

# THE 360

## First In Erases All Doubt: A calm, silent firehouse offers a chance for reflection on why we love the job.

BY JOHNNY PETERS

B SHIFTER BUCKSLIP, Jan. 7, 2025.

**I**t is good to be the first person at the firehouse. The earlier you arrive, the less hurried you'll be—the less distracted by morning greetings. You can make the coffee just the way you like it, measuring out the grounds instead of letting an under-rested heathen from the previous shift dump them in by the handful. Sometimes, you might get the chance to rob one of your brothers or sisters of an early morning fire—a pleasure second only to leaving overhaul for the oncoming shift and returning to the station by riding in the back of someone's pickup truck. (Admittedly, this isn't the most reasonable activity. Then again, if we were reasonable people, we'd be accountants or engineers. We would not strap ourselves into vehicles of questionable repair, driven by humans of dubious sanity.)



**When you're the first at the firehouse, the coffee tastes better because you brew it with the respect and precision it deserves.**

There is a less practical reason to be the first person at the firehouse. Honestly, it might not even be a real reason but merely something I've cooked up entirely in my head, a total fantasy. If you get to the fire station before everyone else, you might experience something rare: A full yet quiet firehouse.

This is not the same as an empty firehouse. And it doesn't count if there's a bustle of activity as crews put their gear in place or if one or two units are out on a run.

You see, there is stored energy in a full firehouse. You might need to arrive early a few times to witness the perfect calm, the particular silence that is, of course, not silence at all. It might be broken by the tick of a cooling apparatus engine, the rattle of an air compressor kicking on to top off a slowly leaking reserve. The drip of a faucet worn out from years of firefighters shutting it off with too much force after cleaning up the equipment.

It is delicate, this moment. Fleeting. It cannot last. It won't be the same once you've gotten caught up in your duties. Something will go wrong; some disaster will occur, breaking the remarkable calm. Sometimes, it will be just a ripple, sometimes a massive wave.

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And we want that. Not all of the time. Not when we've just heard the call to dinner or when we'd rather stay under the covers in a hopefully frigid dorm. Maybe not even when we're on the way looking for a column.

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When I was starting out, my dad asked me, "Are you sure this is what you really want?" My answer was yes. Without reserve, without hesitation. I wanted this job like nothing I'd wanted before. The question remained of whether or not I could do it.

My first experience with firefighting was, of course, training. Senior Captains Reed and Mendel of the Houston Fire Department had turned a 52-foot trailer into a flashover chamber. We watched the fire progress and listened to lectures about firefighter survival while in gear and on air. It felt right. At the end of the training, they put me on the nozzle and had me advance through the trailer. The fire had been smoldering for a while by then, banking the smoke down. We entered from a side door, so the fire was substantially closer than 50 feet. But it was dark once I moved a few feet in. I could see nothing, permitting me to appreciate the heat.

I was scared out of my mind.

I moved forward on wobbly legs, driven as much by my fear of appearing cowardly as by the backup man pushing me on from behind. I reached the fire and put it out, but I have no memory of the flames. All that remains is the heat and the darkness. When I emerged, I was more drained than I'd ever been in my life. I was shivering as though it was midwinter, although we were in Houston on a blistering summer day.

I'd done it. I believed the question about whether or not I could do the job had been answered. But, of course, I was wrong.

I have asked the same question several times since: When we roll up on a house pushing smoke out from windows, eaves, siding, no fire to be seen. Or when I'm striking the roof just before stepping off the ladder. Sometimes, the answer is, "Well, it's too late to turn back now," which is another way of saying, "No, but I'm going anyway."

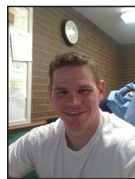
But I have never asked my dad's question again. It is still a yes, and I still feel that moment all the time. It repeats. I don't feel it in my head. It's not logical.

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What does this have to do with being first in at the station? I'm not sure. I told you it wasn't logical. Maybe it's a Thoreauvian back-to-nature thing. It's about carving out a moment to see things properly, get perspective and step outside your world and look at it with a fresh mind.

At the risk of being too philosophical, maybe it's this: The full firehouse holds a promise. It is the physical representation of our oath. Without getting too mystical about the job, the quiet fire station is a sort of temple, a place to meditate on why you started this crazy nonsense in the first place. It's like looking at your old wedding photos and remembering why you fell in love.

Find a way and the time to do it, especially when the world has started to tarnish, however slightly, the once shining passion you had for the job. And while you're at it, make some fresh coffee. **BS**



*Johnny Peters has been with the Houston Fire Department since last century. In this time, he has successfully gamed the system and was promoted to senior captain, forever freeing himself of the burden of fire hose by hiding in a truck company.*