



## Not Your Ordinary Job – Season Two, Episode One Transcript

- Jasmine:** Hello, everyone, welcome to the Bureau of Land Management, Eastern State podcast, Not Your Ordinary Job. I'm your co-host, Jasmine.
- Allison:** Hello, everyone. I'm Allison.
- Jasmine:** Each week, we will highlight a Jackson Hotshot team member by allowing them to speak about their experience working in the career of fire. We are very excited for you to listen to their stories. We also encourage you to head over to [NIFC.gov](https://www.nifc.gov), for the latest fire news every weekday.
- Jasmine:** Hi, everyone. So without further ado, we would like to welcome Darren on our show. How are you Darren?
- Darren:** Doing well. How are you doing?
- Jasmine:** Doing well. Thank you. So tell us a little bit about yourself?
- Darren:** I guess the info would be I came to BLM eastern states three years ago, and I came here from Utah, where I ran a crew out there. I'd spent about a decade over a decade out there. Prior to that I was a temporary seasonal employee, worked in the Midwest, down here in the south doing working on engines and trails and it was a dozer operator for a little bit. And then I got my first government job when I was 16, picking up trash in a state park and outside have a little bit of work with some non-profit land management organizations and continued that government work up until today.
- Allison:** That's great. Thank you. To start us off, can you give us a quick recap of last year's fire season?
- Darren:** Last year's fire season for our crew started in January with our career staff supporting some BLM prescribed burns here in the south, and then supporting other federal agencies in prescribed burning. And that picked up in February, folks were quite busy. And then in March, our crew started its formal season. And then we were available in early April. From there, I think we had about a week of downtime where we started to adjust to some of the COVID mitigations and plan, how we were going to do business and try and keep our folks safe as possible. And after that, we went to Florida, and really didn't come home very much until early September. We were in Florida for about a month. It was very dry there. We were doing assignments where we were driving UTVs on what should be airboat trails. Active fire, a lot of new situations that a lot of us that came from out west had no idea how to handle but working with the local staff at Big Cypress National Park, they were able to show us kind of the best way to utilize the crew. And it was I think 30 some days of learning. And then about the time we finally got the hang of it. They got rain. We came home for some days off and then we headed out west. And were fairly busy out there from mid-June, all the way until our last day on the line. And then we came home. And the crews shut down in the second week of September. And since then the career staff has been

supporting incidents in the west and our last person got home December 19th. So our season really kind of just ended just in time for the 2021 season to start right over again.

**Jasmine:** That's great. So speaking of the Covid-19 pandemic that happened last year, what were some of the challenges that you faced during last season?

**Darren:** We were fortunate in some aspects where our crew was already on and working and mostly complete with our annual training when a lot of the I guess chaos of COVID really hit. Some of my peers out there who had spent all winter planning how they were going to onboard people had to shift. I was fortunate enough that we had already done all that. And then we were more focused on the day-to-day operations as opposed to how we were going to get folks in the door. I think the greatest challenge we faced was we traveled so much and from state to state. We ran into different expectations or different protocols. And then by mid-summer, it felt like the fire community kind of got a little more organized. People got the hang of it. We did...or our crew leadership kind of had a point in about July, where we did get some frustration with, with other folks in the fire community. And then we realized that we had been doing this stuff since late March, early April. And we were working alongside folks that may have been their first fire assignment of the year. So using that as an opportunity to pass on we had seen instead of getting frustrated, helped us a bit. The biggest challenge we faced was well, our crew was very responsible, very active in mitigating exposures to COVID. We did have quite a few crew members that had immediate and extended family fatalities, which was hard on, on everyone. Very, very impressed with how some of these young folks handled that tough situation, especially when they're in a remote situation. And they get the news that there's been a death in the family. That was hard on everybody from a from a supervisor standpoint, that was difficult. And then from a peer, friend standpoint, that was that was difficult. Fortunately, no one on the crew was diagnosed with COVID. But that family aspect of it was extremely stressful the throughout the summer.

**Allison:** Yeah, I'm sure that must have been really stressful for everyone. It's good that you were able to adapt as well as you did, though.

**Darren:** And I think one thing to note is, you know, we, all of this stuff, the fire community and our crew members have shown an increase in patience, and as well as communication. And I think, I think by mid summer, things just got easier. We learned, we learned how to deal with it. The spring was mighty stressful. This winter has been mighty stressful as we plan how we approach this next spring. But overall, just very proud of how the crew handled it. We spent several days, taking days off on the road, our crews unique that once we leave Mississippi for the **West**, we will often take days off out in the West, and some of these young adults, you know, they're in a town where the town itself may not be completely shut down. And there's people out and about, and they want to go do things that every 25-year-old might want to do and their adherence to what we agreed on as a crew, as far as our conduct when we were on our time off was extremely respected. And man, I'm just super proud of how they how they approached everything.

**Allison:** Yeah, that is really impressive. How are you preparing for the upcoming season? And I know you said you're already getting into it, but when would you say it officially starts?

**Darren:** Well, every year I say that the next season starts the minute we sign the paperwork to terminate everybody from the previous season. So I feel like our season started for the crew last September. Our formal season right now is scheduled to begin March 15. Next month in February, we will start seeing an increase in our career staff being out supporting prescribed fire operations with the crew's formal season will pick up in in March. And then we will run the crew probably till the beginning of September. And follow kind of the same cycle that we did this year with our career staff, trying to find opportunities to go out and get training assignments or support other resources where they can. As far as what we're doing to prepare, we're kind of kicking off our hiring or not really are hiring but our selection process. Our applications closed in December. And now it's waiting on our certificates, going through those and picking the personnel that we want to add to the team and then planning out our annual training. And then of course everybody's favorite our physical training. Which currently the crew is doing a virtual pull up challenge which I am not winning. So I'll probably spend my weekend trying to make up some ground on the young folks that are blowing me out of the water at the moment.

**Jasmine:** Well, that's great. So what advice would you give to a new crew member? What should they do to prepare?

**Darren:** So outside of physical training, you know a new crew member that is new to a hot shot crew, I really don't think they can be 100 percent physically prepared. Now the returning crew members really don't have an excuse not to be prepared because they know what to expect. For a new crew member, get online, use Google, there's tons of information out there about physical training expectations, different workout plans, with the focus really should be on physical conditioning. And then as well as mental conditioning, a lot of people get into the job not understanding just the mental stress and mental rollercoaster that sometimes this job can put you through. So I think my advice to them, I'd probably tell him a couple things one, don't wait to do anything, whether that's any of the hiring onboarding paperwork, don't wait to work out. Don't wait to seek out housing, use every available minute to set yourself up for success two months from now. Another little thing I like to tell people is if we... if you can get contact information for other crew members, and you they would obviously have our contact information is call and ask questions or email and ask questions. The only the only dumb question is the one that doesn't get asked. And we commit quite a bit of time in the winter and spring to trying to answer those questions, but we can't answer them if they aren't asked. So anybody that's new to our crew or new to fire. Once you get your contact information for who you're going to be working for, you shouldn't hesitate to ask. I always know that people new don't know what, what to expect here. So it's my obligation to provide them that information and encourage them to ask those questions. Lastly, I would probably tell them is give yourself a good pair of boots and a good pair of sunglasses. And just be prepared for the ride you're about to go on.

**Allison:** That sounds like great advice. What are you looking forward to in the upcoming season? And what do you think we can expect to see from the new team?

**Darren:** Oh, man. So this, this coming season is going to be pretty big for the crew. We are looking to start our recertification process for type one status. We've been working the last two and a half years to work towards that goal. And the pieces are in place we have the right folks and the right positions to do that task. So that's priority number one for the crew. Every year, we have folks

that step up into new roles. And so one of the things I like every year is watching those folks that are in a new position that has a little more responsibility, a little bit of leadership, and watching them take on that challenge and providing them with some mentorship to help them succeed. You know, when you're younger in fire, you like the big paycheck, you like the adventure after you've been at for a while you got to find other things that kind of keep your appetite high. And for me it's watching people grow into leadership and more skill. This year, we're going to have some folks that have a good foundation at the mid-level leadership step into bigger responsibilities. And they are there some of the best new leaders I think we could ever ask for not just within this crew, but within the agency in wildland fire. So I'm really looking forward to seeing those individuals get tested, to grow and to become a bigger part of the fire community. As far as what we can see from the team, you know it every year is the same every year is different. I think the work we've put in helping to rebuild this program. I think this year, you're going to see a lot more independent and a lot more competent crew members within the program. We have a lot of folks that we picked up like in 2018, 2019 that we've been training and pushing upward. And those folks I think are ready to take on a higher level of expectation and responsibility. Outside of that I don't get too much into the predictive services as far as how severe the fire season is going to be. Whether it's a busy season or a slow season, the phone seems to always ring and goal for this year is to answer that call and get the crew back to type one status.

**Jasmine:** That's great. Well, we're definitely looking forward to the great work. You all will be doing for this fire season. Is there anything else you would like to add?

**Darren:** If folks are interested in fire, use the resources online, find phone numbers, they're not always the easiest to find. But call, plan ahead. For a lot of positions, it may be a little too late to get your name on a hiring list or to get on an application. But there, there's always going to be another fire season 2022 fire season as a guarantee. So plan ahead, always feel free to reach out our contact information for the crew is online. We don't always respond immediately. Sometimes we're a little busy with other things. But we try and get back to every inquiry, especially if it's an email inquiry into information about the crew.

**Allison:** Thank you for taking the time to meet with us today. We can't wait to see all the great work that you and the team do this year.

**Darren:** Yeah, it's been it's been an honor. And again, thank you all so much for organizing this. It makes our job easier and it makes us want to do a little bit better job when our support service folks are pushing hard. Just like we want to do.