



REMEMBERING OUR FALLEN FIRE FIGHTERS

by *Scott Mellott, Retired*

As a lot of you know, I sometimes share this column with someone who wants to share their words with us about someone that they cared about.

Grady Don Burke, Captain on Engine 46, lost his life at a house fire on the early morning of Saturday, February 19, 2005. The Houston Fire Department, his family, his friends and the citizens of the City of Houston suffered great loss.

My co-writer for this month is Jenna Lindsey Burke, the daughter of Paul Burke, Grady's older brother. Jenna is a student at Barbers Hill High School in Mont Belvieu, Texas. Jenna wrote these words as an essay for a district wide Christian youth contest called "Fine Arts." She ranked high in the contest and was able to make it all the way to the national level. Please keep in mind, as you read this, that she wrote this wonderful account of her Uncle Grady at age 15.

The Life He Lived, The Chance He Took

He held the pipe with a shaking hand. The February wind cut through the abandoned house. Old photographs, magazines, and children's toys were only silhouettes in the darkness of early morn. He lit the match, but his numb fingers could not grip it, so it slid through liquid air. Soon, the silhouettes could be seen for what they were. He ran out of the house clutching his pipe and stash of crack cocaine. A city bus pulled up to the corner of the dilapidated neighborhood. The bus driver watched the man's escape, saw the smoke creeping out from the crack of the structure, and quickly called the fire department.

The Fire Captain walked in just as the telephone began to ring. Though it was not yet his shift, and as Captain, he did not have to take the call, he leaped onto the engine and sped away. When he arrived with his crew, he organized his team for a Search-and-Rescue, unaware that the house was abandoned. As he gave out orders, he wiped his forehead and winced. His rough uniform scraped the burn he had received just before Christmas. His wife's voice echoed, "I told you to be careful" in his head. He ran to join his men on the hose. A rookie was at the front, the Captain, and another Fire Fighter just behind him. They pushed in the door, but once inside the house, the hose stopped and would go no further. The Captain motioned to the rookie to go see what was wrong and took his place at the front of the hose.

When they flew into the house, the fire began to go wild. It was as if they had been thrown into the sun. A crack from the ceiling sounded overhead. The Captain yelled to his men, his friends, to get out. As the ceiling began to fall, time seemed to move in slow motion as brief glimpses of his life passed by. The Captain floated back to just five days before, where he had attended the annual Father-



Captain Grady Don Burke

Daughter Valentine Banquet at his church with his two girls. He had been one of the speakers and talked about the importance of being a good father. He saw, in his mind, the last Christmas, when he played Cowboys and Indians with his son who had new toy pistols and a cowboy hat. One final time, he recalled his wife's kiss. He whispered the name of his Savior, and then he saw him.

I remember that day. My grandpa called to tell us my uncle was Missing In Action, which is never good for a Fire Fighter. A few minutes later, my uncle's life was no longer a questionable thing for us. Shock held back my tears. I walked into the bathroom, where my sleepy brother was attempting to put in his contacts. I stuttered out the words that I didn't want to believe, then sank down in the doorway, trying to pray, trying to cry, trying to believe I was awake. We drove to my aunt's house, where we waited for more news. For hours we desperately tried to reach my father, who was three hours away on our farm. We didn't know how he would take losing his baby brother. When he finally showed up, Fire Chief Dowdy was already explaining to the adults exactly what had happened to my uncle. My mom told me what he had said. The fire strengthened as the men had entered. Seven men ran in, but only six came out. The roof had fallen in on my uncle, knocking his helmet off, and possibly causing him to lose consciousness. He was burned beyond recognition.

At the end of his funeral service, we filed past the closed casket. An American flag covered the huge wooden coffin. "good-bye Uncle Grady," I whispered, but I was thinking so much more. Why him? I didn't want anyone else to have died, but why did he have to be trapped in there? Why did he even go? Why did he even take that chance? Why did he choose to make fire-fighting his life? Why, why, why? I felt tears streaming down my face. He saved peoples lives, their homes, and their memories. He was a good Christian man with a wife and three children. He lost his life because of one man's addiction. Yet, every time he ran into a fire, he knew the chance he was taking. Saving people was the life he lived, and the chance he took. I know that I will see him in Heaven someday.

Jenna Lindsey Burke