

"No one wants this mantle"



By Brock Weir

There is a lot of time to pass waiting for the next call.

As an on call fire fighter, you have to remain at the ready of all times, but there can also be some downtime in which you live side by side with your colleagues.

And so it was for Aurora's Larry Martin in April 2014.

A long-time member of the Mississauga Fire Service, he heard all about one of his colleague's plans to break in a new truck the next day, beginning a road trip to Florida, and some of the more everyday tasks ahead for another, but life changed in a flash.

"It was just a routine call for us," says Mr. Martin on the April 23, 2014 call that turned out to be anything but.

Then, Mr. Martin, along with his colleagues Matt Attwell, Brian Chapman, Anthony Colabufalo, Marcus Middleton, Travis Robbins, Daryl Roy and Derek Wilson, along with paramedics Ean Smith and Eryn Smith, responded to a warehouse fire.

"The call came in as alarm bells and then the first responding trucks arrived on the scene," Mr. Martin recalls. "They noticed some fire signs but nothing out of the ordinary [aside from] a little bit of smoke in the air. Then, with our protocol, they bumped up the call to a first alarm and we were in the next truck responding with them as well."

The scene was a logistics building near Pearson International Airport.

Firefighters, he said, were under the impression that the building was vacant, largely empty, with precautions in place. They were wrong. The building happened to be overloaded with flammable material and that factor sparked an explosion which trapped three firefighters.

"A violent blast inside the warehouse caused a wall to collapse, burying the firefighters under the rubble," reads the citation proudly read out at Rideau Hall last Thursday as Mr. Martin and his colleagues were honoured by Governor General Julie Payette with the nation's Medal of Bravery. "The remaining firefighters either had their breathing apparatus blown off by the explosion or had to remove them after quickly running out of oxygen."

"Despite flying debris, heavy smoke and secondary explosions, the firefighters and paramedics combined their efforts to recover their injured colleagues, and moved them away from the intense heat and flames to safety."

Over 30 Medals of Bravery were awarded by the Governor General last week, honouring individuals and groups from across the country who had displayed extraordinary acts of heroism and courage.

While Mr. Martin says the Medal was an "honour," he says "no one really wants that mantle."

"You're just doing your job and trying to look after your colleagues," he says. "You don't want to go to work only to come home in a body bag; you go to work to take care of ourselves and everybody else."

What happened on April 23, 2014 is a day none of the honourees particularly want to look back on.

'You can see how fast things can change,' he said. 'I lived beside one of the gentlemen in the same fire station and then the next day one of them was to drive their children to Florida for their first trip in a new truck, all ready to go. They never went. Another gentleman was in rehab for a couple of years with all these surgeries ' no one expects how their life can change, but I see it now. 'I am a little more relaxed now, but at that same time, it was very emotional in how fast life can change. In any situation, you're like, 'There are always worse things that could be happening, we can deal with this and move on in life,' but it always brings you back to how very fortunate and lucky we are in what we do.

'How fast life changed for those gentlemen, but they are with us and they have still got their lives.'

One such gentleman was firefighter Tim Casarin who, in the midst of the explosion, was pinned under a cinder block wall.

Mr. Casarin returned to the job this past winter after years of rehabilitation and, on Thursday, walked through the doors of Rideau Hall to take part in the ceremony.

'When I got the call [that we were to be honoured] it took a second to register; I was in shock because you hear of all these things happening every day in the news, but they are recognizing this one,' says Mr. Martin. 'Tim is a miracle man and an inspiration for all of us. Having him there was great because he has been through 27 surgeries, had 41 broken bones, and just to see him playing hockey, golf, and being with his family again is amazing. For him to join us made it that much more enjoyable.'