

Headline: Mountain View firefighters help with Cameron Peak Fire

By Patricia Logan

His mom cries every time he heads toward the flames of a wildfire. “She acts like I’m going off to war,” said Mountain View Fire Protection District Lt. Chris Queen, who has been a firefighter for 34 years. He recently returned from the Cameron Peak Fire, northwest of Longmont. But his mom may soon be worried again. Queen thinks he’ll be back on that fire or another one until Colorado gets multiple snowstorms to help put an end to a devastating string of fires.

Queen and other local firefighters from MVFPD have been doing 14-day deployments at Cameron Peak, working 16-hour shifts. His day began at 5:30 a.m. when he’d slither out of his sleeping bag, climb out of the tent and step into the cold mountain air before facing the heat of the day.

Mountain View firefighters are an all-hazard department, meaning they do every type of firefighting. Queen is an Engine Boss when on wildland fire duty and typically has three others on his crew. Once they packed their gear and prepped the truck, they would head to an operating base to pick up breakfast and get their daily assignment.

Food was in to-go boxes because of the pandemic. “Some of it is really, really decent,” Queen said with a caveat. “With the whole COVID thing, most of your food is now what you call ‘luke cool.’ It’s made and shipped off in trucks and cools off. You get oatmeal that sticks to the container when you turn it upside down. But there are people living in a lot worse conditions. I am definitely not starving to death.”

Breakfast was scarfed down in the truck as the crew members headed to their assignment. They listened to the morning briefing on the radio to get information on progress and losses, fire behavior and weather, including estimates on how far embers and debris like pine cones might travel in smoke clouds. “They’ll get thrown up to ¼ mile ahead,” he said.

In normal years, the briefings are in person. Not now. Queen said 24 people on the Cameron Peak Fire have tested positive for COVID-19. “It’s there and they’re trying to keep their hands around that and not let it run rampant. We socially distance the best we can.”

Fire managers need every healthy body available. Firefighters and other resources are tough to get with fires burning all over the west. Queen said there were over 1000 people working Cameron Peak, day and night, while he was there. And that’s just one fire. Equipment and firefighters have come in from all over Colorado and other states.

Queen and his team worked near Red Feather Lakes where wind had caused the fire to jump previous containment lines. They needed to stop that from happening again by working on hot spots and strengthening the lines that were still in place. “We were doing a lot of hiking up and down hillsides. Basically hiking in chain saws and tools and things like that.”

It is painstaking work. “We would take care of any trees that might fall across it [the containment line] and go into the green area or the unburned section of the fire. So we would cut those down and, depending on how they were laying on the side of the hill, we would cut them up into smaller chunks so we could lay them up and down on the hill so they wouldn’t roll out and start more fire.”

Cameron Peak has been a stubborn fire, burning since August. Queen said there are several reasons, including rugged terrain. "We don't have good escape routes or safety zones. Some of those areas are so dense with trees that we could run through and touch our shoulders on everything."

Even the aerial attack has been challenged by steep canyons, smoke and wind, making it unsafe or ineffective. Queen said that above 30 MPH, retardant is useless because it blows away or doesn't coat correctly. He said the wind has pushed the fire so fast at times that "it's impossible to get out front of. You just can't catch up to it."

Safety comes first. "You see the destruction. It's natural for us to feel helpless. But you have to look at it in a realistic way. There is only so much we can do." Queen has been in previous fires with smoke so thick he couldn't see his engine or the fire, but he could hear it burning. "I like to start with Plan B. Try to make sure that I know where there are areas of refuge we can retreat to if we need to."

When his work day was done, he and the crew would pick up their to-go dinners, set up their tents, eat and clean up in one of several ways - using shower trailers, spraying off behind the truck or making it simple. "It's not shower clean, but we use a lot of baby wipes and Bath in a Bag - sheets of baby wipes that are 4 [feet] x 8 [feet]. At the end of 14 days in dirt and dust and smoke, you stink."

He gets about six hours of sleep before doing it again the next day. "You get into a rhythm and you don't really notice it until you're done and then you're exhausted." But Queen said the physical work and conditions aren't the hardest part of his job. "Being away from home. You miss your family. There is always something that seems to happen when you're away. Anytime that there is a sliver of cell phone service then we try to make contact as time allows." That makes spouses, friends and moms feel better too.

The fire season has gotten longer in the past 10 to 15 years, Queen said. He used to put away his gear in September or October. "The fire season goes from January 1 to December 31 now. Whether you believe in climate change or arsonists or whatever it is, we are definitely seeing an increase in fire activity." Along with working in Colorado, he sometimes travels around the country to fight other wildland fires as long as there are enough people here at home to staff Mountain View Fire.

Queen grew up in Littleton and Steamboat Springs, where his mom still lives. "I think it goes back to there are people that are designed for this. My mom said whenever there was a disaster anywhere around town I was always there to help. I work best when it's chaos."

The work is "gut busting," but he is glad he can help. Community members are also glad. "We stopped in Loveland for coffee and they wouldn't let us pay. We see signs on the side of the road that say thank you and we appreciate you. It's good to know. People are always thanking us and that does a lot for morale."

The need for wildland firefighters is high and so is Queen's desire to keep working, even as he turned 50 this year. "This career path has always fascinated me. Most guys are retired by this age. I can't see it. I just can't."

