Our man sweats it out

BY MICHAEL WHITE
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

SWEAT SOAKED MY HAIR. The iron ax in my right hand grew heavier. A sudden shortness of breath caused me to panic for a moment.

Standing under the blazing sun in 100 pounds of firefighting gear was really wearing me down.

The first 15 minutes had been surprisingly bearable even though I had been as active as possible, doing calisthenics outside the Commack Fire Department in Long Island.

The heavy gear is designed to resist temperatures that top 1,000 degrees. But the steamy air soon penetrated my turnout coat and oxygen mask.

The final 12 minutes were an absolute struggle.

My strength faded sharply. Even completing a short walk became a battle as I fought to keep my feet under me.

I kept telling myself to relax. I knew I had two advantages over the courageous firefighters battling blazes during the heat wave: I was nowhere near a fire and I could soon take off the gear.

Firefighters obviously aren't afforded the same luxuries.

When they get hot and their clothes become weighed down with sweat and their shoulders grove much, they cannot call a timeout, undress and go home.

"They'll let you rest for a few minutes and then send you back in," Commack Fire Chief Mike Hertz said. "It's tough to re-hydrate in weather like this. In the winter you come out and you get a breath of fresh air. Now, you can't do that."

After 25 minutes, I stumbled into the firehouse and lacteted to peel off the equipment I had borrowed. My collared shirt, jeans and department issued hood were drenched.

I took my body temperature with a shaky hand. The theromometer read 99.1 degrees — significant up from the 97.4 degrees I had measured before putting on the gear.

"You really don't feel it during the fire," Hertz said of the hot weather. "The problem is when you get out."

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Firefighters face another foe with scorching temps

BY ALISON GENDAR, HOPE REICHBACh and DAVE GOLDINER
DAILY NEWS WRITERS

OVERCOME BY HEAT and exhaustion, at least 50 firefighters were injured battling blazes around the city during the last two days of the heat wave, officials said yesterday.

The firefighters are loaded with 100 pounds of gear designed to save their lives. But the same equipment is causing them to overheat.

With temperatures topping out at almost 100 degrees, the Bravest have been forced to work in 30 to 15 minute shifts while fighting many fires, including a high-rise blaze at 234 St. and 108th Ave. yesterday.

"It's like going into an engine room and setting up the furnace and putting your head in," FDNY Capt. John Graziano said Tuesday outside a fire in Brooklyn.

Though the sweltering weather has taken a toll on the Fire Department, it hasn't stopped firefighters from doing their job.

Firefighters rushed into a burning two-story building in Bay Ridge early Tuesday after getting frantic reports about children trapped inside.

"When we hear there are kids, the heat becomes secondary," said Firefighter Gene Baginski, 30, an 18-year veteran. "You get that adrenaline going. You just want to get those kids out."

A borough away, special fans blew droplets of water onto exhausted firefighters as they emerged from a gutted building on Grand Ave. in Queens.

Working in shifts, they gulped down water and Gatorade and then returned to face the fire and smoke again.

Fire officials say there is no way to protect firefighters — and keep them cool at the same time.

"They [have to have] no skin showing," said FDNY Deputy Assistant Chief John Acerno, the Queens Borough Commander. "On a hot day like this there is a price to pay.

Yet firefighters said their instincts are to push themselves to the limit.

FDNY Lt. Douglas Nixon celebrated his 29th birthday running from one blaze to another — and sweating through his clothes every time he left the firehouse.

"See how sweaty I am? This is my third one today," said Nixon, of Engine 330. "We just keep going back and putting our clothes in the dryer."

With James Kirchick

Daily News reporter
Michael White gets new respect for Bravest.