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## The People That Fight for Your Lives: Firefighters' Impact on Society Today

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## The People That Fight for Your Lives: Firefighters' Impact on Society Today

Before I met my boyfriend, Ethan, I had no clue what firefighters really do. Yes, they fight the blazing flames that are caused by many things such as household appliances, chemicals, mother nature, cars or even save cats from a tree but, have you really dived deep into the history of it? In the past year I have learned more from the horrific stories and scenes Ethan has had to learn about and go through while he has been in the service and let me tell you now, I've learned it is not for the faint of heart. The things these first responders see and must live with are brutal. The loss society and the fire industry faced from Granite Mountain and 9/11 shaped the Firefighting community into what it is today. According to Rita Fahy and Jay Petrillo from the National Fire Protection Association, "The total number of on-duty firefighter deaths in 2021 continues higher than it has been since the late 1970s (apart from 2001)" (1). The firefighters in these positions have to adapt to the challenges they face and be able to think of a solution in the heat of the moment. The significance of Granite Mountain, 9/11, Dennis Smith, Jack Pritchard and Wildland Firefighters has impacted society with the loss and safety revisions within the service.

Starting with Granite Mountain, the loss of these Hotshots in 2013 during the Yarnell Hill Fire served as a tragic reminder of the inherent risks involved in wildland firefighting. In response to this incident, there has been a revision of safety practices within the firefighting community. This includes increased emphasis on situational awareness and communication, improved training and equipment standards, and more stringent protocols for assessing risk and making operational decisions. The Hotshots was a tight-knit team of wildland firefighters within the Prescott (Arizona) Fire Department established in 2008. Previously mentioned in the first paragraph, hotshotting is not for the weak. The twenty men that put their lives on the line to save

the city they grew up in is more than heroic, it's empowering. The group was supervised by Eric Marsh, who served twenty-three years in the fire service, protecting land, property and most importantly, human lives. Marsh was one of the nineteen that did not survive the fire. In honor of his memory, his wife Amanda Marsh created the Eric Marsh Foundation to give back to those who gave so much. According to the EMF, they have donated “over \$95,000.00 to wildland firefighters and their families” and is given to those that have encountered line of duty death or trauma. The lone survivor of the accident is Brenden McDonough. Marsh had put him on weather duty, which allowed him to escape from the blazing fire they were battling. McDonough became a public speaker, advocate for wildland firefighters and author of the book *Granite Mountain*. The book tells his perspective on the fire, before and after the incident and how it has shaped him. In the last few pages of the book, he goes on to say, “Only by learning to live with what happened at Yarnell, and accepting the gift that my brothers gave me, can I be with the people I love” (McDonough 276). The loss of these brave firefighters will forever be remembered, but their legacy lives on through the positive changes made to ensure the safety of future firefighters.

Furthermore, the impact 9/11 had on the world shed light on the risks and courage it takes to pursue firefighting. 343 Firefighters died then and still to this day we honor the ones we lost and confide in the ones that survived to tell their story. Joe Pfeifer, Orlo Palmer, and Ronald Bucca made significant contributions to emergency preparedness. Joe Pfeifer was the first Fire Chief on scene and in his memoir, *Ordinary Heroes*, he explains what exactly happened on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Pfeifer was on a routine call when he wrote “I stood on the streets and watched as the airplane intentionally crashed into the upper floors of the World Trade Center” (11). He soon sprang into action and requested “about 150 firefighters to go to the scene” (14) later

revealing one of those men was his brother, Kevin Pfeifer, which was the last time he saw him. Since 9/11, Pfeifer has turned his attention to analyzing global terrorism. Currently, he serves as the chief of counterterrorism and emergency preparedness for the FDNY. Apart from his wildly uncommon name, Orlo Palmer was another hero that made an impact on that day. Palmer was well known in New York for his dedication to the fire service and his athletic abilities. He was one of the few first responders to make it up to the seventy eighth floor with around fifty pounds of gear. The 9/11 Memorial and Museum dedicated an article to him sharing that “Palmer and his team freed a group of civilians who were trapped in an elevator one minute before the tower collapsed at 9:59 a.m.”. Palmer was also the first Battalion Chief to arrive at the World Trade Center. Instead of him commanding responsibility for personnel, he geared up and went toward the danger. Lastly, we have the first Fire Marshal to die in the line of duty, Ronald Bucca. Before his time with the FDNY, he was an army mechanic dedicating his life to helping others and serving his country. His son, Ron Bucca, shared what he knows about his father with John Jay University during an interview. “My dad had an intricate knowledge of the towers themselves. In fact, the month before, he talked to the guys in maintenance about an evacuation plan,” said his son. Once arrival, Bucca Senior went to the seventy eighth floor to begin first aid and search for those trapped. Later in the article his son explained “Like all firefighters, I think he wanted to get to the point of impact to start trying to put out the fire” expressing his father just wanted to help people. Through their efforts, they helped establish a framework for disaster management adopted by agencies around the world. Today, their legacy lives as emergency preparedness continues to be a critical component of public safety and national security.

Lastly, Dennis Smith, Jack Pritchard, and Wildland Firefighters have influenced the reconstructions of protocols in the fire industry and helped inspired others with their heroic acts.

Dennis Smith's book *Report from Engine Co. 82* gave insight into the daily lives of firefighters and helped to create a better understanding of their needs. Smith also authored *Report from Ground Zero after* he volunteered to help with search and rescue shortly after the jets hit the towers at the World Trade Center. He arrived to find that many of New York's elite fire squads and many of his close friends were buried beneath the rubble. In the hours, days and weeks that followed, Smith took part in the search for survivors, recording his own observations and the stories and experiences of his fellow rescue workers. "This book is dedicated to the 343 brave souls who went in to help others get out" (Smith 1). Smith was also known for his fire service advocacy and was recognized over the years through many awards from groups like the Congressional Fire Services Institute, the National Fire Academy, the International Association of Fire Chiefs and New York Fire Department. In 1991, he created the Foundation for the Health and Safety of American Firefighters with royalties from one of his books. The foundation supported health and safety efforts through grants to leading organizations in the fire service.

Jack Pritchard's work as a consultant for the National Fire Protection Association led to the development of codes and standards that are still used today. An article written by Xavier Jackson takes a dive into Pritchard's life explaining all the heroic challenges he faced while being with the department. The famous story Jackson shares is when Pritchard "performed the most heroic of his career" and goes in depth on the story. Jackson addresses the act and writes "Pritchard entered his Superman-mode and fearlessly leaped into the building to locate the baby" referring to an infant trapped in his crib on the fourth floor of a burning building. Due to his outstanding acts, he was awarded the Bennett medal to those who go beyond their call of duty.

Lastly, Wildland Firefighters, also known as Hotshots, experiences battling wildfires have brought about advancements in technology and training techniques that improve safety and

effectiveness on the frontlines. According to the National Interagency Fire Center, “An interagency hotshot crew consists of eighteen to twenty two specially trained firefighters that provide an organized, mobile, and skilled workforce for all phases of wildland fire management”. In the book *Granite Mountain* Brendan McDonogh dives deep into what being a Hotshot truly is “I thought fighting fires would be the hardest thing about joining Granite Mountain. I was wrong” (McDonogh 71). This quote illustrates that not only do they fight fires but, the physical ability they endure is brutal. Each of these individuals and groups has left their mark on the fire industry and continues to influence its progress towards better practices and procedures

Overall we can see the impact these events and people have had on the world and the revision of safety practices has made the community overall a more attentive place. Not only has the impact of 9/11 brought more attention to counterterrorism and emergency preparedness but it also serves as a reminder of the 343 firefighters that risked their lives that day so we can sleep peacefully at night. The Yarnell Hill Fire reminded us of the inherent risks involved in wildland firefighting and the impact it has on society with the loss of those nineteen courageous hotshots. The Firefighters creed says “My badge is a symbol of honor and heritage bestowed upon me by the Heroes that have gone before and embodies the trust of those I am sworn to protect” this serves as a symbol of courage that those men and women have difficulties they will face throughout their career. We honor and thank those firefighters that risk their lives every day and night so that the world can be a safer place not only for the people but for the first responders as well and remember those that have lost their lives serving and protecting us.

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