mat. Ops	Monticello – Station 11	June 21, 22, 23, 29 & 30

Development, Construction and Plans Review by ACFR's Fire Marshal Office

Welcome to the fall 2023 installment of the Albemarle County Fire Marshal Development discussion. In this installment, we are going to discuss fire apparatus access requirements. The Fire Marshal's Office is involved in the review of development site plans and utilizes the Virginia Statewide Fire Prevention Code, and International Fire Prevention Code.

The code requires that all developments have at least one entry point, and a fire apparatus access road to provide access to all sides of the ground level of the buildings within 150 feet. Obviously, if a building's footprint is smaller, one road on one side may provide the requirement. Larger footprints

may require additional fire apparatus access roads on multiple sides. This aspect of the code is meant to reduce the amount of hose necessary to reach all points of a building. A misconception is that all roads in a development must be suitable to meet the fire apparatus access road requirements and that residential driveways must conform to the fire apparatus road requirements.

The widths for fire apparatus access roads are delineated in the codes. The road must be a minimum of 20 feet wide for buildings 30 feet tall or less, measured to the eave or top of the parapet wall, whichever is taller, and 26 feet wide to accommodate aerial apparatus if the building height exceeds 30 feet,

measured to the eave or top of the parapet wall. These widths must be maintained in an unobstructed condition, including free of parking that will reduce the width of the road, which means No Parking – Fire Lane signs or markings may be required if a parking space would reduce the width of the road below the requirements.

This is the most recent installment in the quarterly series of releases about the plans review process and projects of interest. If there are questions about the content or any of the below listed projects, please contact BC/Fire Marshal Howard Lagomarsino at hlagomarsino@albemarle.org or 434-531-4861.

Project Name	Location	Station 1st Due	Description
Slate Mill Branch Landscape Contractor	Slate Mill Road	3	Special Use Request – Landscaping Business Expansion
Berkmar Flats	Berkmar Rd. and Woodburn Rd.	8	Multi-family – 28 dwelling units
Granger Property	Stribling Avenue	11	ZMA – Redevelop land around Stribling, Fontaine and Railroad tracks – up to 200 dwelling units
Airport Road Body Shop	Airport Road at Rt. 29	12	Expand the property and add new parking and buildings to accommodate storage of vehicles



Date	Street	Incident Type	Resolution/Cause
2/1/23	Union Mills Rd	Structure Fire	Failure of a heating appliance/chimney
2/6/23	Winsome Orchard Ln	Structure Fire	Malfunctioning leaf blower
2/22/23	Crenshaw Court	Structure Fire	High resistance heating of an extension cord
3/10/23	Lindsay Rd	Structure Fire	High resistance heating of structural wiring
3/16/23	Rugby Rd	Structure Fire	Combustibles too close to a cold spark device
3/27/23	Castle Rock Rd	Structure Fire	Discarded wood stove ashes
3/29/23	Bremerton Ln	Structure Fire	Undetermined
5/18/23	Middlesex Dr	Structure Fire	Unattended cooking
5/24/23	Esmont Rd	Structure Fire	Unattended candle
5/26/23	Valley St	Structure Fire	Torch used for weed removal ignited the structure
6/12/23	Burnley Station Rd	Structure Fire	Undetermined
6/17/23	Oak Hill Ct	Structure Fire	Unattended cooking
6/30/23	Inn Dr	Structure Fire	Arson - no arrests at this time

Releases

- Xavier Bostick..... DPO
- Shane Corpolongo.....DAO
- Marin Tapia DPO
- Angelo Markantonantos..... FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Josh Cangialosi..... FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Tyler Graves FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Roy Boyd FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Jacob Roland..... ALS
- Caleb Shetler..... DPO
- Alex Rodriguez..... FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Nicholas Russel..... FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Matthew Warren FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Nick Chiarappa..... FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Rob Combs..... FF, BLS, Ambulance Driver
- Henry Masseur BLS
- Ryan Kenyon..... BLS
- Jonathan Moore..... BLS
- Jenn Sachs BLS
- Savaira Zaib BLS
- Antonio Gao BLS
- Neha Pai..... BLS
- Wesley Kilbourne BLS
- Holden Kerr BLS

Promotions

- Cody Gillispie Captain II
- Ken Naccarato..... Captain II
- Ryan Holbrook..... Master FF
- Gilbert Monroe Captain II
- Shawn Maddox..... Captain II
- Justin Dix..... Master FF
- Rebecca Morris Management Analyst

2023 Training Division Wrap-Up

Another successful year of training is under wraps and the 2024 training schedule is ready to roll.

2023 had many successful courses and candidates, starting with our Recruit School 22 that finalized with a graduation in July, bringing 20 new recruits to our department. We will be ending the year with Firefighter I and EMT classes this December. We also have Paramedic School that runs through mid-March 2024!

Throughout the year, our division provided training for firefighters and EMTs by offering classes as well as Continuing Education classes. Many of our ACFR staff traveled across the country from Seattle, WA to Coral Springs, FL to attend classes and conferences pertaining to their careers and furthering their education.

As we bring this year to a close, we are ready to hit the ground running with Recruit School 23 to kick off 2024!



Rowing for Responders

This year we hosted our third annual “Rowing for Responders” event to raise awareness for first responder mental health and wellness. September is National Suicide Awareness Month, and we kick it off each year with an amazing event. First responders are five times more likely to suffer from a mental health illness than the average person. This event helps to bring awareness to that by raising money for an amazing non-profit organization. Next Rung provides free services to first responders and their families.

This year so many participants came out to both row and cheer us on. We had Concept2 rowers donated by the surrounding localities of City of Charlottesville Fire Department, Stafford County Fire Department, Gordonsville Volunteer Fire Company, and of course Albemarle Fire Rescue.

We had some generous monetary donations made as well as donations that came in the form of apparel and sticker purchases. New this year were both hoodie sweatshirts, and stickers. We also auctioned off some cool prizes. Thanks to area businesses we had desserts, as well as hamburgers and hotdogs served up.

All these things were equally matched with phenomenal weather to make this event amazing. We are so grateful to have had help from friends, family, and strangers to make this happen. We couldn't make the row happen every year without your support. Thank you! We'll see you next year.

If you or someone you know is struggling, please know that you are not alone. There are people that care and can help. No one should fight alone.

988 SUICIDE & CRISIS LIFELINE



Volunteer



Samantha Chassé
Volunteer with Stony Point and Earlysville

Q. How long have you been a volunteer?

A. I started volunteering with Stony Point three years ago, where one of my three brothers ran; he enjoyed it, and I thought I would too. Two years ago, I also started running with Earlysville, as they had an ambulance and I wanted to do my EMT since I enjoy giving back to the community and helping people in their time of need.

Q. How do you see yourself evolving in your roles?

A. Volunteering with ACFR has given me some great life experiences and allowed me to further my knowledge of Fire and EMS. I see myself getting the highest possible level of training to best serve the community I live and work in. I would like to get certified in technical rescue as well as be able to provide a higher level of medical care.

Q. Tell us about your day job?

A. About five years ago I got into animal medicine. I started out at the local shelter, working with intakes and medical cases. From there I moved on to Greenbrier Emergency Animal Hospital, but eventually specialized in equine medicine, which was a perfect fit as I have ridden horses and competed in hunter jumping since I was a kid. We mainly do ambulatory care - farm to farm - and provide regular wellness checks as well as emergency care. In the clinic, we perform elective surgeries as well as any emergency surgeries that come in.

Q. So, who's the better patients - horses or people?

A. In animal healthcare, your patients can't talk, so you must be very aware of anything the patient shows you. Human patients can usually tell you roughly what their ailment is but may not know what is exactly wrong. With both types of patients, you have to be alert and watch for any signs they show you - which really helps to determine the best type of care needed. I can't say whether one type of patient is better or worse - each comes with its own challenges. Some horses are just hard to handle - and the same can be said for people. Many treatments used in equine medicine are the same that are used for humans - just on a much larger scale. However, I will say that equine medicine requires more empathy than human medicine as they react to how you act and not what you say.

Career



Amal Mitchell
Firefighter/EMT
Station 11/B

Q. How long have you been with ACFR?

A. I started Recruit School 18 in July 2020; I was drawn to the profession because I wanted to help others and make someone's day better. I also love the unconventional schedule - I'd hate to be stuck in a 9-5 rut.

The job's been everything I could ask for. I joined as a 23-year-old, and still had lots of maturing to do. Thanks to good role models, lots of structure and discipline - all of which you need to succeed - it has done a great job of guiding me. I find the job very fulfilling, as I'm able to see the difference I make every single day - whether I'm taking a patient to the hospital, installing a smoke detector, putting out a fire, or going to an elementary school to teach fire safety. My friends and family also really admire what I do - which is nice.

Q. How do you see yourself evolving?

A. I think I am unique in that I am not necessarily looking to get promoted all the way to the top. My main goal is to become a good senior man and level up to Firefighter Technician I - from this rank I could teach incoming rookies what it means to be a good FF/EMT and mold the future of the department. Rookies are often taught many basic skills in the field by firefighters with just 3-6 years of experience, but I'd like to one day have 10-15 years of experience and still be working closely with the rookies in the field.

Q. What do you do in your free time?

A. Since 2020, I have run a YouTube channel - The Sensei - where I react to new hip-hop and rap music. I listen to songs for the first time on camera and give my genuine opinion; I never sugarcoat my reviews, but if I start recording and am really not enjoying it, I'll just find another song to review. A few of my colleagues watch my channel and ask when I'm putting out a new video, which inspires me to continue.

I started this platform as a creative release, because I've always been very dialed into the music world - I've been listening to rap since I was a kid and was in the Student Hip Hop Organization at James Madison University. I have >1,300 subscribers and promote my channel by posting snippets to Instagram and TikTok. I would love to monetize it one day, but it needs to grow a lot first. Even if that doesn't happen, it doesn't matter as I enjoy it anyways; I love chatting about music, as it's something that brings joy to everyone.

"Smoke Eaters": How the Job We Love Is Killing Us

BY KEVIN FREIER

Firefighter/EMT-B | Station 15 | A Shift

Growing up my two biggest heroes were firefighters. There was Grandpa Warren, a 7-year veteran of Racine Fire Department's Engine 9 in Washington, and Mr. Jim, my childhood neighbor and twenty-year veteran of Baltimore City's Truck 30 in Maryland. Both were hard-working public servants that put their lives on the line for their communities day in and day out. But unfortunately, it wasn't just their diligence and selflessness that they shared - as both died of service-related cancer.

Now it is no secret that firefighting is a dangerous profession. Hell, most of our firehouses probably display some kind of tribute to the 343 who experienced this occupational danger firsthand on a crisp September morning back in 2001. But with all the talk these days surrounding cancer, responder suicide, line of duty deaths, and whatnot, it got me thinking: just how dangerous is firefighting really?

According to the United States Department of Labor, firefighting is the 9th most dangerous job in the United States. Falling behind farmers, garbage collectors, and delivery drivers. In 2022, 96 firefighters died in the line of duty. For comparison, 118 police officers and 1,009 active-duty military members died in the line of duty that same year. But unlike cops and Marines, we aren't usually bracing gunfire and artillery while on shift. So, it begs the question, what is it that actually kills us?

The Culprits

A study conducted by the NFPA found that the three most prominent causes of "on-duty" firefighter deaths are sudden cardiac arrest, vehicle accidents, and fire. Whereas the three most prominent causes of "off-duty" (to include retired) firefighter deaths are cancer, suicide, and heart disease.

Cardiac Arrest

Sudden cardiac arrests account for 51% of all on-duty deaths. Usually caused by overexertion, the physical stress of certain high intensity activities, such as fighting fire and or PT, can often aggravate underlying conditions and cause firefighters to suffer serious medical emergencies, such as MIs or strokes, that often prove fatal in the form of sudden cardiac arrests.



Grandpa Warren



Jim Mitchell

In the past year alone, 34 of the 49 line of duty deaths have been due to sudden cardiac arrest, including Lieutenant Jan Tchoryk of the Chicago Fire Department. While fighting a high-rise fire back in early April, Lieutenant Tchoryk suddenly collapsed and was pronounced dead shortly after. An autopsy later revealed that he died of sudden cardiac arrest due to aggravated hypertensive-arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease.

Some best practices to avoid this fate include staying hydrated, eating a balanced diet, limiting tobacco and alcohol use, exercising daily, seeing your doctor regularly, getting adequate sleep, and lowering stress levels.

Vehicle Accidents

Vehicle accidents account for 24% of all on-duty deaths. They are usually caused by either a firefighter being struck by a passing vehicle while working on the roadway or a fire apparatus being involved in a crash while responding to or returning from a call.

A recent FEMA study found that 550 firefighters were injured and 15 were killed due to vehicle accidents alone in 2020, with the vast majority of those deaths involving a firefighter being hit by a passing vehicle. In October of 2018, Hanover County Fire-EMS Lieutenant Brad Clark was hit and killed by a tractor trailer while working a MVC on the side of the interstate. Witnesses say that moments before the truck plowed into Clark's engine, he called for his crew to take shelter and in turn saved their lives.

Some best practices to avoid this fate include SLOWING DOWN, utilizing proper

blocking techniques, downgrading responses for lower acuity calls, and always maintaining situational awareness on the roadway.

Fire

Last but not least, fire accounts for 8% of all on-duty deaths. Caused by either asphyxiation or burns, fire-based deaths are usually due to equipment failure (mask malfunctions), medical emergencies (passing out), loss of structural integrity (falling through the floor), human error (getting lost), or rapidly changing fire conditions (flashover).

The US Fire Administration found that in 2021, 141 firefighters died while on duty, with 34 of those dying of fire-related causes including Frederick County Captain Joshua Laird in Maryland. While fighting a McMansion fire in ljamsville, Maryland in early August of 2021, Captain Laird fell through the floor and quickly found himself trapped in the basement. Despite crews' best efforts to rescue him, he ultimately succumbed to smoke inhalation induced asphyxia, but not before transmitting one last heartbreaking goodbye to his family.

Some best practices to avoid this fate include proper PPE application (that includes buckling chin straps and waist belts), sounding floors, paying attention to changing fire behavior, not freelancing, and establishing proper RIT procedures.

Cancer

A 2022 study conducted by the CDC found that cancer is the new leading cause of death among firefighters. This includes on-duty, off-duty, and retired personnel. Since then, 75% of the 469 names added to the IAFF's Fallen Firefighter Memorial have been due to cancer.

Statistically speaking, firefighters are 9% more likely to contract cancer and 14% more likely to die from cancer compared to civilians. A recent NIOSH report found that the most common forms of service-related cancer are Mesothelioma, Testicular cancer, Esophageal cancer, and Leukemia. In terms of mortality, mesothelioma has a 10% 5-year survival rate, testicular cancer has a 99% 5-year survival rate, esophageal cancer has a 20% 5-year survival rate, and leukemia has a 65% 5-year survival rate.

As most of us are probably aware, service-related cancer is usually contracted through contact with carcinogens like polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs). These deadly

Smoke Eaters Continued on page 8

Smoke Eaters *Continued from page 7*

carcinogens can be found in smoke, exhaust fumes, Class B foam, and even our bunker gear. Meaning that we are more or less constantly surrounded by cancer-causing chemicals while on shift.

So, it is no surprise that both Grandpa Warren and Mr. Jim contracted cancer after a collective almost thirty years in the fire service. Especially since they fought the majority of their fire back in the days of rudimentary air packs and salty gear. But regardless of the PPE and cancer prevention advances we have made since then, the threat still remains as construction materials become more and more toxic and chemicals become more and more advanced. Grandpa Warren died of leukemia on June 3, 2003, and Mr. Jim died of esophageal cancer on January 22, 1999.

Some best practices to avoid this fate include properly deconning gear/tools, showering after fires, getting regular ultrasounds checkups, keeping gear stored outside of living quarters, and staying on air in IDLH environments.

Suicide

A study conducted by the Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance found that 80 firefighters died by suicide in 2022. That is only 16 less than the total number of line of duty deaths that year and likely only accounts for a fraction of the real amount considering there is no national database that officially tracks firefighter suicides.

Trauma, depression, PTSD, alcohol/drug addiction, and a lack of adequate mental health resources are some of the main reasons why firefighters are three times more likely to commit suicide than civilians.

Tim Casey, a Firefighter/Paramedic with the Colorado Springs Fire Department in Colorado, documented his struggles with mental health and suicidal ideations on his YouTube channel @DrunkenFireman. Featured in the powerful Al Jazerra documentary, "The Final Call: Why Firefighters Commit Suicide," he spoke about the horrible things we see daily and the mental toll that they take on us. Despite his and others best efforts though, he died by suicide on July 31, 2015.

Some best practices to avoid this fate include asking for help, forming peer support groups, seeing a shrink/counselor, looking out for each other, developing healthy coping mechanisms, and avoiding drugs/alcohol.

Heart Disease

Heart disease accounts for 45% of all firefighter deaths. Different from the previously mentioned cardiac arrests, heart disease refers to more chronic cardiac conditions like congestive heart failure and atrial fibrillation. Conditions that develop over time and are spurred by things like stress, unhealthy eating habits, and genetics.

Similar to cardiac arrests though, stress plays a vital role when it comes to heart disease and firefighters. Only this kind of stress isn't physical. Cortisol, a hormone that is released in our bodies during stressful events, has been directly linked to heart health. Studies show that people with higher levels of cortisol tend to be at higher risk for heart disease as increases in cortisol tend to increase things like blood pressure, triglycerides, cholesterol, and blood sugars. So, people who regularly work in high stress environments, ie. firefighters tend to have a much higher risk of developing heart disease.

Firefighter Matthias Wirtz of the North Haven Fire Department in Connecticut is one

such example of the toll heart disease can take on firefighters. A 22-year veteran of the fire service, Firefighter Wirtz was pumping a 2-alarm fire in late December of 2022 when he experienced a medical emergency on scene. He was quickly transported to a local hospital where he later died of complications associated with hypertensive-arteriosclerotic cardiovascular disease.

Similar to cardiac arrests, some best practices to avoid this fate include eating well, exercising regularly, sleeping (can't stress this one enough), taking care of your mental health, lowering personal stress levels, and seeing your doctor regularly.

The Bottom Line

As I previously mentioned, there is no doubt that firefighting is a dangerous job. We literally run into burning buildings for God's sake! But when it comes down to brass tacks, I don't think the actual act of fighting fire is as dangerous as it is often portrayed to be. Sure, accidents happen, but if anything, I think the real dangers are the ones that lurk in the shadows. The carcinogens, the trauma, the cholesterol, and all the other indirect killers are what hurt the most of us, not fire or structural collapse.

So, the question remains: just how dangerous is firefighting really? Like anything else in life, if you do not take the necessary precautions firefighting is incredibly dangerous. But if you decon your PPE, exercise regularly, get some sleep, slow down, see a shrink, and keep your head on a swivel, firefighting is a lot less dangerous. So put down the bacon cheeseburger and go wash your gear because when it comes to things like cancer, suicide, and heart disease, we are the only ones that can save ourselves.

SIRENS is the official newsletter of Albemarle County Fire Rescue and is published three times yearly.

The newsletter is available online at acfirerescue.org with hardcopies distributed to each station.

SUBMISSIONS: Articles, feature stories, cartoons, photographs, upcoming training, station news, and station events and functions are welcome at any time and can be submitted to ACFRSirens@albemarle.org.

