

Alton Fire Department honors its fallen heroes

by Cory Davenport, Contributing Writer
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ALTON - In the 178 years of the Alton Fire Department's existence, only four of its rankings have perished in the line of duty.

The department remembers each and every one of the brave men who laid down their lives serving the community of Alton.

On Oct. 24, 1992, two such men were killed while valiantly fighting a case of arson on Highland Street. They were stuck within the exterior walls of the burning building when it collapsed upon them. Gary Porter, 42, was a 14-year veteran of the department at the time of his death. Probationary officer Tim Lewis was only 29. Tuesday, on the 25th anniversary of the worst tragedy to strike the Alton Fire Department, those two men were honored alongside their fellow fallen heroes at the Alton Fire Department Station One, located on 20th Street.

Alton Firefighter Michael Bensman also served as alderman for Alton's Sixth Ward. He was killed on Jan. 11, 1946 of smoke inhalation after battling a fire. Alton Fire Chief Bernie Sebold said firefighters in that era were known as "smoke-eaters," because of their lack of protective gear when going into dangerous situations.

On Aug. 25, 1948, less than two years following the death of Bensman, Probationary Officer William Baker was alerted to a call to duty, when he fatally struck his head after an accident involving the pole he used to reach his gear.

Each of the four men was honored at the ceremony, which began with an invocation from Alton Firefighter John Davis, who asked God for protection over all of Alton's public servants.

Following the invocation, the American flag outside the station was lowered and raised to half staff during the Pledge of Allegiance.

Alton Mayor Brant Walker offered a few words regarding the devastating possibilities facing firefighters each day when they go into work. He recounted his father, who was a firefighter himself, getting badly injured after the roof of a flaming garage collapsed, nearly crushing him.

"They go into work every day knowing they cannot control the course of events, but showed up dutifully every day, knowing the risks they face," Walker said. "They died while protecting our community, and they did the best they could every day to protect it."



When Walker described his father's lifelong struggle with his injury after breaking his back in a North County St. Louis fire, he said the work of firefighters is "harrowing."

Sebold spoke of each of the men who gave his all for the safety and well-being of the people of Alton, detailing each of their stories, and reminding the people assembled of the continuing sacrifice, risk and service of the Alton Fire Department.

"We have trucks now instead of horses and buggies to go to calls, and we no longer have the long coats and rubber boots," Sebold said. "Those have been replaced with better equipment in the interest of our safety, but two things never change: we still use water to put out fires, and the pride our firefighters show in their commitment to protect the people of this community."



His department responds both swiftly and compassionately to all calls placed to the station, Sebold said.

Firefighter Steve Perry recited the Fireman's Prayer before Deputy Chief Mark Harris and Captain Rick Orban performed the ceremony of the bells. With his white-gloved hand, Orban struck a small silver bell three times in three intervals - a signal for the long work day of a firefighter coming to its end.

Following that ceremony, Firefighter John Bolling, a former pastor, offered a benediction to conclude it.

Sebold then invited those gathered into the firehouse to escape the cold with some refreshments and a tour of the firehouse. Several representatives of the City of Alton, the Alton Fire Department and both the Lewis and Porter families were present during the ceremony.

