

When there's one way out

Feb. 26, 2002

Firefighters take survival training for the times "when it's this or dying."

As a cluster of wide-eyed children stare up at a third-floor balcony, a firefighter in full gear tightens his grip around the cold metal bar on the top of a ladder. He swings out into a handstand and flips right-side up again, then slides like a melting ice cube down the sides to the grass below.

Noticing the pint-sized spectators, La Ronge fire chief Ron Pratt calls out, "Tell the kids to go away. We don't want them trying this at home."

Nor, for that matter, does he want his firefighters trying this technique in their spare time. What he's training his firefighters for, this cold, sunny afternoon, is those desperate moments that no one talks about and every firefighter fears.

"This," he says, "is the stuff we do when it's this or dying."

Coming out alive is precisely what this one-day course is about. Pratt has been teaching firefighting skills as long as he's been a firefighter — 25 years — and he knows what works. He also knows that while most volunteers learn the basics of fighting fires, no one talks about (and thus no one teaches) what to do when things go badly wrong.

That's why he put together this survival course, which he first taught last fall at the Saskatchewan Volunteer Firefighters Association's provincial conference, and then, at his own firefighters' request, here in La Ronge on Feb. 16.

A group of local firefighters thus spent the day putting themselves in hair-raising situations. They trudged blindfolded through the fire hall, following fire hoses to where they believed the exit to be. They dropped 20 feet off a roof with only a rope to hold them.



Photo by Carmen Pauls

Kevin Molnar begins his headlong climb down a ladder during survival training for the La Ronge Fire Department Feb. 16. The course was designed by La Ronge fire chief Ron Pratt, and it received rave reviews from a firefighters' conference held last fall. Firefighters took turns going head first down a ladder, crawling through a tangle of cables and ropes, and rappelling down the side of a building.

Survival training for the skills you never hope to use

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They crawled with air gear through a steel culvert strung with ropes and wires; and finally, making that very quick exit off a balcony at the Quarry Apartments.

"Before today, I was scared of ladders, period," said Rob Stevenson, a new

recruit going through his first firefighter training. "I think I got over that pretty well."

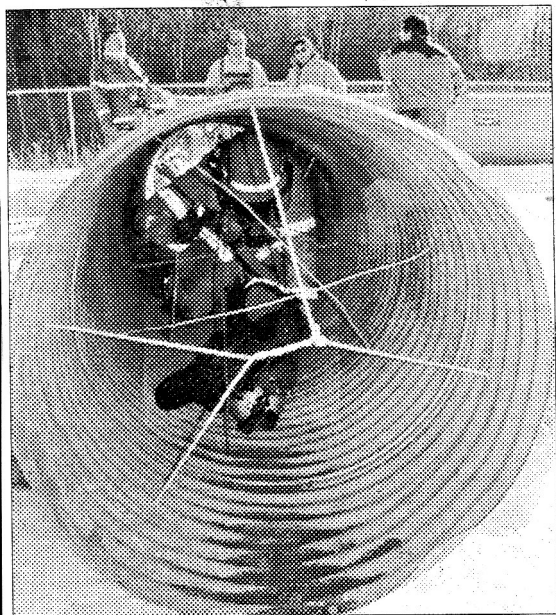
"I'm fairly used to that height," added fellow firefighter Mark Grambo, who works for SaskTel. "(But) I've never gone head-first off a third storey balcony."

What the firefighters quickly realize, however, is how critical these techniques are if you're ever caught in an emergency situation, Pratt said.

With the rope exit, for example, "you start leaning back, and knowing there's nothing underneath you but air and the grip in your own hands... it's pretty nerve-wracking," he said. Despite that, "you saw how fast they got out, because that's the only alternative to burning."

Whatever second thoughts you might have, "you don't have time to think of the fear once you get into it," said firefighter Kevin Molnar.

"It's reinforcing the training we've already had — just taking it one step higher."



Firefighters practiced hauling their air tanks through an entangling maze of cords and wires.