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Honors Thesis

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FOREWORD

Firefighting has been a paid profession for less than half a century. Before that, volunteer departments handled the fire emergencies and in some locations still do today. The fire service, whose history goes back to the 1600s, developed and employed techniques that evolved into advanced training and technology now considered "cutting edge." As technology evolves, traditions of the fire service remain stable and resistant to change.

One tradition that remains a big part of the fire service is the image of what a firefighter should look like. For almost the entire history of the fire service, the persons who carried out this job were referred to as "firemen." And when the general public thinks of a firefighter, they think of a man. The term firefighter emerged out of political correctness, but is not often used by the general public. Part of this is due to the fact that up until the 1980s, there were few, if any, women in the fire service. Part of this is also because today less than 10% of all firefighters are women. It is almost a novelty to see a female firefighter, especially one who drives the fire engines or wears an officer's uniform.

Times are changing. More and more women are entering the male-dominated professions. Today, women are allowed to be fighter pilots, enter into combat situations, and join military academies that were once exclusively for men. Women are CEO's and owners of their own businesses. And now, more

women are entering law school then men. But with all these changes, the traditional male role still exists in the public eye.

After the "9 11" tragedy, firefighters were once again heroes. People openly thanked the firemen for their dedication to a dangerous profession, and the job of being a firefighter received a great deal of public attention. People donated money to help the families affected by this tragedy, and profits from benefit concerts, added to the help provided. After the tragedy, a memorial was built to honor the fallen firemen, a memorial copied after the now famous picture of the three firemen raising the flag at ground zero.

The picture told a story of hope, resilience, and pride for a damaged nation. The three men were not posed for the picture; they were just three co-workers saying we will not quit, this is not going to break us. They had no idea their actions would have such an effect on an entire nation. This was a very powerful picture.

The controversy came when it was decided to make this picture into a statue to serve as a memorial. The three men were cast in bronze, and the fighting began. African Americans felt slighted because they were not portrayed in the statue. All the men appeared to be Caucasian—which was what the three men in the picture actually were. A movement to change the memorial emerged, and it was decided that the statue should be changed to include a Caucasian, a Hispanic, and an African American, a representation of all who served in the tragedy. Never once was it mentioned that female firefighters were not represented in the memorial. Tradition is still alive and well.

I completed this project with bittersweet emotions. I wanted to present firefighting with the pride and honor I feel for this profession. I believe this is a tough job that requires strength, intelligence, flexibility, and humor to get through a number of difficult situations. I also wanted to address the difficulties that females face in working in a male-dominated profession. I did not want, nor did the women I interviewed want, to portray a profound negativity when discussing these issues. However, I wanted to provide an accurate reflection of their feelings and mine.

Chapter 1

Genesis

It is the middle of the night and everyone is asleep. Rhythmic breathing can barely be heard over the sound of the ceiling fans. A car passing by outside breaks the silence, but no one notices. The ten slumbering men and women have entered REM sleep, and the only interruption is an occasional toilet flushing or a body shifting in the night heat; but again no one notices. Suddenly, every light in the building blinds you, a loud heart-pumping, mind-numbing siren is wailing and instructions are being issued over an intercom. Your heart rate goes from a resting pace of sixty to a rapid one-hundred beats per minute in an instant. Confusion, sleep, and anxiety cloud your mind. Your feet hit the floor at the same time the siren began screaming for you to arise. Your neighbor across the room is dressing—a man clad only in his skivvies, but you fail to notice. The voice on the intercom has now begun to repeat the information; this time you listen. “Engine 41, truck 41, squad 41, rescue 41, and district 41 structure fire, smoke and flames showing, multiple calls received.” Finally, you are once again plunged into silence and darkness.

Working for a fire department for the past four years has already given me the experience of a lifetime. As you can probably guess by now, I am a firefighter, a female firefighter. I am one of seven females at my department of one hundred and thirty men. Working in this profession brings great pride, but it

also brings along with that pride countless problems for the women who signed up to live in a man's world. I have interviewed six women firefighters; you will read their stories, share in their pain, and revel in their successes. Some of the women were among the first to be accepted as firefighters at their respective departments, so they have paved the way for a much easier road for the rest of us to travel. Before I divulge their secrets and bare their psyche for all the world to read, let me begin with some background, a little history if you will.

Historical Perspectives

The fire service as a paid profession has been around for less than four hundred years. Firefighting, however, dates back to the second century B.C. when the Egyptians operated wooden pumps by hand.¹ A leather fire hose was first developed in Holland in the beginning of the 1600s; and in the 1680s the fire service had made its way to the colonial United States. Boston established the first paid fire department.² These departments were actually bucket brigades, teams of men passing leather buckets of water down a human line to be thrown on the fire. This proved to be quite effective as long as the water supply and human supply of manpower lasted. Volunteer departments began in Philadelphia, in 1735. Benjamin Franklin, the famous inventor, was concerned that embers from chimneys and lightning strikes during thunderstorms, started many fires which quickly spread out of control. He founded the first volunteer fire department, of which he was a member.³ George Washington, who was once a

volunteer fireman, imported the first fire engine from England in 1765. This pump not unlike the one the Egyptians used many centuries before, was also hand operated and required men to move the engine to the fire. Washington gave this engine as a gift to the Alexandria, Virginia Fire Company, of which he was once a member.⁴ By the late 1800s horse-drawn steam engines were rapidly replacing the hand-pulled cart, and by the early 1900s gasoline engines replaced the steam pumps.⁵ Volunteer departments occupied many of the stations until the middle of the 20th century; and to this day many rural areas rely on volunteer departments for fire protection.

Once fighting fire and emergency medicine became an opportunity to make money, paid professionals slowly replaced the volunteer departments. This paid profession is less than sixty years old, yet it reeks of tradition. Departments have slowly evolved from only fighting fires to handling emergency management during disasters, providing pre-hospital care for the sick and injured, transporting to hospitals, extricating people from vehicles, cleaning up hazardous spills, assisting in bomb removal, and preparing for hostage removal as seen in the Columbine incident. The veterans of the fire departments fight to keep to the tradition of only fighting fires. Emergency medicine is a job many old timers refuse to accept. "We are a fire house, not an ambulance service" is a common statement. This and many more statements are often uttered, shouted, and cursed by the veteran firefighters. Fortunately, a few progressive chiefs, money-conscious city managers, and mayors have challenged this archaic tradition.

Another issue that sticks hard to traditional lines is the employment of minorities—women. Although some women served as volunteer firefighters as early as the beginning of the 19th century, their service as paid professionals did not begin until the second half of the 20th century. Most of the history of female fire fighters has gone unrecorded. Little is known about the women who served on the bucket brigades and fire watches, and who dedicated their time as volunteers.⁶

Throughout history women have filled men's shoes in the time of need. In 1912, in the Los Angeles area, volunteer companies protected the city. The chief, Archibald Eley, was concerned that the level of protection was diminished during the day while the men worked. Eley decided to form an all women's volunteer company to cover the residential areas that he felt were unprotected during the daytime. The women rose to the challenge and learned to operate the hand-drawn hose reels. Photographs indicate that they often did so in their long dresses.⁷

Another example of women taking the place of men in the firefighting work force occurred during World War II. As the war shipped many male firefighters off to serve their country, women joined the ladies auxiliary and became trained to perform the duties left unattended. In New Jersey and New York, fire departments became the responsibility of women, and in Port Washington in Washington State, the ambulance service became a regular job for many housewives.⁸ This is particularly ironic because, as you will read later, New Jersey, and Yonkers, New York, do not have any female firefighters currently.

European women also filled the shoes of male firefighters during World War II. In Great Britain, women joined the Auxiliary Fire Service, some on a full-time basis. They were paid to act as pump operators on fire engines, firefighters, dispatchers, and couriers. More than two-dozen women firefighters died in the line of duty.⁹

Forest Fire Fighters Service (FFFS) became an organized program in 1942. This program joined the state and federal agencies to recruit and train residents in heavily wooded areas to serve as fire lookouts, firefighters or in support positions with established fire agencies throughout the country.¹⁰ The first all-woman forest firefighting crew was assembled in Soledad, California in 1942. This crew, employed by the California division of Forestry, consisted of a foreman, a truck driver, an assistant driver, firefighters, and a cook.¹¹

All-women fire companies emerged in King County, California, and Woodbine, Texas in the early 1960s. The "Firettes," as they were commonly called, organized themselves in 1962 to provide fire suppression to King County Fire District #44 during the daylight hours, when male volunteers were scarce.¹² And in 1967, several women became concerned with the growing threat of brush fires in Woodbine, Texas. The nearest fire department was ten miles away, and the brush fires often overran the terrain and consumed building before the fire department could arrive. The women formed their own volunteer department, held raffles to raise money for equipment, and received training from neighboring departments. The women, undeterred by the lack of protective gear or formal

communication systems, grew to include twenty-three members and remained in service for eleven years.¹³

During the postwar period, the first women known to be paid professionals served as wildland firefighters under the direction of the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). In 1971, a woman just recently hired in Alaska to serve on an emergency wildland crew was fired at the end of her first day after numerous men complained she was in the way. When journalists in Fairbanks, Alaska aired the story, sympathy and outrage poured in. With the aid of an attorney, the woman won the right to return to duty, but only if she could recruit twelve other women. She recruited twenty-four. The all-woman crews worked through the summer of 1971 and were congratulated by the BLM for their excellent service. Although they were terminated at the end of that summer season, a year later the BLM decided that future crews would contain both males and females.¹⁴

In 1974, the San Diego Civil Service Commission ordered the hiring of minorities (African-American and Hispanic men and women of all races) into the fire service. This was the beginning of female firefighters as paid professionals. Predictably there was much turmoil over the order. An organized opposition raised money to hire an attorney and block the order. The San Diego fire department eventually hired five women who were put through a twelve-week training program, but the department "washed out" all five halfway through the course. The women later sued and won an out-of-court settlement.¹⁵

Today

During the twentieth century, technology made huge advances, and the fire service was not left behind. What was once a volunteer outfit has evolved into a state-of-the-art profession equipped with the most current technology available. Structural firefighting gear that was once heavy, hot, and did not fully protect your body, has been replaced by lighter gear that also keeps you as cool as possible. Fire engines now have cabs that hold 6 to 8 crew members; no longer are the boys riding the tailboards to calls. The interior is equipped with multiple air conditioner outlets, rocking radios, and computers that not only dispatch the calls, but can also provide directions and a layout of the structure in question. And yet, despite all this sophistication, certain traditions still dominate the fire service.

Women occupy less than 10% of the paid firefighting positions across the country.¹⁶ In Pinellas County there are nineteen fire departments currently employing hundreds of men and approximately fifty women; some local departments do not employ any females. St Petersburg Fire Department has over 300 male firefighters and 15 female firefighters (including one female captain, and one female lieutenant). Largo Fire Rescue has 130 firefighters, 7 of whom are female (including one female lieutenant). Lealmen Fire Department has two stations and approximately 50 firefighters, but has never had a female employee.¹⁷ Across the country, according to *Fire Service Inc.* magazine, by the

most current estimates there were 4,784 paid female firefighters as of July 1999.¹⁸ The article estimates an additional 5-10% not accounted for, and this does not include volunteers. Each state has a breakdown of the number of departments, the number of women employed, and the position or rank they hold. California leads the country in female employees, with 1008 in 125 departments. 51 California women hold the rank of captain, 5 are lieutenants, 11 are division chiefs, and 2 are chiefs of their respective departments.¹⁹ At the opposite end of the spectrum, Montana, as of 1999, employed no women firefighters. Puerto Rico has only one female employee, a lieutenant.²⁰ And there were several large metropolitan areas that did not have a single female firefighter: New Orleans, Louisiana; Jersey City, New Jersey; Yonkers, New York; and Worcester, Massachusetts.²¹

The Firefighting Profession

When women first entered the fire service as paid employees, initially they held the job of firefighter. But later on, as departments educated their employees to be EMT's and paramedics, women sometimes filled these new roles. Women occasionally filled other positions in the hierarchy, but, as of 1993, there were only 119 women working as engine drivers, 72 women as lieutenants, 54 as captains, and 21 as battalion or division chiefs.²² New York City fire department, for example, employed 12,000 line personnel in 1999, but only 36 were female. Out the 36, 2 are fire marshals, 3 are lieutenants, and only 1 is a captain.²³

The job of a firefighter encompasses many tasks. First and foremost you must fight fire. Women are expected to perform this function just as well as any other employee, male or female. This involves skill, strength, and some thought. Pulling a hose filled with water involves brute strength, but properly positioning the hose before it is full is important and requires thought. All the while you are wearing bunker gear that weighs 40-50 pounds: if you are a woman you are probably walking in boots that are too big for your feet because you have to wear men's shoes. (Until recently women wore the same uniforms and bunker gear the men did, because uniform companies did not make female equipment.) The job also includes rescuing people or animals from precarious places, extricating victims from vehicles, and working with toxic chemicals. In addition to this list, emergency medicine now utilizes an enormous part of most departments' resources. Last year the City of Largo received over 18,000 calls, the vast majority of which involved medical emergencies.²⁴

Most fire departments across the country respond to medical emergencies as first responders, people who establish basic care and wait for paramedics to arrive to take over. We are blessed that some of our tax dollars are used to provide advanced medical care. In Pinellas County a citizen who dials 911 will routinely get fire rescue or fire engine equipment with paramedics as a first responder within 7 minutes. (In Largo, the response is within 5 minutes). Within 10 minutes an ambulance (equipped with another paramedic) arrives to transport a patient to the hospital. So on top of fighting fires and rescuing stranded victims, taking care of the sick occupies most of the shift. (Did I mention that the

medical equipment weighs about 40 to 50 pounds and must be carried in on every call?)

Each duty day is 24 hours in length. Although schedules vary, usually firefighters work 24 hours on duty and get 48 hours off duty. Some departments give their employees a shift off with pay during the monthly pay cycle to avoid paying overtime—a workweek is 53 hours. The term for this day off is called a Kelly day, or a non-scheduled day. This benefit is much desired because the Kelly day allows for a firefighter to have 5 days in a row off once a month and work a total of 9 shifts a month. Tampa Fire Department and the Sarasota Fire Department use what they call a super Kelly day. The employee picks a day of the week (Wednesday, for example) and has that day off with pay whenever their duty day falls on that particular day. These employees work, on average, 8 times a month.

In addition to all the above-mentioned duties, each day begins with house duties, chores if you will. Aside from washing every vehicle, floors are mopped and vacuumed, bathrooms are cleaned, vehicle bay floors are scrubbed, kitchen cabinets, ovens and refrigerators are spit shined, ladders are washed, and vehicles are waxed; some departments even mow their own lawns.

Getting the job is another story. Becoming a firefighter requires much training and education. First, one must attend fire academy. This is an intensive program that not only trains an individual in the basics of firefighting, but also tries to get him or her into shape with a boot-camp style motivation. From this point on, each department differs in the requirements necessary for employment.

In the Tampa-Bay area medical training is imperative. EMT school trains one to be a first responder and to practice basic life support skills. This, however, is not usually enough education to get a job. Most departments today hire three times as many paramedics as EMTs. So attending paramedic school is essential. This school is a year to a year and a half of prehospital medicine that prepares one to handle almost any medical crisis. A college degree does not hurt, and maturity is a must. Finally, when one finds oneself in the position to apply for a job, the real fun starts.

To be considered as an applicant, an individual has to pass a physical agility test—the combat challenge. Not all of the 19 departments in Pinellas County use this test, but most do; and many other cities and counties across the US are familiar with this test and use it as a hiring prerequisite. The combat challenge consists of four stations and six tasks. First, you are in bunker gear with an air pack on your back. This adds about 40 pounds to your body weight. Next, you must carry a hose, layered in a section about eight feet in length and weighs 40-45 pounds. And you must carry that up five flights of stairs to the top of a tower. Once at the top, you drop the hose load and hand-over-hand raise another hose rolled up and secured to a line the entire five flights over the railing setting the hose on the floor of the tower. Then you descend the stairs and go on to station two, a sled with a 120-pound weight that must be moved six feet with a sledgehammer. Station three, the easiest station, requires you to drag a 100-foot section filled with water and fully charged 50 feet and knock down a cone by spraying it with water. The final station is the most difficult. This is where you

realize exactly what you are made of and what you ate for breakfast. You must pick up a man-size mannequin that weighs 175-180 pounds, is dressed in bunker gear, and is about 5'10" tall. He must be carried backward 100 feet across the finish line. The dummy can be set down, but evidence shows that once you put it down, you can't get it back up again. The entire process must be completed in seven minutes or less. This test is brutal. The time, procedures, and established rules are the same for men and women. If you cannot pass this test, you will not be hired, this is a one reason why only 10% of firefighters are women.

The hiring process continues with a background check, a financial check, a polygraph, a written test, an oral interview (usually twice) and a physical exam. The polygraph is stressful enough, but blood tests, x-rays, hearing and eye exams, a stress test, and pulmonary function that took the better part of a day, all with the premise that if you fail any portion of these tests you will not be hired. Talk about stress. And they save the best for last. The final portion of the health screen is an actual exam. I was examined by a very cute, young male doctor, while two other male applicants had an older female doctor. The nurse asked me to get undressed and put on a flimsy, very drafty gown. Those were not exactly her words, but you get the idea. I was a little nervous, and I was not too sure what to expect. The young doctor came in the room and looked over a sheet of paper that had the health requirements on it, and my results thus far. He informed me that everything was great and after this brief exam he would attest that I was physically able to perform the duties of a firefighter. I began to relax, finally. The doctor checked my eyes, ears, lungs, and abdomen. I was

asked to stand up, then touch my toes to ensure my spine was functioning properly. He checked over my vital signs the nurse had written down and reported that the exam was over and that I had passed. Great! I can finally go home. "Oh wait," the cute doctor said, "it says here I have to do a rectal exam." "Why", I asked, reeling in horror. He replied, " the hiring form requires a prostate exam." I giggled, breathed a sigh of relief, and then informed him that I did not have a prostate. He looked at the paper again and said, " well I better check for rectal bleeding anyway." Now I was sweating and trying to think how to get out of the situation, quickly. I assured the not-so-cute doctor that I was quite sure I did not have any bleeding, but if I did he would be the first to know. He smiled and said "well I can not sign you off without this test, so if you could lie on you side with your knees drawn up to your chin...". How humiliating! In the end, no pun intended, I passed all the necessary requirements and was in fact hired. This hiring process took seven months to complete.

Once employed the new hire is placed on probation. Depending on where you are employed the probation period can last from one to five years. During this time the employer can fire you with out a great deal of trouble, mainly because you cannot be supported by the union until you are off probation. The union invites you to join and takes your union dues, but is unable to represent you in legal action. What a deal. During probation, the rookie has to take monthly written tests, perform skills, get along well with others, and pass a final exam. Each month a different lieutenant evaluates you and many different people show you how to perform the same skills in many different ways. There is that stress

again. Besides trying to pass fire-related tests, as a paramedic you have to prove your medical skills, and as a future member of the team you have to be able to drive a rescue vehicle. Some smaller departments require the new employee to drive the fire engine. Thankfully, in my department that entails another class, numerous training sessions with different people, and written, practical, and driving tests before an employee can operate the fire engine. After your probation is over, a small ceremony occurs and then the rest of the department plays practical jokes on you to show you how glad they are you made it.

Women And The Firefighting Profession

The purpose of writing this thesis is two-fold. First, I wanted to write about a profession that brings so many men and women enormous pride and satisfaction. And secondly, I wanted to show what women go through in order to achieve this pride and satisfaction. This job places heavy demands on both your mind and body, but it gives you a high that nothing else can produce. When you fight a fire the physical demands are huge. You exert a tremendous amount of energy initially, and then it is followed up with two hours of clean-up. By the time the fire is out, the body is also out. The mind, however, is doing jumping jacks. You and ten of your friends are on the adrenaline high for hours. This is truly a

bonding experience. The same situation exists when you are able to save someone's life. This is relatively rare—perhaps 5% of the time, but when it does happen the feeling lasts for hours. On the flip side, the big fires and tough medical calls are few and far between and what remains is a job that is physically demanding, mentally draining, and sleep depriving.

Women, in particular, often feel like they give up their identities as they put on the uniform everyday. Over and over again women must prove they can do the physical demands of the job. They have to perform the job not only under the watchful eyes of the entire department, but also in front of the public as well. They also must be able to handle the mental demands of working in a man's world. Living with five to ten men for twenty-four hours a day is difficult. Dirty jokes, cursing, and practical jokes are all part of the job. Harassment, being left out, and verbal abuse should not be, but, unfortunately, too often they are.

It takes a special woman to work in a man's field. I would like to introduce you to six very special women. Each woman offered me candid responses and shared many of her experiences. They did this without regard to embarrassment, regret, or the desire to put some things to rest. As the following biographical sketch demonstrates, each of these six women has established a career in a male-dominated field.

Marilyn

Marilyn Ponds has worked for Largo Fire Rescue for eight years. She is a firefighter/paramedic who began her career relatively late in life. She is forty-nine years old and is married to another firefighter in her department; they have no children. Marilyn is 5'6" tall and weighs about 150 pounds. Her carefree attitude reminds me of a flower child who was suddenly left in the twenty-first century. She never has a harsh word for anyone, and she usually is the first one to embarrass her fellow crewmembers with a racy story. Marilyn has ridden horseback in Africa, Canada, and Europe, and her sense of adventure leaves most of her friends behind.

Working for the fire service was a change she felt she needed from her normal office work. So at age 41 she went to the fire academy and EMT school. Although the physical challenges are hard for women, she prepared and passed without any problems. Today she will tell you it gets harder. Her work-out schedule somehow fits into her fire department schedule, a part-time job, and school—she recently went to paramedic school full time. When asked her favorite part of the job, Marilyn told me it is the medical calls; she loves helping people.²⁵

Linda

Linda Ott-Revelia is also a firefighter/paramedic for Largo Fire Rescue and is married to a retired Lieutenant in her department. She has one child, a daughter, from a previous relationship. Linda is a certified engine driver and can function as an acting lieutenant. She has worked for the department for twenty years and was one of the first females to be hired by this department. Linda is 5'4" tall and 130 pounds and seeing her on a fire scene is pretty amazing. Her fire gear totally engulfs her small frame and you are left wondering just how she is able to carry an air pack on her back and equipment in her hands without falling over. Linda always has a smile on her face, and can usually be heard laughing. After many years in the department Linda is content; being close to retirement, she now counts the days. I asked her what is the hardest part of her job, and she told me one of the hardest aspects is what it does to your body. She said "this job gives you wrinkles from lack of sleep, it makes you fat from all the bad fire station food, and it hurts your body from all the physical stuff."²⁶

Linda grew up in the fire service. She was twenty years old when she began her career, and that was twenty years ago. Throughout that time there have been many memories and mistakes. Before she was married, Linda dated several men in her department. The father of her child is a lieutenant in her department. Hard feeling and ugly rumors have followed her, but they do not

bother her. She has regrets, but she is proud of her achievements and her ability to last this long in a man's world.²⁷

Karen

Karen Jackson is a fifty-two year old firefighter/paramedic who has worked for Clearwater Fire Department for sixteen years. She is also an RN, certified engine driver, and acting lieutenant. At 5'5" and 120 pounds, her frame is very slight. She has short brown hair and a very kind smile. She is not married, and that suits her just fine. She does date, but not firemen. Karen has no children, but has a huge love for animals. She regularly adopts stray animals, she finds homes for homeless animals, and she always stops for the injured animals, on or off duty. Karen surrounds herself with friends that have that same kind heart.

Karen loves her job. She works for a very busy department and has chosen to work on the rescue truck. The rescue position at her department is a bid slot, and seniority could get her a slower, less hectic spot. Karen, however, loves to ride the rescue and run medical calls. She is unsure when she will retire, but is hopeful that she makes it without an injury.²⁸

Diane

Diane Berkheimer is a firefighter/paramedic who works for St. Petersburg Fire Department. She was one of the first females to be employed by this department. She has served eighteen years in the department and is forty-two years old. She has two children and is married to a fire inspector. Diane is very tall; at 5"11" she has a very imposing presence. Her light brown hair, brown eyes, and athletic frame give her a stunning appearance. At one time, Diane had put together a calendar of female firefighters. For several years she recruited female firefighters and EMS workers to pose, herself included. The calendar was entitled Hot Shots, and it received much attention. While the male calendars often featured shirtless men, her calendar showed women in fire gear, or workout clothes—never in a bathing suit or skimpy outfit. In spite of this, she received numerous complaints, and after several years she dropped the project.

Diane has a personality that makes you feel comfortable the minute you are with her. On medical calls she is calm, her train of thought is focused, and she is in charge. Her manner outside an emergency situation is much the same; calm, focused, and very relaxed.

Diane has a very successful career in the fire service, but the road has been rough. Members of her department throughout the years have made her job difficult, letting her know she was not welcome. Harassment, exclusion, and just

plain rudeness are all familiar to her. She has had to stand tough and play hard to keep her place in the department. Diane is not bitter or angry at the difficult times she had; she accepts them as part of the job. Today she works at a station where she is accepted and well respected by her crewmembers.²⁹

Jennifer

Jennifer Deleo is also a firefighter/paramedic for the St Petersburg Fire Department and Diane's partner. She is an African-American woman with two and a half years on the job. Jennifer is married and has two children. Her husband works for Hillsborough County EMS as a paramedic. Jennifer is 5'7" tall and has a slim build. Jennifer originally wanted to go to medical school, but family life became more important. Her husband and family are very supportive of her career choice.

Jennifer has already had a difficult time. During her probation, issues with childcare caused her to either be late or find someone in her department to stay late for her. Very few people helped, and she almost lost her job. Although these problems have been rectified, others followed. Jennifer feels being an African-American woman is twice as difficult as just trying to fit in as a female. She has very few friends in the department and trusts very few people. Her lieutenant is also African-American and so is another one of her crewmembers. This station

has been called "too black," and she has heard that other employees feel her crew protects her and shelters her from the rest of the department. Jennifer likes her job but wants better for her daughter.³⁰

Sue

The sixth woman I interviewed is a lieutenant for a fire department in Pinellas County. She would like to remain anonymous, so I will call her Sue. She has worked for her department for seventeen years and is married to another lieutenant in her department. Sue is a certified driver, CPR instructor, and a medical instructor throughout the county. Sue, like Karen, has no children, and is an animal lover.

Sue is 5'6" tall and 130 pounds. She recently cut her waist-long brown hair off above her collar. Freckles cover her cheeks and nose, and she has posed for Diane's female firefighters calendar. Sue is on an all female firefighters combat challenge team that regularly competes in the physical agility event. This is a worldwide event that allows men and women to compete in the combat challenge—the agility test described above. Her three team-members perform one portion of the course, and Sue performs two. In the past, she has competed in the challenge solo. She regularly places on a national level.

In spite of all her accomplishments, Sue has a very difficult time at work. She also grew up in the fire service, and her past is always a problem. She dated several men in her department and finally married a fellow co-worker. Her sexuality is a common topic for discussion among her peers. Her husband has had to listen to explicit descriptions of her past experiences, most of which never actually happened. She has very low self-esteem, and she fights to keep her weight at a comfortable level. Her eating habits are often criticized when she eats the same portion size as the men. As a lieutenant she has difficulties. If an error is made she is heavily criticized, and again her husband hears about the situation. While he stands up for her at work, he questions her judgment when they are home, then she feels doubly attacked. Even so, Sue loves her job. She goes to work everyday with a good attitude and the drive to continue her fight. She truly cares about her position as a leader in her department and has aspirations for promotion in the future.³¹

¹ A Brief History of Firefighting. www.brockville.ca/ffhist.htm. 1.

² Ibid. 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid. 2.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Women in Firefighting: A History. www.wfsi.org/history.html. 1.

⁷ Ibid. 2.

⁸ Ibid. 3.

⁹ Ibid. 5.

¹⁰ Ibid. 4.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. 3.

¹³ Ibid. 4.

¹⁴ Ibid. 5.

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- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ "Women Firefighters, 1999: A status report", Fire Service Inc. (1999): 11-16.
- ¹⁷ Pinellas County EMS. [www.pinellas county ems.com](http://www.pinellascountyems.com).
- ¹⁸ Ibid. 11.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. 12.
- ²⁰ Ibid. 14.
- ²¹ Ibid. 16.
- ²² Federal Emergency Management Agency. A Handbook on women in Firefighting: The Changing Face of the Fire Service. 7.
- ²³ Women Firefighters, 1999: A status Report. www.wfsi.org/history.html. 6.
- ²⁴ City of Largo Annual Report. 4.
- ²⁵ Interview, Marilyn Ponds May 23, 2001. Largo, Fl.
- ²⁶ Interview, Linda Ott-Revelia May 15, 2001. Largo, Fl.
- ²⁷ Interview, Linda Ott-Revelia.
- ²⁸ Interview, Karen Jackson May 25, 2001. Clearwater, Fl.
- ²⁹ Interview, Diane Berkheimer June 13, 2001. St. Petersburg, Fl.
- ³⁰ Interview, Jennifer Deleo June 13, 2001. St. Petersburg, Fl.
- ³¹ Interview, Sue. May 13, 2001. Dunedin, Fl.

Chapter 2

Station Life

People often ask, "How can you do this job?" "It must be so stressful." "How do you cope with all the hardship you see everyday?" Most firefighters will tell you the job, although very stressful at times, is not the cause of their stress. Station life is one of the hardest aspects of being a firefighter. Living twenty-four hours a day, eating, and sleeping with four to ten other persons is difficult.

Numerous articles have been written regarding the hardships women face pursuing a career in the fire service. *Women Firefighters: Information and Issues*, a report on the obstacles women encounter in the fire service, to include: skepticism about women being competent firefighters; distrust involving the woman's motives for wanting to become a firefighter; and lack of support from family and co-workers. Some of the not so obvious issues include: women losing their self-image as a female; grooming policies that force women to look like men; and sleeping and living arrangements that only provide unisex sleeping and restroom facilities for men and women.¹ All these issues and many more add to the daily stress of the job.

Inadequate restroom facilities can lead to a decrease in morale and add considerable job stress. "Most fire stations in use today were planned and built

with a single-gender workforce in mind," according to *A Handbook on Women in Firefighting*.² One fire service observer noted "under the best conditions, bad facilities are an inconvenience which women suffer from in far greater proportion. Under the worst conditions, poor facilities can lead to problems with morale and job performance and an increase in the occurrence of harassment."³ Furthermore, it is found that women will usually adapt to the situations presented in order to fit in, but when the situation is less than ideal, it is wrong to allow the situation to continue.⁴ *Fire Station Facilities for the Workforce of the Future* reports on the legality of unisex facilities. California state law requires businesses that have five or more employees to provide separate bathrooms for each sex. Local building and health codes require employers to provide bathrooms and other facilities for each gender in the workplace. Most fire stations are considered the property of municipal or county government and are exempt from these codes.⁵

The Office of Federal Contract Compliance states "the employer must provide appropriate physical facilities for both sexes. The employer may not refuse to hire men or women or deny men or women a particular job because there are no restroom or associated facilities."⁶ This presents at least two major problems. First, who decides what an appropriate facility is? Second, what do you do with the existing firehouses that only have one or two restrooms and have no room to expand? In past practice the officers' restroom was also designated the ladies room. This causes problems with crew separation—the females are being treated differently than the males. Another alternative is to have a flip sign on the

door "occupied" or "unoccupied." Solutions to these problems exist, and as the new firehouses replace the old, multiple unisex facilities and designated restrooms are becoming the norm. But whose solutions are these?

Among all the women I interviewed and all the female firefighters I know, using the restroom is a private matter. However, female firefighters do not want to be separated from their crew. It is apparent enough that we are different without the need to make us use separate restrooms and sleep in separate bunkrooms. The first reaction from the male crewmembers or station officer (usually a male) is to frequent one restroom that is now designated for ladies only. At the fire stations in Largo, this was the lieutenant's restroom located at the front of the station next to the living and TV room. Now, this probably should seem like a respectable solution, but, not only would the female firefighter have to pass everyone on a regular basis to enter the restroom, but the door has a vent at the bottom that lets light, sound, and smell enter and exit. The alternative was to use the crew restroom and hope one of the men was not using the facility, as some of the restrooms had no locks; if a lock was present it was never used.

Jennifer and Diane said they both use the restroom outside in the apparatus bay. Jennifer said, at times, she would hang a picture of a girl stick figure on the door to let them know the room was being used; but she agrees that she feels self-conscious about the time spent in the restroom. Not wanting to be questioned as to what took her so long, so she now goes outside to the bathroom in the apparatus bay.⁷ Diane was one of the first females to be hired in her department, and the male crewmembers informed her that they did not intend to

change anything because she was now assigned to their station. She was made to share a restroom with the rest of the crew as well as sleep in the same bunkroom. Diane tells a story of when she was in the restroom grooming herself, (again no lock on the door) and a naked crewmember entered the facility with only his toothbrush. Diane said she realized this was a test and that she needed to handle the situation very delicately. She looked at her new crewmember and said, "Does that come in a man size too?" This never happened again.⁸

Karen shares some of the same concerns, but as a veteran firefighter she does not feel as uncomfortable. She solves the problem by putting a pair of shoes outside the door. This signals the crew that the facility is occupied.⁹

Marilyn who is a very free-spirited person does not feel at all uncomfortable using the same facilities. She feels comfortable using a stall and not locking the main door, unless, as she puts it, "she is going to make some noise." Several of her crewmembers have remarked that they, however, do feel uncomfortable and wish she would lock the door.¹⁰

The Bunk Room

Sleeping at the firehouse brings a whole new set of problems to light. Just for the record, female firefighters do not want to be separated from their crew, but the alternative is sometimes very difficult. A bunkroom has single beds that

either pull out of the wall (Murphy beds) or are free standing with has a half wall or a set of lockers separating them. Many of the older stations were not equipped for women so the beds are not enclosed with a curtain or door for privacy. Recommendations by agencies that have researched unisex facilities suggest that crewmembers not be isolated from each other, but have access to cubicles with walls that reach the ceiling and have a curtain or door to ensure privacy as well as reduce noise.¹¹ Snoring is a huge problem.

Sleeping in the same room with several other people is difficult, but try several men that you do not know very well. After a time it becomes old hat. As you bond with your crew, sleeping becomes just another part of the job and if you are lucky enough to get any sleep in your duty day, you are ecstatic. Most of the firefighters will tell you that some of the best times on the job are in the bunkroom with the lights off, laughing, telling stories, and playing practical jokes.

In addition to the lack of privacy, the bunkroom also creates problems for many wives. Sue told me during her interview that there were many rumors about her during the early years of her career, and she often had difficulty dealing with crewmembers' wives. Being one of the first females hired at her department and being very young when she began her career, she tried to fit in by conforming to the male behaviors at the station. The evening uniform is a jumpsuit, and it is extremely uncomfortable to sleep in. Many of the men sleep in their underwear and in the event of a call they are able to slip quickly into the jumpsuit. Sue was no different. She also slept in her underwear and a t-shirt. Numerous men complained and/or commented, and she was told by her station

officer to sleep in her jumpsuit. Sue felt that if the men could sleep in their underwear why couldn't she? To this day her peers ridicule her.¹²

Diane has a similar story. Like Sue, Diane slept in a large room with no divisions between the beds. She also slept in a t-shirt and underwear; however, she waited until everyone was asleep and quietly changed in the restroom and tried to sneak into bed. The men waited until she was right next to her bed and turned on flashlights to catch her.¹³ Marilyn sleeps in her jumpsuit so she is immediately ready for a call and avoid problems with the crewmembers and their wives.¹⁴ But many wives still complain. Largo has a station that only has two firefighters present for the twenty-four hour shift. This station provides emergency care to an area where another department provides the fire suppression. Several of the men have told me their wives do not want them to work with any females alone at this station. Furthermore, a co-worker's wife and a friend of mine told me she trusts her husband but is concerned that a female firefighter left alone with a male firefighter could say anything and he could lose his job. Did anyone ask the women how we felt being alone with another male firefighter? I can only tell you my experience, and the answer is "NO."

Now let's talk about the noise involved with sleeping in a room with four to ten other people. First, no one goes to bed at the same time. People are coming and going, turning lights on and off, retrieving items they need, and reading in bed. Some people talk in their sleep, some fart, some SNORE. Where this might seem like trivial matter, it is quite the contrary. *Women Firefighters: information & Issues* talks about the problems snoring presents. Difficulty in

falling asleep, interrupted sleep, and failure to get a restful nights sleep are issues all crewmembers face.¹⁵ Karen likened the bunkroom to the thunderdome, and Marilyn says she has learned to wake her co-workers up in a way that does not get her hit. Past experience has shown her that for one crewmember you kick the end of the bed and avoid the head of the bed or he swings. Also, she adds, "you never throw your pillow at a snoring firefighter—they keep the pillow."¹⁶

Another problem that adds to the noise is the bathroom facilities. They are usually located close to the bunkroom, if not in the bunkroom. Each time a crewmember gets up to use the bathroom the light comes on, the door closes, the toilet is flushed, and if you are on the opposite wall you can hear the water running, and then the door opens and the light floods the room again. Now image this happening for each crewmember ten times a night or more. We never sleep.

The Firefighting Equipment

Women Firefighters: Information & Issues reports one of the biggest problems women face on the job is wearing uniforms and protective gear designed for men.¹⁷ Due to the fact that less than 10% of all firefighters are women, the companies that supply fire equipment to the departments have not

been in a big hurry to develop a female line. Normally, each female is fitted in a man's uniform. This is problematic since most women are not built like men. Women have wider hips, and the men's pants are too short in the crotch. If they fit in the waist, the legs are too small. If they fit in the legs, the waist is too large. In order to wear a uniform shirt that properly covers the chest, the neck is usually too big. Marilyn usually orders her uniforms and then has them altered, at her own expense, to fit properly and comfortably. Linda, who wears a women's size 6 1/2 shoe, has problems finding work boots. Women's work boots are very difficult to find, only a handful of companies actually make them. When a company actually does sell them, they are only available in a few sizes, the more common ones. Linda told me she has to find a store that sells boys boots and hope they are available with steel toe protection and a durable tread.¹⁸

Protective gear is another story. The helmets come in one size that has a ratchet to tighten the inside shell to fit any man's head. Any "man's" head is the key word here. The helmet tightened down as far as possible still falls off a small head when looking down. Many women secure their hair in bun or ponytail to create more bulk. The protective coats (bunker coats) again are made for men and unless they are specifically measured for each person, the coat fits but the sleeves are too long. Fortunately most departments have a sale person come and measure each employee when they are issued new gear. When an employee is first hired, however, gear is assigned on an availability basis—meaning the closest fit is what you get.

Sue told me that for the first time in about fifteen years she finally has fire boots that are made for women. In the past she was issued protective boots that were as close a fit as possible. This meant that the boots were too big and fell off when she was climbing a ladder or crawling in a fire.¹⁹ It is very embarrassing when climbing a ladder to the second floor and your boot falls to the ground, and even more embarrassing when your male co-worker has to bring it to you. Still to this day, the fire gloves that are issued are unisex, and the smallest size has gaps of extra material at the end of each finger. This makes manual dexterity nearly impossible. Aside from the humor in these situations, this can be very dangerous.

Diane said when she was initially fitted for her uniforms seventeen years ago; the clerk who measured her had a hard time figuring out what size male pants and shirt would fit properly. When Diane asked if they had female pants or shirts, the clerk commented that they do not make female uniforms and if she wanted to wear women's clothes she should get a different job.²⁰

Practical Jokes

Practical jokes are a big part of the fire service. Tradition in this case has preserved a valuable tool. The sadness and horror firefighters see too often on a daily basis has to have an outlet, and the very fact that the crews live together

and become a family feeds the impulse for pranks. Each of the women I interviewed told me they have been the butt of many practical jokes. They also told me, and I am very happy to report, none of the jokes was malicious; all were in good fun. One of my favorite stories comes from Linda. Linda was part of a five-person crew and had been at her station for some time. Linda did not normally lock her locker, feeling very secure with the other crewmembers. One morning she noticed a Tupperware container placed on a shelf in her locker. She could not see in the container, but she did not think anything was inside. She opened the container and instantly knew by the smell that escaped why the container had been placed on her shelf. Someone had farted in the Tupperware and sealed the container. Much to Tupperware's credit, the smell was preserved and the laughter the crew elicited was proof of her suspicions.²¹

Sue told me when she was promoted to lieutenant she was pleased to finally have her own quarters. The lieutenants typically have their own room in a separate part of the fire station. Some time during the early evening the crew took airbags that are designed to lift disabled vehicles off the ground and put them under her mattress at the head of the bed. These airbags have tremendous lifting power and operate on very little pressure. While she was sleeping, the crew slowly inflated the airbags. She awoke and realized she was sliding off the bed—and then she hit the floor.²²

I am no exception. One day a fellow firefighter had continually talked about being interrupted while on the toilet. His repeated monologues about having to stop midway through the procedure left me disgusted—so I toilet-papered his

cubicle. He laughed and said he got the picture. Later that evening, around 2:00 a.m., I got a call for a fire alarm. He was assigned to a different vehicle and did not have to respond. When I returned approximately one hour later, every spare mattress was placed on my bed. This put my sleeping surface six feet off the ground. I looked around the bunkroom and realized everyone was asleep except for the lieutenant, who was in his own room, and the engine driver whom I did not know very well and was afraid to bother. So I did what anyone would do in this situation, I got a chair, climbed to the top, and went to sleep. The station wake up call is at 06:30 a.m., and I normally sleep until the last possible minute. My co-workers, however, are earlier risers. At wake up call, all my crew and the oncoming crew was present and standing at the bottom of my bed to view, as they put it, "the princess and the pea."

Diane had a problem with a fellow firefighter always trying to kiss and hug her while on duty. She was sure he was just trying to upset her, but she grew tired of his behavior. To get even, one night after dinner she curled her hair, put on a lot of lipstick, and a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. When the firefighter was very relaxed watching television, she jumped in his lap and gave him a big kiss on the cheek while her other co-workers took their picture. She promptly got off his lap and told him if he messed with her again she would show his wife the picture.²³

The Boys Club

I asked all six women when I interviewed them if they felt they fit in with the guys, if they felt accepted and respected by their peers. Do the male firefighters feel that women do the same job and have the same abilities? Most of them answered they felt respected; however, they did not feel accepted.

Diane told me when she was first hired, an off-duty district chief came in to inform her that women did not belong in the fire service, and that sooner or later he would see to it that she was fired. That was over a decade ago and she is still employed; apparently he did not do his job very well. Also at the beginning of her career a co-worker she did not know approached her and gave her this advice. "Don't trust anyone and remember not everyone will like you." Diane remembers thinking, yes they will, they will like me. She said she learned very quickly they did not. Diane finished by saying, "no matter what you do to try and fit in you will never be what they want you to be, because they don't know what they want you to be." Her advice is to be yourself: "If you want to wear makeup wear it, if you want to curl your hair, curl it. Look and act like a girl."²⁴

Karen recently became engine driver/operator certified. This means she has taken a class on how to operate the fire pump on the engine, how to maneuver the engine, and how to handle emergency situations while driving a fire engine.

She did this on her own time and then instructed her department she was certified. Normally after the department gives additional training and then a practical test, the person becomes an engine driver. Karen's district chief told her he did not think she was strong enough to handle the hose and did not feel comfortable with her driving. Karen directed this comment to the fire chief, and the matter was taken care of with apologies. Karen told me this particular chief is very nice and she does not think he is trying to be discriminatory. But, he is a huge man, almost seven feet tall and very large, and he assumes you also have to be huge to do the job. He told Karen he equates her strength and ability to that of a 125 lb. man, and that is not very strong.²⁵

Sue has had numerous problems. As I mentioned before, she was very young when she joined her department, and she tried to fit in and be one of the guys. Sue used to play sports with the men on duty only to be grabbed and groped in private places. When she complained, she was told not to play if she did not like it! She was made to share a restroom with the men, being one of the only females hired on at the time; to this day there are stories about her using a stall when another co-worker was in an adjacent stall. When she requested to become an engine driver, that request met with much resistance. The engine driver is usually the most senior person at the station, and that is almost always a man. She was informed she was trying to take away a man's job; and for a long time no one would teach her. Today, as a lieutenant, she feels when she introduces a new idea for training or station improvements her ideas are shot down and criticized, but when her peers suggest a similar idea they are praised

for their efforts. She feels no matter what she does she will always be criticized, and she told me, "no matter how hard you try you will never fit in with the guys." Sue told me as a result of all this pressure she developed very low self-esteem and once had thoughts of suicide. Yet, somehow, she feels she loves her job.²⁶

Linda does not feel she has had as hard a time as Sue. She told me that she was very lucky when she was first hired; several "Good Ole Boys," as she puts it, watched out for her. They did not allow other crewmembers to harass her, and they even took the time to teach her advanced skills, including driving the fire engine. In spite of this, she says, she keeps to herself and has very few close friends in the department. She has had her share of rumors, but when she married another firefighter in her department they finally stopped. I asked Linda if she is close to her crew, and her answer was yes! But she added, many years of jealous wives make you keep your distance. She said, "I'm just tired of it, I'll be your best friend, but only every three days."²⁷

Jennifer does not feel accepted at all. She swears she has two strikes against her, one being a woman, and two being African-American. Jennifer is relatively new to her department and has had problems since her first day. While she was on probation, she was required to rotate to each station house and be evaluated by a different officer every two-to-three months. One lieutenant gave Jennifer a low evaluation, and at his request her probation was extended. He said she had no skills and was lazy. When she returned to her home station and received a favorable review, the poor evaluation was questioned. The

lieutenant responded that the fellow African-American who wrote the favorable review was protecting her.²⁸

Just recently I had to work at a station to which I am normally not assigned. My partner for the day was a 6'4", 320 lb. man. We started discussing the possibility of our department hiring three new employees. While he is usually very nice and considerate, he told me he did not think women belonged in the fire service. He said his personal opinion is that a woman cannot do the job. He pointed out I would not be able to pull him out of a fire if he were injured. I responded that most people could not pull his 320 lbs. out of a fire. He agreed, but said he did not like the fact that women are not as strong as men and cannot possibly have the same abilities. I reminded him that the job of being a firefighter has very little to do with strength and a lot to do with knowledge and skill. I also reminded him that every woman in our department had to do the same physical ability test as the men to become employed. He again agreed, reluctantly admitting, professionally women have a place in today's fire service. But he made it clear that his personal opinion will not change.

This attitude is too often shared by others. Many fire departments have public education divisions that educate the public, conduct home inspections, offer CPR courses, and visit schools to instruct children in fire safety. Recently a female public educator, who works for Largo, took me to a preschool for a fire safety talk. The children gathered around the "Pub Ed" officer and listened as she gave a speech on home safety. She promised them if they were quiet before she left she would bring out a real firefighter in gear to give them a demonstration. After

her speech she announced that they were very good and now the real firefighter would come out as promised. On her cue I came into the room wearing bunker gear and air pack, and holding my helmet in her hand. A small boy in the front row stood up and yelled, "that is not a firefighter, it's a girl."

More Boys Club

It is tough being a "girl" working with men, and overcoming the male machismo is tiring, to say the least. But, being a female with monthly female problems is even more difficult. What if you are having a really bad period and your back aches, or you have cramps? Do you call in sick? And what do you say if you do call in sick? Whom do you tell when you have female problems? Well, I can tell you it is not the men at the fire station. It is okay to call in sick and say your wife is ill or your children are sick, but God forbid if you call in and say your having female problems. This is not acceptable. Two examples demonstrates that the adult male cannot deal with the adult female and her problems.

Part of the daily routine is to go food shopping for lunch and dinner. This is usually done as a crew. While shopping one day, Marilyn and her fellow crewmembers were adding items to the shopping cart to complete the dinner menu. Marilyn separated herself from her crew for a few minutes to pick up a

necessary personal item. Now as I mentioned before, Marilyn is a very easy-going person and is in her late forties. She thought that the mature, married men she worked with could handle a feminine product being placed next to their dinner items in the shopping cart. She was wrong. One of her peers looked at the box of Tampax and asked, "How do you cook that?"²⁹ Several years later her co-workers were still talking about the incident, and they could not believe she felt it was okay to buy Tampax on duty.

A second example again deals with an everyday situation at the firehouse. Taking out the trash is a daily duty or chore and is assigned to various employees depending on which vehicle assignment they have for that day. As one of the men was emptying the trash into a large bin, a used tampon landed on top of the pile. Sue was the only female at her station at that time, for all three shifts, and it was obvious from where it came. Instead of doing the mature thing and realizing there is no other place to put a feminine product in a male fire station but in the trash, her male colleague approached her and reported he wished the mice with the red noses would stay out of the garbage.³⁰

On a more serious note, a female employee at my department had to undergo surgery for a female problem. Not wishing to explain to the entire department her troubles, she applied for sick leave and only told the necessary personnel the actual reason. Each shift is posted in a computer; the station and vehicle assignment are noted along with vacation and prescheduled sick leave. Several of the male firefighters noted she had two shifts of prearranged sick leave. They questioned her, and while she would not give them a definitive answer she

replied she needed to have surgery for a female problem. They assumed she was having breast augmentation and joked about what size she would be when she came back to work. While this joke was all in fun, this female had cervical cancer and did not wish to share that information with the entire fire department; she now has to reassure everyone she did not have a boob job.

On a different note, watching television as a group in the firehouse can lead to problems for the women. Many years ago it was normal to watch “dirty” movies at the station, either on tape or cable. Sue remembers going into the TV room to watch a movie and falling asleep, only to wake up to a graphic movie being watched in its place. She told me she felt so uncomfortable that she pretended to still be asleep until the movie was over. I asked her if that happens today and she said, “not at her station.”³¹ Most of the other women confided that dirty magazines and movies had not really been a problem; the crewmembers either hide the magazines or refrain altogether.

Finally, I keep a picture in my locker of several firefighters in their underwear. This is an ad I found in a magazine for Haines underwear. One day I left my locker open, and the station lieutenant informed me that the picture was inappropriate and that I needed to remove the picture before someone complained. I told him I would remove the picture only after he made all the guys remove the dirty magazines from the restroom cupboard. He looked a little surprised and then said, “Just keep your locker door closed.” This is the same station, by the way, where Sue is a lieutenant—she just works on a different shift.

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- ¹ Women Firefighters: Information & Issues. www.wsfi.org/WFS.basucubfir.html. 2-3.
 - ² Federal Emergency Management Agency. A Handbook on Women in Firefighting: The Changing Face of the Fire Service. 53.
 - ³ Ibid.
 - ⁴ Ibid. 54.
 - ⁵ Fire Station Facilities for the Workforce of the Future. 2.
 - ⁶ Fire Station Facilities for the Workforce on the Future. 1.
 - ⁷ Interview, Jennifer Deleo. June 13, 2001. St.Petersburg, Fl.
 - ⁸ Interview, Diane Berkheimer. June 13, 2001. St. Petersburg, Fl.
 - ⁹ Interview, Karen Jackson. May 25, 2001. Clearwater, Fl.
 - ¹⁰ Interview, Marilyn Ponds. May 23, 2001. Largo, Fl.
 - ¹¹ Fire Station Facilities for the Workforce of the Future. 3.
 - ¹² Interview, Sue. May 13, 2001. Dunedin, Fl.
 - ¹³ Berkheimer Interview.
 - ¹⁴ Ponds Interview.
 - ¹⁵ Women Firefighters: Information & Issues. 5.
 - ¹⁶ Jackson and Ponds Interview.
 - ¹⁷ Women Firefighters: Information & Issues. 3.
 - ¹⁸ Interview, Linda Ott-Revelia. May 15, 2001. Largo, Fl.
 - ¹⁹ Sue Interview.
 - ²⁰ Berkheimer Interview.
 - ²¹ Revelia Interview.
 - ²² Sue Interview.
 - ²³ Berkheimer Interview.
 - ²⁴ Ibid.
 - ²⁵ Jackson Interview.
 - ²⁶ Sue Interview.
 - ²⁷ Revelia Interview.
 - ²⁸ Deleo Interview.
 - ²⁹ Ponds Interview.
 - ³⁰ Sue Interview.
 - ³¹ Ibid.

Chapter 3

Work-Related Problems

Balancing a career and a family is difficult; add raising children to this situation and difficult becomes an understatement. I asked the women I interviewed what their families thought when they chose firefighting as a career. Were their families supportive? Has their career choice, a job that requires shift work, ever caused problems at home? Did they at any time regret their decision to become a firefighter?

All of the women I interviewed stated that they have wonderful support from family and friends, and none of their relationships had suffered greatly as a result of their career. On the other hand, all have had to deal with issues involving a female working very closely with several men, sleeping in the same room, and using the same facilities. Insecurity on the spouse's part has often caused problems, but the insecurity usually comes from the wives of colleagues, not the female firefighters' spouses. Problems are especially prevalent when a workday is a twenty-four hour shift, or the work environment is shared with a spouse.

Marilyn, as already noted, chose firefighting as a career late in life. She needed a change and, being an adventurous person, she chose something she was always interested in pursuing. Right from the beginning her family supported her decision to become a firefighter, and it has continued to do so. Marilyn met her husband Greg while working as an EMT for an ambulance company, and with his support she applied to become a firefighter at his

department. They have worked at the same department throughout their entire marriage and find this to be an asset to their relationship. Although they do not work at the same station, they work the same shift, have the same days off, and can arrange to have the same vacation time. Shift work has not been a problem in their lives, though they do miss some holidays with their families; not having children allows them to celebrate together at a later time.

Problems of a different sort, however, result when married couples work together. Working for the fire service and working so closely with a group of people allows everyone to know everyone else's personal business; and being a woman in that environment gets even more attention. Mistakes such as leaving equipment at a scene, driving mishaps, and problems with other crew members are not only noticed by the personnel present at the time, but also are often shared with the rest of the department. Many times Greg has had to listen to co-workers share unpleasant or derogatory comments about Marilyn. She not only has to endure the incident at work, but she goes home knowing her husband has heard all about it. Fortunately, Marilyn and Greg have a secure relationship, and the station's politics and rumor mill have not caused problems for them.¹

Sue works with her husband at the same fire department. Because they are both lieutenants it is not possible for them to work at the same station, and it is difficult for them to even work on the same shift. There are only six lieutenant positions available per shift, and with turnover or reassignment at their level, it is almost impossible for them to be assigned to the same shift. Prior to her husband being promoted, they did work the same shift, but at different stations.

This usually did not present a problem unless Sue had to fill in for the district chief. A district chief is responsible for all the personnel at all the stations during that duty day. This involves coordinating personnel problems, scheduling training, and disciplining the employees in his or her charge. Sue, when placed in the acting chief position for a shift, supervised her husband. While this did not cause a problem between them, many times Joe had to hear complaints, mistakes, and general dislike for Sue's management style. Once Joe was promoted, he was moved to a different shift. Now there is no problem with direct supervision, and the complaints from the employees are fewer in number. But their time spent together has greatly diminished. As Sue is coming off her twenty-four hour shift Joe is just starting his. And if one of them is lucky enough to get a holiday off, the other is usually on duty. Nevertheless, they say they are adjusting well to this schedule.²

Linda became a firefighter at age nineteen, and she has always had the support of her family and friends. Linda dated several men she worked with during her career and as a result has a child. Initially the rumors were a problem for her and her husband, as she married another firefighter in her department, but many years of marriage have taken away any doubt of her ability to be faithful. Other problems, however have taken their place. While her husband was a career firefighter for over twenty years, he is now "retired" and works a nine-to-five job. Pressure is often applied, according to Linda, for her to retire, as money is not an issue for her family. Her husband does not like coming home to an empty house, eating dinner, and sleeping without his wife. Linda feels guilty

taking time away from her family, especially missing special events that involve her daughter. Missing Christmas or a birthday, she finds, is very hard to explain to her young child. Although shift work is on a rotational basis, getting off work on a scheduled duty day must be arranged by the employee. Vacation days are assigned on a seniority basis, and the department has a limited number of slots available. Getting off on a holiday is nearly impossible.³

Discussing children with Linda brought up another important point. I wondered if she had a difficult time working when she was pregnant, and what happened after the baby was born, being she was a single parent. Little, if any, authoritative information is available as to how long a female should continue to work as a line firefighter. There is no scientific evidence that shows the demands of being a firefighter is dangerous to the fetus at an early stage of development; however, it is known by doctors that prolonged exposure to heat is bad for the fetus. Unfortunately, the exact point a pregnant woman should go off line for the safety of the fetus is not known. Most departments leave the decision to determine when it is no longer healthy to continue fire fighting up to the obstetrician.

In a large department, an injured worker is taken off line and placed on light duty. Light duty allows the employee to do office work, run errands, and assist administrative staff. This is a great benefit because this allows the employee to continue working and not use sick time. Some departments do not have light duty status, and the person is placed on extended sick leave, or leave without pay. In Linda's case, her department is very family oriented; she was allowed to

go on light duty for the duration of her pregnancy and then take her full maternity leave when the baby was born. Linda told me she took the advice of her doctor and went off line immediately.

After the baby arrived, day care became a huge issue for Linda. The father of the baby worked the same duty hours as Linda so day care had to include over twenty-four hours at a time, including weekends and holidays. It was very difficult to find a reliable person to watch her child every third day for twenty-four hours. When the baby was ill, she had to find someone who was willing to take a sick child for an entire day, or call in sick. Fortunately, she told me, her family helped out with day care while she was on duty.⁴

Diane had already had her children when she became a firefighter, but she thought it was clear from the beginning that her department felt firefighting was a choice she made and everything else came second. Like Linda, she was also a single parent at the beginning of her career, and she remembered how hard it was to find reliable day care. At one point, one of her children became ill and she called in sick to stay home and take care of her child. When she returned to work the next shift, a member of the administrative staff informed her that she needed to decide what was more important, her career or her family. Later in her career, she remarried and her husband worked a nine-to-five job, so childcare issues were no longer a major problem.⁵

Diane agreed with the other women that missing important events in her family's life was unfortunate, but the beauty of shift work is that the on-duty firefighter only works nine to ten shifts a month.

Jennifer works for the same department as Diane, and childcare has been a problem for her as well. While she had her children prior to being hired in the fire service, finding daycare that worked around her family's new schedule was difficult. Her problems stemmed from the fact that her duty day started at 08:00 A.M. and her day care center did not open until 07:30 A.M. She lived in Tampa, worked for the St. Petersburg Fire department, and her husband was a paramedic for Hillsborough County and also did shift work. Very often Jennifer was caught in traffic or she would be delayed at the day care center and ended up being five minutes late for duty. Working for the fire service does not allow anyone the luxury of coming in a few minutes late. Arrangements have to be made for another employee to remain on duty until the late employee arrives. Jennifer could not find anyone to "hold over" for her, and she was often late. Being a new employee, she was still on probation and during that time the department can fire an employee without cause. New employees on probation are not allowed union representation. As a result of her frequent tardiness, she was written up numerous times and told her job was in jeopardy. She was also counseled by the administrative staff and told to choose between being a firefighter and a mother; one had to come first. With her job on the line, a few co-workers approached her and told her they would stay late for her until she could get her child-care issues straightened out. Since that time, she has relocated and her husband now works a different shift, which fixed the child-care problem.

For Jennifer, her past problems combined with the time spent away from her family is very unsettling. She feels guilty missing special occasions that involve

her children. She told me it is difficult to get time off work, due to the fact that sick, injured, or administrative leave take many of the available slots that are allowed off each shift—this makes getting vacation leave impossible. She feels too often she has to choose between her family and her career, and she did that once already, giving up medical school to raise a family.

In addition to the above-mentioned problems, it was hard for Jennifer to be a new mother and work a very hectic job. When her children were young they often did not sleep through the night. Thus, the night before her duty day she was often up with the kids several times and then she worked at a busy station that kept her up for most of the twenty-four hours. So, she went without sleep for almost two days. For her working holidays and weekends was a relief, because only then she could finally take a nap and catch up on her lost sleep.⁶

The Body

As hard as it is to try to balance a career with family life, it is equally hard to survive a career that requires intense physical labor. As already noted, firefighting is not all strength—it also requires a great deal of thought. But the part that does require strength takes everything you've got. Moving a charged fire hose, climbing stairs carrying equipment, pulling down ceilings with a pike pole, and breaking into a locked facility with an axe and halagan tool is back-

breaking work. The men and women that do this job must be physically fit. They must also like manual labor. I questioned the women about their ability to get into the physical shape necessary to carry out the job of firefighting, and what injuries "they" have sustained as a result.

All of the women told me they work out regularly, either lifting weights, running, or doing some type of aerobic activity. Injuries are rare, but they do happen. Just recently, Sue was riding in the lieutenant's seat responding to a fire call, trying to look up the address and trying to put on her bunker gear at the same time. Her right arm hit the lever that opens the door just as the engine was turning the corner. She was thrown out of the vehicle onto a major roadway. She rolled to the side of the road to avoid being run over by the vehicle's rear wheels. The engine driver stopped the vehicle and was able to pick her up without additional injuries. But Sue hurt her back as a result of this accident and was in therapy for several weeks.⁷

Karen injured her back and neck while trying to extricate a very obese patient injured in a vehicle accident. Karen now regularly visits a chiropractor and pain management doctor in order to keep doing her job.⁸ Linda told me all the years of running night calls and getting very little sleep, she believes has taken a toll on her body. The sudden shock of the alarm and the missed hours of sleep have given her wrinkles.⁹ Marilyn is concerned about a different healthcare issue. She told me that after a fire she finds black soot in her nose for days afterwards, an indication that the protective masks do not filter out all the dangerous particulates.¹⁰

On that same note, disease is an issue that worries many firefighters. Not only do they worry about the possibility they will contract a life threatening illness, but also they face the prospect of bringing a disease home to their families. Protective equipment for illness and disease is provided in the form of gloves, masks and paper gowns, but the risk comes when the patient does not disclose their medical conditions so the emergency provider can wear the proper level of protective equipment. Screening for diseases such as Tuberculosis and Hepatitis C is common, but employees are not tested for HIV and other forms of Hepatitis unless a doctor feels the employee has received a significant exposure. When an exposure does occur, the patient's blood must be immediately tested to ensure the employee has not been exposed to a potential life-threatening disease. In these cases, the patient must consent to the blood test, and they have the right to refuse to have their blood drawn for testing. A doctor can request a court order for the blood drawing and test, but this process takes time, and in some cases the window for treatment of a particular disease is two to three hours. Jennifer told me she changes her clothes before leaving work and does not bring her work boots into her home for fear her children will get sick.¹¹

I asked the firefighters if they felt their departments do a good job of protecting them from injury, rehabilitating them after injuries, and providing a proactive program to prevent injuries and illness. Sue told me her department does a poor job in the area of injury prevention. One area of concern for her is the number of small incidents that are considered routine and that do not require a lot of equipment. This is when she feels the safety of the personnel is compromised.

The extra personnel that relieve tired firefighters and provide a rescue team in the event a firefighter goes down in a fire is often overlooked. According to Sue, "It is the every day house fires that catch you off guard, and that is when an injury or worse, a death, will occur."¹² Marilyn feels her department has a great physical fitness program with monetary incentives to stay in shape. Karen's department does not have a wellness program, but if a firefighter is injured workman's compensation provides the employee with the necessary rehabilitation services.¹³ According to Diane and Jennifer, their department requires all firefighters to perform the combat challenge (physical abilities test) every year as a condition of their employment.¹⁴

The Calls

In addition to the physical stress that a firefighter faces, and problems that shift work can cause at home, another aspect of the job places significant mental and sometimes physical stress on the mind and body—caring for sick people. Paramedics must perform both firefighting and emergency medical skills as a condition of their employment. Throughout a paramedic's career, thousands of sick people will be cared for and many will die. Cases of abuse, neglect, and murder will present themselves. Trips to court to testify are part of the profession. Consoling a family member after pronouncing death of a loved one is

also part of the profession. Although county and state guidelines assist the paramedic with treatment protocols, the quality of the treatment the patient receives is often at the paramedic's discretion. Tough decisions have to be made such as when to render care and when not to intervene with nature. All the women I interviewed are paramedics and know full well the impact of such stress.

According to Marilyn, being a paramedic is the hardest aspect of her job. She decided after being a firefighter EMT for many years to go back to school and become a paramedic. This process entailed going to school full time, working full time, and finding time to do the clinical ride time the program required. After she graduated, she was placed on paramedic probation at the fire department. This probationary period lasts from three-to-six months and must end with a favorable evaluation of the necessary skills. Marilyn became stressed over this process. It is very difficult for her to be evaluated not only her superiors but also by her peers. Once she finally passed the probation period, she was on her own to administer EMS (emergency medical services) to the citizens of Pinellas County. This stresses her out even more. Marilyn worried she would not know what was wrong with the patient when the time came to make a treatment decision. I asked her if she has had a particular call that she wished she could do over, one that caused her to lose sleep at night. She told me about one call that really bothers her; she had to deliver a premature baby. The young mother did not have very good prenatal care and went into labor at a very early stage. When the baby went into respiratory arrest, Marilyn tried to revive the infant, but she

was unable to save the child. She said she often lays awake at night and runs that call over and over in her head to see if she could have done something different. She worries that it was her skill level that did not allow that child to be revived, as she has heard of other paramedics saving premature babies.¹⁵

Diane has a similar story that haunts her. She responded to a car accident in which a pregnant mother was fatally wounded. The woman was very close to her due date. Resuscitation at the scene did not revive the mother, but the baby was still moving inside the dead woman. Diane called for medical assistance over the radio and asked for permission to perform an emergency c-section to save the baby. The doctor monitoring the call refused the request and told her to perform CPR to provide enough oxygen and blood flow to keep the baby alive until the hospital could perform the c-section. Another crew arrived to render assistance and one of the crewmembers was a flight medic who had performed a c-section on a prior call. Diane, realizing that they were about seven to ten minutes away from the hospital and knew the chances of CPR keeping baby in the womb alive was slim, again asked to perform the life saving procedure. Her request was denied. By the time the patient had arrived at the hospital, both mother and baby were dead. Diane said this call bothered her for years.¹⁶

Linda had two calls that bother her to this day. They both involved young motorcycle riders who were critically or fatally injured. She said for years she dreamt about these calls, thought about them off duty, and could not stop reliving the images in her head of the damaged bodies. Linda admitted to seeing many horrible injuries that would make anyone cringe, but she felt these two men

bothered her the most because they were her age when they died. And she later found that one of the victims was riding his bike to his parents house to tell them the good news that his wife was pregnant with their first child.¹⁷

Sue remembers a call from early in her career. She was responding to a call that involved a possible death and she remembers noticing while driving to the call just how beautiful the day was outside. She also remembers noticing how nice the neighborhood and the home actually was. When she entered the home, there was blood everywhere and a woman's shoe in the middle of the living room floor. Entering the bedroom, she thought it looked like a staged scene from a horror movie. The bed was in disarray, and there was a blood trail to the bathroom. The patient was found in the bathroom, naked except for a ripped pair of underwear. The tub was filled with water, and the patient had her throat slit; her head was completely submerged. Sue said for many years after that call she would never close her eyes in the shower. She waited until she was finished showering and then washed her face with a washcloth at the sink. Today she is able to take a shower and close her eyes, but she said that call sticks with her even now. She could not believe that a person could do that to another human being. The memory of the incident makes her feel very vulnerable, especially when she is home alone.¹⁸

Karen recently had perhaps one of the worst experience any firefighter could ever have. Several members of her department, including herself, responded to a fire alarm at a commercial building. Each crewmember has an assignment on a suspected fire call, and all personnel were carrying out their duties without

problems. Suddenly one male firefighter said he was dizzy and then he collapsed. Karen and several of her crew rushed to the firefighter hoping he had fainted from the stress of carrying equipment and the heat of the bunker gear. The firefighter of twenty-eight years, who was in his early fifties, did not faint; he was in cardiac arrest. Because the crew was on a fire alarm, no medical equipment was on hand. With crewmembers running to retrieve the defibrillator, airway kit, and drug box from the fire truck, Karen and another co-worker started CPR. The crew worked without words to perform their duties and save this firefighter's life. The down firefighter was pulseless and not breathing, and his heart was fibrillating. He needed to be shocked to restart his heart. Finally, the necessary medical equipment arrived and the dead firefighter began to receive advance emergency care. The patient was shocked one time, and an IV with normal saline was started. The patient was about to be intubated, but he woke up. Opening his eyes and gazing at his co-workers gathered all around him, he said, "What happened?" Karen and all her co-workers now breathed a sigh of relief; they had restarted his heart and saved his life. Karen told me after the fallen firefighter was safely in an ambulance enroute to the hospital, several of the crewmembers began to realize the full impact of what had just occurred. A much younger firefighter approached her and said, "that could happen to any one of us at any time, why are we so hard on each other? It just isn't right." Karen said she smiled and agreed with her co-worker, knowing it would be business as usual tomorrow.¹⁹ The firefighter made a full recovery after he had surgery to implant an internal defibrillator, but he was not allowed to return to duty. The

crew also recovered, according to Karen, but she felt they could have all used some counseling to help deal with the situation of reviving a fellow firefighter.

Putting it all Together

One of the hardest jobs in the fire service is to be a lieutenant. It encompasses being a firefighter, engine driver, paramedic, and a trusted leader. The lieutenant acts as a mother to his or her crew, a liaison between management and the firefighters, and a leader and role model for all personnel. The responsibility for the safety and well-being of the public and the crew is the number one priority. Putting out a fire, righting an overturned vehicle, or handling any other situation that arises comes second.

Eligibility for promotion to lieutenant requires a candidate to be certified engine driver and pump operator, take many officer classes on fire suppression, hazardous materials, and fire chemistry, have four years on the job, receive management training in dealing with personnel, and pass a written test and then an interview and assessment with several high ranking personnel. Many departments also require that all candidates either have a degree or be in the process of obtaining a degree before they are promoted.

The candidate must first have enough time on the job to enter the process. Then he or she must take all the necessary classes and additional training and

place in the top five on the written test to even be granted an interview. Once the interview process begins, all five applicants are considered to have the same standing and each has to convince the chiefs that he or she deserves the promotion. Many firefighters never even enter this process. In a large department it could easily take ten to fifteen years and several tries at the process before a firefighter is promoted, and in a small department it could take even longer.

Many firefighters, however, serve as acting lieutenants. This allows a firefighter to act as a lieutenant when the actual lieutenant is sick, on vacation, or tied up doing administrative duties. Virtually all-prospective candidates for promotion must have experience as an acting lieutenant before being promoted.

Of the six firefighters that I interviewed, four are either an acting lieutenant or an actual officer. Acting as the lieutenant for even one shift is no cakewalk. All the responsibilities of an officer fall on the shoulders of the acting lieutenant. This includes maintaining the station, scheduling the employees for training, and maintaining the discipline of the crew. Many people find it is difficult to be considered a crewmember on one shift and being placed in charge of your coworkers on the next shift. Karen, Linda, and Diane can all fill the acting lieutenant spot, but none of them desire promotion to lieutenant. They all agreed they enjoyed the acting spot on an occasional basis, but did not want the responsibility and hassle everyday. Jennifer has not had enough time on the job to enter the training process, but she did not express a desire to do so. Marilyn has been on the job for almost ten years, has a wealth of experience, and is just

now considering the prospect of becoming an acting lieutenant. I wondered why all these very smart, very energetic and career oriented women have little or no intention in being promoted. I got my answer when I interviewed Sue.

Sue became an officer before she reached ten years on the job, but her promotion was surrounded by controversy. At the time she was eligible to enter the promotional process, she had the necessary time on the job, all the officer classes the department required, (including a state fire certification that no other candidate had), had been acting for several years, and was a certified engine driver. This particular process had only four candidates eligible to enter the testing and interview process. All four were given the test, the test was scored and made public, and Sue finished number one. The department decided because only four applicants had taken the test they would throw out the results and lessen the qualifications to allow more individuals to enter the promotional process. Sue again entered the process and again finished number one. This time she was allowed go one step further and go through an interview and a mock-fire scene assessment. This assessment involved a multistory building that is on fire, and the candidate must talk through his or her actions to put out the fire, rescue trapped victims, and ensure the safety of the crews. Sue was given a scenario that involved a building that just happened to be in her response area. She knew this building well and finally thought she had caught a break. Unfortunately, the examiner failed her because they said she placed the fire apparatus in a driveway that did not exist. When she told them she knew exactly which building this was and where it was located, and she could show them a

building plan with the driveway present, they told her she had also failed because she was too soft in managing her personnel. She was not promoted. The next time the promotional process came around she again took the written test and was given the highest score. She continued on to the assessment portion of the interview. She again failed the assessment of the fire scene. This time she asked to see her score sheet and found alleged errors she did not make.

Dejected, she went to the administration and suggested they videotape the interviews to ensure fairness on all the personnel's part. This idea was rejected, and Sue did not try again until several high-ranking positions had changed. Finally she encountered a chief that did play fair and she was promoted. Due to her questioning and complaining, when she finally was promoted many of the employees believed that she was only promoted to prevent a lawsuit. In their view, she had not proven that she was right for the job.²⁰

In recent years, there have been a growing number of articles written on how to become an effective leader and make the transition from peer to superior. In 2001, *Fire Engineering* ran two such articles. The first gives advice on how to go from being a "Buddy to a Boss," explaining that the employees want a leader but they will resist you when you try to take charge. The article gives advice on how to overcome the initial resentment—by keeping your cool, demonstrating that you are an expert in your field, and making sure you always act professional.²¹ A second article, "*How To Become An Effective Fire Officer,*" offers additional suggestions. The officer should read as much information as possible and refine his or her skills at every opportunity. "Always be a

professional,” the author adds, “do not perpetuate disrespectful or bad behavior.”²²

With this advice in mind, I asked Sue what she thought her job as an officer entailed. Sue told me aside from handling fire and medical situations, ensuring the safety of all personnel, providing leadership, it was also her duty to help personnel to reach their full potential—something that had not been done for her. Despite the best of intentions, she has encountered many problems since becoming an officer. Her management style has often been criticized by her subordinates, and by her peers. Although, no one questions her ability as a firefighter, many do not feel she is officer material. She regularly butts heads with other lieutenants and higher staff officers. Her own personnel complain about the manner in which she directs assignments and how she tries too hard to get respect. Although, her management style was once criticized for being too soft, some now see her as too assertive. This is somewhat surprising, because she is not the most assertive lieutenant in her department; in fact, she is probably falls somewhere in the middle. When I asked her why she felt she had so many problems, she replied, “When the firefighters see the staff officers and administration acting in a discriminatory manner, they follow suit. This profession comes from a good ole boy system that does not like minorities and tries to limit the admission of minorities into their world.”²³

When I asked Sue what her biggest fear was as a fire officer, I thought she would say the usual, fear of heights, failing to perform a critical task, or maybe not getting along with the personnel. But she told me her biggest fear was

making a decision on a fire scene that would get one of the personnel injured or killed. The reality of the job hits every firefighter, but rarely is that a disabling fear, rarely does any firefighter expect to perish while on duty. Fortunately, in Sue's case, this was not a disabling fear, but it is clearly something that stays in her mind.

In spite of Sue's problems, she looks forward to the future, and hopes one day to be promoted to chief. Since her promotion to lieutenant, she has earned an EMS degree, and she regularly attends advanced officer training classes. She has stopped trying to be accepted and now focuses on just doing a good job.²⁴

Being a firefighter is a tough job. Men and women alike share some of the same concerns: time away from the family, working in a physical and emotionally stressful environment, injury, and the potential to contract disease. The women face additional stressors. They often must prove themselves able to handle every aspect of the job. Difficult choices have to be made not only to maintain their careers, but also to further them. And, thick skins are a must. Each of these women has risen to the occasion, but I wonder, is it really worth it?

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- ¹ Interview, Marilyn Ponds May 23, 2001. Largo, Fl.
 - ² Interview, Sue May 13, 2001. Dunedin, Fl.
 - ³ Interview, Linda Ott-Revelia May 15, 2001. Largo, Fl.
 - ⁴ Revelia Interview.
 - ⁵ Interview, Diane Berkheimer June 13, 2001. St.Petersburg, Fl.
 - ⁶ Interview, Jennifer Deleo June 13, 2001. St.Petersburg, Fl.
 - ⁷ Sue Interview.
 - ⁸ Interview, Karen Jackson May 25, 2001. Clearwater, Fl.
 - ⁹ Revelia Interview.
 - ¹⁰ Ponds Interview.
 - ¹¹ Deleo Interview.
 - ¹² Sue Interview.
 - ¹³ Jackson Interview.
 - ¹⁴ Berkheimer Interview.
 - ¹⁵ Ponds Interview.
 - ¹⁶ Berkheimer Interview.

¹⁷ Revelia Interview.

¹⁸ Sue Interview.

¹⁹ Jackson Interview.

²⁰ Sue Interview.

²¹ Sargent, Chase. "Buddy to Boss" Lessons for a New Company Officer. Fire Engineering Magazine. (July 2001), 51-62.

²² Cook, Robert. "How To Become An Effective Fire Officer." Fire Engineering Magazine. (July 2001). 71-75.

²³ Sue Interview.

²⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 4

The Benefits

Up to this point, it may seem that the six female firefighters have encountered nothing but problems. Why, one might ask, do they put up with all the hassles, yet remain true to their profession? Is it the benefits? Or the money? Or the time off the job? Or time on the job? Most people think firefighters are well paid, but most firefighters disagree. In the City of Largo, for example, basic firefighter pay ranges from \$29,200-\$44,321, paramedic pay starts at \$33,600 and ends at \$51,082, and a lieutenant's pay ranges from \$42,700 to 56,440¹. Pay raises are awarded in steps, or years of service, and it takes twelve years to reach maximum pay. While a new firefighter/paramedic starts out at \$33,000 a year, twelve years later he or she will only make \$18,000 more; and this is the last mandated pay increase for his or her career. The pay and benefit contract is only valid for three years, and then the city and the union renegotiates. This can be a plus or a disadvantage, depending on the economy. It is possible for the pay to decrease when a contract is renegotiated. Pay and benefits vary depending on the city or municipality that governs the department; the Largo pay scale is fairly typical of Pinellas County departments. The department usually pays for the employee's health care, but the employee pays anything additional—such as family coverage, dental, or eye care. The department and/or the state will also pay a death benefit, in the event the firefighter dies in the line of duty, but life insurance is another additional expense.

The pension plan that is available to retiring firefighters is a well sought after benefit. But, the number of years it takes for an employee to collect a pension varies widely. Largo requires an employee to work 23 years. St. Petersburg requires 20 years, and Clearwater requires 30 years. Basically, the employee contributes a percentage of his or her pay, and the city adds its portion to the contribution. In Largo, it takes 10 years to be vested in the pension. This means that if you work 9 and $\frac{1}{2}$ years and decide to quit, you lose the city's portion of the contribution and any interest it has earned. This also means if you are injured off duty and cannot continue working as a firefighter, you are reimbursed only what you have contributed. Anytime after the 10-year mark, the employee can retire at a partial rate or complete the required number of years for the full pension rate, which is around 70% of your highest salary. Again, this differs depending on the department. Some very small departments, unable to offer their employees a pension, substitute a 401K or similar investment plan. In most cases, medical benefits are not continued after retirement. Traditionally, firefighters received a cost-of-living increase each year with their retirement, but many cities have done away with that benefit. This has made retirement very difficult for many firefighters. With the rising costs of health care alone, many retirees cannot afford to pay their insurance premiums.

Most firefighters work a second job, and some even have thriving businesses or carry on a second career. The time off between duty days allow for a second job, and many firefighters take advantage of the opportunity in order to earn additional income.

If it is not the pay or great benefits, why would the women put up with all the difficulties that go along with being a female firefighter? I asked this of all the women during the interviews. I also asked what they were most proud of during their careers and what aspect of the job they most enjoyed. Finally, I asked, if they had to do it all over again, would they choose being a career in firefighter.

Linda was not able to pinpoint a favorite aspect of the job, but she finds all the work very rewarding. She enjoys her job and is proud of the fact that she has lasted twenty years. She is equally proud of the fact that she was one of the first females in her department. When asked if she would do it all over again, she answered "yes," but only because she sees the big picture now—she no longer is scared or intimidated. She added, however, that she would not want her daughter to follow in her footsteps. "You might not like this," she explained, "but I do not think women need to be in this career field, it just wears you out."² She will retire soon as a twenty-three veteran.

Karen finds helping people the most rewarding part of the job, holding the hand of a scared or lonely elderly person, or making them a cup of tea, this is where she thinks she makes a difference. Karen insisted that she would make the same career decision again, but when I asked her if there was anything she would change, she replied, "You mean if I have a magic wand, what would I do?" I said "ya, that's exactly what I mean." She replied, "I would make it easier for people to be accepted, this job is really great, it is the people that make it difficult."³

Marilyn enjoys the medical part of the job more than the fire fighting. She prefers the mental challenge of a medical emergency to the physical demands of a vehicle accident or structure fire call. During the summer months when it is 95 degrees outside and she is required to wear bunker gear, the job is very tough for her, even though she claims she loves a good fire.

When I asked Marilyn about changes she would recommend, she jokingly told me she wants more money, better insurance, additional staffing on the fire engines, and a portable potty that is pulled on a trailer that responds to all structure fire calls. (A structure fire usually ties a crew up for several hours, and while the men can usually find a tree or bush to hide behind, the women are out of luck.) She told me she has knocked on a neighbor's door before because she could not wait any longer.

I then asked her if she felt she had made the right career choice, especially so late in life? She said, "Yes, I love this job." "Everything changes, it is never the same thing day in and day out." I asked her how long she intends to work (because she started at age forty-two, she would have to work until age sixty-five to receive a full pension) she replied, "as long as my body will hold out, or at least the ten years required to receive a partial pension."⁴

Diane feels that she has had a rewarding career. She is very proud of the fact that she was the first female paramedic to be hired by the St. Petersburg Fire Department. She told me she was unaware at the time that so few women actually worked in the fire service. She had no idea she would be considered a trailblazer for women. Diane is very close to retirement, and I asked her if she

could think of a call that was special to her. She told me the call that she will always think of as her favorite call involved a baby that was born at home. The mother, who thought she simply needed to use the restroom, was actually in labor. The mother delivered the baby in the toilet and then put the infant on the bathroom floor. When she finally called for help, six minutes had passed; and the child was blue upon the crew's arrival. Diane noticed the child's color immediately, but then noticed the baby was still in the amniotic sac. She removed the sac and revived the child, and the baby lived. To her this was the greatest feeling in the world.⁵ I wondered if she was aware that her best and worst calls were both related to infants.

Jennifer, like Karen, enjoys helping the elderly and children. She also believes that handholding and comfort represent a big part of being a paramedic. When I asked Jennifer if she would change anything in her department, she laughed at me. I then asked her if she thinks she had made the right career choice. She said if she had to do it all over again, she would do something else, probably medical school.⁶ Problems with the administrative staff and on-line personnel make the job bittersweet at best for her.

Sue told me she loves being a firefighter and a paramedic. It is the best job in the world, according to her. She finds great pride in the work she does, but she, like Karen, feels that the personnel make the job hard. Sue told me she would absolutely make the same decision again to be a firefighter, but she would handle things differently. "I would not put up with any of the crap I put up with," she insisted, "I would make people treat me with respect," adding, "I would do

that by treating them with respect, but make them follow the law.” “ I would do it again, but I would be smarter and know I do not have to give my entire self to be a firefighter.”⁷

On a Personal Note

I also struggle wondering if I made the right career decision. I have immense pride in my profession, and when able to save a life, or help put out a big fire, there is no greater feeling. But, it is the other times that leave me feeling unsure. I also have had some difficulties with the male personnel. My problems do not stem from their dislike in working with a female; instead they reside on the fact that I am one of the only females that they work with, and my opinions and ideas are not well received, or maybe not trusted.

Once, I was working with another female on a two-person rescue. At the end of our shift, we went to the fuel pumps to refuel for the oncoming shift. During the previous shift, the city had installed new fuel pumps and the nozzles were too large to fit into the orifice of the rescue vehicle's fuel tank—the orifice was too small. We had to slowly drip fuel into the tank, which took a long time. When we returned to the station, the crew questioned why we were gone so long? As we explained the situation, several of the men began laughing and told us that just like all females, we did not know how to pump gas. I reported the situation to the vehicle maintenance man and although he did not laugh, he looked at me very strangely and said, “None of the other vehicles had a problem.” I assured him

that we did have a problem and asked him to please check it out. The next shift he came to the station and, in front of the whole crew, told me that he had to drill out the orifice of the rescue to make it larger so it could hold the new fuel nozzle. And the reason none of the other vehicles has similar problems was because this particular rescue was brand new and the other vehicles are a different make.

Another problem I have encountered is the way the men communicate with each other. Very often, orders are barked out and are accompanied by a string of obscenities. My male colleagues really try to watch their language around me, but I have asked them to treat me the same as any other crewmember. What I was not prepared for was a string of obscenities directed toward me.

I had just become a certified engine driver and driving was new to me. This particular day, it was raining very hard and we were very busy with calls. While responding to an emergency call, I noticed the brakes were wet and not responding very well. As I went to make a turn, I applied the brakes and nothing happened. The lieutenant screamed that I just missed the intersection, while the vehicle is slid to a stop. I recovered from the spin and made the next turn. To make matters worse, as we were continuing to the call, I hit a bump in the road at about 40 MPH. This sent everyone out of their seats, including me, and the lieutenant hit his head on the roof of the vehicle. I started laughing and could not stop. The lieutenant started yelling and could not stop. This yelling went on all day. Every time we went out that day, he yelled. Not only did he yell, but he insulted me, called me names, and told me he wanted to have my driving privileges taken away. The next morning, he had the oncoming crewmembers

yell at me because the engine was dirty from all the rain the day before. I was so upset I went home and cried for several hours. I told my husband I never wanted to drive the engine again, and I wanted to quit my job. After I calmed down, I talked to one of my male friends in the department, and he convinced me to have a meeting with the lieutenant as soon as possible. I arranged the meeting, explained that I felt badly about my driving errors, and that I really wanted to be a good driver. I also explained that while I did not mind the criticism, I wanted only constructive criticism and I wanted it done privately. And furthermore, I wanted to be reprimanded by my superior only, and not by other crewmembers. Finally, I told him that I would not work for someone who could not train or discipline me without swearing or insulting me. After I finished, he took a breath and apologized. He then went on to say that this was the way he was trained and yelling and insulting did not mean much. He also said that he understood how I felt and that in the future he would not repeat this behavior. The outcome was good, but I often wonder if this happens in other professions.

Like the women already mentioned, I also miss the time I have to spend away from my family. I am currently working on a Bachelors degree, and I also work a second job. My husband works a forty-hour workweek, and we frequently go two entire days without seeing each other, and this happens twice a week, almost every week. We talk about having children, but worry whom we will get to watch our child when I am on duty and he is working a ten or twelve hour day. I have missed birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays with my family. On top of all that, I have broken my hand while on duty, have worried about contracting a disease,

and frequently have come home exhausted after being up for almost twenty-four hours.

In addition to the above mentioned, I find it is tough being a minority in a department of 120 men. I am always the outsider. Entire conversations stop when I enter a room, and although this is out of respect it is very obvious that I am not included. The crews often sit around the dinner table and talk about retirement, what will happen after, how long are they actually going to work, and when is that day finally coming. This question is asked of everyone, even the newest employees, and it is assumed that all will retire as a firefighter, it is just a question of how long they will last—twenty, twenty-three, or twenty-five years. Whenever they ask me what my plans are, they precede the question with, “You probably won’t put in twenty-three years,” “How long do you think you will work here?”

Recently, a fellow female co-worker began dating one of our male co-workers. This prompted a new station rule regarding the bunkroom. The lieutenants decided that no one of the opposite sex is allowed in each other’s bunk area—same sex is permitted. While this seems like a reasonable rule, I am the only female on my shift and this means while I am in my bunk area, no one can sit and talk with me unless they sit outside the general area of my bed. Very often the crewmembers will sit on each other’s bed and talk, share stories, or plan practical jokes. I now cannot do this, and once again I feel excluded.

Along this line, many of the men are good friends off duty. They play golf, go fishing, repair each other’s homes, and get together for barbeques. I am rarely

invited to attend these functions. I am never asked to help repair a home or help paint. I have two close male friends in the department and if we want to go to lunch, or go fishing, they have to lie to their wives, or at least forget to mention that a female is included in the day's activities.

All the factors have an additive effect. I initially thought when I decided to become a firefighter that one of the most desirable aspects of the job was the brotherhood that goes along with the fire service. I really believed that I would develop lifelong friendships, feel a sense of belonging, and become a part of that brotherhood. What I did not realize is that it is just that, "a brotherhood."

Now I have to ask myself the very same question I have asked the six other women. It is worth it? I find that is a very difficult question to answer. Some days it is not worth the stress, and some days it is the best job in the world. I have aspirations to be promoted and I also have supervisors that have encouraged me to pursue a promotion. But, when I look at the rough road ahead, I think I will probably only put in ten years, and then change careers. I know I could get a higher paying job in the medical profession right now, with regular hours, and less stress. Yet something keeps me tied to this career.

Pride in the profession is a strong motivator. I love to tell people I am a firefighter. I love to help the patients, and I really love to fight fire. Taking care of a person who is unable to take control in a situation, or needs immediate medical attention, is very rewarding. Fighting a fire that is "blowing" out the roof, doors, and windows is a high that cannot be described. And finally, being part of a profession that is considered tough and stressful, especially as a woman also,

keeps me motivated. What it comes down to is: does the good outweigh the bad? I just do not know.

Writing this thesis has given me an insight I did not have before I took on this project. I truly enjoyed hearing the women's stories and thoughts. They were honest and forthcoming even when the topic was difficult to discuss. They smiled when they shared their stories about helping a patient, and they cried when the end result was not so good. The calls have stayed with them and probably always will. They live and breathe this job because being a firefighter is not just a job; it is a professional career that demands more than just hours on a time clock.

Although I work in this profession, I learned a great deal more about what it really means to be a firefighter from them. First, it does not take 200 lbs of muscle to pull a hose, and it certainly does not take a penis to wear the uniform and give it the respect it deserves. Being a firefighter is more than putting out fires, it is the little things that are taken for granted or never known that make a true firefighter. Holding the hand of a frail person, hugging the family of a deceased patient, or rescuing a beloved pet from a burning building are more important than putting out any fire. Building trust and friendships with co-workers, working in extreme conditions such as heat, cold, or rain, and doing it all over again the next day without complaining are all part of being a professional firefighter.

At some level all of the women I interviewed are deeply committed to the job of firefighter/paramedic. The work is hard, and they do not deny it is trying at

times, but they wear their uniforms proudly and believe they make a difference. They all feel very capable in the mental and physical aspects of the job, even when they go home sore and hurt from a rough day at the office. They have all had to prove their abilities more times than they can recall; and they all agree that as tough as the job is, the greatest difficulties come in dealing with their male colleagues. And yet, those problems are not enough to make them quit. They all give their best everyday in spite of the obstacles in their way. Apparently, they think it is worth it.

¹ International Association of FireFighters. City of Largo. 22.

² Interview, Linda Ott-Revelia May 15, 2001. Largo, Fl.

³ Interview, Karen Jackson. May 25, 2001. Clearwater, Fl.

⁴ Interview, Marilyn Ponds. May 23, 2001. Largo, Fl.

⁵ Interview, Diane Berkheimer. June 13, 2001. St.Petersburg, Fl.

⁶ Interview, Jennifer Deleo. June 13, 2001. St.Petersburg, Fl.

⁷ Interview, Sue May 13, 2001. Dunedin, Fl.

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