

Hands-on fire training

By Neal Ross Index-Tribune Staff Writer

04/30/02 - The first thing that's apparent inside the structure-fire simulator is that nothing is apparent at all - except for a dull red glow dimly licking through the murk of smoke.

A deafening white noise of flame jets and smoke generators, accentuated by the shrill whine of breathing tanks, fills the audible universe. Weighted down by protective clothing, crawling on hands and knees to avoid the intense heat just over their heads, the three-person crew drags the heavy firehose into position and sweeps a high-pressure water stream across the base of the leaping flames.

This scenario - in about a half-dozen variations - was repeated almost non-stop this past weekend, as part of the Sonoma Valley Volunteer Fire Academy.

The structure-fire simulator - a big blue trailer, technically called a "mobile live fire trainer" - was parked behind the Valley of the Moon fire department's station on Highway 12.

Valley fire-training officer Mark Emery, coordinator of this year's academy, said that of the 18 would-be volunteers enrolled this year, 16 - as well as a number of Valley paid and other volunteer firefighters - had gone through the trainer in 60 "rotations" over two Saturday sessions. Sunday morning, Emery said, the academy was going to try for 30 rotations between 8 a.m. and noon.

"In order to do that, they're using propane burners and artificial smoke ... you can burn over and over again, unlike a (training) fire in a building which destroys everything," Emery said. "We started them off slow (on Saturday), and by noon ... they learned. They learned quite a bit." Six of the Valley's seven fire departments - Kenwood, Mayacamas, Glen Ellen, Valley of the Moon, Schell-Vista and Sonoma - are sponsoring students for this year's academy, which began March 28 and concludes on May 23.

Conducted at a half-dozen Valley locations, the academy covers a variety of knowledge and skills including fire behavior and chemistry; building ventilation and forcible entry; hose and nozzle practices; and interior search-and-rescue operations.

The three-room, live-fire trainer, which simulates an upstairs bedroom with downstairs kitchen and hazardous-materials storage, is rented to fire departments on a daily basis by North Tree Fire International. VOM battalion chief Mark Freeman said the two-day rental costs \$5,850 - minus a \$1,000 discount, through a grant from the California State Firefighters Association.

"It was well worth it," Freeman said.

North Tree education and training chief William Vandevort, a 35-year veteran of the fire service, said the trainer gives an up-close-and-personal taste of conditions inside a burning building.

"The whole idea is to give the firefighters an opportunity to go in a hot fire environment that's safe, that's not going to damage their equipment or overpower them with heat, but they're still going to get the full experience," Vandevort said.

"We can run people through seven different scenarios, one fire after another ... (in) maybe 15, 20 minutes, " he said. "If you get an old abandoned building, you're lucky to get a half-dozen, eight fires in a day ... we can replicate that perfect scenario all day long."

Vandevort said that unlike live-fire exercises in an abandoned building, the machine - using propane for fire and burning peanut oil for smoke - is non-polluting. The trainer also features a battery of safety features, automatically shutting off when the temperature reaches 500 degrees, or if the propane concentration gets a little too high.

"We can run about 50 people a day through this. Most fire departments that we go to don't have 50 people that they can put through in a day, so it encourages them to get their neighboring departments together," he said. "... That's a real big benefit, because if there's a large fire in any community, typically you're going to have several departments coming into it."

Dawn Mittleman, president of the VOM fire district board, went through the trainer twice on Saturday and stopped by the station Sunday to visit. She said her experience was "a real eye-opener."

"There's no way to have any concept of what (the firefighters) go through on a regular basis without really physically being in there," she said. "The lack of visibility is unbelievable. The intensity of the heat, the need to crawl through there ... to be in there and be crawling along with that incredibly heavy equipment is really something else."