The Firefighter

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LEVELED BOOK • Y

The Firefighter

An Interview with Todd Cupell
Conducted by Julie Harding

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Front cover: Firefighter Todd Cupell poses in front of the Rodeo Fire in Arizona, one of the most destructive of the 2002 fire season.

Title page: A wildland firefighter sets a back burn using a drip torch; Rodeo/ Chediski Fire, Arizona, 2002.

Please note:
Several photos in this book were taken at the Rodeo/Chediski Fire. This fire began as two separate wildfires, Rodeo and Chediski, and merged into one.

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Correlation

LEVEL Y	
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Reading Recovery	40
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Glossary

arsonists people who start fires on purpose (p. 10)

bladder bag a bag full of water that firefighters carry on their backs (p. 6)

briefing a meeting that gives everyone up-to-date information (p. 12)

brutal harsh; vicious (p. 12)

camaraderie friendship (p. 11)

competent able to do a job well (p. 12)

entrapment being trapped and surrounded by fire (p. 7)

fire line the area at the edge of a wildland fire where firefighters work (p. 12)

fire-retardant helps slow down fire (p. 13)

fusees very hot flares used to light back burns (p. 15)

mesmerized amazed; hypnotized (p. 5)

Nomex a brand-name fire-retardant material (p. 13)

Pulaski a small tool with an ax on one end and a hoe on the other; named for its inventor (p. 16)

tedious boring and time-consuming (p. 6)

Table of Contents

This mobile home park in Arizona was devastated by the Rodeo/Chediski Fire.

Introduction

Wildfires are a part of nature. Many scientists have found that certain plants and animals depend on fire to clear the wilderness of dead material, allowing room for new growth on the forest floor. Some species of trees, such as the lodgepole pine, actually need fire to melt the waxy seals on their cones and release their seeds. But plants and animals are not the only things that use the wilderness.

Human beings live near wilderness areas, grow crops and livestock in the countryside, and visit wild areas such as national parks. When fire threatens homes, farms, ranches, or parks, wildland firefighters must try to save them.

Often, wildfires are simply too large to put out, so wildland firefighters try to control the fires by forcing them to move in a certain direction. They clear fuel away from the fire's path, either by moving it out of the fire's way and creating a firebreak or by burning it away using a small, controlled back burn.

- Ask your parents if they can get a fire-retardant layer built onto the roof. Often, wildfires throw large sparks into the air, and the falling sparks can set fire to roofs miles away from the fire.
- During extremely dry periods when fire danger is high, have your parents consider removing brush and trees that grow close to your home. These plants are much easier to replace than your home.

If you visit wilderness areas, be sure you follow these steps for preventing wildfires.

- Always follow posted rules for building campfires. If fires are not allowed, do not build one, even if you think it's safe.
- Always have a grownup build and watch your campfire. Never leave a campfire unattended.
- Build a safe fire. Clear any debris away from the fire pit or fireplace. Make sure the outside of the fire is lined with at least two layers of rocks. Keep your extra firewood away from the fire.
- Always keep a large bucket of water and a shovel near a campfire. Put out stray sparks with water or a shovelful of moist dirt.
- Put your fire out with plenty of water. Make sure you stir the ashes so the water can get to every burning bit. Carefully feel over the ground to make sure there's no heat left.

Wildfire Protection and Prevention

Wildfires can happen anywhere—in forests, in grasslands, even in the desert. If your home is near any sort of wilderness area, be prepared in case of a wildland fire.

- Keep an emergency kit handy in case your family needs to evacuate. An emergency kit should contain plenty of fresh water, a battery-powered radio and spare batteries, blankets, food that does not need to be refrigerated, and any medicines or baby supplies your family needs.
- Always obey evacuation orders. If your neighborhood is evacuated, do not stay at your home to try to protect it or your belongings. Do not return to your home until officials tell you it is safe. Leave the firefighting to the firefighters.
- Before evacuating, close all your windows and ask an adult to turn off any gas lines.
- Make sure there are no flammable materials such as piles of brush, leaves, or garbage near your home. Store firewood away from your home.
- Ask your parents to make sure your roof and gutters are kept clean and free of debris.

Todd Cupell, a wildland firefighter from Tucson, Arizona, gave this interview in 2002 during one of the worst fire seasons in history.

Ups and Downs

Interviewer: What is your favorite thing about being a wildland firefighter?

Todd: I love that I get to see some of the most scenic country in the world. Because I have to hike into the most remote areas to get to fires, the countryside is absolutely beautiful. I see a mixture of everything—landscape going from green, lush, gorgeous countryside to flames and burned areas. Many people are **mesmerized** by the flames and smoke. I also like the variety, because I never do the same thing two days in a row.

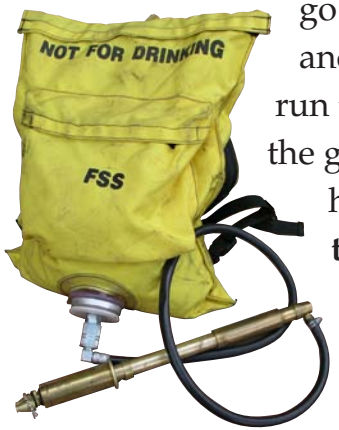
Interviewer: What is the worst thing about your job?

Todd: There are a couple of things I don't like. One of the things I don't like about firefighting is seeing the destruction that fire causes, mainly to property and people's residences.

That's real tough to stomach because you work so hard to save property that has value to people. When you feel like you didn't have enough time or like you didn't do a good enough job, it's difficult. Sometimes I feel like if I had just done one other thing, maybe I could have saved a home. That is probably the toughest thing about firefighting.

Interviewer: What is the other bad part?

Todd: The other bad part is just the mop-up. We go out and turn over every rock and ash, take our gloves off, and run the backs of our hands along the ground to make sure there's no heat left. That's just long, hot, **tedious** work. Plus we've got all our gear on our backs, like a **bladder bag** (a pump that sprays water) and hand tools. It's a hot, heavy, dirty job.



Bladder bag

Conclusion

Being a wildland firefighter is not easy. Wildfires are unpredictable; they can change from small, low-to-the-ground brush fires to firestorms that devour the treetops in seconds. Rough terrain can make escape very difficult, and many firefighters lose their lives. Although it is a tough job, firefighting can also be extremely rewarding. Firefighters save people's homes and jobs, and they often help preserve beautiful wilderness areas. If you love hard work and excitement, wildland firefighting might be for you.


The Rodeo Fire just before it burned through the town of Pinedale, Arizona, destroying several homes and the local fire station.

An airplane drops fire-retardant chemicals in a wildfire's path.

Interviewer: What are some of the qualifications a person would need to become a wildland firefighter?

Todd: You have to be in good shape, and you have to be able to work long hours. You also have to take and give orders well, and you have to love what you're doing. If you don't love it, you won't last long. If firefighting is what you really want to do, you will probably be able to do it if you work hard.

Wildland firefighters set small, carefully controlled back burns to eliminate a wildfire's fuel supply.

Interviewer: What was the scariest moment you ever experienced on a fire?

Todd: There are lots of scary moments, because dangerous things are always going on all around you. One of the scariest things is **entrapment**, which is when a fire burns all around you and cuts off your escape route so there is no way out. Firefighters put up their fire shelters and hope the shelters are enough to save them. Entrapment is the biggest fear that firefighters face, because it's how many firefighters lose their lives.

Fires started by nature are often located in remote areas.

Causes of Fire

Interviewer: How do wildfires get started?

Todd: Wildfires get started for two main reasons, the first of which is Mother Nature. Lightning strikes are the most common natural cause. Once in a while a windstorm is strong enough to knock over a power line and cause a spark, which causes a wildfire. But still, most wildfires are caused by lightning.

The biggest problem is that when nature causes wildfires, most of the time the fires are out in the middle of nowhere. No one sees them to report them in time, and it's too late to control them.

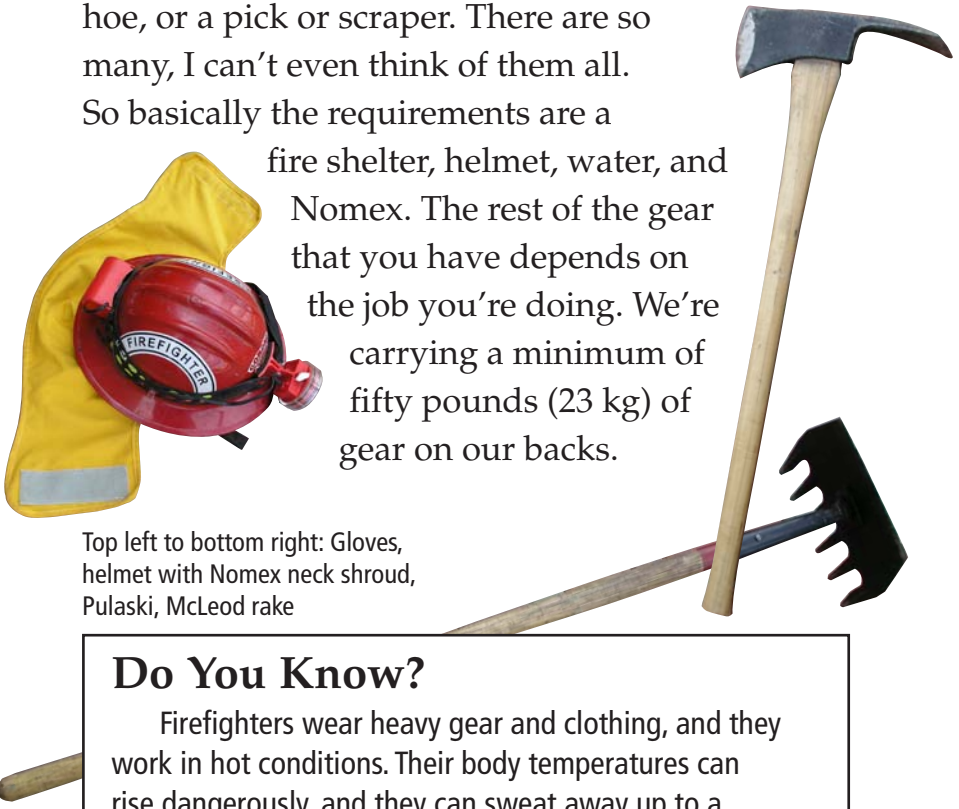
Firefighters doing the mop-up after a fire is out

Who Fights Fires?

Interviewer: What personality traits are important for someone in your job?

Todd: Probably the most important thing is that you've got to be a team player. You've got to be able to take direction from people and be able to give direction to other people. When you're on a fire line, you've got a whole group of people that you need to be able to work with well. Everybody needs to be on the same page. So firefighters really have to have the ability to cooperate and help others, as well as lead others. Every firefighter has to have the spirit of teamwork in his or her personality.

We carry a ton of things. We always have to have a pair of gloves with us because we're dealing with heat and flames and wood, so we have to have hand protection. Each firefighter will usually carry one hand tool, either a **Pulaski**, which is a combination ax and hoe, or a pick or scraper. There are so many, I can't even think of them all. So basically the requirements are a fire shelter, helmet, water, and Nomex. The rest of the gear that you have depends on the job you're doing. We're carrying a minimum of fifty pounds (23 kg) of gear on our backs.



Top left to bottom right: Gloves, helmet with Nomex neck shroud, Pulaski, McLeod rake

Do You Know?

Firefighters wear heavy gear and clothing, and they work in hot conditions. Their body temperatures can rise dangerously, and they can sweat away up to a liter of water within twenty minutes! It is very important that firefighters drink water constantly. They must carry all that water, which adds to the weight of their gear.

Humans are the second cause of wildfires. Unfortunately, this year humans have been the cause of almost all the major wildfires in Arizona. Embers blow from unattended illegal campfires, setting fire to an area.

Then there are intentionally set fires, like the Rodeo Fire, which was set by a firefighter. He hadn't had much work this season, so he wanted to set a fire and create a job for himself. But the fire got out of control and endangered other firefighters and people's homes. The Madera Canyon Fire was actually started by a helicopter that flew too low and clipped a power line.

Vehicles start wildland fires too, such as when somebody blows a tire and sparks fly to the side of the road, igniting dry brush or grass. That's happened a couple of times this year.

The Bullock Fire, north of Tucson, Arizona, was suspected to have been started by a campfire.

Do You Know?

Special firefighters called smoke jumpers get into extremely remote areas of large wildland fires. They parachute from airplanes into the hearts of fires to combat the flames.

Interviewer: How do you feel about people who cause wildfires?

Todd: It's a shame—especially this year, when we had two fires that were intentionally set by firefighters. Whatever the reason they might have, it's a real shame, and it puts a black mark on firefighters who are out there working hard, who love what they do. We put our lives on the line to save people's homes and property, and the **arsonists** are out there setting fires on purpose. They're not very well liked.

We also have an IA (Initial Attack) pack, which is basically a backpack that carries quite a bit of water. We also carry other things in the pack, usually one change of clothes and some fusees, which are ignition devices kind of like very hot flares. One of the ways firefighters try to save themselves from entrapment is to use a **fusee** to light another fire to burn all the fuel in an area. A firefighter can get into the black area that has already been burned, which is what we call a safety zone.

Do You Know?

An IA pack holds an amazing amount of equipment. Here is just a partial list:

- quick-deploy fire shelter
- a variety of hand tools
- reference books for dealing with every kind of fire
- Velcro (for repairing clothing and packs)
- extra socks and bandannas
- extra Nomex pants
- extra shoelaces
- lip balm
- earplugs
- goggles
- fusees
- matches
- electrical tape
- MREs—"Meals Ready to Eat"

Interviewer: What is Nomex?

Todd: Nomex is a special fabric that is fire retardant, so if I put a match to it, it won't catch on fire. It's a big lifesaver because if we wore normal clothing, there's a good chance that all the sparks flying around would light it on fire.

In order to work on a fire, you also have to carry a folded-up fire shelter. A fire shelter looks like a one-person tent made of aluminum and fiberglass. It's the last chance you have to save your life.

If you're entrapped and a fire is going to burn over you, you open the shelter and get in. The temperature inside a fire shelter can get up to 190 degrees (Fahrenheit; 88°C), but it's survivable. If you weren't in it, you could get 2,000-degree (Fahrenheit; 1,093°C) flames on you, and you'd die instantly. Or if you inhaled the gases and super-heated air, they would burn and damage your lungs and could kill you. People still die in fire shelters, but the shelters save a lot of lives.

Interviewer: What else do you need?

Todd: You have to wear a hard hat, because there are snags, such as dead trees or falling branches, that can hit you. There are actually numerous things that can fall.

Crew Life

Interviewer: What is life with the crew like?

Todd: You spend a lot of time at the station and working with your crew—they're very much like a family. One guy put it cleverly; he said that fifty years ago, firefighting was a brotherhood. Now, with so many female firefighters, it is more like a family, with men and women working closely together toward the goal of controlling fire. When we get off a shift, there is always a lot of **camaraderie**. We eat lunch together, we eat dinner together, and "families" are always together on fires.

Firefighters take a much-needed break after working for 16 hours on the Rodeo/Chediski Fire.

If there are firefighters from several cities working on one fire, they still usually eat with the members of their own team. You never see any fights between firefighters.

When you're on the **fire line**, you have to trust the people you're with. You have to know that whoever is working with you is **competent**. The training that you've gone through together, the fires that you've fought together, and the experiences that you've had really help, because you know you can trust that person. Your life depends on them and vice-versa.

Interviewer: Describe a typical day in the life of a wildland firefighter.

Todd: Well, it depends. Usually it's pretty quiet around here, but during the Rodeo Fire, the first few days were absolutely **brutal**. We spent 43 hours on the fire line without sleeping. I'd get up at about five o'clock every morning and go to the morning **briefing** with the forest service to find out what was going on and where everybody was going. We'd go out on the fire lines and spend all day cleaning up around houses, setting back burns, and doing what needed to be done to help work on the fire.

Tools of the Trade

Interviewer: Can you describe some of the gear you use on a fire?

Todd: The most important gear firefighters have is their Personal Protection Equipment, or PPE, which is the clothing they wear. PPE consists of a **Nomex** shirt, Nomex pants, and **fire-retardant** soles on our boots. We have to wear leather boots because we can't have any fabric or cloth that can catch fire or melt.

Todd in his full gear, including a radio, a head lamp, and safety goggles