

# REFINING THEIR SKILLS

By **Vicki Vass. Special to the Tribune**  
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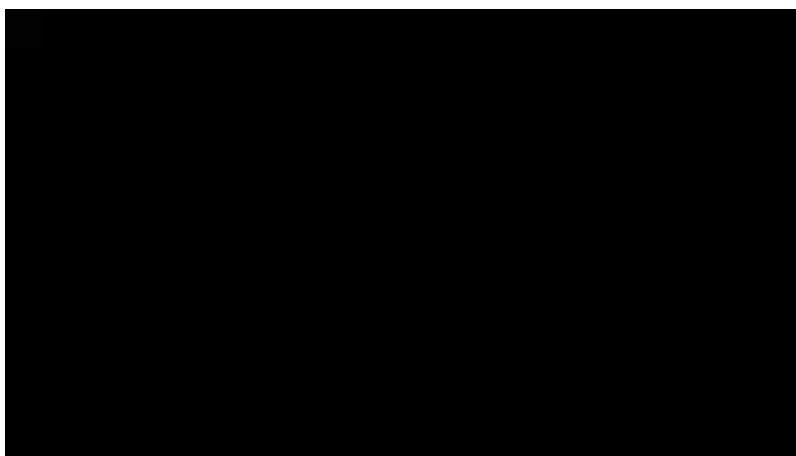
**A**s if communicating during a disaster isn't challenge enough, try adding a language barrier.

That's what instructors at the Fire Training Academy of the **Joliet** Refinery of Mobil Oil Corp. encountered when firefighters from Taiwan arrived in March for a two-day course on battling flames fueled by a flammable liquid.

Communication is especially important in these exercises, said Charles Snyder, fire chief/academy director, because firefighters must advance as a unit in containing the fire at the source of the fuel. It requires a close-in and coordinated effort, he added.

"It was really challenging for our folks," Snyder said, explaining that hand signals and an interpreter helped save the day. "(The Taiwanese firefighters) were really pleased with the training, and so were we."

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The Asian firefighters had learned of the academy through its Web site ([www.mobil.com/fire](http://www.mobil.com/fire)) and arranged a visit while in the Chicago area to call on the Chicago Fire Academy. The Joliet facility's focus, however, is usually on training those who serve a little closer to home. Crews from the Elwood, Downstate Troy and Channahon fire departments come for instruction, as do industrial clients such as Abbott Laboratories, the North Chicago-based pharmaceutical company.

Mobil started the academy about 25 years ago to train firefighters for the refinery's force, according to Robert Midwest Division. It then was extended to local

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"We also felt it was part of being a good neighbor," Bahr said. "It made a lot of sense to extend to municipal departments. It enhances all of our emergency preparedness."

That training was free to local departments; then other industries from the area, also involved in the mutual aid agreement, asked about classes as well.

"Other companies didn't have the benefit of an on-site facility," Bahr said. "They were impressed with our quality instructors and asked, 'Can we come to your fire school and pay for training?' They looked at it as an opportunity to reduce costs and have high-quality training. We saw it as an opportunity to strengthen our teamwork because we would have to rely on them if we had an incident."

Because of the demand for the courses, Mobil has started charging its industrial clients fees that range from \$100 to \$150 per person per day, depending on the coursework (municipal departments still train for free). Courses vary from one to four days.

"We're not trying to make money," Bahr said, "but to cover our costs," which include fuel, instructor time and any materials.

Sam Rosetti, fire chief for Abbott Labs, said the firm's 62-member fire brigade recently completed its eighth training session in five years at the refinery.

"We're very fortunate," Rosetti said. "It's great to have the hands-on training. Training with them gives firefighters at Abbott Labs the chance to experience live fire. We're glad they're here."

Before training in Joliet, the Abbott firefighters used to travel to Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas, for coursework, but they prefer to take their training a little closer to home.

"(Mobil is) willing to tailor courses to our specific needs. I'm glad we were able to hook up with them," Rosetti said.

In 1997, 400 people were trained on the Joliet grounds, where facilities include classrooms, a firehouse housing apparatus that includes fire engines and an ambulance, and a 2,000-square-foot, two-story smokehouse.

"It's a good tool for showing fire behavior," Snyder said of the smokehouse, or burn tower, which comprises four rooms and two staircases to accommodate a variety of rescue scenarios, including search and rescue involving 185-pound mannequins. Built about 18 years ago, the smokehouse is constructed of concrete with steel shields to contain the straw or wood fires set for the students to fight.

The academy this year offered courses on subjects such as foam and foam application, interior structure firefighting, flammable liquid fires, confined space rescues and emergency response. The staff is open to  
ers.

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"We can design training to meet their needs," said Snyder, who also has volunteered with the Manhattan fire department for 18 years.

Classes start in March and run through Nov. 1 (after that, low temperatures may keep the water from flowing freely). The fire department of Snyder's hometown, Elwood, comes regularly to train.

"We have a good working relationship," Snyder said. "It helps hone their skills, and it's a benefit to us in the area."

The Elwood Fire Department spends eight hours every week having someone trained at Mobil's fire academy, according to Chief Bill Offerman. For the last 20 years, his department has relied on the smokehouse and other equipment to support its training program.

"They're a great asset to the community," Offerman said of the Mobil firefighters. "It really enhances our training, and everyone gets their chance to go out there. We don't have to pay for additional training or find a tower. They also run mutual aid to surrounding communities and absolutely help us. They have a well-trained and well-equipped department. We're pretty close to them."

The academy's 10 instructors regularly attend classes at Texas A&M, the University of Nevada, the University of Illinois and the Chicago Fire Academy, and the brigade's volunteer force of 110 regularly take classes at the refinery. Many of their volunteers are retired or working firefighters from nearby departments.

"They're interested and they want to help," Snyder said. "And there's nothing that beats years of experience."

With 11 pieces of apparatus, the brigade's primary job is not in the classroom. Handling safety inspections throughout the refinery and being prepared in case of a problem are its main jobs, Snyder said.

According to Bahr, the ongoing training keeps Mobil's firefighters well-prepared to handle an incident (the last one was fire in the plant's crude unit in 1991). Prevention is the motto of the refinery staff as well as the theme of the coursework.

"We're fanatics on safety," Bahr said. "Safety is the first thing on our minds."

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