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Life in the Line of Fire

I've been a wildland firefighter in Northern Ontario for a decade. Our working conditions have to change.

BY MARCO LIZOTTE



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At 6 a.m. one Friday this past July, I found myself once again loading gear into my truck outside my home in Sudbury, Ontario. Inside, my wife, Jessica, and our two daughters, who are four and

two years old, watched me from the doorway. Jessica, then seven months pregnant with our third child, had just finished a 12-hour nursing shift at our local hospital, and she should've been sleeping. Instead, she was watching her husband disappear into the wilderness—again. She'd heard it all before: "*I could be gone as long as 19 days. I don't know where I'll end up, or what conditions will be like when I get there.*" I wasn't trying to be dramatic. It's just the reality of life as a wildland firefighter in Northern Ontario.

Wildland firefighters do the same job as the ones working in cities; the difference is we have access to provincial resources, like helicopters. When the alarm goes off at headquarters, we grab food, camping equipment, hoses, hand tools and set off, whether to chase a just-sparked blaze or to relieve crews who've been sleeping in tents for days on end. At 30 years old, and after 10 seasons in the field, I should be settling into a career as a veteran crew leader. But I'm finding it harder and harder to justify my job to myself and my loved ones. The sacrifices heavily outweigh the compensation.

When I started this job in 2016, I didn't see it as a long-term career, just the perfect summer gig. Growing up in Sudbury, I spent weeks camping in every kind of weather, even snow, so I was confident I could handle myself outdoors. Even the hazards—chainsaws, wind-felled trees and frequent chopper flights—didn't intimidate me. Once my week-long training was done, I got a job as an emergency firefighter in the tiny township of Wawa, and, later, a crew position in Chapleau, a town five and a half hours north of Sudbury.

I still remember my first fire: lightning had struck one of the tallest points in our sector, and I'd arrived as part of the second crew called to contain it. Each day, we hauled more than 50 pounds' worth of lunch packs up several steep kilometres from our base camp. My coworkers, all used to that kind of terrain, were sprinting up the mountain. I, on the other hand, found myself gasping for air—constantly stopping to catch my breath, my muscles

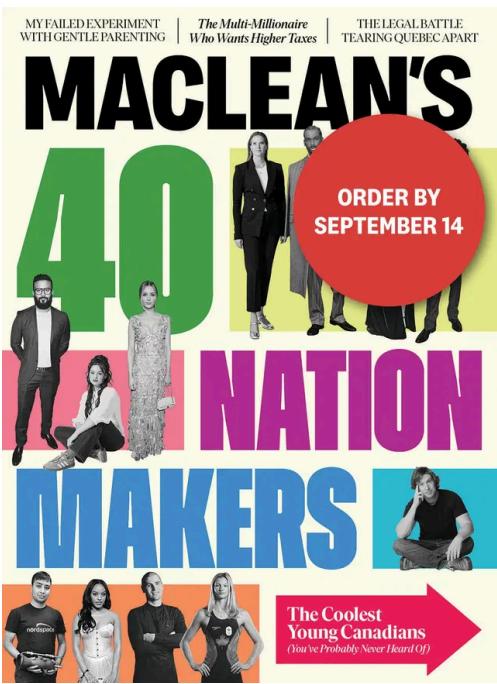
burning. When our group finally reached the top, we started safely setting up sprinklers on the burning cliff face. The heat radiating off the fire was unlike anything I'd felt before.

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Adventure is built into this work: roughing it for weeks, trekking through knee-deep swamps, encountering walls of flame 15 feet above the tree line. After years of walking up and downhill over uneven rocks and roots, wildland firefighters develop what we call “bush legs”—the forest equivalent of sea legs. In the far north, the moss is so thick and spongy, you have to use every ounce of energy just to lift your knees. Throw a 60-pound hose bag on your back and every step becomes a full-body effort. At the end of each job, our feet are destroyed from walking in wet boots from sunrise to sunset. Then there’s the fire: the forest consumes itself, erupting in a continuous chain reaction, one tree after another.

For all the excitement, the job also took a significant mental toll. It could be lonely, and sleeping next to out-of-control fires is obviously stressful at times. It didn’t help that I made \$20.50 an hour to start—only about \$10 more than the hourly wage at the local Tim Hortons. But the importance of the work brought me back year after year. I took pride in protecting communities and showing up for my country in its time of need. There was also something deeply gratifying about returning home with stories most

Canadians could hardly imagine. One year, I was dispatched to the Northwest Territories. As our crew's helicopter lifted off from the airstrip, all I could see was endless scorched earth in every direction, an ocean of black. A fire had devoured hundreds of thousands of hectares. It gave me a newfound respect for the power nature can unleash.

I'd love to keep my boots on the ground as long as I can, but the expectations on Canada's firefighters have risen dramatically in the last decade. Wildfire season used to last three or four months, but the drier, hotter, windier conditions associated with climate change have extended it. Now, I work on six-month contracts that run from mid-April until mid-October (or, lately, more like Halloween). The fires are far bigger and more dangerous too. Earlier this summer, the Red Lake 12 forest fire in northwestern Ontario became the province's largest wildfire on record, burning more than 194,000 hectares—nearly 2,000 square kilometres—and forcing the evacuation of two First Nations communities near Thunder Bay. Twenty-eight firefighting crews were deployed to contain it. And this isn't just an Ontario problem. Since 2020, we've sent fire workers to every other province and territory.

The hours have always been demanding. Each deployment can last up to 19 days, with two to four days off in between. My record is working 14 straight 16-hour shifts chasing a single fire. I've grown used to the pace; what's been harder to accept is how little the job pays, given how essential it is. In the past, Ontario crew leaders could work for 25 years, live comfortably and retire with solid pensions. In recent years, however, the cost of living in Canada has surged.

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Even though we log enormous amounts of overtime, often around 300 extra hours each summer, none of it counts toward our pensions. It's not uncommon to see firefighters in their sixties—folks who really shouldn't be sleeping on the ground—still working because they have to keep the lights on at home. Rookies earn about \$25 an hour, which is only eight dollars higher than minimum wage. The highest-paid crew leaders earn \$32 an hour. Despite three seasons of leadership experience, I earn \$30.56, which unfortunately isn't enough to provide for my growing family.

Unlike in B.C. and Alberta, wildland firefighters in Ontario are only employed for part of the year—though, with the weather nowadays, there's more than enough work to keep us on full-time. Fewer crews mean fewer hands on deck when lightning storms ignite dozens of fires at once. I've returned from one blaze only to be redeployed immediately because there simply wasn't anyone else available. When destructive wildfires burned across Los Angeles last January, other provinces could send aid to California because they had firefighters under contract. At that point in the year, Ontario hadn't hired anyone yet, so we had no one to send. Most wildland firefighters are forced to patch together employment during the off-season. And if they land a decent-paying job in the winter, they often don't come back the following season.

This turnover is gutting our ranks at the exact moment the country needs experienced firefighters more than ever. When there aren't enough workers, lives, homes and entire communities can be lost. And with the steady exodus of veterans, we're seeing more and more rookies hired in roles that require expert judgment. Firefighters have to be able to size up a fire, call in air attacks and request additional resources as needed. Leadership does a thorough job of vetting new recruits, but there are risks that come with relying on more inexperienced workers.

Each year, I find myself re-teaching the importance of lookouts, anchor points, escape routes and safety zones so new crew members know what to do when the wind shifts. The greener they are, the easier it is for them to rush into fire-suppression tactics without properly thinking things through. Wildland firefighting isn't only about putting out flames; it's about constant tactical decision-making. And if you haven't spent years in the field building that intuition, you can easily make a small mistake that has devastating consequences.

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I've started looking into other roles within AFFES—Aviation, Forest Fire and Emergency Services—like specialist positions that offer year-round contracts, better pay and more frequent opportunities to sleep in my own bed. Still, I feel guilty when I think about leaving operations; I'm not sure how long it would take to replace me. It's already hard to get people to relocate to Northwestern Ontario. Firefighters from the GTA, for example, often spend more time driving home on their days off than actually *being* at home with their loved ones. They spend years with little to no contact with the outside world, trading family memories for money. They deserve better working conditions, considering all they give up to protect the province.

In my case, it's hard to imagine spending another summer away, expecting Jessica to take care of our soon to be three kids *and* schedule her shifts around my absences. It's a lot to ask. Every alarm, every chopper ride into

danger, every night spent sleeping up against an inferno—it's all shaped who I am. But I'm running out of time to wait for the winds to change.

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