

**GOT A FOREST FIRE THAT'S OUT OF CONTROL?  
BRING IN THE ELITE FIREFIGHTERS.**



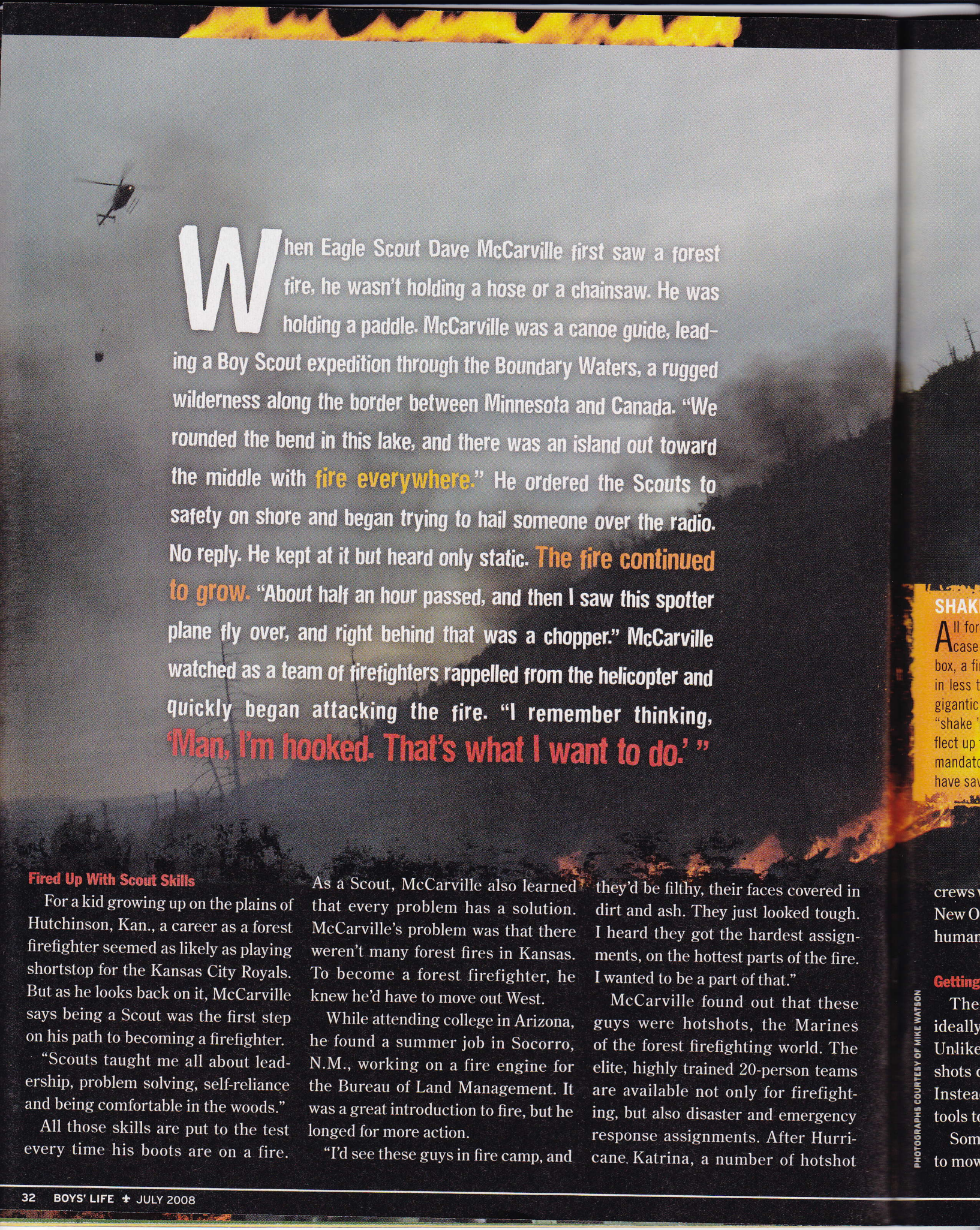
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# CALL THE **HOTSHOTS**

By Michael Kennard



**W**hen Eagle Scout Dave McCarville first saw a forest fire, he wasn't holding a hose or a chainsaw. He was holding a paddle. McCarville was a canoe guide, leading a Boy Scout expedition through the Boundary Waters, a rugged wilderness along the border between Minnesota and Canada. "We rounded the bend in this lake, and there was an island out toward the middle with **fire everywhere.**" He ordered the Scouts to safety on shore and began trying to hail someone over the radio. No reply. He kept at it but heard only static. **The fire continued to grow.** "About half an hour passed, and then I saw this spotter plane fly over, and right behind that was a chopper." McCarville watched as a team of firefighters rappelled from the helicopter and quickly began attacking the fire. "I remember thinking, **'Man, I'm hooked. That's what I want to do.'**"

### Fired Up With Scout Skills

For a kid growing up on the plains of Hutchinson, Kan., a career as a forest firefighter seemed as likely as playing shortstop for the Kansas City Royals. But as he looks back on it, McCarville says being a Scout was the first step on his path to becoming a firefighter.

"Scouts taught me all about leadership, problem solving, self-reliance and being comfortable in the woods."

All those skills are put to the test every time his boots are on a fire.

As a Scout, McCarville also learned that every problem has a solution. McCarville's problem was that there weren't many forest fires in Kansas. To become a forest firefighter, he knew he'd have to move out West.

While attending college in Arizona, he found a summer job in Socorro, N.M., working on a fire engine for the Bureau of Land Management. It was a great introduction to fire, but he longed for more action.

"I'd see these guys in fire camp, and

they'd be filthy, their faces covered in dirt and ash. They just looked tough. I heard they got the hardest assignments, on the hottest parts of the fire. I wanted to be a part of that."

McCarville found out that these guys were hotshots, the Marines of the forest firefighting world. The elite, highly trained 20-person teams are available not only for firefighting, but also disaster and emergency response assignments. After Hurricane Katrina, a number of hotshot

### SHAKE

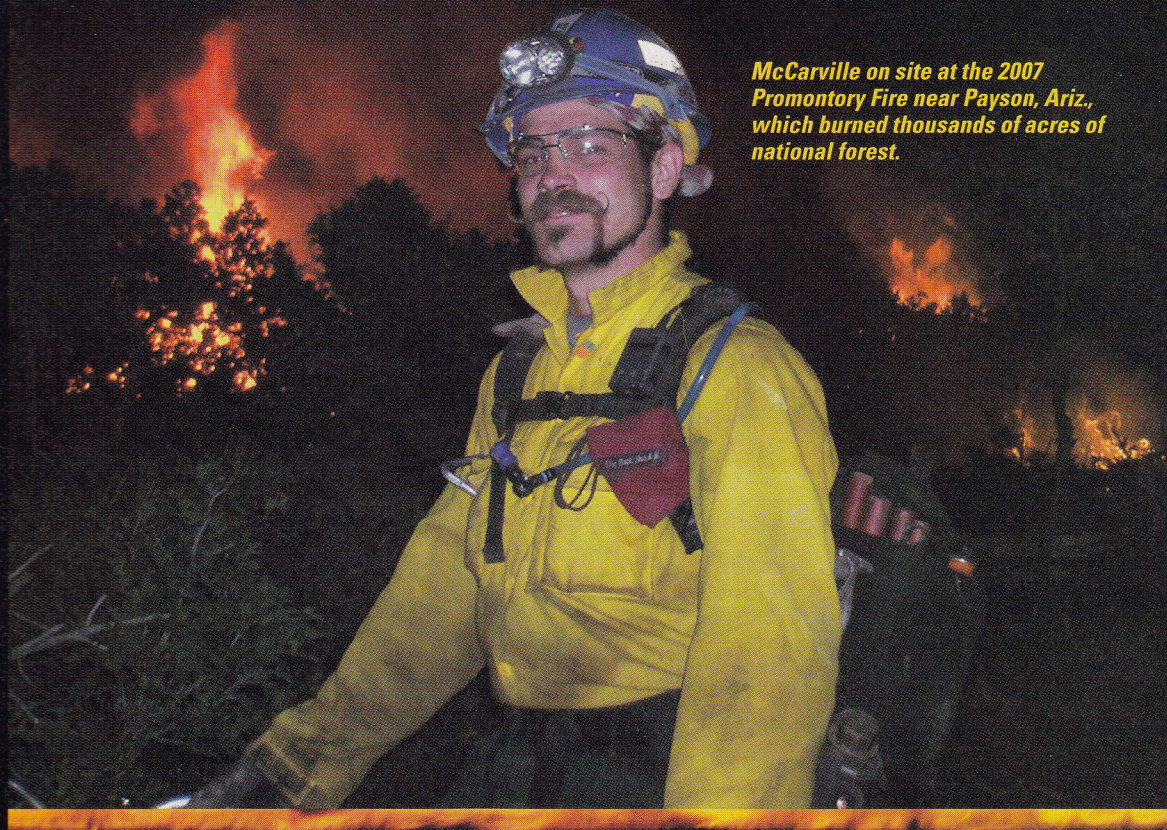
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**McCarville on site at the 2007 Promontory Fire near Payson, Ariz., which burned thousands of acres of national forest.**

### SHAKE 'N' BAKE

All forest firefighters carry a fire shelter in their packs in case they get trapped by a fire. About the size of a cigar box, a firefighter can deploy this life-saving emergency tent in less than 25 seconds. When it's unfurled, it looks like a gigantic hot-dog wrapper; some firefighters refer to them as "shake 'n' bakes." But they save lives because they can reflect up to 95 percent of all radiant heat. Since they became mandatory equipment for firefighters in 1977, fire shelters have saved more than 300 lives.

crews were called to action to help clear New Orleans, La., of debris and provide humanitarian assistance.

### Getting Down and Dirty

Their versatility makes hotshots ideally suited for forest firefighting. Unlike regular city firefighters, hotshots don't have easy access to water. Instead, they use a number of hand tools to combat fire.

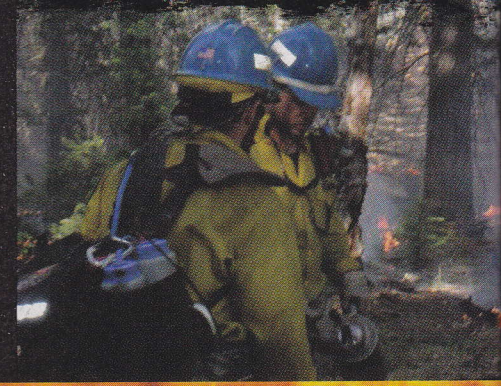
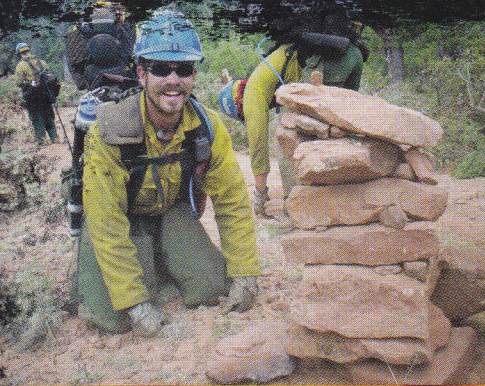
Some are trained to use chainsaws to mow through thick brush fields and



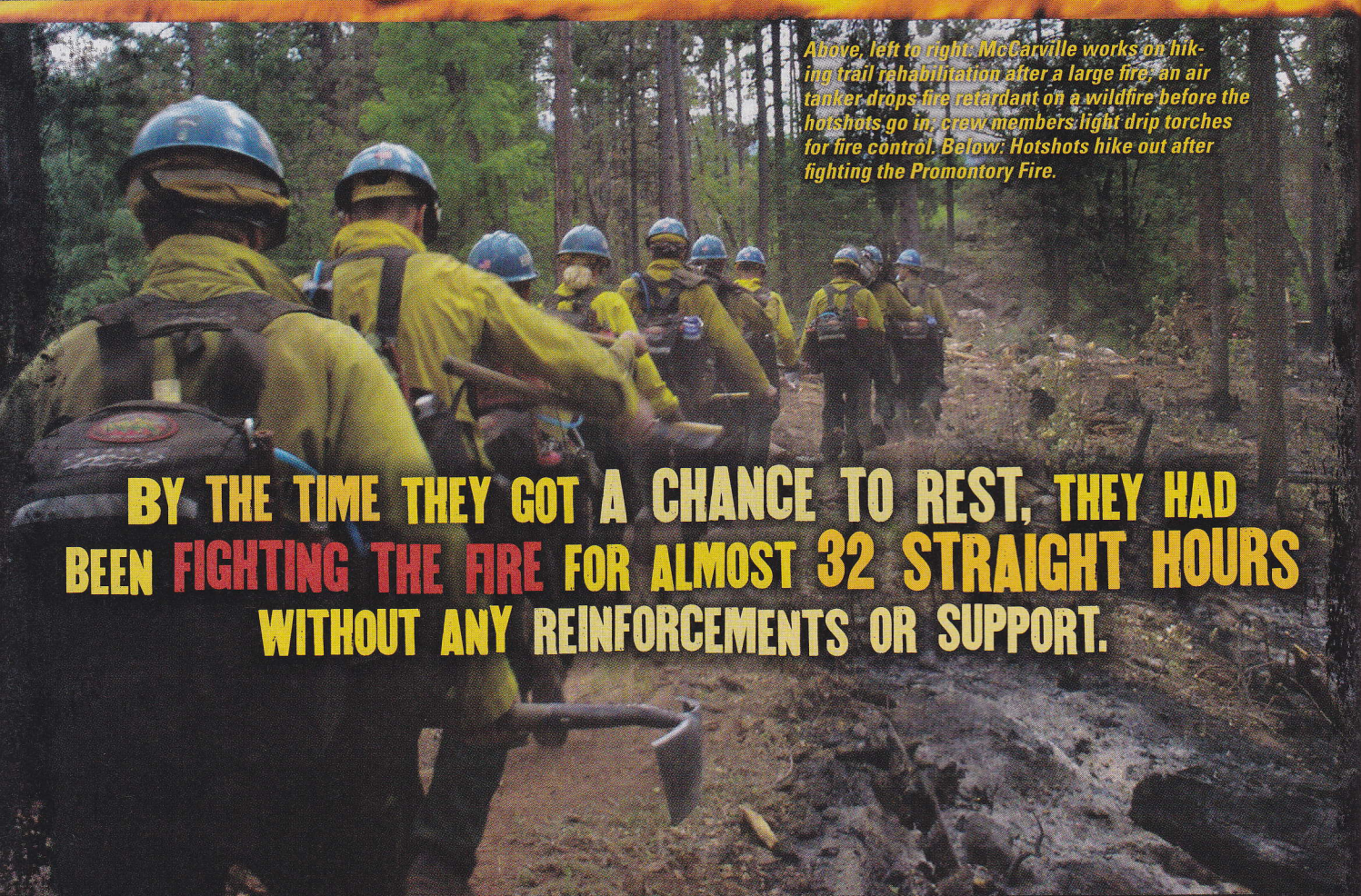
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*Above, left to right: McCarville works on hiking trail rehabilitation after a large fire, an air tanker drops fire retardant on a wildfire before the hotshots go in, crew members light drip torches for fire control. Below: Hotshots hike out after fighting the Promontory Fire.*



**BY THE TIME THEY GOT A CHANCE TO REST, THEY HAD BEEN FIGHTING THE FIRE FOR ALMOST 32 STRAIGHT HOURS WITHOUT ANY REINFORCEMENTS OR SUPPORT.**

fell trees. Others use Pulaski axes, rakes and shovels to dig through grass and roots to create a dirt line that fire can't burn over.

Basically, it's like clearing away all the flammable materials around a campfire but on a much larger and more dangerous scale. Each crew member is assigned his own tool, and they work together to construct a three-foot-wide dirt trail called a fire line.

It's not uncommon for hotshots to cut a fire line for 16 consecutive hours,

often in extremely rough terrain, in temperatures well over 100 degrees. Hotshots don't get to rest until the fire is contained.

#### **Trial by Fire**

After two fire seasons in New Mexico, McCarville finally got his chance. He was accepted by the Snake River Hotshots, stationed in Pocatello, Idaho.

His first season as a hotshot was grueling. He traveled all over the country fighting fire after fire, and the

long hours and tough work began to wear on him. On a fire in California, McCarville went down with heat exhaustion. "At the end of the season, my superintendent looked at me and said maybe this wasn't the right career for me."

But McCarville wasn't about to give up. He bought a weight bench and worked out tirelessly over the winter, running, hiking, even entering a couple of 24-hour mountain-bike races to keep pushing himself harder. All he wanted was to come back the fol-

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## ARE YOU A HOTSHOT WANNABE?

Besides safety, physical fitness is the most important part of being a hotshot. That, and genuinely loving the idea of not showering for two weeks, breathing smoke all day and carrying around a 30-pound pack.

All firefighters must pass "The Pack Test" at the "arduous" level, which means completing a three-mile hike in less than 45 minutes while wearing a 45-pound pack. But to be a hotshot, you have to meet additional requirements. They include:

- 1.5-mile run in 10:35 or less
- 40 sit-ups in 60 seconds
- 25 push-ups in 60 seconds
- 4 chin-ups

Most hotshots make around \$26,000 in a typical six-month fire season, with most of that from overtime pay. Hotshots regularly work 600-plus hours of overtime in a season, often as many as 112 hours in a single week.

For more information: U.S. Forest Service Interagency Hotshot Crews: [www.boyslife.org/links/fshotshots](http://www.boyslife.org/links/fshotshots); Bureau of Land Management Interagency Hotshots: [www.boyslife.org/links/blmfire](http://www.boyslife.org/links/blmfire); Wildland Firefighters: [www.boyslife.org/links/wildlandfire](http://www.boyslife.org/links/wildlandfire)

lowing year bigger and stronger than ever.

His persistence paid off, and he was hired by the Pleasant Valley Hotshots on the Tonto National Forest in Arizona.

### 'Mother Nature at Her Angriest'

One of the most memorable fires for McCarville was the La Burrenca Fire in 2006. Just outside Sedona, Ariz., a piece of heavy machinery sparked a firestorm that threatened to overrun the town of Oak Creek. McCarville

and the Pleasant Valley Hotshots began cutting a fire line in the punishing desert heat.

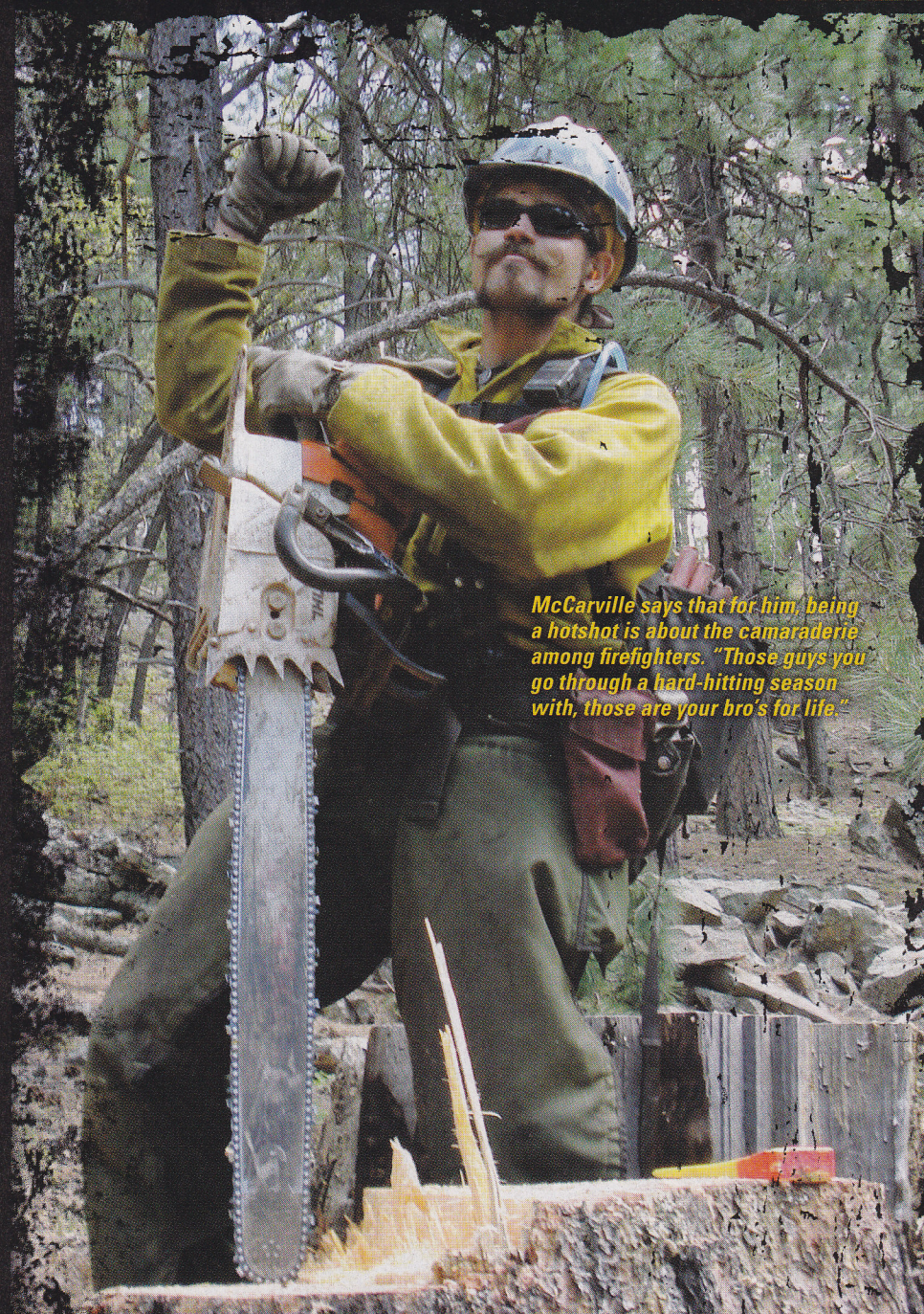
Short on resources, the incident commander asked if Pleasant Valley could spare some men to battle the western flank of the fire, which had moved into a jagged maze of gulleys and steep bluffs. McCarville and a fellow crew member volunteered and followed their superintendent toward the most violent part of the fire.

Four hours later, they had the fire on their flank contained, having

accomplished what would have taken most fully staffed crews seven or eight hours. By the time they got a chance to rest, they had been fighting the fire for almost 32 straight hours without any reinforcements or support.

McCarville has been hotshotting with Pleasant Valley for more than four years now, and he has no intention of stopping anytime soon.

"I'm getting paid to be in the woods!" he says with a laugh. "I get to see Mother Nature at her angriest. That's what I love." ♦



*McCarville says that for him, being a hotshot is about the camaraderie among firefighters. "Those guys you go through a hard-hitting season with, those are your bro's for life."*