

Fired up for

Firefighting recruits tackle the 'real' thing

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

Inside, you couldn't really see your hand in front of your face — or the fire until you were right on top of it. "Just a bunch of swirling smoke," was what Markham fire services recruit David Swain saw inside the training tower as he dragged a hose up a stairwell and tried to zero in on a crackling fire.

"You certainly have to keep your wits about you," said Swain, whose father and grandfather were firefighters before him.

His task in the tower was to contain the fire while other recruits searched the three-storey building for any 'victims' to rescue.

Last Wednesday was the first time many of the department's 16 latest recruits fought a structural fire, in this case one deliberately set for their own training behind a Scarborough fire hall.

The next time, it might be for real. You have to be both aggressive and cautious in fighting a fire, said recruit Dan Makort, who backed Swain up on the hose.

Makort joined the military nine years ago to train as a firefighter — a childhood dream.

TOP 16 OF 700

This year's recruit are nine weeks into a 12-week training course: the top 16 of 700 who applied.

They have been drilled on how to put on breathing apparatus, how to catch a hydrant, how to pull a hose.

Now, instructors say there's every reason to think all of them will graduate as Markham firefighters.

"They walk in as 16 individuals. They walk out as a team," said Lyle Quan, the chief training officer.

Kathryn Morton-McDonald, the only female recruit, applied for the job armed with a lot of lifeguard, rescue and first-aid experience.

"There's a certain personal challenge, physically and mentally, and really I feel that I'm up to it," she said.

The department has to do more to encourage women and ethnic minorities to look at fire services as a career, Fire Chief Jim Sales said.

He added recruits must meet realistic physical standards, but there is no minimum height, for instance, to be a firefighter.

"As long as you can do the job you can pass."

Although some current recruits are as young as 19 or 20, the average age of a rookie firefighter is increasing.

"We find with maturity (in a recruit) we usually have more success," Sales said.



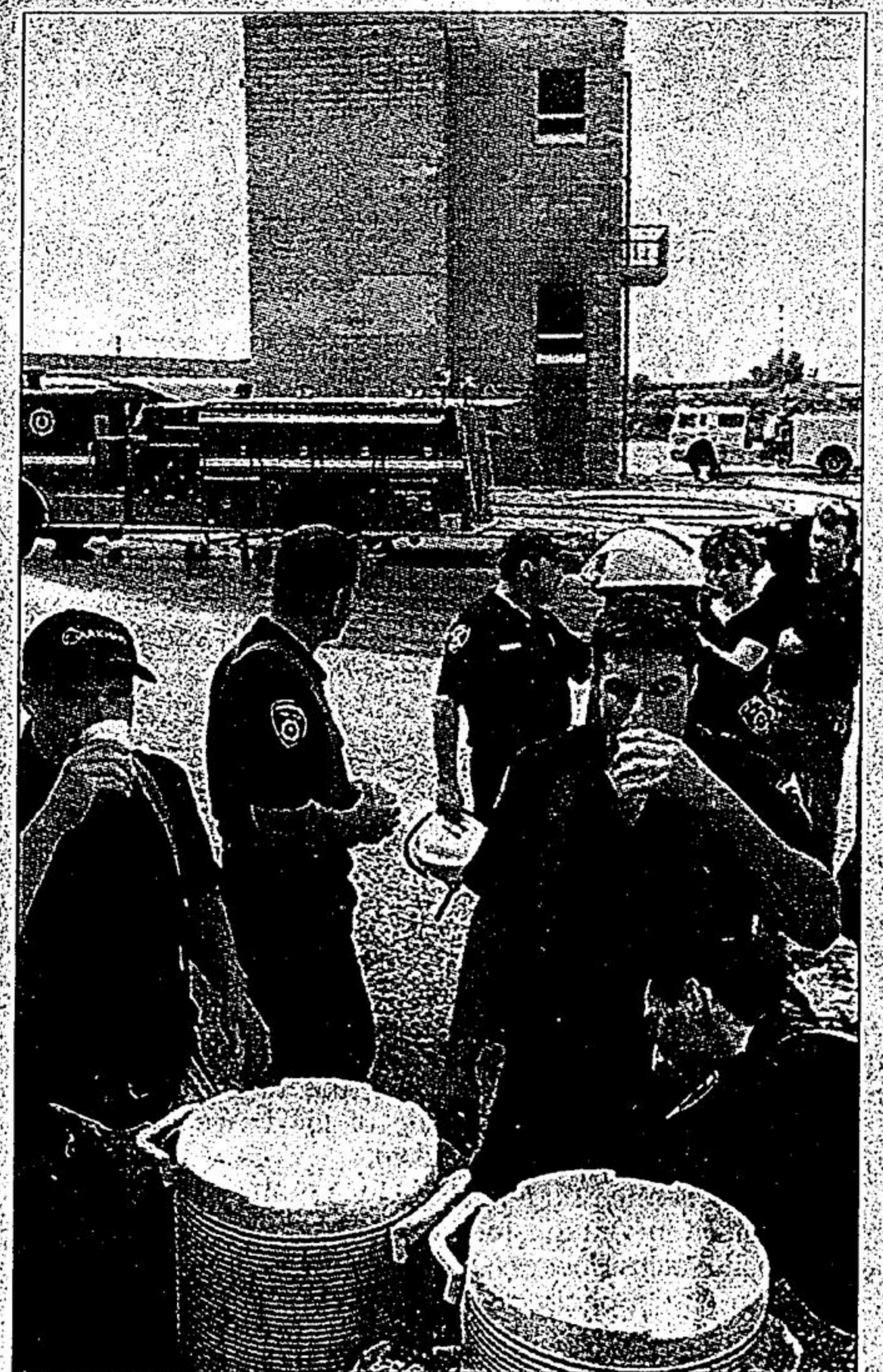
Markham firefighter trainees David Swain (left) and Dan Makort wipe sweat from their brows after extinguishing a fire.

*'They walk in as 16 individuals.
They walk out as a team.'*



The new crew poses with Markham Fire Chief Jim Sales (second from left) and Markham Mayor Don Cousens (far right).

Photography by
Sjoerd Witteveen



It's time to take in some water instead of pouring it onto flames during a break at the Toronto Fire Services east command centre where Markham recruits train.