ANNALS OF DISASTER

INSIDE THE FIGHT AGAINST A LOS ANGELES INFERNO

A reporter embeds with wildland firefighters during one of the deadliest blazes in California history.

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An image of a burned-down building in Los Angeles. Photograph by Bryan Anselm / Redux

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On the seventh day of the Eaton Fire, the most lethal of several wildfires burning in Southern California, I woke up in a tent at the Rose Bowl, which had become a staging area for first responders, called "fire camp." At 7 A.M., an emergency-management team known as incident command gave a briefing at the stadium entrance. We were told that the blaze now encompassed fourteen thousand acres and was only fifteen per cent contained. It had risen into the San Gabriel Mountains to the north and spread into the suburbs to the south. "It does not get much worse than it's going to be the next few days," an expert on fire behavior warned us. "We could have rapid fire spread in basically any direction."

At eight o'clock, I climbed into one of several white pickup trucks as part of a twenty-person handcrew, a team of wildland firefighters who dig lines around fires to contain and control them. (If fire engines are the artillery of firefighting and airtankers and helicopters are the air force, handcrews are the infantry.) Our caravan drove east to Sierra Madre, a community of about eleven thousand in the foothills of the mountains. Police officers, parked on the streets to enforce mandatory evacuation orders, waved us through, and we unloaded at the eerily vacant Eaton Canyon Golf Course. Behind us, the houses were untouched, but we knew that in front of us hundreds of homes had been reduced to rubble. Nearly everyone in the crew carried hand tools, and two people, designated sawyers, carried chainsaws. We shrugged on our backpacks —which included silver, cocoonlike fire shelters that we could deploy if we were overtaken by flames—and lined up. "Assume you're not coming back to the trucks till tonight," our captain instructed. "Stay vigilant! Stay alert!"

We began to hike along the edge of the burn scar, the charred area that a fire leaves behind. Our job was to cold trail—to scour the boundary where the fire had stopped, looking for hot spots that could reignite. Walking side by side, we marched into drainage ditches, scaled chain-link fences, crossed culs-de-sac, and passed through back yards that sloped steeply upward, toward the mountains. Each of us was responsible for scanning the ground for anything that might hold heat. At one end of the line, a crew member shouted, "Feel all white ashes! Don't pass the person on your left!" Each firefighter repeated the message, one person to the next, as though it were an echo.

When we saw ashes, we touched them gently with the backs of our bare hands to detect warmth. If we felt any, we shouted "Hold for heat!," and the line stopped long enough for us to dig the hot spot out of the earth and cool it in the open air. Cold trailing is extremely dirty and laborious work, but this is by design. Aerial imaging can detect hot spots and show crews like this where to look, but every inch has to be checked by a person in order for an area to be declared fully contained. The perimeter of a wildfire is typically walked over three or four times, and sometimes more.

By California standards, the Eaton Fire was not especially large. It wasn't even close to being a megafire, which is generally defined as one that burns at least a

hundred thousand acres. But it was already the fifth deadliest fire in the state's history, with a confirmed death toll of seventeen, and authorities were still searching for victims. The destruction in parts of Altadena, a few miles to the west of Sierra Madre, and Pacific Palisades, which had burned in a separate fire on the other side of Los Angeles, made these areas appear bombed out. Sierra Madre looked more like a place where missiles had fallen here and there; the damage was not total. We would circle the charred husk of a house and find a back-yard pool whose water was black with ash, yet neighboring homes would be unscathed.

A chief with Cal Fire, the state agency that fights wildfires, drove by the crew and stopped to talk to the captain. Some of the homes in the neighborhood had basements, he said, and this raised concerns that people had sought shelter underground and perished. (As of January 20th, there were more than twenty people missing.) Looking inside the burned homes, I found it difficult to recognize anything at all, but one time I saw what looked like a blue-and-white vase. Miraculously, it was still upright. When I looked closer, I realized that it might be an urn—a container for ashes in the ashes.

The handcrew I had joined referred to its captain as D. At midday, D instructed everyone to break for water and food in the back yard of a burned house. I peeled the first of two mandarin oranges that I'd plucked from a tree. We'd seen lemons whose rinds had started to melt away, but these were perfect orange orbs. After eating the first, however, I thought of the toxic air—chemicals from burning houses and cars—that had swirled around the fruit for hours. I threw the second mandarin into some bushes.

D began his career as a firefighter in his late twenties, when he was serving time in state prison. (More than a thousand of the firefighters who have worked Southern California's deadly fires this year are currently incarcerated; in an emergency like this, they might earn a few dollars an hour.) Unlike the vast

majority of wildland firefighters, he is Black. While we rested, he leaned against his pack, a gray helmet on his head, but he didn't eat or drink anything. As a practicing Muslim, he chose to fast on Mondays and Thursdays—a reminder, he told me, of those who have no food or water. After seven years of fighting fires, he had recently decided to move on. The Eaton Fire would be his last assignment. He had a baby girl at home and another child on the way, and he wanted to spend time with them. He planned to focus on a side business—cleaning windows and gutters—and a Ph.D. in Islamic studies.

I asked D if he would miss firefighting. "Yes," he said. "If I was rich, and I could choose anything to do for a living, I would choose this work."

"What have you learned about fire?"

"I view it as a kind of animal. If you take away the air, it dies. You can feed it by giving it more fuel. It can sleep. That's basically what we're doing now—finding dormant fire. It's an entity that you have to respect, not just some dumb element that, if you put water on it, it stops."

As he spoke, I realized that we were sitting in front of what had been someone's bedroom. The blackened timbers of the roof had caved in on a scorched mattress and a blue bedspread.

If we are going to live in places where fires like to burn, D went on, we need to become comfortable with small or controlled fires that consume accumulating fuel. "Fire was here before us," D told me. "It's good for the earth. Everything grows back better. It keeps the tree density down. We interfered with that and created these conditions." Research has shown that during the twentieth century a combination of aggressive wildfire suppression, temperature increases, and water scarcity encouraged the growth of smaller, more tightly clustered trees across much of California. "Now, when wildfires start, they're hard to stop," D said.

Our break was almost over. We had half a day of cold trailing ahead of us. Before we got back on our feet, D asked a question: "How do we live in peace with fire?"

I spent three nights at fire camp, embedded with a private wildland firefighting company that had been hired as a contractor. (Several of my sources requested that I use only their first names.) I had previously trained as a wildland firefighter and maintain my qualifications, so I worked alongside the crew when I wasn't reporting. We slept in the Rose Bowl parking lot, not far from supply depots, laundry and shower facilities, therapy dogs, and kitchens that fed more than two thousand first responders. Almost every major fire has a camp like this one—a fairground or a sports field where a command center can operate and people can recuperate between shifts. Of course, most fires are not ten miles from downtown Los Angeles. The community affected by these blazes in some way encompassed millions of people, including many who were wealthy and influential; the national news coverage and the public's response were unusually intense. At one point, the rapper the Game brought firefighters coffee and paid to have fire engines detailed. At breakfast one morning, I heard a rumor that Angelina Jolie had attended one of the incident command's briefings, and she was photographed at the stadium alongside World Central Kitchen workers.

The handcrew had difficulty believing that they were being treated so well. A McDonald's trailer showed up at the stadium and handed out free breakfasts. Food trucks doled out burgers and tacos. Locals arrived with portable grills and fed anyone who passed by. "It's one of the coolest things I've ever seen on a fire," I overheard a crew member say. Out on the line one day, a firefighter expressed his shock that he had been given a pillow and, moreover, that it was still sealed in plastic. "It was brand new!" he said. Another jokingly compared these offerings to the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

At night, the temperature was near freezing. I pulled my sleeping bag over my head to keep warm and looked at my phone. I wanted to understand how people outside the camp were processing and extracting meaning from the fires. An interview with the actor Dennis Quaid, looking shaken as he evacuated his home, seemed weirdly profound.

"We've all had a really big lesson," he told a TV reporter.

"What is it?" the reporter asked.

"That our experience of reality can change in a moment."

An entire city, maybe an entire country, was starting to appreciate the reality that wildland firefighters inhabit. Dirty work is often assumed to be unenlightened work, but wildland firefighters have a unique empirical understanding of natural forces. This includes troubling facts, such as the distance that floating embers can travel (miles) and the speed with which a wind-driven fire can move (about ten per cent of prevailing wind speeds). Firefighters also have access to a ground truth that is out of reach for the general public, and even for many scientists, about how our world is changing. In the past ten years, they have witnessed new and dramatic kinds of weather, unfamiliar fire behavior, and blazes that grow to an unprecedented size and intensity. Firefighters told me again and again how much they loved their job: the physical labor, the adrenaline, and the freedom of working outdoors. But they expressed how frustrated they were that, as a society, we are not doing routine work—creating defensible space around communities, managing landscapes, igniting prescribed fires—to help prevent such devastation.

The most visible part of the Eaton Fire was in the suburbs, where it destroyed thousands of structures. The largest part of the fire, however, was burning through woods and chaparral—shrubland—in the mountains, largely out of sight of the public. Many firefighters were working in the Angeles National

Forest, miles north of Sierra Madre and Altadena. This is the landscape that gives wildland firefighters their name.

On my first day embedded with the firefighting company—day six of the fire—I'd joined a separate crew that drove north from camp, following a twisty highway uphill for an hour. We passed a law-enforcement vehicle that was blocking the road to the public. After parking on the shoulder, we clambered out of the trucks, shivering in the morning air as we changed out of hoodies and jackets and into yellow shirts made of Nomex, which is fire-resistant up to seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit. We lined up with our packs and tools, then set off at a fast pace along a dirt trail that hugged the mountain.

In a handcrew, physical stamina is at once a point of pride and a safety requirement; falling out of line is considered a severe transgression. After a couple of miles we circled up for a briefing, and some of the firefighters turned away and retched unself-consciously into the dirt. "We got a moderate Santa Ana wind for the first half of the day," a crew member said, examining a weather report and using the term for strong, dry winds that push into the area from the desert. "Winds up to forty miles per hour on the ridgetops. It's getting cooler, but the R.H."—relative humidity—"is also getting lower." Wind both adds oxygen to the flames and transports them, and the drier the air the drier the vegetation that feeds fires.

A man named Ben was crew boss, meaning that the captain reported to him. "The next few days, they're talking about Santa Anas bringing winds up to sixty miles per hour," he said. "Six. Zero. O.K.?"

From our position, more than a mile above sea level, we could see that the Eaton Fire was alive below us, wafting smoke from the low points between the mountains and creating an ethereal haze. Those steep canyons were too treacherous to hike into—a broken ankle would require an air evacuation—so the crew's assignment was to create a mile-long containment line in the peaks west of Mount Wilson Observatory. We would remove a forty-foot swath of vegetation to insure that, even if winds energized the fire and it made another run, "we don't get anything in Canada," as a member of the incident command had put it. (Canada wasn't in danger, but there were hundreds of miles of dry forest to our north.) There was also the risk that Santa Anas would blow the fire into another densely populated part of Los Angeles. The crew spread out, and sawyers began to cut the chaparral with their saws. Their partners, known as swampers, grabbed at underbrush and dragged it away.

To gain a better vantage point on the fire, Ben and I hiked a mile toward an improvised helispot at the end of the ridge. Ben, who was in his late thirties, was tall and lanky—the latter, he said almost apologetically, because he had lost a lot of weight last year while working the Park Fire, in Northern California, which burned some four hundred thousand acres. He said that in one month he had hiked more than a hundred miles to put in containment lines. He and the crew had done the same work that we were doing now, removing vegetation with chainsaws and hand tools, and had also strategically lit fires to starve the main fire of fuel. (Last year's Smokehouse Creek Fire,

which started in Texas, was even bigger than the Park Fire: it burned more than a million acres, making it a "gigafire.")

Ben's adult life has been defined by fire. He became a firefighter after serving in the military. "I've pretty much been on every megafire the last decade," he told me. In 2018, he and his mother were living in Paradise, California, when intense winds and abundant fuel helped the Camp Fire grow into the deadliest and most destructive blaze in the state's history. He had a hard-won understanding that wildfires are incredibly difficult to fight in windy conditions; his and his mother's homes were destroyed. "I was fighting to protect another person's house when mine burned," he said. "There is a reason that old fire brigades used to show up with hooks. It's almost impossible to save the house. You can only pull it down to try and stop the spread."

One difference between the Camp Fire and the Eaton Fire, Ben said, is that the former happened in November, which is considered part of fire season. "Firefighters were prepared, and had more resources," he told me. "The fact that this fire is able to burn like this in January—that's *weird*." January is typically one of Southern California's rainiest months. Richard Seager, a climate scientist with Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, told me that researchers attributed the unusual conditions to "human-driven drying and warming"—climate change—combined with relentless Santa Ana winds (and "a possible nudge from an emerging La Niña"). These factors together, he said, helped fuel "an appalling inferno."

Ben and I came to a dip at the top of a mountain ridge called a saddle. A steep slope, covered with charred loose rock, descended toward the fire. Hundreds of feet down, I could see a forested canyon; bluish smoke was pouring from the trees. So far, the fire was not pushing its way up toward us. A Chinook helicopter was circling, its rotors thumping, and we watched it dump an

estimated eight hundred gallons of water on the trees. Beyond was the city of Los Angeles and, in the distance, the shimmering coast, where the Palisades Fire had killed at least ten and destroyed thousands of buildings.

Ben had hoped to spend part of January in an ecological preserve along the coast of central California, igniting piles of vegetation that he and his crew had painstakingly removed from an overgrown forest. The preserve was adopting an approach that is understood to make for a more resilient ecosystem: reintroducing fire to a landscape that hadn't been allowed to burn in centuries. "When we started, you couldn't see through the forest," Ben said. "Now there's fifteen-to-twenty-foot spacing between the trees. It's beautiful." We watched an airliner-size VLAT, short for Very Large Airtanker, fly in the direction of the Palisades Fire. It could carry thousands of gallons of pink fire retardant.

Around midday, I hiked a little foot trail through thickets of mountain whitethorn and scrub oak. I passed a crew of incarcerated firefighters who were blowing out—or removing nearly all the vegetation from—both sides of another saddle. (Fires often halt as they crest a mountain, but strong winds can help them jump over saddles and ignite vegetation on the other side.) The crew's sawyers were running their saws at full power; the rest of the crew had their heads down in concentration as they cleared brush. Every so often, one of the firefighters howled like a wolf and the crew howled back.

At one point, the superintendent of the incarcerated crew came over to chat with Ben. They compared observations on the weather and the fire. Then the superintendent asked Ben if he knew a young wildland firefighter who had learned the trade in prison and kept it up after his release. He had been killed by a falling tree a few years earlier.

"I hired him," Ben said, surprised.

"He was one of mine," the superintendent said. They both seemed moved to

have made the connection, and for a while they just stood there and reminisced. "His mom kept saying at the funeral how much he loved this job," Ben said.

The crew I was with was remarkably diverse. Some of its members had learned wildland firefighting in prison. One had heard about it from a cousin; another had seen a recruitment flyer. A rookie firefighter had just finished a year as a conscript in the Finnish military. The crew's lead E.M.T. was a member of the Hopi Tribe. A man who'd worked for a hot-shot crew—essentially the special forces of firefighting—had been the first Black firefighter to be named its Rookie of the Year. Unusually, one of the sawyer teams was all-female.

One commonality among wildland firefighters is that they have an almost pathological aversion to the idea of being in an office, or really any type of building. Their fondest work memories always seem to be about "spiking out," camping so far from any roads that food and supplies have to be air-dropped in. Yet wildland firefighters are increasingly being drawn out of forests and mountains and into the growing number of suburbs and cities that border the wilderness. Some of the most terrifying fires in the so-called wilderness-urban interface have occurred in the past three years. Devastating fires in Boulder County and Maui began after droughts intensified by climate change sucked the moisture out of vegetation, drastically increasing what's called the energy-release component—the available energy, measured in B.T.U.s per square foot, within the flaming front of a fire. (On the day the Eaton Fire began, the energy-release component was setting records for the season.) Both fires involved power lines in brush; intense winds then pushed their flames and embers through densely situated homes. Officials are investigating whether electrical infrastructure also started the Eaton Fire.

On my last day with the firefighting company, day eight of the wildfire, the

Santa Ana winds were predicted to return in force. Meteorologists warned of a "particularly dangerous situation," a rare official designation used only for the worst conditions. The winds would test the containment line that Ben's crew had established; they were sent back into the mountains to make sure it held. At a mobile base that had been established nearby, powder and water were being mixed into tens of thousands of gallons of fire retardant, in anticipation of an extensive air-attack operation that was meant to paint the ridge pink.

On the hike in, I followed the most senior member of the crew, Joss, who grew up in South Central L.A. He was homeless for a long time before he became a wildland firefighter, a decade ago. Joss was a mentor to younger members of the crew, but he admitted that he was kind of a big kid himself. He loved cereal. At fire camp, he slept with a Baby Yoda pillow and a blanket he had brought from home. He liked to compete in *lucha libre* competitions.

This was Joss's first time fighting fire in his home town, an experience he found surreal. A close family friend had been forced to evacuate her home in Altadena. "I love the camaraderie on fire," he said. Our feet crunched through the dirt. "Everybody is from somewhere else. You have different political views, different religious beliefs. We're all on the line together, working."

We caught up with the rest of the crew, which had circled up for a briefing. A sudden gust hit us and we all hunched our shoulders, bracing ourselves. "There's that wind," Joss said. A crew member taking weather readings up on the ridge was now registering forty-five-mile-per-hour winds. Reconnaissance helicopters flew in to gauge the conditions, and it soon became clear that the planned air operation would be unsafe, and the retardant would probably scatter in the wind. "It's going to look like kids finger-painting," a voice said over the radio. A new plan was quickly devised. A hot-shot crew would be sent into the canyon. They would put out as much of the heat as they could with hand tools and chainsaws.

Near the top of the ridge, the charred skeletons of shrubs suggested that the fire had made a fierce upslope run several days earlier. At first glance, the entire landscape looked grim and desolate. But hawks were gliding on air currents, hunting for prey. A peregrine falcon landed on a dead branch and stayed for a while. A lizard scampered over sharp, blackened rocks.

Satellite images of the Eaton Fire showed that the mountain chaparral had burned with characteristic intensity. In canyons at higher elevations, however, images showed streaks of green where trees had survived. This type of patchwork landscape is called a mosaic, and fire scientists have studied it extensively. Mosaics have been shown to promote biodiversity and create gaps between fuel sources, which can interrupt or slow the spread of subsequent fires.

I could hear the hot-shot crew's chainsaws roaring. It seemed impossible to reconcile the potentially positive ecological benefits of fire, up here, with the wreckage at the base of these mountains. Such a reconciliation would require a profound realignment in our society—a shared understanding that our lives and our infrastructure must coexist with fire.

The winds started to quiet down. I watched a helicopter complete its last water drop. The fire was still burning, but the line had held for another day. Before we hiked out, I spent a few minutes with Leo, a firefighter who was born and raised in East Hollywood. He was wearing oil-stained chaps and carrying a red container of chainsaw fuel. He reminded me of something I'd asked the crew earlier: Was there anything they wanted people to know about their work?

"It's devastatingly beautiful," Leo said. Sometimes the remote places he works strike him as sacred; he often wishes that he could show people scenes like this.

A cold gale hit our backs and I gripped my helmet to keep it on my head. If I lost it down the side of the mountain, I wasn't getting it back.

Like many wildland firefighters, Leo was a seasonal employee, so he was laid off at the end of the 2024 fire season. The assumption has always been that the risk tails off as winter approaches. Leo took a temporary job up north to make ends meet, and when he heard about the Los Angeles fires he was hours away, installing cabinets with his dad. He couldn't believe that his own city was burning and he wasn't in a position to help. All he could think was, I wish I could be there.

Ten minutes later, he got a call telling him that crews were being mobilized. He left so quickly that he didn't pack any bedding; the first night, in a tent at fire camp, he had to wrap himself in every piece of clothing he had. Even then, he was cold. But the next day he started receiving grateful messages from friends in the area, and one of them drove over with a sleeping bag. "I've been fighting fire in California, up and down, for four years," he told me. "They finally see what I do." ♦

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