

What Firefighters Mean to Me.

I don't know exactly when it happened, but at some point during the past three years whenever I thought "firefighter" a sense of respect would overwhelm everything else in my mind. Today, that respect stands like a beacon on the tallest peaks of the San Jacintos as tears fill my eyes, all of our eyes.

I never really thought about how these feelings have slowly developed within me until yesterday when I learned what had happened on the Esperanza fire above Cabazon. I was sitting in a fire station in San Diego County talking with a few guys about fire, the 2003 Cedar, when the call came in; a USFS engine company had been involved in a burn over and three firefighters were dead, two others critically injured. I felt something clutch my heart hard. My whole body shuttered.

I eventually went home and paced back and forth in the kitchen, constantly checking my computer to see if I could find news, any news on who it was. Did I know any of them? How did it happen? How could it have happened? All the faces of those I knew in the San Bernardino National Forest flashed across my mind a thousand times. I couldn't take the uncertainty any longer so I called a good friend who is a battalion chief on the Forest and left a message. He called back and I found out the guys I knew weren't on the engine that burned. Initially I was relieved. Then I felt guilty about feeling relieved. Then I wondered why this all was hitting me so hard. That's when I realized what the fire service had come to mean to me; it had become family.

This is all very strange you see because I'm a biologist who was once quite content studying quiet things; things that didn't take people's lives. Fire was the farthest thing from my mind. Then the 2003 Cedar fire blew through my life. But I wasn't impacted in a way one would expect; my house didn't burn down, I didn't know anyone whose house did, nor did I know any of those killed by the flames. Back then, like most of the civilian population, my experience with wildfire was limited to what I heard from breathless media reports and after-the-fact newspaper coverage.

What happened to me was different. I got mad, and it got worse. I grew increasingly irritated over all the stupid things I was hearing about the fire from radio commentators, politicians, and self-focused academics, none of who knew (it became increasingly clear) what they were talking about. At first I believed some of what they were peddling, but then I took some time to try to understand fire myself and realized that not only were these talking heads ignorant, but their ignorant babbling was negatively influencing public opinion. Worse, their self-serving accusations were dragging down the morale of firefighters who were doing all they could to protect lives and property. They blamed firefighters for either allowing the fire to become so huge or creating conditions which made a huge fire inevitable. What a contrast Riverside County has shown the past 24 hours; professionals all.

As time went on I started meeting some of these firefighters, asking them questions while searching through the fire scar for bits of information that would help me understand

what had happened. Names are not important; they are all remarkable human beings. What is important is that I came to appreciate the job firefighters do as well as the conditions under which they must operate. I can now say with confidence that unless you've lived a career fighting fires (meaning you've been on the fire line risking your life, not analyzing it from a safe distance), you really have no business having an opinion on the matter unless you've checked it first with a few seasoned firefighters, the ones who know what it means to be in the thick of it.

Now that I look back, it was inevitable that I would end up sneaking into a USFS Type II wildland firefighter training course with a bunch of kids thirty years my junior. It was the most logical step. Pulaski's, bulging lower lips filled with tobacco, cutting line through manzanita, wild personalities, one or two ex-cons, and hauling hose over a mountain; it was all part of the process. I was called Pops once. Once. That stopped when I showed these guys (and one remarkable woman) that I was able to keep up with everyone else during PT. I'll admit it wasn't easy. One of the proudest moments in my life was when I received my Red Card. I was one of them now. I was a firefighter.

Family responsibilities have made it difficult for me to get out on the line, but my mind is always there with them, every inch of the way; breathing the dust, feeling the heat, cutting the line. Something has become a permanent part of me now that I do not fully understand. When I hear an engine siren howl I sit up straight and look around. When the air gets dry and the Santa Ana blows, cold chills run down my spine and the hair on the back of my neck stands up. When I see smoke in the air I want to go. I want to be there. I want to be with the kind of people I have come to know. I want to be with my friends. I want to be with the best bunch of people I've ever known. I want to be with the firefighters.

Yeah, I suppose the Fire Service must have its share of idiots. However, I haven't met any. It seems all of the idiots I've met are outside looking in. That's what I will be worrying about shortly, after-the-fact projections and finger pointing. I'm not talking about the investigation which may or not help us understand, I don't know how they run those things. I'm talking about those who see this wildfire as just another opportunity to promote their one-size-fits-all theories concerning what they claim as the lousy job the USFS has done managing the landscape, how conservationists have prevented this or that, or how the Fire Service failed to properly protect some particular community. I'm hoping the tragedy will slap some reality into these people, but if past fires are any indication, probably not.

All of that is irrelevant now though. What occupies my mind today are the firefighters who have been killed, four as of today with one fighting with every ounce of strength he has left, and their families. I want to hug them and protect them. I want the world to always remember them and crowds to grow silent when their names are spoken. I want everyone to recognize each and every day how firefighters are always there, ready to help, no matter the dangers. I want those "Thank You Firefighter" signs along the roadways to become permanent to help everyone to remember, on a daily basis, the price America's best are willing to pay to protect us in one of the most dangerous, fire-prone

environments on earth.

There are experiences in one's life that can be defining or can change forever how one sees the world. Getting to know and become friends with firefighters over the past three years has done that for me. It's too late to start a career in the Fire Service for me now, but I sure know what direction I would go if I had to do it all over again. I'd be a firefighter. I want all of you to know that it has been an honor to be invited into your stations, your engines, and your homes. I've enjoyed every second I've spent with you. I'm just sorry that I never had the chance to meet Mark, Jess, Jason, Daniel, and Pablo before the flames. You guys are heroes and define all that is good in this country. All of you are the best people on earth.

Godspeed.

jimhart

Published on *They Said*, an online discussion board for wildland firefighters, after the 2006 Esperanza Fire Sadly, it no longer exists.