

# Simulator trains crews for rigor of fighting fire

By Kathryn Reed

The hose is full throttle and still the fire jumps along the wall. At one point it dances overhead on the ceiling like it wants to wrap its potentially deadly tentacles around those who want to kill it.

It's as though the fire is alive. Oxygen – it feeds off of it.

The room goes dark. There's smoke. It's a game of hide and seek.

“Everything we do is by touch,” South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It's all done at knee level. We are usually on the bottom third of the building because if you stand, you get burned.”

It's normal for a fire to spread overhead and temperatures to reach 1,700 degrees.

What made this particular fire different is that with a push of the button the flames went away.



The simulator helps crews train for live fire action.  
Photo/Provided

South Lake Tahoe firefighters are getting to experience three scenarios – a kitchen, hazardous materials and second floor bedroom fires – during four days of training in a simulator.

Many of the younger guys are lacking real fire experience. This time inside the trailer is about 75 percent realistic. The heat is much less at about 500 degrees. And the level of smoke is nowhere near what it would be in the real world. A lot of this has to do with natural gas being used during training.

Even for the veterans, what they are encountering in buildings compared to last century is different.

“The biggest difference between fires today and 20 years ago is synthetics. Instead of a clean fire, it’s a carbon fire,” Battalion Chief Jim Drennan told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s highly toxic.”

Tactics are changing in how to fight these types of fires. The books are being rewritten to take into account the substances firefighters will find in today's structures.

Building code changes have benefited owners when it comes to snow loads, but some ceiling joints are quick to collapse in a fire. Time is of the essence, though safety is always the priority.

Firefighters have 60 seconds to get dressed from the time a call comes in. In just more than three minutes the hose lines should be laid. In South Lake Tahoe, they expect to be at the fire between 10 and 12 minutes after they get the call.

Two firefighters usually go in at a time. This is for safety as well as muscle. Those hoses are heavy. Turnouts are not light. And with a breathing apparatus on, they are carrying about 65 pounds of extra weight.

South Lake Tahoe had been a bit negligent in upgrading uniforms for the men and women. Turnouts that were to last eight years have been used for 12. That's now changing, with each firefighter given two sets.

And in Tahoe there's always the threat of a wildland fire. That requires completely different gear.

Then there is the added element of weather. All that water usually means icicles form on the firefighters during winter. Slipping on the ice they've created becomes another concern.

And while training is a daily activity, there is nothing routine about their jobs.