

# FIREHOUSE

# RULES



It's easy to imagine the sense of relief someone trapped in a burning apartment might feel at the sight of Richie Othmer emerging through the smoke and flames. Thick through the shoulders, neck, and arms, the New York City Fire Department firefighter has got the kind of muscular build that comes not from pushing weights around in the gym, but from almost 30 years of working a second job as a stonemason.

A former Marine who also served onboard a ship in the Navy, where he got his first exposure to firefighting, Othmer played football in college and boxed in the service. The physicality inherent in such activities certainly helped prepare him for his chosen career: FDNY firefighters wear and carry almost 90 pounds of equipment when responding to an alarm. But spend a day with Othmer and you'll learn quickly what the FDNY veteran knows well. It takes more than strength to be a good firefighter.

It takes an ability to think and react quickly and remain calm under trying conditions. It takes a willingness to work closely and cooperatively with others. It takes a good work ethic and a willingness to continue learning throughout your career. And it takes a quality that is difficult to define—and that firefighters are sometimes reticent to discuss—one that for lack of a better term is often called “heart.”

Call it what you want, but it's what sets apart that small minority of men and women who are willing to risk their lives running into a burning building to save total strangers. There's no way to test for this quality in advance; it requires a literal trial by fire. But seasoned firefighters know how to spot it in each other. “It becomes part of your survival instinct,” Othmer explains. “When you're running into a fire, you have to know you can rely on the guy who's coming in behind you.”

#### ORDER WITHIN CHAOS

To the untrained observer, a team of firefighters responding to an alarm might look disorganized, even chaotic. “When bystanders see some firefighters going around to the back of a building, it's not unusual for them to yell that the fire is in the front of the building,” Othmer says. They don't realize that the firefighters know exactly what they are doing.

“The actions we take at the scene are very deliberate. The ladder company guys are cutting holes in the roof, breaking down doors, searching for victims and gaining access for the engine company guys,” Othmer explains. “The engine company guys are stretching the lines and getting ready to come in with the hose to knock down the fire. As they make their way down the hallway, we have guys coming in from the outside and searching behind them. The whole thing is highly orchestrated. It's pretty neat, really.”

Othmer's boyish enthusiasm dates back to his first days with the FDNY, which he joined in 1986 at age 28. Born and raised in Putnam County, about 50 miles north of the Big Apple, Othmer was quickly dubbed “Jethro” by his city-wise comrades. “I was clueless about a lot of things,” he admits. “I had never lived in an apartment, unlike a lot of the other guys, so I didn't know the typical layout. That could be a real disadvantage in a smoke condition. I felt like I had a bull's-eye on my head for awhile.”

It took him about five years to make his bones, Othmer says, but he learned what he had to, proved himself in the ways that counted, and was woven into the fabric of FDNY society. He's spent his entire career with the same unit, Ladder Company 41, on White Plains Road in the Bronx. His unit shares quarters with Engine Company 90, and the station, which has the largest response district in the entire city for a truck company, is known as a “good house,” in fire department argot.

#### A FRIGHTENING INCIDENT

FDNY is the busiest fire department in the world, responding to almost half a million “incidents” yearly. Most, about 400,000, are medical and nonfire emergencies such as car wrecks and heart attacks, but more than 50,000 calls a year involve structural and nonstructural fires. The borough of the Bronx saw about 10,000 fires in 2005, of which almost 6,000 were structural.

One of the most dangerous positions on a fireground (the site of a working fire) is above the fire floor, and Othmer's been there many times. On most occasions, the experience is as routine as such an inherently dangerous situation can be. But he's had his share of heart-stoppers. ▶

BY MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT

**RICHIE OTHMER  
EPITOMIZES THE  
HEART AND SOUL  
OF A NEW YORK  
FIREFIGHTER**

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER YANG

One he recalls vividly occurred on a winter day in the late 1990s. “I was the roof man, and I opened the roof to ventilate the fire. Then I started coming down the fire escape to search apartments above the fire floor,” he recounts. The roof man can usually hear his comrades down below dragging hose and starting the flow of water to fight the fire, and Othmer heard those sounds as he entered a fourth-floor apartment from the fire escape.

As he moved to shut a hallway door to block the partially contained fire’s path, he heard the gushing water below

him stop and firefighters yelling, “Back out! Back out!” Water pressure had been lost due to a frozen hydrant, and the fire was already roaring back as he slammed the door. Othmer made it to the fire escape but quickly realized he had nowhere to go from there.

With flames bursting through the windows above and below him, Othmer was marooned on the fourth-floor fire escape, which was heating up quickly and starting to pull away from the building wall. “I was sitting there on a fire escape that was turning cherry red, and I didn’t know what the hell I

was going to do,” he recalls. There was a sizable snow cover on the ground below him from a recent storm, and he began to think that the risky jump might be his only way out. Before he had to make that fateful decision, however, his fellow firefighters got the hoses charged from another hydrant and were able to knock the fire down again.

### **LEGENDARY CAMARADERIE**

Combat military service has been described as long periods of incredible boredom punctuated by brief intervals of sheer terror, and that has parallels to

life as a big-city firefighter. While Othmer can tell of dozens of incidents similar to his fire escape scare (but won’t, without substantial prodding), he’s also endured many shifts where “you don’t turn a wheel,” he says, meaning the truck never leaves the firehouse because there are no calls.

The camaraderie of FDNY firefighters is legendary. They rely on each other out of necessity when battling fires, but the bonds they form often extend beyond the firehouse and help make the quiet shifts more bearable. “It’s like a tribe, and there’s a definite pecking or-

der,” says Othmer. Today, as he effortlessly pilots a hook-and-ladder truck through the streets of the Bronx — one of the perks of being the company’s senior firefighter — he’s a long way from the Jethro of 20 years ago.

But Othmer keeps it all in a perspective that may be unique to those who share his chosen field. One gets the feeling he speaks for many of “New York’s Bravest,” as the FDNY is often referred to, and for many other firefighters throughout the world. “I’m no Rescue Ranger,” he says. “I’m just a grunt trying to get the job done.” 