

# Panic Room

By Sergeant Shawn W. Napier

**T**here is no light. . . Sirens fill the air, a constant reminder that oxygen is limited and every space is too small. All paths feel like dead ends. “This is the real deal. It’s 90 degrees out here and you’re inside of a blistering hot, metal container,” said a firefighter specialist with the 482d Engineer Detachment (Firefighting) from Fort Riley, Kansas.

Firefighters come here, to Fort Hunter Liggett in California, to get a realistic feel for the obstacles they may face some day. Under the guidance of the Fort Hunter Liggett Fire Department, these Soldiers will climb into the self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) box, navigating a course to practice the skills of their trade. Soldiers go in with all their gear and work their way through as if in a maze. They’re sweating, their hearts are racing, and they can barely breathe. When they get stuck, they just breathe, try to wiggle their way through, and do the best they can without panicking.

But there is a trick—the firefighters must negotiate the course blindfolded to simulate heavy smoke conditions, crawling through spaces that are about as slim as they are. The military come here at least once every year, and 2009 has been the Fort Hunter Liggett Fire Department’s biggest year with the Soldiers. Firefighter units from across the country have run through the SCBA box, and about six groups have gone through this year, each ranging from 15 to 30 firefighters at a time; two more groups went through in June.

With all the Soldiers fully geared, the firefighters of Fort Hunter Liggett begin blindfolding participants while checking their equipment. Participants need to have a good left-hand search pattern—relying on every other sense that they have, and definitely relying on a buddy. The two-story structure—sometimes having three tiers within it—helps the firefighters become familiar not only with their equipment but with their SCBA and how to use it in emergency situations when they’re stuck.

One by one, pairs of Soldiers begin descending into a makeshift construction designed to simulate a collapsed



**Center and Left: A U.S. Army Reserve Soldier/firefighter negotiates the SCBA at the Fort Hunter Liggett fire station.**



building. Inside, instructors watch as the Soldiers guide themselves through a maze of loose wires, tight spaces, and various obstacles. The training is realistic, since it teaches participants how to use their equipment to stay calm and focused.

Back in the “panic room,” several minutes have passed since the firefighters entered. Muffled yells pass from partner to partner as they attempt to help one another navigate the SCBA. Finally, the first pair crawls through the inverted tube that is the exit. Both of them stumble out, exhausted and disoriented. But they have just learned something that may help them save a life some day, perhaps their own.



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*Not only do individual units benefit from the Operation Essayons experiences—it is a win-win situation: Fort Hunter Liggett gets much-needed construction done, and units get to work on more than 60 realistic construction projects, doing the tasks associated with their military occupational specialties. Soldiers can take this experience and, with later exercises, become a part of engineering units that can perform their combat missions and their combat support mission at the same time.*