

Bill McEwen: In good times and bad, firefighters, police remain Fresno's heart

By Bill
McEwen



Fresno Fire Capt. Pete Dern in action in a 2008 rescue. LEAD PHOTO — The Fresno Bee

This is a city where crime and fire never rest.

Fresno is poor. Many of its residents are stressed. Our concentration of poverty and gang members is said to be among the highest in the country.

In addition, our neighborhoods are urban, suburban and rural. Each comes with unique challenges for those who keep us safe.

Whether you wear a fire helmet or carry a gun in Fresno, there's little time to catch your breath.

And then there are runs like this one.

It has been crazy out there.

On Sunday afternoon, veteran fire Capt. Pete Dern was among firefighters responding to a garage fire at a home on Cortland Avenue, west of Blackstone Avenue and north of Shields Avenue.

Dern and the other firefighters didn't know it, but there had been 13 calls for police service at the residence in March

— two earlier that day.

Something out of the ordinary had been going on there.

But firefighters save lives and property. And Dern was determined to do his job.

The tragedy that unfolded was captured on video and later would be seen by people across the world.

Dern, 49, was walking across the garage roof when it collapsed and he descended into an inferno. His teammates got him out, stripped off his gear, called for an ambulance — and put out the blaze.

Dern suffered second- and third-degree burns over about 65% of his body, said the medical director of the Leon S. Peters Burn Center at Community Regional Medical Center.

These are horrific, painful injuries. Dern will undergo skin grafts and many other intensive surgeries in coming months. His situation is a sobering reminder of the dangers that the brothers and sisters in this profession face. And of the emotional burdens carried by their families.

Monday night, with Sunday's events still painfully fresh in their minds, Fresno firefighters put their lives on the line again.

The fire was in the Tower District, on Echo Avenue. Trapped inside a home was an 85-year-old woman who had fallen out of her wheelchair. Crew members advanced through the burning house and found her unconscious. They pulled her out, administered CPR and got her to the hospital.

And saved two dogs — pugs — at the house.

“An emotionally charged time,” said Battalion Chief Lawrence French.

Emotionally charged, too, for Fresno police.

On Thursday, one of the department's top cops was arrested by federal agents for his alleged role in a drug-trafficking ring. Deputy Chief Keith Foster's arrest was a national story and sent tremors through the department.

But the Foster story — and the politics of it — doesn't change the assignment for Fresno's 717 police officers.

Tuesday morning came a call. Shots fired at a medical office downtown.

Active shooter. Possible hostage situation.

More than 50 officers responded, about 25 of them SWAT members.

The perimeter was secured. Neighbors were informed of what was happening.

Officers pulled adults and children out of the office. Other people inside fled on their own.

Windows were smashed. Doors broken down. Officers followed their training and performed their assignments, adrenaline pumping all the while.

Unanswered questions were behind every door, around every corner.

Who knows where the shooter could be holed up and what his intentions might be.

Finally, resolution. The shooter was dead.

Neng Moua, 43, of Clovis, had taken his own life after killing a woman, 33, who worked at Sang Pediatrics, Deputy

Chief Pat Farmer said.

Fresno police handle an average of 1,150 calls for service a day. Many are routine. Many aren't. Some are life-threatening.

It's the same for Fresno firefighters. Last year, 287 sworn personnel responded to nearly 38,000 incidents, two-thirds of them requests for medical help. About 2,500 of the calls were for fires — 281 serious enough to require two or more crews to battle the blaze for 30 minutes or longer.

Some of the firefighters who were with Dern on the Cortland fire helped extinguish the flames and rescue the woman on Echo on Monday night.

"It has been exhausting for some of them," said Pete Martinez, the Fresno Fire public information officer. "But you will never get a firefighter to admit it. They will just keep going until the job is done."

In Fresno, as police officers and firefighters know, their jobs are never done.

Tomorrow, they'll get up and come to our aid all over again.

Bill McEwen is The Bee's editorial page editor. Contact him: bmcewen@fresnobee.com or [@fresnomac](https://twitter.com/fresnomac) on Twitter.