

Firefighter in coma after factory blast

Andrea Petrie
October 13, 2007

A VETERAN firefighter remained in an induced coma in The Alfred hospital last night after he was injured in an explosion while fighting a large chemical fire in Melbourne's west.

Leading Firefighter Richard Zapart, 56, was inside a Yarraville furniture factory when highly flammable liquids exploded, knocking him unconscious.

The firefighter of 32 years was not breathing when three colleagues risked their lives to drag him to safety and revived him.

The Newport fire crew was called to Japanese Screens and Interiors in Hall Street about 8.40am after a fire broke out in a pile of sawdust. The blaze quickly spread, spewing toxic smoke into the sky.

Assistant Chief Fire Officer Terry Hunter said the explosion burnt Mr Zapart's gloves off and blackened his breathing mask. He sustained burns to 45 per cent of his body.

"The fact that he was wearing his breathing apparatus that protected his airways and the actions of his crew members have saved his life. The MFB commends the bravery of the firefighters who were more concerned about Richard's wellbeing than their own."

After the rescue, the three continued fighting the fire. One suffered slight facial burns.

The factory owner declined to comment yesterday.

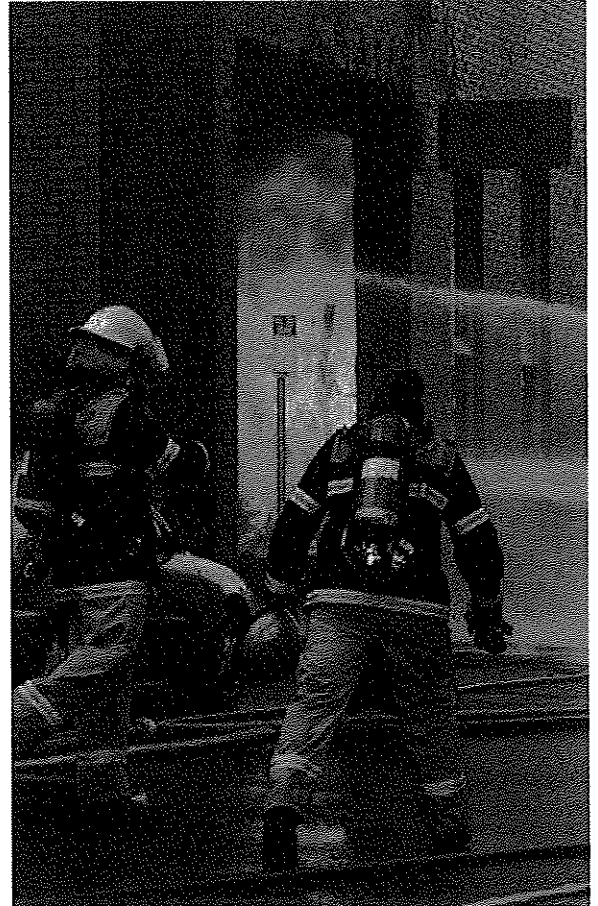
Six people from a nearby container yard were taken to hospital after inhaling toxic fumes and suffering mild symptoms such as coughing and watering eyes. Several other people suffered breathing difficulties.

More than 100 firefighters fought the blaze, estimated to have caused up to \$2 million in damage.

"It is very, very rare to have a firefighter burned in a fire," Mr Hunter said. "All the correct procedures were followed and he was wearing protective clothing."

Mr Zapart's family remained by his bedside last night. He is expected to spend at least the next month in hospital. His colleagues are expected to be nominated for bravery awards.

The fire brigade, police and WorkSafe will investigate.



Firefighters battle flames at Japanese Screens and Interiors in Yarraville.

Photo: *Craig Abraham*

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Firefighters go space age

Andrea Petric

Published: July 3, 2008 - 3:02PM

They might not be heading for moon, but Melbourne firefighters are to be decked out in new uniforms made from the same hi-tech, flame resistant material worn by NASA astronauts.

The Metropolitan Fire Brigade's (MFB) chief fire officer, Tony Murphy, said the Australian-made uniforms would provide better protection and greater support for the city's firefighters.

He said safety improvements would depend on the type of environments the firefighters faced, "but they provide significant protection to the firefighters and it's a significant enhancement to the current uniform".

The upgrade follows years of campaigning by the firefighters' union for safer uniforms and the serious injury to the MFB's Richard Zapart during a factory blaze in Yarraville last year.

He denied firefighters' lives had been put at risk in the interim.

"(Yarraville) was a terrible situation, one that no one's proud of and one that no one's happy about," Mr Murphy said.

He said it the outcome could have been different had Mr Zapart been wearing the new and improved uniform but that was "only speculative".

The final product is the result of a comprehensive consultative process was carried out with firefighters and the University of Wollongong.

Improvements include back and knee supports, neck protection and a moisture barrier to keep out airborne pathogens.

All 1500 fire fighters will be issued with three sets of the distinctive gold uniform - valued at \$2000 each - by March.

United Firefighters Union national secretary Peter Marshall said the new uniforms were long overdue.

"It's absolutely disgraceful," Mr Marshall said. "The MFB should hang their heads in shame. No doubt, had the MFB acted years ago a member would not have been injured."

Mr Marshall said the union had also secured the new uniforms for firefighters in rural and regional Victoria.

with AAP

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/national/firefighters-go-space-age-20080703-312h.html>

Victorian firies receive bravery medals

Kellee Nolan

Published: November 23, 2009 - 6:34PM

Metropolitan fire chiefs have vowed to ensure firefighters are never again put in the life-threatening situation three "heroic" officers and their rescued colleague faced two years ago.

Footscray firefighters Mark Fincher, Brian O'Connell and Russell Johnson are the first officers to be awarded the Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services Board's highest bravery awards in 50 years for heading back into a factory inferno to save their critically injured mate Richard Zapart.

The three on Monday were awarded the brigade's Valour Medal, last awarded in 1959.

Presenting the medals, board president Adrian Nye vowed the situation they faced "must not happen again".

"The board's commitment, that we give to Richard, to the crew who were on duty, to everyone in the force ... is that we will not give up until we get a secure and safe environment," Mr Nye said.

The four firefighters were inside the furniture factory on October 12, 2007 when a build-up of nitrocellulose gas, used as a furniture lacquer, allegedly self-combusted and erupted into flames.

Officers Fincher, O'Connell and Johnson escaped but the force of the ignition knocked Mr Zapart unconscious, trapping him.

"There was a massive flashover, I felt an extreme heat come over the back of my helmet and over my shoulders," Mr Johnson told reporters on Monday.

"We sort of scrambled to the first point of safety and then we realised Dick (Mr Zapart) was still trapped in the corner of that cutting room ... we got back in there."

None of the three hesitated in facing the intense heat and danger of the flames to save their mate, who had stopped breathing, hauling him outside to resuscitate him.

With burns to 45 per cent of his body, Mr Zapart fought for his life over the next month. He attended Monday's ceremony with his wife Elaine, to thank his rescuers.

But firefighters union secretary Peter Marshall says it is an "absolute disgrace" that Emergency Services Minister Bob Cameron helped present the awards.

In the days after the fire Mr Cameron faced angry firefighters accusing the government of ignoring their warnings that the MFB's "outdated" uniforms would give inadequate protection in such a fire.

New uniforms were issued from July 2008.

At Monday's medal ceremony, Mr Cameron said the heroes had shown "immense courage".

Mr Marshall was scathing about the minister's presence.

"I think it's a disgrace that he was there, because he could have prevented the injuries of Mr Zapart, had his department listened to the firefighters two years before that fire happened, about the uniforms being inadequate," Mr Marshall told AAP.

Mr Cameron, however, accused Mr Marshall of hypocrisy because the union did not participate in a 2008 report by former County Court judge Gordon Lewis and held up the rollout of protective equipment called for in the report.

"His comments are regrettable because this is such an important day for the families and wider community to mark the sacrifice made by our firefighters," Mr Cameron said in a statement.

This story was found at: <http://news.smh.com.au/breaking-news-national/victorian-firies-receive-bravery-medals-20091123-itt7.html>

