

Rescue team ready to help

Firefighters are first in Brevard County to handle search and rescue ops

*BY J.D. GALLOP
FLORIDA TODAY*

Through pitch black smoke and darkness, Palm Bay firefighter Mark Barwick crawled along the floor with an ax, searching for life in a second-story Melbourne apartment ripped apart by a gas explosion.

The fumes lingered, and fire officials feared the blasted-out Tucker Heights townhouse might collapse at any moment.

But the floor held, and soon Barwick and other members of Palm Bay Fire-Rescue's search and rescue team found the bodies of 18-year-old Joshua Jackson and his 8-month-old daughter Ja'Miyah resting beside each other beneath the rubble, officials said.

The April 11 natural gas explosion was the first major use of Palm Bay Fire-Rescue's state-funded Light Technical Rescue team and the first test of the agency's efforts to train for the worst.

"It was still a rescue in our eyes," said Barwick, a 19-year veteran of the fire department. "At no time after we arrived were we told it was a recovery effort."

The 18-member team, packing an assortment of hand tools, lighting and detection equipment, is the only such group in Brevard County.

It's also one of 54 first-responder teams across Florida trained for light rescues, which includes pulling victims out of confined spaces or walking through the jagged wreckage of steel and glass from a collapsed building to find survivors.

"I'm quite proud of the team," said assistant Palm Bay Fire Chief Jim Stables. "We prepare for the worst, and, hopefully, it'll never happen."

Within moments of arriving on the Tucker Heights scene, Melbourne Fire Department officials made the crucial call to pull in the team to hunt for survivors trapped by the blast. Authorities think the 3 a.m. explosion was caused by a stolen clothes dryer taken from Unit C and placed somehow in Unit D, where the two victims lived.



All about teamwork. Engineer Ben Kiszkiel, left, and driver engineer Gran Krauss are members of Palm Bay Fire Station No. 92's Light Technical Rescue Team. The rescue team discovered the bodies at the scene of the Tucker Heights apartment explosion. Kathleen Hinkel, FLORIDA TODAY



In action. Firefighters from Palm Bay's Light Technical Rescue team look for missing bodies following an explosion. Michael R. Brown, FLORIDA TODAY

The case is still under investigation, with Melbourne detectives hoping to talk with the mother of Jackson's child, Amanda Lewis. She managed to escape the partially collapsed building and expected to talk with detectives sometime soon, said Cmdr. Ron Bell, spokesman for the Melbourne Police Department.

"We haven't approached her yet. But there were several other people we wanted to talk with before we got to her," Bell said.

Six members of the team, all based at Fire Station 92 on Malabar Road, were called about 4:30 a.m. to quickly put together a rescue plan.

"They just let us do our jobs. They even had blueprints up there waiting. Those were helpful. But it was the training that allowed us to accomplish our jobs," said Ben Kiszkiel, a 17-year veteran firefighter.

The team, working under an eerie glow of red and blue lights, used two firefighters at a time to crawl through sharp bits of roofing material, fire-scorched walls and smoldering furniture to find the victims.

Stables also said the team had to be sure the building was secure enough to hold the weight of the rescuers -- each wearing about 50 pounds of firefighting equipment.

Melbourne fire officials praised the team.

"They were just instrumental in helping us locate the bodies and did a great job," Assistant Fire Chief Greg Anglin said.

The team formed in December 2004, just months after a series of devastating hurricanes pummeled the state and highlighted the need for rescue teams. It's funded through a U.S. Department of Justice grant administered by the state.

The training for all 18 members cost about \$69,000, with another \$19,000 spent on equipment, including thermal imagers used to pick up heat signatures and snake-cameras that coil into hard-to-fit crevices, Stables said.

The training, which is not as intense as that for the federally funded National Urban Search and Rescue teams, means firefighters can perform rope rescues, work in confined spaces and trenches along with extracting accident victims from vehicles or small structural collapses, Stables said.

The team is not trained to secure homicide scenes like the aftermath of the killings at Virginia Tech last week, officials said.

"The difference is that our team wouldn't go into a high rise. We can deal with single-family dwellings," said Stables, who eventually wants the training to include wild land searches.

Palm Bay set aside \$50,000 this year so the rescue team can buy more equipment, something Stables said he believes will be worth the cost in light of the team's response to the Tucker Heights explosion.

"They performed flawlessly in my opinion and worked well as a team," Stables said. "It's unfortunate there was a loss of life."

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