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Two South County Firefighters Receive Statewide Acclaim

Wednesday, November 22, 2006

By Emily Alpert

Medal of Valor is highest honor given to state employees

n By Emily Alpert Staff Writer

Gilroy - Thick black smoke rose like a pillar in the blue sky, a foul mark on a May day. Even from Morgan Hill, Capt. Tim Main could see it, spilling skyward from the San Martin fire.

That day, April 30, 2003, he and Capt. Jim Rajsakup would pull a frail woman, 98 years old, from her scorched Llagas Avenue home, an act that won them California's highest honor for state employees. Three and a half years later, when Rajsakup and Main won the Governor's Medal of Valor, they said they'd almost forgotten about the call. It was one day, one call, out of thousands the South Santa Clara County Fire District receives.

"We were just doing our job," said Rajsakup, "and we weren't alone."

Yet they remember the density of the smoke - so thick, Rajsakup said, that you couldn't see your own hand, held in front of your face - and the overpowering heat. Then-battalion chief Rob Van Wormer said rooms full of artificial plants and flowers, made of flammable nylon and silk, fueled a rapid, raging fire.

"This wasn't business as usual," said Van Wormer. "The smoke and the heat were tremendous. The only thing that wasn't burning were the two back bedrooms."

Main arrived first. Groping through the smoke, he crawled through the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, trying to find Alice Olson.

Oddly, he knew exactly who he was looking for. When Main arrived, Van Wormer told him an elderly woman was trapped in the back corner bedroom. Seventy-three-year-old Betty Gardner, Olson's daughter, and her young grandson had already fled. As Wormer pointed to the house, Main suddenly realized he'd been there before, on a medical aid call. He'd glimpsed the woman briefly, sleeping in her bed, as he passed through the house.

But Olson couldn't be found, and Main was beginning to grow frustrated. Rajsakup joined him, and the two combed through the rooms a second time, to no avail, trying to feel for a hand or foot through their bulky, fireproof gloves. They returned to the bedroom and ransacked it, searching every corner, before Main found Olson lying on the floor alongside her bed, unconscious, cocooned in blankets.

Outside, firefighters battled the blaze, turning flames to deadly steam. Rajsakup and Main dragged Olson through the house, then bolted through the door, carrying her. Breaking into the open air, the woman gasped - and Rajsakup and Main stared at each other, in shock.

"Whoa," Rajsakup said, "she's got a pulse!"

"It's not often you get a successful rescue on a structure fire," explained Main. "They often die because of the smoke."

But Olson survived. Weeks later, when Rajsakup and Main stopped in to the hospital to see her, dressed in plain clothes, she didn't know who they were, and they didn't say.

"We didn't want to make it a big public event," said Main. "We just wanted to see her. She looked dramatically different. Great color - and, well, she was alive."

Firefighters don't like to talk up their awards, said Van Wormer - it's like a target on your back, for teasing. Rajsakup and Main play down their medal. It's just our job, they say. Every firefighter does this.

But then, that's why they give them awards.

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