

Wear That Gear...Your Life Depends on It
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As I sit here on 9/11 writing this article, my thoughts are obviously with our brave brothers and sisters that gave their all, six years ago on this terrible day for our country and our fire service. All of us have been touched by the events of 9/11. Our awareness level has been greatly heightened and we have trained and drilled on terrorist activity.

Unfortunately, these terrorists are not the only thing killing our brothers and sisters. While 343 may have died at the events themselves, an alarming number are now dealing with ill effects, such as cancer, introduced into their bodies that day. Yes, when all is said and done and the true facts are known, we may be sick to learn that 343 were only the tip of the iceberg.

The even more alarming fact is that it does not take events like 9/11 to introduce cancer to our firefighters bodies. On a daily basis we deal with carcinogens on even the most bread and butter calls we respond to. The days of sticking your "nose in the nozzle" are long gone. I clearly remember my dad telling me when I joined the fire department "don't let them put you in an air pack, they are dangerous". "If you need one of those you shouldn't be in there". What my dad didn't realize at the time is that "ordinary construction" was not so "ordinary" anymore. Building materials and contents have changed. Every breath we take could introduce chemicals into our body that just don't belong there. Chemicals that react with this amazing thing we call the human body and transform normal cells into things that cause so much grief and pain.

We are doing a much better job realizing the need for full protective equipment when entering a structure, but many of us fail miserably when faced with overhaul, cleanup and exterior operations. We must understand that we can no longer inhale, ingest or absorb these materials into our body. Even a little bit is too much. When we start to cough it is too late. It does not take a large volume all at once to put us in harm. The slow introduction of these chemicals into our bodies is killing us at a rate that no terrorist could even dream of. As we pay tribute today and everyday to our fallen brothers and sisters, lets increase our awareness on how to save more of them that are still alive. Full personal protective equipment whenever we are around burning material is no longer an option, we must make it mandatory. While we can not eliminate every worldly hazard that faces our firefighters, this is one that we all have the equipment and knowledge to deal with today. I, for one, would much rather teach my firefighters the importance of wearing PPE than the right way to conduct our next funeral because we did not use PPE.