

## Editorial 06/18: A time to honor courageous acts

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**MEMPHIS FIREFIGHTERS** will say goodbye to two of their comrades this week, in ceremonies that will offer painful reminders of the risks they must take and the debt citizens owe men and women who perform life-saving tasks with strength and courage.

Lt. Trent Kirk, 39, and Pvt. Charles Zachary, 39, became the seventh and eighth members of the Memphis Fire Department to die in the line of duty since 1990. The collapse of a roof trapped them inside a Frayser discount store Sunday night.

Both were involved in what ultimately turned out to be a needless search. Initially, firefighters were told that store manager Anthony Shaw might have been trapped in the building. The report turned out to be false.

Shaw, 21, appeared in court Tuesday to face federal charges of arson resulting in death or injury. Prosecutors allege he set the fire to cover up his theft of several thousand dollars from the company safe.

It was unclear Tuesday how the false report originated, but the incident illustrates the importance of accurate intelligence in fire fighting operations. Firefighters don't ordinarily enter burning buildings that are assumed to be unoccupied. The obligation of witnesses to be observant and precise in what they tell authorities can be a matter of life or death.

The tragedy also offered a reminder that advances in technology may never eliminate the risks involved in fire fighting and other life-saving professions. But equipment such as hand-held thermal imaging cameras, which use infrared technology to detect subtle changes in temperature to reveal the presence of people beyond curtains of smoke and flames, hold much promise in the effort to reduce fire deaths, among firefighters and civilians.

The U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) is exploring the potential use of vibration sensors that would provide early warning of an impending building collapse and give firefighters a chance to escape. Interpreting the vibration data remains a challenge, however, and the development of reliable building safety systems that could alert firefighters to such danger is not yet a reality.

**AS IMPORTANT** as such advances may be, it seems unlikely that warning firefighters they are in dangerous territory would eliminate the risks. Some level of danger is assumed when a firefighter dons the uniform. Public servants such as Lt. Kirk and Pvt. Zachary respond to the challenge of saving a life as an opportunity to express their courage and demonstrate their skills.

The two men were among about 100 U.S. firefighters who die in the line of duty almost every year. The most notable exception occurred in 2001, when 343 firefighters were killed in a single incident - the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York.

In a typical year, according to USFA, the leading cause of death for on-duty firefighters is heart attacks, at 44 percent. Death from trauma ranks second, at 27 percent. Asphyxia and burns account for about 20 percent of firefighters' on-duty fatalities.

Despite improved training and technology, the number of firefighters who die in the line of duty per 100,000 incidents rose between 1997 and 2002. A majority of those who die are volunteer, seasonal or part-time firefighters, but men and women who make fire fighting a career lose their lives at a rate disproportionate to their numbers in the fire service.

As sad as the funeral services for Pvt. Zachary and Lt. Kirk will be, they also will provide opportunities to pay tribute to those who continue to serve the public in the same way these two men did over the course of their careers, with distinction and honor. They made the ultimate sacrifice for a cause larger than themselves.