

Let Burn — a policy of the U.S. Forestry Service that allows wildfires to burn unchecked. Although highly destructive, the fires leave behind rejuvenated soils, a landscape cleared of underbrush, and an environment ripe for new growth.

Each of us is the sum of our experiences. Our personalities are carved out by events in our lives, just as water carves out a canyon. Torrents tear away the walls of our psyche, leaving voids where solid ground once stood. Steady currents strip away our interior, shaping us in ways that can only be seen later, on reflection. Painful memories become smooth, like a stone in a river, their edges worn away over time.

For thirteen years I worked as a firefighter/paramedic, primarily for the Orlando Fire Department (OFD). I began my career working for a small department just outside of Orlando. I also worked for an ambulance service in Orlando and later, for a short time, with a county agency north of Nashville, Tennessee. I spent eleven years with OFD, becoming only the third woman in the history of the department to achieve the rank of lieutenant.

These settings provided an array of perspectives. Working on an ambulance sharpened my skills as a medic. The small, rural service in Tennessee exposed me to challenges of a system where backup is nonexistent. My career with OFD placed me among highly trained individuals in a large metropolitan area. There, I honed my skills, not only as an emergency medical services (EMS) provider, but as a future officer. Through education, training, and promotional exams, I prepared myself for a leadership position within the department. I learned to be adaptive and flexible under changing circumstances, valuable lessons that would help me when I suddenly found my career cut short.

As a firefighter and medic, I saw things I never could have imagined – traumatic injury, burns, cardiac arrest, and the violence people inflict on each other. And I took on challenges I never could have anticipated in my desire to succeed. But within a moment, all that I had achieved was gone. A single decision meant the end of my accomplishments, my future as an officer, and my career.

This book recounts the incredible experiences of becoming and working as a firefighter/paramedic and the events that led to the end of my career with the Orlando Fire Department. It was hard to leave the field of EMS. You grow accustomed to the daily dose of adrenaline and when it's gone, you're left with a nagging sense of restlessness. I left the field of EMS and completed a PhD in anthropology. I hoped the intellectual challenge would replace the physical and emotional challenges of my previous occupation. In many ways it did. In other ways, I still feel the pull of a field that shapes you as an individual. So I maintain my paramedic license out of a sense of remembrance and loss; the remembrance of being a young rookie beginning a new career and the loss of knowing those days are part of an unalterable past.

The field of EMS changed me. It carved out a personality I never knew existed; one of aggression, intensity, and determination. The physical demands of firefighting, combined with the emotional challenges of dealing with the sick and the dead, produce profound changes in an individual. It is a rare opportunity to be tested in such a way.

Within these pages, I have tried to recreate my experiences in the field. The book is divided into four parts. The first recounts my experiences upon entering the field and what it was like to acclimate to the world of firefighting and EMS. These experiences shaped me as a professional. The second part recounts my work as a firefighter/paramedic, primarily with the Orlando Fire Department, where I spent the majority of my career on some of the busiest trucks in the city. The third part provides an overview of my rise up the chain of command at OFD and the education and experience that went into the process. Part Four recounts the events that led to the end of my career. It has taken me over a decade to gain the perspective needed to put these events down on paper; to formulate the necessary detachment that comes with time and introspection.

These memories invoke pleasure and pain, but also a sense of longing: longing for the excitement I felt upon entering the field, for the camaraderie of the fire department, and for a career that was cut short. But the end of my career meant the start of a new one. It forced me into the intellectual arena of a doctoral program, and I took with me the hard-earned lessons of EMS. These lessons instilled in me a perspective few jobs can. They have given me an appreciation for the brevity of our existence and the frailty of the human body where, within a split second, all that you are and all that you have can be ripped from you. These lessons are priceless.