

First Person: Learning the ropes and hoses

Firefighting's a family tradition for Pennsylvania banker Mike Foreman

Firefighter-banker Mike Foreman prepares to go aloft in a bucket, prepared with gas-powered chainsaw. The bucket—a 95-foot Aerialscope—is attached to Middletown (Pa.) Fire Departments Truck 88, a 2009 Seagrave Marauder. You can see more shots of the entire truck [here](#).

By Steve Cocheo, executive editor

Rescuing people in burning buildings takes guts. It also takes training.

Knowing how to use a "Halligan bar"—12 pounds of steel, just short of a yard long—to bust open a door can be critical. But so can knowing how to use it to secure a rope when you're trapped by flame and smoke, and the only path to safety is to rappel out the window. (See end of article for more about Halligan bars.)

Volunteer firefighting and fire training has been part of Mike Foreman's life as far back as he can recall. His father, Tom, 63, has been an officer and member of the Middletown (Pa.) Volunteer Fire Department since the 1970s, and Mike, 28, spent many hours down at the firehouse as a kid.

From the ages of 14-18, he was a full-fledged trainee able to work his way up to actual firefighting. As a newbie, "you're constantly cleaning and maintaining," says Foreman, who is a relationship manager at \$590 million-assets Atlantic Central Bankers Bank, Camp Hill, Pa. Around 16, Foreman began riding the engines and helping out at scenes. At 18, he could enter burning buildings.

"People are always amazed at how much training you have to go through before you can go in," says Foreman. He says continuing education is a must for volunteer firefighters—two or three nights a month. That puts off some people. But it's also the key to feeling ready to go in where most people want to get out. "I don't see the danger in it," he says. "I'm trained."

Volunteers like Foreman look forward to unusual training opportunities. Recently, he and fellow firefighters spent an evening in an office building slated for the wrecker's ball. "This was a real treat for us," says

Foreman. The team had been given permission to practice commercial building forcible entries. Foreman was in there, swinging an eight-pound, flat-head ax, hammer-side-first, to drive in the versatile Halligan bar and pop open a locked door. (Firefighters call this "ax and irons.")

"The Halligan bar does 100 different jobs," says Foreman. "I own one personally, and I even use it for all kinds of things at home."

He's not only a fully qualified volunteer and emergency medical technician, he's an experienced trainer of other firefighters, both at his department and at the Harrisburg Area Community College.

Foreman teaches new recruits the basics, and instructs other firefighters in forcible entry, technical rescue using tools such as the "jaws of life" and more. He's qualified to help teach new firefighters to put out "live burns," which are generally simulated by setting fire to hay, straw, and shipping pallets.

"I don't see danger" in fighting fires, says Mike Foreman. "I'm trained." Continuing ed is a must. Middletown firefighters answered nearly 800 calls in 2011.

One thing you can't teach is what it's like to be in a burning building. "You try to stay in as long as you can," says Foreman, to get to trapped people. Once inside, fires "can get eerie," he says.

Foreman's department averages 30-40 actual fire calls annually, and sometimes people die in spite of best efforts. Perspective helps.

"It is what it is," says Foreman. "You didn't put them in that situation. But you extended every possible effort once you came."

What a Halligan bar looks like

A Halligan bar just looks like a neat tool.

The forked end can be used for prying and penetrating a doorframe, and more. It can also be use to shut off a gas valve.

The other end can, between its two parts, perform any task that a pick or adze can. The tool can be used by a single firefighter, or in a two-firefighter team, one holding the bar against the work while the other pounds the other end with a flathead ax or other heavy striking tool. There are many variations on the basic idea.

The tool's name, according to some sources, comes from an inventor named Halligan who worked for the New York City Fire Department. Some sources say the tool is called a "Hooligan Bar," while others use that term for a bar that's made not of one solid, forged piece of metal, but of a version where the tools are otherwise attached to the bar. The implication seems to be that anything like that isn't quite up to standard, and doesn't deserve the official name. Many makers sell such tools.

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You can learn more about the Middletown Volunteer Fire Department on its website.

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