CALL OF THE WILD FIRES
STATE CREWS JOIN UP: FOR MONEY, ADVENTURE AND FRIENDSHIP ON THE BUS

Page: A1
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BY MICHAEL KODAS / THE HARTFORD COURANT

After five years of drought, the Saturday lightning strike on Crazy Woman Mountain, in Wyoming's Big Horn Range, was virtually guaranteed to start a fire.

The bolt blasted the scruffy forest of ponderosa pine and pinion juniper, and fire spread quickly through the heaps of bone-dry tinder over steep slopes.

The blaze would become Greg Vantine's ticket to the front lines of the nation's annual, shifting war against Western wildfires.

The following Tuesday, Vantine had just finished his morning rounds through the docks, campsites and trails of Hopeville Pond State Park in Griswold, Conn., roughly 1,600 miles from the fire zone. He stopped for lunch and found a message waiting for him: There's a fire in Wyoming; get ready.

In fact, Vantine's bag was already waiting by the door of his home. He packed two days earlier, when he saw the national fire alert reach Level 4, the second highest.

``I knew we would be getting the call in a week or so,'' he says. ``Often we only get a couple hours' notice. I wanted to be ready.''

By 2 p.m., he and 19 other Connecticut men had committed to fly to Wyoming to scratch a line in the dirt between fire and forest.

Wednesday night they landed in Casper, Wyo., where they joined more than 20,000 men and women fighting wildfires throughout the West.

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For the next two weeks, from late July into early August, they would be the property of the federal government. They would sleep and eat in dirt, fell towering ponderosa pines, crawl on hands and knees to sniff out the last burning cinders of vast, incinerated forests and bounce from fire camp to fire camp over hundreds of miles of Rocky Mountain roads in a school bus.

It Takes A Nation

In New England, the Western fire season seems remote, but burning federal land presents the same responsibilities, threats and financial opportunities to firefighters from Connecticut to California.

Twenty-person crews trained by the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection mobilize with state, federal and private crews from across the country into an army of no small size.

By early July 2002, 28,000 people -- all the civilian resources available -- had been called into the battle by the federal government. They were joined by Army troops and foreign firefighters from as far away as New Zealand to fight the largest fires of the past century in Colorado, Oregon and Arizona.

Record-setting fire seasons are no longer surprises. Excessive fire suppression for nearly a century has left an explosive load of fuel -- brush, leaf litter and small trees -- spread over the floors of forests throughout America. And sprawl has seriously raised the stakes of even small fires by placing thousands of homes in harm's way.

In 2002, the federal government spent $1.6 billion to fight 88,458 fires that burned nearly 7 million acres and 2,381 structures. So far this year, 47,220 fires have burned more than 3 million acres. The fire season runs from late spring to the first heavy snows.

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DAY 2

Casper, Wyo.

Thursday morning, outside a Casper motel, the Connecticut crew crowds onto the bus for the half-day ride north to the Big Spring fire camp, where crews from northern New England, Missouri and New Jersey are converging.

Vantine, a gruff ex-bull rider, borrows pliers to cinch the knot on a child's shoelace wrapped around his wrist.

``This is the one thing I can't lose,'' he says. ``It reminds me what I'm doing this for.''

Long gone are the pink hearts the lace had when his 3-year-old daughter, Amanda, gave it to him as he left for his first Western forest fire. She's 7 now, and the tattered ribbon he wears only while fighting Western forest fires has turned gray from sweat, sun and cinders.

``First, it's about the money,'' Vantine says. ``Then it's about the camaraderie.''

No joke is too vulgar for the boys at the back of the bus, but no one will talk about how much they are being paid. With some members of the crew paid radically more than others, envy could erode the esprit de corps. That has put pay at the top of the list of taboo topics.

As a state employee, Vantine gets overtime and hazard pay while on the fires. He has worked as many as 242 hours over a 16-day assignment -- more than 150 hours of overtime.

For a few others on the crew, Vantine's equation is reversed. Mike ``Rock'' Bednarz, 24, of Sterling, makes better money as a Toyota mechanic but takes an annual leave to fight forest fires for an hourly wage of $11.68, with no extra pay for overtime. The adventures and friendships, he says, make up for the financial loss.

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``How else am I going to get to do this?'' he says.

One DEP official said Connecticut firefighters can make between $2,000 and $8,000 on a Western fire assignment. The federal government pays the firefighters' wages.

Firefighters who are new to the scene are quickly accepted into the fraternity. Vantine comes up with a moniker for one of the new guys.

``We haven't all met before,'' Vantine says. ``We don't want to be out on the line saying `I think what's his name might be in a bad spot.'''

So Mike Kinane, 24, of New Hartford, a senior from Plymouth State College in New Hampshire and a seasonal DEP employee, is ``Snowman.'' It is a comment on his girth. After a day working with helicopter crews, he gets a new name: ``Helitubby.''

Andy Lively, 26, of New Hartford, got his nickname: ``Smells Like Bear'' from Native American firefighters when he took his boots off near them on a fire last summer.

The Big Horn Mountains towering over the bus are cleaved by gorges that look like giant claw marks. Blackened strips of forest grasp the ridge tops like fingers. In the distance, the highest peaks are snowcapped.

The first, subtle odor of smoke drifts into the windows and the scent sparks memories.

Vantine, of Canterbury, and Josh Rimany of Kent live about as far apart as two people can in Connecticut. They got to know each other in 2000, in Montana's Bitterroot Mountains, where 73,000 acres were burned. ``It got into the drainage and destroyed 67 homes and there was nothing we could do about it,'' Vantine says.

The two are usually the ringleaders of the crew's bawdy comics, but this morning they snuff out the back-of-the-bus banter fast, nodding to a stranger in front.

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``We have to behave,'' Vantine says. ``[He] might be the person giving us our assignments.''

Mike Clarkson, staring out the window at the southern end of the Big Horn Mountains, doesn't seem to notice the curiosity he's inspired.

A longtime firefighter from Alaska, Clarkson is retired now, but the sluggish economy has made it difficult for firefighters to take leaves from their day jobs. This year, hundreds of supervisor positions are unfilled on Western fires. When Clarkson was called up from retirement, he flew to Casper and hitched a ride on the first fire bus he could.

Clarkson's history reaches to a fatal firefight that has passed into lore among Western fire crews. In 1994, he sent three men who, along with 11 other firefighters, died fighting a 25-acre fire on the flanks of Storm King Mountain, near Glenwood Springs, Colo.

Thousands of fires have scarred these mountains. That one haunts them.

Buffalo, Wyo.

The bus finally pulls into a small, municipal airport overlooking Buffalo, Wyo., now doubling as a camp for the Big Spring fire. The Connecticut men spill out and add their tents to the expanding, nylon subdivision.

Tractor-trailers filled with portable kitchens and shower stalls gather like wagons around white tents and wash stations. Crew buses line up next to firetrucks at one end of the airport. Choppers land at the other.

Supply workers stack truckloads of bottled water and Gatorade. Crew bosses sign out cartons filled with chain saws, axes, shovels and rakes. Firefighters trade in worn-out Nomex -- fire-retardant clothes. Commemorative T-shirts, the only thing for sale at the camp, are marketed from a car trunk.

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It's the first time in more than a decade that Connecticut has sent out a crew without any female firefighters. More than 10 percent of the state's estimated 75 wildfire fighters are women.

No crew is allowed to work without a daily briefing, and Dan Caffin, an operations boss for the Big Spring fire, makes sure every new firefighter is present for the first one.

``The van rollover, the engine rollover ...`` Caffin is listing the fire traffic accidents that have killed firefighters during the past year. The number of firefighters traveling between and around fire scenes has made transportation the most dangerous part of the job. Caffin notes solemnly that two firefighters in Idaho were overtaken by flames and killed the day before while clearing a landing pad for their chopper. The next night, a runaway truck rumbled past him in camp.

DAY 3

Big Spring Fire

At the 6:30 a.m. briefing Friday, crew boss Ed McGuire, his assistant, Jim Bender, and their three squad bosses represent the Connecticut crew. Supervisors address every aspect of the operation: fire weather, fire behavior, air operations, payroll, planning. Safety again takes up the biggest chunk of the half-hour meeting.

Robinson Canyon is full of cliffs, poison ivy and rattlesnakes, Caffin warns.

Two hours later, they are there, taking on the surreal task of laying fire hose through a rushing mountain stream while watching trees torch on a mountain across the valley.

They douse the flaming trees on the mountainside before heading back to camp, but the next morning they are back at the canyon. This time they stand on the edge of the gorge, 200 feet above the

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stream they worked in the day before. They spread out at 20-foot intervals to hike down through the burnt woods in a grid, hunting for tiny, smoldering embers that seem to hold their breath to avoid detection.

DAY 7

Bluebird Fire

``Welcome to the BLM black hole,'' says assistant crew boss Bender after the crew arrives in Rangely, Colo. ``This is the kind of thing that happened to the firefighters on Storm King Mountain.''

What has happened is nothing.

The Bureau of Land Management's delays and disorganization on Storm King helped the small fire turn into a killer.

After two days on the Big Spring fire, the bureau demobilizes the Connecticut crew. The firefighters lay in the sun for a day waiting for a new assignment, then ride 10 hours to a new fire. But the incident commander at the Rangely, Colo., fire camp asks for a crew with four-wheel-drives, not a school bus. He can't use them. As they climb into their tents that night, a single thunderbolt flashes in the darkness onto the mountains on the horizon.

``There we go,'' says a voice in the darkness. ``Bet that starts a fire.''

Nearly 20 hours later, the crew begins the rugged climb to what is later dubbed the Bluebird fire.

After the rugged and punishing 1,000-foot ascent to the newborn fire, McGuire lines up the squads on the fire line, a trail that will surround the fire, then steps to the burned-over landscape.

``What's this?'' the normally quiet McGuire shouts.

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A few skeletal trees burn behind him, but most of the fire scene is hidden behind clouds of white smoke.

``The safety zone?'' one of his crew responds.

``That's right,'' the crew boss responds. ``The black is the safety zone.''

In wildfires, people live by embracing death. The blackened earth -- land that the fire has already burned -- is often the only place to escape the flames.

``The fire line is the escape route,'' he continues, covering the lookout, communication, escape route and safety zone, known collectively as LCES. Remembering the 10 standing fire orders and 18 watch-out situations when a fire goes bad is like reciting the Bill of Rights in a hurricane.

The list of perils is far longer.

Snags, for example -- trees weakened by fire or disease -- can fall at any time.

``They'll drive you into the ground like a tent stake,'' says Vantine. The junipers surrounding the crew here split and twist when they fall, launching shards of timber and branches like harpoons.

Stumps burn into the ground, leaving ash-covered pits of embers that can swallow a firefighter to the waist like burning quicksand. Hot ash runs like water, de-laminating the crew's boots and blistering their feet.

Squad boss Emery Gluck will monitor the weather with a portable kit, broadcasting his report over the crew's radios at the top of every hour.

A slurry bomber unexpectedly rises into view and drops its load of retardant before the crew can get out of the way. The red mud splashes over them, stinging their skin and staining their clothes. A more direct hit would be crushing, but most of the firefighters

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relish the red blotches on their clothes and the thrilling site of the bomber.

``You got the red badge of courage," Vantine says to one of the rookies. ``Some guys come out three or four times before they get that."

The crew breaks into its three squads to continue building the fire line. The squads line up like centipedes that crawl slowly along the edge of the burning land. With every step, each man takes a swing or two at the vegetated ground, then moves up the line. By the time 20 firefighters have passed, there is an 18-inch ribbon of mineral soil between the black of the fire and the green of the forest.

Water is a luxury fighting wildfires. Dirt is the suppressant of choice. They shovel it onto flames to smother them and stir it into embers to cool them.

``Bone piles" of fallen timber burn like pyres scattered amid the last twisted trees on the apocalyptic landscape. Airplanes swoop over to drop retardant. Chain saws growl beyond thick smoke that blinds the crew.

The firefighters work until dark, then descend by headlamp to a pasture. They dine on military prepackaged meals while wrapped in their sleeping bags, then sleep under the stars. Two days later they are on the road again.

DAYS 11-14

Langlas Draw

When the crew arrives in Langlas Draw, rumors circulate that Vice President Dick Cheney is planning a weekend fishing trip to the area. No mobile dining facilities are available, so the firefighters ride to the Sleepy Cat, a local lodge, for breakfast and a morning briefing in the basement.

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Jeff Briggs, crew boss for the northern New England firefighters, asks about showers. ``My people have gone a week without washing," he points out.

Managers apologize, but the portable shower facilities are committed on other fires. The dirtiest crews can get showers in a nearby cabin.

``Jane and Mike Witt are really thankful that you saved their wedding site," says a member of the management crew, changing the subject. He holds up a snapshot of the tuxedoed groom and his white-gowned bride to the firefighters who haven't bathed in days.

Three hours later, the crew stands at the Witts' cabin, looking like a set from a Ralph Lauren catalog -- except for the foil that wraps the entire house.

For three days, the crew hikes from the Witt cabin to the pine and aspen forest above to mop up the fire.

Some work their way through the forest with chain saws to drop snags. Some carry bladder bags -- 5-gallon backpacks of water -- to dowse small smokes. Others, crawling, crush out embers in their gloved hands.

Hiking back to the Witt cabin on their last day of firefighting, the crew is cheered by the confidence that their section of the fire is out. McGuire's crew had walked the entire fire line, crushing every ember within 100 feet. More than a dozen orange and pink ribbons, each taken from a snag his crew had cut down, hang from the shaft of his shovel.

But as crew members crawl into their tents after dinner, a tree on the ridgeline, in the heart of their turf, torches, shooting into the darkened sky like a Roman candle.

``Mother Nature starts `em," says Vantine. ``And only Mother Nature can really put them out. They'll burn until the snow flies."

Meanwhile, Secret Service agents arrive to prepare for the vice

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president's arrival and announce plans to ground the operation's helicopters.

Incident Cmdr. Hal Coombs sizes up his predicament: ``I'm not going to not be able to medevac a firefighter because the vice president's going fishing.''

Things get a little tense. Coombs points out how bad the publicity might be; agents arrange to keep helicopters working the fire.

That Sunday, three Blackhawk helicopters will land a mile and half east of the Langlas Draw fire camp to drop off Cheney and his fishing gear.

DAY 15

Storm King Mountain

Rimany leans on his knees and gasps for breath as sweat drips from his face into the dust of Storm King Mountain. The noon sun has pushed the temperature close to 100.

They are not fighting a fire today; they are here to pay homage, and to learn.

High on the mountain above, a fire line stretches below what is known as Hell Gate Ridge. Marble crosses mark the spot where each firefighter fell on July 6, 1994. Skis, tools and sun-baked flowers decorate their bases. On top are coins from firefighters who, upon reaching the monuments realize they have nothing else to leave to pay their respects.

On that day nine years ago, 49 firefighters, including 16 smoke jumpers and a 20-person team of Oregon ``hotshots,'' were on the mountain. To contain the puny but stubborn blaze, they built the fire line downhill -- a dangerous practice.

When a dry, cold front swept into western Colorado, the wind

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drove the flames from scrubby pinion pine and juniper onto steep slopes of highly combustible Gambel oak.

And all hell broke loose.

White smoke that hung about the mountain turned dark gray and rose miles into the air. Fire whirls spun at the sky. The flames, ravenous for fuel, leaned onto the 55-degree slope above and rolled up the mountain in waves. Chain saws and gasoline cans exploded. Blasts of radiant heat seared skin and superheated gases scorched lungs. The rocket-engine roar drowned out all but the closest shouts and screams.

At its peak, the blowup was running 18 mph -- as fast as 35 feet a second -- up terrain so steep that the firefighters could hardly run at all.

Twelve smoke jumpers and hotshots -- America's firefighter athletes -- perished. Two helicopter crewmen died trying to outrun the fire on the ridgeline. The flames claimed nine of the 20 Prineville Hotshots, from a town of 5,300 in the pine forests of central Oregon.

For the first time, America saw a tiny fire in the Rocky Mountains as a national problem. If this ``nothing'' of a blaze could cut the young heart out of a small town a full thousand miles away, it could do it to any town in the country.

Firefighting began to change within hours of the blowup -- when a smoke jumper refused Colorado Gov. Roy Roemer's order to remove the bodies from the site. Until then, bodies had not been left long enough to allow for the advanced forensics that were common in urban firefighting investigations. The line of corpses leading to Hell Gate Ridge held critical clues that could help prevent similar disasters.

As the Connecticut crew makes its way back to its bus for the six-hour ride to Denver, where showers, beds and their flight home await, crew boss McGuire and his squad bosses Gluck and Tom Nosel somberly bring up the rear.

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``It's like a firefighters' mecca,'' Gluck says, looking back at the mountain. ``A pilgrimage.''

That evening, with their first alcoholic drinks of the trip -- homemade Connecticut hard cider -- the crew toasts the Storm King firefighters.

To Fight Another Day

In the two weeks the Connecticut crew were on the fire line, five firefighters died in Western forest fires. Later in August, a bus crash killed eight Oregon firefighters -- bringing new tragedy to the land of the Prineville Hotshots.

Four days after McGuire's crew arrives home, Connecticut is back on the national availability list. Barely 24 hours later, a new crew is called up for the Cooney Ridge fire in Montana. The national situation is now at Level 5, the highest, and all available resources are needed.

But as the flight carrying the Connecticut crew approaches Missoula, smoke from the burning forests obscures the airport. The flight is diverted to Great Falls, four hours away, where the crew boards a school bus for a long ride to the Bitterroot Mountains.

Visit www.ctnow.com for more photos and links to more information about wildfires.

Michael ***Kodas***, a photojournalist for The Hartford Courant, traveled as part of the Connecticut fire crew to research this story. He first underwent a rigorous physical-fitness test and attended a wild-land firefighting training class at the Connecticut Fire Academy in Windsor Locks and at Sessions Woods Wildlife Management Area in Burlington. The class was run by the state Department of Environmental Protection. ***Kodas*** was allowed access to the front lines of the Western fires by signing up as an

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employee of the federal government, working alongside other firefighters.

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