One of our firefighters, John, was missing. Not in a fire, lost and disoriented by heat and smoke. Not stranded in a wildfire, cut off from rescue. He had gone fishing. He and his brother, JO, also a firefighter with the city, had taken a small boat out onto Tampa Bay to spend the day on the water.

Their afternoon had been uneventful, the success of their trip unknown. The details of the day were lost once John went missing. A storm had blown in with such speed they were unable to make it back to shore. As they struggled against the waves, their small boat capsized and they were thrown into the bay. JO fought against the churning waters and eventually made it to shore, but was unable to find John amid the dark swells. Word spread quickly.

John had come to the fire service late in life, having worked in various fields before finally attending the fire academy and obtaining his certification. He was tall, black, maintained the musculature of a young man, and spoke in quiet tones. He was intelligent, eager to learn, and would offer assistance at the slightest provocation. He had a warm smile and emulated kindness. It still amazes me that someone so strong could drown.

As soon as the news spread, our department mobilized and the Dive Team was assembled. Many came from home to gather equipment, ready
their gear, and begin the long ride to the coast. Tampa firefighters were already on scene initiating the search, fueled by the anxiety that it was one of their own in the water.

As the sun set, there was still no sign of John. The search continued through the night. The divers would drag themselves from the water to sip hot coffee, eat a bit of food, and then return to the boats to comb the dark waters.

By morning everyone had accepted the fact that he had drowned. But the group refused to leave him behind. It was decided that efforts would continue until the body was recovered. The search went on.

I headed for the bay with several other firefighters, hoping to assist in some way since John and I had been stationed together when he was a rookie. I have a wonderful picture of us, filthy, sweaty, and smiling with satisfaction following a particularly intense fire one frosty winter night.

We arrived at the bay in early evening, and the dark skies were smeared with gray and blue from another afternoon storm. The wind was biting and we pulled our jackets tightly around our shoulders in an effort to ward off the cold. The divers continued searching the shoreline while small boats combed the bay, scanning its surface. Members within the command post studied tide charts and monitored the currents, trying to predict where the body might surface. The search went on for three days. Finally, on a beautifully clear, crisp morning, his body was spotted just off shore and pulled from the water.

Members of our Dive Team gathered as they brought him to shore, lifting John from the craft and carrying him to an awaiting ambulance. They moved like pallbearers, still dressed in their dive suits, their faces wet and salty. The groups eventually disassembled, silently gathering their equipment, shaking hands, and saying good-bye.

Although John didn’t die in the line of duty, his funeral resembled the grand event of one who had. Firefighters came from across Florida, having heard of the communal effort on the shores of the bay. His body was carried on the back of a fire truck as hundreds of emergency personnel stood by in polished shoes and shining brass. John’s death stood as an example of the bonds within the firefighting community.
I still wonder what happened out on the water that day. I picture him struggling against the waves, determined to grab hold of the boat, yet unable to reach it. I imagine his strong body fighting against the cold waters and the look of resignation that must have settled on his face as he slipped beneath the surface. One of the haunting aspects of working in the field of emergency services for so long is the ability to imagine, in all its frightening detail, the moment of death.