INITIATION BY FIRE
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Matchbox fire trucks and ambulances line the dresser, arranged in a rescue scene. Surrounding the scene are department patches and rescue memorabilia. The setting looks like a child’s room, but one look around at the chronically unmade bed, the stacks of CD’s, papers, and books proves it to be a college dorm room.

The inhabitant of the room, firefighter, emergency medical technician, and non-traditional student Andrew Olsen, says, “All of the guys in the dorm make fun of me for having all these toys and things. I’m a 26 year old man (being old gets me my share of shit too, he jokes), but I’ve had these things since I was young. I loved to play rescue when I was little. While all the other little kids were watching ‘Scooby Doo,’ I watched reruns of this show, “Emergency.” I idolized the main characters, Johnny and Roy. I guess I was a rescue nerd then, and a rescue nerd now.”

As a “rescue nerd,” Andrew spends about 30 hours a week (more when school is not in session) working at the Richmond, Kentucky fire department and Richmond’s Patty A. Clay Hospital as a fire fighter and emergency medical technician. He also currently attends Eastern Kentucky University, where he is working toward a bachelor’s degree in arson, fire, and explosive investigation.¹

¹ All information stated in this paper, unless otherwise noted or cited, is derived from Andrew Olsen, personal interview, 14-21 March 2001. The bibliography following this paper is composed of resources used to only to enhance my personal understanding of the fields of fire and rescue, as well as my subject’s interview responses.
He says with a wry grin, "It's like I never had to grow up. I even get to have a blast at school. Literally... my labs consist of going out on the weekends and burning down a house, or blowing some random structure up. Then we get to go through and explain why it happened. It's every guy's dream... to blow shit up all the time."

While he makes a lot of jokes about his choices in life, Andrew's reasons for joining the rescue forces were pretty serious and necessary, he says, to the salvation of his worth as a person. He says, "A lot of guys go into the field because they are courageous and want to make some big difference in the world, or because they have four family generations invested in it or something. But I'm not like that.

"I got into the field because I got tired of being an empty person... tired of being bored. I wanted something to get into, something that I could let all of my energy out, and rescue was one of the only things that seemed to keep my apathy at bay. When I was younger, I wasn't what you would call a model citizen. I wasn't a complete asshole, but I had a lot of misdirected energy. I could have been doing better things with my time than the regular teen stuff, which was basically going to concerts, partying, and drinking. I started for a pretty selfish reason, but now what I do is now a large part of who I am, a part of what makes me. And I am still striving to improve myself through improving the lives of others."

He smiles as he reflects, "I guess I'm like a work in progress."

Andrew's work in progress has been going on for seven years, since he was 18 years old, which is the minimum age that one can officially work in fire and rescue. He started out as a volunteer at the local fire department, and he liked the work so much that he decided that he would stay with it.
One of the criteria for many firefighters, including those in Richmond, Virginia (his original home), is that they are trained in at least the first or second level of emergency medical technician work.

He said, “The fire and EMT training was the hardest work I had ever had to deal with at that time in my life. Because I was so young, and hadn't really seen or done a lot, and it all started out really kicking my ass. It definitely took me a while to get on my feet.”

Firefighters, when they are first brought on at the department, are subjected to extensive physical training, which varies from state to state and department to department. Besides participating in written exams, agility and strength training, and going through a short, boot camp-like training period to get fighters into acceptable physical shape, training usually consists of weekend trips out to old, abandoned houses which are about to be demolished. The department makes sure conditions are safe, then sets fire to the house, and lets the “young’uns” fight the fire.

Andrew had to get used to the equipment, which can weigh up to hundreds of pounds, the heat, fighting techniques, and keeping calm. He says, “You might not think so, but when you go into an enflamed house for the first few times, it can be a little unnerving. The training is as much physical as it is mental.”

He eventually adapted to the conditions, however, and over a period of time, he was accepted fully into the department. He wasn’t on payroll, but that didn’t matter to him. The pay wasn’t very much anyway (today the median pay in Andrew’s area is only a little over $18,000), he says, especially for those lower down in the company, but to most volunteers, it’s more than a job, and more like something they want to do. The volunteer
experience convinced Andrew he was meant to do work in this area. It was this determination to be an excellent firefighter that made his classes for emergency medical technician a little easier, but that was not without its trials either.

Andrew started out working toward certification as an emergency medical technician, basic level, which is the first level of EMT work, and then also went on to attain EMT level two, which is the next step up. EMT's on this level can give basic care to patients at accident scenes, transport patients to the hospital, and assess a patient’s condition and manage respiratory, cardiac, and trauma emergencies under medical direction by radio. “I moved along pretty quickly with the EMT work,” he explains. “Sometimes a full EMT education can take up to two years, but I was fortunate enough to work with programs that focused more on mastery. I studied hard, mastered tasks quickly, and passed through course work and the levels of certification quickly.”

After braving some burning buildings and experiencing some tough training, Andrew thought he would be well-prepared for the world of EMS as he began his first real rotations, but he soon found out that there also challenges to meet in this area. He says, “When I went into this line of work, like I said, I was a stupid kid, and I didn’t have any idea about death. When I went in, I expected to be successful every time. Well, my fourth or fifth outing, we lost the person on the way to the hospital. I just wasn’t quite sure what had happened. I thought about that old lady for two days. And then a few calls later, we lost another. They don’t always die, but they don’t always live either.

“You have to learn about failure and success. You have to redefine
those things. If you lose a person, you have to understand that you did your best, and there was nothing else to be done. If you see a family standing outside of their house, which has burned to the ground, then you don’t come down on yourself because that house is gone. You say, ‘Hey, those people are alive. They didn’t die in that fire. Their house is gone, but they are still here to move on, and that’s okay.’”

This was Andrew’s first real experience with the emotional stress that often comes with his line of work. He says, “I still thought that something like that was a rare thing. That’s how dumb I was at the time, thinking I was going to be a firefighter and an EMT and not see all that much hurt or death. It was after I had watched too much “Rescue 911,” which of course only showed the happy endings, and it was before I went to Tennessee.”

Shortly after attaining full-time firefighter status and fulfilling a couple of EMT courses, he moved to Tennessee to work for a while. The move came about the time of the large I-75 accident in Calhoun, which involved 100 vehicles and 50 deaths. He says, “I was one of the workers of that accident, one of the first responders. That was truly, pardon the pun, my initiation by fire. I saw things there that I never deemed possible. Since I was the first responder, I didn’t have any equipment with me, and backup hadn’t gotten there yet. I watched a lot of those people die in burning vehicles because I was without fire suppression equipment and simply couldn’t help them. After backup did get there, a lot of my fellow fighters broke down at the scene or at the hospital and couldn’t go back to the carnage. That left the task of treatment of those we could save and body recovery to [sic.] those of us who could do the job and keep our emotions in
check until later when we dealt with it in private and in our own ways. I managed to finish my job, but afterwards I was pretty torn up. In that one day, I learned more about death, life, heroism, weakness, strength . . . I guess you could say I learned all of the basic concepts of life in that one incident. That’s a lot more than a lot of people learn in a lifetime.”

It was a little too much for Andrew to learn at the time, so he took a short time off from rescue services and worked other jobs for a while; he also moved to Richmond, Kentucky. Soon after, however, he found himself drawn back into the world of fire and rescue. He says, “I became an ER junkie, I watched Rescue 911 until I hated William Shatner. I missed it, and I wanted back in it.”

He began to volunteer at the local fire department and started working at the hospital and taking classes toward the next level of EMT certification, which is level three. Over the next couple of years in the firefighting company, he worked himself up to private, then engineer, which is the next position from becoming an officer. Since most companies must vote unanimously for promotions and appointments, Andrew says, being promoted so soon after joining the company was an honor and a sign of acceptance and trust from his fellow fighters, and this served as more positive reinforcement to stick things out in the rescue profession. He also finished the course work necessary to attain paramedic certification, the highest level of EMT certification. This certification allows him to do all of the things that EMT basics and levels twos and threes can do, as well as administer drugs, interpret electrocardiograms (EKG’s), and use more complex equipment and monitors.

After being promoted and acquiring such a high level of experience
and skill, Andrew began to feel that his life was coming together. But with the newfound experience and skill came the feeling that most rescue professionals feel at sometime or another: burnout.

He says, “This profession has a pretty high rate of burnout. I mean, most people would call us pretty damn crazy. EMTs run around cleaning up blood and gore, dealing with vomit, death, and all those nasty little things. We dedicate our lives to others without asking much back. We don’t sleep a lot. Sometimes, and this goes for the firefighting end too, you’ll be up for 48 hours, off for 72. You work holidays, you work weekends. You risk your life, and most of us don’t even get paid all that much. And EMT’s, sometimes we aren’t even recognized as medical professionals. We aren’t doctors or nurses, or anyone like that. A lot of people just see us as ambulance drivers. That can be pretty frustrating. So sometimes you tend to go a little . . . off the end.”

Andrew admits that many EMT’s and firefighters quit the field because of such high stress and burnout rates, but also says, “If you really love it, you find ways to deal with it. Some ways are better than others, but you do okay. You deal with the emotional stress, you deal with the death and gore, the sleep deprivation. It’s really hard for me since I work and go to school, but at least I don’t work full weeks. I mean, there are guys out there who work 60 and 80-hour weeks.

“To deal, you just learn not to carry work home with you. If you did, you’d have no quality of life once so ever. Sure, sometimes you have thoughts that linger, but you don’t dwell on them. You just do regular things. You watch a movie, you talk to friends, you sleep. Yeah, you sleep. It takes a lot out of you. But the funny thing is, even when I’m not working,
I like doing things related to work, or things that will enhance my performance at work. I work on my continuing education units (CEU's); those are educational activities for EMTs. We have to have 20 hours of those every two years, and they can be videos, seminars, or conferences. I also work out, build up my strength. I read up in journals, I do Internet stuff. That's the right way to deal with it.”

He pauses for a moment, then laughs. “Or, maybe not. Maybe you should stay as far away from work as possible, do anything to forget it while you aren't there. Maybe I'm just a rescue nerd, like I said.”

A lot of people do cope with the stress the wrong way, though. He explains, “Yeah, I have made it through so far without becoming addicted to smoking, drinking, or drugs as a 'crutch.' I've seen a lot of good lives wasted to these addictions in my line of work. Sometimes I drink a little or fool around a little to loosen away some of the shit that comes with the job, but I don't need those things. You have to understand the line between utilization and dependence, and some just don't.”

Shortly after this sentence, he raises his hand and stops the conversation. He says, “You know, I've shed a pretty negative light on this whole thing. But people tend to bitch about the bad a whole lot more than they tend to mention about the good. Let me show you something.”

He bends down under his desk and produces a small leather photo album. He opens it to the center section, where there are several patches, papers, and photos. Several of the photos show Andrew and his company, Andrew and his ambulance partner, Jason, and Andrew and various people. He points to a photo of himself dressed in his EMT uniform, posing outside the hospital with an older lady who is showing a radiant smile.
"I saved that lady from the back seat of a Nissan that was probably compacted to about the size of a golf cart," he says. "This was on her return visit for a checkup. I just happened to run into her on my way out, and she stopped me and thanked me a million times. Her name is Jo."

He points to another photo where he is posing with a young man of about the same age, probably a little younger. Both of them are in street clothing. He says, "Does this guy look familiar? Sure he does, because he lives down the hall. He and I are pretty good friends. I saved him from choking on his own vomit and dying of severe alcohol poisoning. That happens a lot to me around here, especially on a party campus like this one.

"The photo of all of those people there, in the fire house? They came down and fixed all of us dinner one night... turkey, dressing, potatoes, the works... because they knew we never had time for a real hot meal. This was about a month after we saved the bottom story of their house from burning to the ground."

After a few more photos, he closes the album and says, "Okay, that's enough for show and tell... but I just wanted to emphasize that there are so many good things about this line of work. This may sound cliché and even corny, but the best part of this job is helping others. If you're not in it to help others, you're wasting your time.

"I mean, I help people put their lives back together. That's saying a whole lot. Both as a fireman and an emergency medical technician, it is my job to go out to complete strangers and help them make sense of complete and utter chaos. People appreciate it when you really care and show honest compassion. The fact that I make their lives make a little more sense fills me with a deep satisfaction."
Andrew loves the line of work so much that he’s leaving it as soon as he graduates next year. He says, “I love the work, I do. But, as my superiors say, it’s a young man’s game. Now, I’m not old, but I will be before I know it. And maybe I’m not ready to settle down and get my shit together just yet, but that day is coming soon, and firefighting and emergency medical rescue isn’t where it’s at. I mean, I don’t see myself getting tired of it, but I can see how it could happen.

“It has low pay and no recognition. The newness wears off quick. EMS and fire professionals aren’t seen for what they are worth, and they are not paid what they are worth. Why? Because no one considers them until they’re needed, then they forget about them until they need them again. Fellow emergency professionals haven’t exactly done a lot to promote our image either. Too many of those ‘crutches’ I mentioned before are plainly evident and publicized instead of the good done. Sometimes we get pretty bad press and reputations even though we often risk our lives to save yours. Not many professions can claim that.”

He continues, “I think that’s why EMS and firefighting is probably best left to volunteer status, as more of a hobby. You weed out those who have material motives, and you are left with those who are really into it, and who are really willing to give it their all. Yeah, that’s probably what I’ll do, volunteer after I get my degree and a new job. I could never get it out of my system completely.”

And maybe he won’t have to. With a degree in arson, fire, and explosive investigation, he is qualified to work in laboratories, police departments, insurance companies, companies that manufacture fire retardant materials, and housing and insulation companies, which often have
departments dedicated to constructing fire safe materials and doing fire safety research for their products.

“See,” he explains, “I would stay in this line of work forever if I could, but it’s just not practical. At least this way, I can financially and occupationally advance and still remain tied to something I love. And if I make a decent living through this career, then I will have time to devote volunteer time to firefighting and EMS, and I can do it because I love it, not because I have to. I can also pass my passion and knowledge onto others, because I just recently passed my exams that qualify me to teach CPR, Haz-Mat, EVOC (Emergency Vehicle Operations Course – Emergency Driving), First Aid, Bloodborne Pathogens, and other various courses in fire and rescue.”

And what would Andrew look for in his pupils?

“Well,” he says, “if I am allowed to weed out all of the dummies and losers, I would be left with pupils who are caring and compassionate, who have passion and initiative. I mean, that’s just a start. You have to have a lot of things to make it in this field.

“You have to respect human life. You have to think, you have to be fairly smart, maybe even instinctive. You have to be understanding and open-minded. You have to be pretty damn patient and steady-handed. There’s lots of things, physical and mental. You also have to combine and balance all those things, or else you’ll be lopsided, and you won’t be any good to anyone. I mean, you can have the passion and instinct to enter that burning building or help that trauma victim, but you also have to have the brains to know what to do once you get into that situation. It’s an endless combination of skills, talents, and personal initiative.”
Andrew's own personal initiative has brought him almost to the completion of his "work in progress," his life and career. He says, "I tend to use weird analogies for things so that I can get people to easily understand what I am saying. And this one will go along with the whole 'work in progress' thing too."

He makes a molding gesture with his hands. He says, "See, before I entered EMS and firefighting, I was this lump of funky clay that had no real purpose. But then, the work began to mold me into a real man, a person who had form and purpose. And right now I am sort of like a nice looking sculpture, but I'm not finished. There's still some smoothing over and refining to do, to make me a real work of art, something beautiful.

"These people I save, these heroes I work with, and the things I am accomplishing through rescue work . . . these things are refining me. My life is becoming something beautiful and complete. Without that, I would still be at square one, as a clump of ugly clay." His lips turn up at the corners for one last spry grin. "And what good is that to anyone?"