

A DAY IN THE LIFE

of *Earth Refuge* Content Editor James Sedlak



Image by: Kaleena Lynde

I remember turning around to see the red glow creep upwards behind the silhouette of the tree line. At two o'clock in the morning, our surroundings began to light up like an orange-tinted movie-set. Amidst an increasingly loud roar, I heard a familiar voice yelling at us to load-up in the buggies; "C'mon boys, double-time!" shouted my captain. The fire was chugging towards us, up slope from the drainage below, and it was time to get out.

"Loaded" yells the last crewmember, signaling to the senior firefighter in the driver seat that he could start the buggie (small school bus storing all equipment and serving as home on wheels) down the forest road to a pre-established meeting point safely distanced from the fire's projected

path. When we parked, the adrenaline started to settle and we watched the August Complex Fire rage into the night.

It had been a long shift, pushing on 24 hours. We spent most of the day backfiring and chasing spot fires across our line. Backfiring is when vegetation gets burned between the planned containment line (perimeter devoid of vegetation around the fire) and the main fire so that the main fire has nothing left to burn, eventually losing momentum. Spot fires are new fires established across containment line, often caused by embers blown in the wind. We had hoped to burn enough miles so we could get well ahead of the main fire but unfortunately we had too little resources and too little time.



Crewmembers holding the line during burn operations

For now, we waited. Our superintendent and captains drove around in our heavy duty pick-up truck to “get eyes” on the fire, watching what new ground it entered, so we could give the following day’s resources valuable intel. Just another day for our hotshot crew.

Hotshot crews are highly skilled hand crews of about 20 people employed by US government agencies like the Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management, among others, to provide all aspects of wildfire management and incident operations. Contrary to what their title as federal forestry technicians suggests, they are deployed across the nation to fight wildfires typically in the backcountry, including some of the most picturesque parts of the country, to protect assets and prevent fires from threatening communities in the frontcountry.



Crewmembers surveying the main fire

We fight fires mostly by cutting containment line - a minimum 10 foot wide, break in vegetation - around the fire's edge with chainsaws and hand tools and backfiring as explained earlier, among other techniques. Again, the goal is to remove vegetation so that the fire has nothing left to burn. The expectation is to be self-sufficient and maintain a standard of professionalism in highly stressful situations.



*One of our saw teams cutting brush and removing it from the containment line.
Image by: Evan Houston*

When we arrive on scene to an incident, our crew leadership checks in with the government agency in charge and receives a briefing outlining values at risk, the command team's objectives and the different resource assignments. Meanwhile, the rest of the crewmembers, each like a cog in the machine, perform their daily duties: cleaning equipment, gathering lunches, refilling fuel, disposing trash from the buggies etc. Briefings typically occur at first light for day shifts and when finished, the crew vehicles- superintendent truck and two buggies - drive out to the assigned area of work.



The crew hiking out to the line

Image by: Kaleena Lynde

Most days consist of some type of hike, sometimes steep and painful, into our work site where we begin constructing containment line. This can last hours, usually the entire day depending on progression and strategic stopping points. We work wearing packs with essential gear weighing upwards of 60+ lbs, carrying the following items: water, food, fuses, chainsaws with spare kits for some and hand tools like pulaskis for others, radios, weather kits, headlamps (we often work in the night), batteries, and fire shelters. We work as efficiently as possible, meeting our line specifications while preserving energy because one never knows what challenge lay ahead or if a new set of plans may take priority. It's hot, exhausting work and we often encounter operational hazards: heavy smoke, steep terrain, falling rocks, burnt out trees, bees and more.



*Crewmembers with scraping tools digging a two-foot wide trench down to mineral soil
Image by: Kaleena Lynde*



*Lunch break
Image by: Kaleena Lynde*



*A crew sawyer cutting down a hazard tree with potential to fall across the containment line
Image by: Kaleena Lynde*

It's important to stay aware of your surroundings and manage fatigue by drinking fluids and eating at regular intervals because sometimes the fire dictates how long the working shift can be. When fires are finally contained (not advancing but still burning), resources will begin to extinguish hot areas internal to the containment line by breaking up burning material and, if lucky enough to have it, spraying water. We call this mopping up. These suppression operations are often in unison with other fire resources: air attack (air tankers dropping water and/or retardant), helicopters dropping water buckets, dozers pushing extra containment lines, engine crews pumping hose lays and other hand crews. It's a joint effort.



A bulldozer traveling up the containment line for a new assignment during a burn operation

At the end of a usual day's shift, we hike back to our buggies to refurbish: clean and refuel the chainsaws, refill water canteens, pack away gear etc. Afterwards, we drive back to the incident command base or, the more common option, to our "spike camp"(essentially a camping spot outdoors near the fire) to scarf down food - either MREs (self-preserved Meals-Ready-To-Eat) or food prepared by contracted food vendors - and set up our sleeping area.



Sawyers refurbishing chainsaws after a shift

Image by: Evan Houston

The following day will require waking up again at first light - sometime between 5:30 and 6:30am, reporting to our resource in charge for briefing, scarfing down breakfast and tackling the new day's mission.



Sleeping spot during "spike out"

Hotshot crews typically hire seasonal employees at the beginning of the projected fire season, sometime around May for California, to assemble the full roster and they work for 6+ months straight. Assignments can last 2, sometimes 3, weeks with 2-3 days of rest in between. During this stretch, crews can easily accumulate close to 2000 working hours. And while the seasons of this length can be stressful and tiring, they are satisfactory as many seasonal employees depend on the overtime pay rate. It can be hard spending so much time away from family and mentally challenging to stay engaged through the end. And the end is sometimes hard to predict, if predictable at all.



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