

FIRE MARSHAL TOWN OF NEW CANAAN

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Backdraft

I am often asked if there is really such a thing as a backdraft as depicted in the 1991 Ron Howard movie by the same name (staring Kurt Russell, Robert De Niro and a host of others). My response is “yes”, but nothing like depicted in the movie.

I found the movie very entertaining however, I was completely distracted by the unrealistic depiction of fire and how it behaved compared to real life. Of course this would have been a very boring movie if the screen was black every time they had a fire scene but that is reality – smoke in a real fire seals out even the brightest light on a sunny day making finding your way impossible!

A backdraft occurs when a fire, in a confined space (room or building), has used up the available air and begins to starve for oxygen. When this occurs, great quantities of carbon monoxide (CO) are produced. We all know that CO is the odorless, colorless and tasteless gas that can kill us. Another lesser known fact is that it is also highly flammable – like propane or natural gas.

This last characteristic is the catalyst for a backdraft. If a door or window is opened and a fresh supply of oxygen is introduced at the right (wrong) time all of the built up CO will explode with devastating results. To see for yourself log on to www.youtube.com and type “backdraft” into the search box and you will find many examples of actual backdraft explosions. Unlike the movie when the smoke “peaked out” from under a door, there will be a great deal of smoke present making it clear that something is wrong.

Backdrafts and the many other hazards present when a fire occurs is why firefighters must receive much training on how to detect or “read” a potential backdraft situation because ignorance of this phenomenon can be fatal if not properly handled.

Remember, smoke is the big killer in a fire and the best protection is to have properly placed and operating smoke detectors. If you have any questions regarding this or any other fire safety topic please contact the New Canaan Fire Marshal’s at 594-3030.