

LIFE AS A (FEMALE) HOTSHOT

The first tree went up in flames with a roar that would put a jet engine to shame and I knew the test had come again. Pulaskis scraped and the crew sweated, as the fire roared on our heels--another typical day in the life of a Hotshot.

I was a member of the LaGrande Interagency Hotshot crew for two seasons: the Seige of '87 and the Endless Yellowstone summer of '88. I learned more about fire, about people and about management in those eight months on the fireline than during the fifteen years I've spent in school. The significant aspect of my fire career is that I viewed the life of a Hotshot crew through female eyes.

My introduction to the fire crew came from another woman who had been with the LaGrande Hotshots for a few years. She informed me about the harsher side of being a Hotshot--days without showers, nights without sleep and weeks without seeing home. However, she failed to mention the growing and learning experiences and the confidence I would gain and, more importantly, the pride of finishing a long stretch of line, the satisfaction of working hard for a 20-hour shift, and the bonding of twenty people into a working machine.

Having a year of college under my belt, I felt I was ready for a change, and fire sounded like the stimulus I needed. As the fire seasons have progressed, the initial

stimulation has been overshadowed by intense elation, fear, weariness and irritation at any given time on any given day.

Women are encouraged to apply for all jobs these days, especially in the Forest Service, so I had little trouble landing a job on the LaGrande Hotshot crew. I was impressed by the friendliness, openness and helpful attitude of ALL the members of the crew, male and female, not just the Superintendent and Foreman. Through the two weeks of vigorous physical training combined with classroom studies, the members of our crew came to understand what made each individual click. The attention paid to other crew members seemed to be as important as keeping oneself in line, on time and ready for anything. If only one person was not prepared, the crew as a whole was not prepared.

Our first dispatch had the rookies' stomachs churning and the adrenaline pumping through the crew's collective veins. Soon we would know if the training had been sufficient, if the physical training had us in shape, and if we had the mental capacity as a crew to hold together in the stressful times ahead.

It would not be honest to imply that there were no differences between the men and women on my fire crew. Of course, biologically, the men were stronger than the women and could carry Mark 3 pumps easier, but that did not stop us from trying. As long as there was work to do, everyone

worked. Also, although the men seemed to get mad easier and vented their frustrations in physical effort, I suspect none of them crept off in the middle of the night to sob their frustrations out under a tree as I had done when the pressure of the job and responsibilities became a burden too big to handle for the moment. On the line, however, we were equals working toward a common goal.

Somewhere in the back of our minds, we knew we would not fail, but the anticipation kept us alert and humble. Many times throughout the year, I wondered if I would make it; no exceptions were made for women. A Hotshot was a Hotshot and each would pull equal weight. Men and women worked together, not focusing on whether it was a man or a woman doing the job, just whether or not they were doing it right. Our crew was a unit, not separate individuals.

In 1987, we were in California on a complex of fires, when the unity of our crew and our professionalism was tested to the limit. We had been working all day burning out our line and were to continue to burn through the night, when we had a stop over across the line behind us.

Our crew was the only one on the line that night and we were spread out over two miles, lighting and holding. Six of us at the end of the crew ran back to try and line the spot while it was still under an acre in size, saving the rest of the crew from a two mile hike from their lighting positions at the front of the crew. We had almost contained the blaze, when a flaming boulder was freed by the fire and knocked four of my crew members down

the hill and into a pile on top of a running chainsaw.

The fire was momentarily forgotten as we pulled bodies apart and prayed for the rest of the crew to arrive. They were already on their way. Only one man was hurt seriously, but the others were badly shaken and the fire had picked up speed during our absence from the line.

The rest of our crew worked like soldiers on the front line to separate us from the flames licking steadily down the hill. When the paramedics finally arrived, they brought a stretcher, and four of us packed our injured crew member out to the waiting ambulance while the rest of our crew battled the blaze, trying to contain the fire.

We saved our line and our crew members because we worked as a unit of people with a goal clearly in mind. Each had a responsibility to the crew and fulfilled that responsibility with no thoughts of failure or weakness on anyone's part. We had to trust in each other's ability to survive under pressure, and that is what gave us the strength to get through the night. We looked at ourselves as a crew, not as men and women.

Another element important in surviving the rigors of fighting fire is having and keeping a strong mental attitude. When I first started, I was told that a strong positive mental attitude was just as important as a strong back; many times during both seasons this was starkly apparent. Those who refused to give in to the desire to whine and complain, and refused to be shaken by changes in

direction of wind or orders, held up better and won the admiration of the rest of the crew.

We rookies soon learned whom to pattern our actions after. It didn't matter whether their boots were size 11 or 5, just that they kept their pack on, their backs bent and their attitudes adjusted.

I was proud to have survived and enjoyed both seasons on the crew, and I am thankful that I had the opportunity to become an integral member of the unique set of individuals that made up the LaGrande Hotshots of 1987 and 1988. The lessons I learned concerning fire management, respect for what each person has to offer, and professionalism are invaluable and I will take them with me in all my future endeavors. I also am thankful for what I learned about myself and the growing experiences I had because I was a member of the LaGrande Hotshots.

Men and women cannot be equal in all respects, but living with both on the LaGrande Hotshot crew was probably as close as I will ever come to being on the same level with so many admirable and competent people, regardless of their gender.