

NEWS FEATURE

It just goes to show when you think you've heard it all something always happens to change your mind – as I did when I read this article about the first all women fire appliance crew – it just goes to show it can be done against all the odds. Hopefully it won't be too long before we can also boast of having all-women crews. So when it happens in your station, let us know.

Against all

When it comes to the first all women fire crew I think America has beaten us to it!!

When the fire bells go down in rural Alderson, West Virginia, the gates of the federal prison swing open and a white fire truck races out. The captain, who is also the driver, is a convicted bank robber, a kidnapper hangs on the back and a couple of drug dealers' cling to the sides.

But most surprisingly they are all women, and they make up the only all women fire department in America and perhaps the world.

They are fast, efficient and expert. Out of every 100 women who apply only seven are accepted. They then have to pass stringent physical training and exams, and in a male dominated world of firefighters, and also in the community they serve, initial scepticism quickly turned to admiration.

And when the fires are extinguished, the girls of engine 19, station ten, have an unblemished record for wrapping up the hoses and heading straight back to jail.

But I'm sure it won't be long before we in this country can boast our own all women fire crew although hopefully not in the same circumstances – so let us know when it happens in your area.

The Editor

When the fire bells ring in rural Alderson, the gates of the federal prison swing open and a white fire truck races out.

The driver and captain is a convicted bank robber. A kidnapper hangs on the back and a couple of drug dealers cling to the side.

They are all long-term inmates of the federal correctional institution there and – most surprisingly – women.

They make up the only all-women fire department in America and perhaps the world. They are fast, efficient and expert, and in the male dominated world of firefighters initial scepticism has turned to open admiration. And when the fires are extinguished the girls of engine 19, station 10, have an unblemished record for wrapping up the hoses and heading straight back to jail.

THE TOUGHEST WOMEN CRIMINALS

"They love it" says their supervisor Wallace Howard. They just wouldn't want to let me, or their friends in the fire department down.

When they go charging out the gate they are on their own. I don't think of them as forgers, drug dealers or kidnappers. I think of them as a great bunch of girls doing a fantastic job. Most of them are doing something they have never done before, 'helping someone else'.

While the institution in West Virginia, has the manner and style of a university, its inmates are some of America's toughest women criminals.

A smartly-dressed secretary in one of the offices is serving life for shooting a federal judge: one of the Manson girls is doing time here; so are two women who made world headlines for trying to shoot President Gerald Ford.

The engine company captain is a blue eyed blonde with a soft Carolina accent. Mr Howard said: "She's the sort of girl you would take home to meet mother, but not the bank manager", she is doing 15 years for seven counts of armed bank robbery.

the odds

The engine company captain is doing 15 years for seven counts of armed bank robbery. She has done nearly a third of her time and is destined for a half-way house and freedom. She said: 'I have done some pretty wild things but I never dreamed I would end up in charge of a fire department.'

Her boyfriend got 35 years. She has done nearly a third of her time and is destined for a half-way house and freedom.

She said: "I have done some pretty wild things but I never dreamed I would end up in charge of a fire department". When the company is in action in conjunction with other state firemen, her rank sometimes puts her in charge of professional firemen. She doesn't see herself taking it up as a profession when she gets out. "There is still a lot of prejudice against women firefighters", she said. "I am hoping to make it as a dental technician".

Patricia Gainer, 33, doubles as a firefighter, and captain of the ambulance. Her emergency medical training involves high-speed trips to local hospitals when one of her 578 fellow inmates becomes seriously ill. She is doing 10 years for 'drug conspiracy'.

"That means I was trying to sell them", she said. Her time is nearly up and when she returns to her native New York, she has high hopes of using her new skills to earn a living as a paramedic.

At 40, Vera Hines from Jacksonville is the oldest of the firefighters. She's serving seven years for a drugs related offence.

'We kidnapped a drug dealer', she said. After the kidnapping, according to the court records, he was tortured and killed.

The institution sprawls over nine well-kept acres. The women whose average age is 32 live in 'cottages' – large two floor blocks. They have their own rooms without bars, and use communal lounges. They wear their own clothes, work during the day and there is a high degree of involvement with the local community, ranging from helping the elderly to former junkies lecturing school children on how they went wrong. The fire department is regarded as the top duty. Out of every 100 women who apply, only seven are selected.

Mr Howard, a lieutenant in the prison service and a former professional firefighter, won't entertain any applicant with a record of disciplinary problems. Then there are physical and mental tests.

SUCCESS OF THEIR LIVES

The excitement, the reality of doing a worthwhile job, and the break from the grinding routine of serving time, are part of the appeal of firefighting. There are also perks – their own accommodation and less supervision. For the top two members of the team, there is also a monthly wage of £100 – an enormous sum by prison standards.

There are about eight escapes a year from the institution, but none has involved members of the fire department or emergency medical team. Letters and messages to Mr Howard from discharged inmates, suggest that they have steady jobs and they are making a success of their lives.

In Alderson, a volunteer fireman recalled an elderly woman praising the work of the all-women unit after a hotel fire. She said: "That blonde girl is just an angel", I said 'Well not exactly lady she's really a bank robber' she just looked at me and said, "how dare you say a thing like that about such a nice girl". He added: "the truth is that they do such a darned good job we have to forget who they are and respect them for the job they do".