

Fully Knowing The Hazards — September-October of 2004 was another difficult time for the Park Service family, particularly rangers and firefighters. Once again, we had to bury two of our own . . . two of our finest. Yet another sobering reminder that our jobs often place us in harm's way.

Ranger Suzi Roberts was killed in the line of duty Sept. 14 by falling rock in Haleakala while she was clearing a previous rockslide's debris from Hana Road. She was 36 years old.

Barely two weeks later, on Oct. 2, Arrowhead Hotshot Daniel Holmes was also killed in the line of duty. During a prescribed burn in Kings Canyon, Danny was struck by a burning treetop as it fell to the ground. His fellow crew members were there by his side when it happened. Some saw it happen. Danny was 26.

Two more of our best and brightest are gone. Gone in their youth, in their prime.

At least in both of these cases there are no accusatory fingers to point. There is no one to blame. Nobody did anything wrong this time. What happened to Suzi and Danny could have happened to any one of us. They died doing the jobs we all do every day. Somewhere in our national parks a rock or a tree falls every day, and there is no preventing that. It just so happened that on these two days, a ranger and a firefighter were standing in the fall line.

Some will surely ask, "How can we prevent this from happening again?" The answer is we cannot — unless we quit going to work, and neither Suzi nor Danny would approve of that. The hard reality is as long as we carry out the rigorous duties that we do amidst the magnificent — but wild — landscapes of national parks, we shall continue to be in harm's way.

Suzi and Danny knew this, and the telling thing is that they went to work anyway. Just as we do every day. They accepted the risks, "fully knowing the hazards of our chosen profession," to paraphrase the U.S. Army Ranger Creed. Just as we do every day.

This is exactly why we should all congratulate every retired law enforcement officer, firefighter and other emergency services worker we meet. We should congratulate them not just for a successful career, but for living through it.

It's quite the wake-up call to realize that living through our careers — and for that matter, our next shift — is not at all a given. If it was, we would not have walls all over our country memorializing those who have fallen in action, especially those with blank space waiting for new names.

But that's precisely what makes what we do for a living such a beautiful and sacred thing —we band together in answering a higher calling that often tempers our bonds amidst difficult circumstances. We don our uniforms every day and radio 10-8 in a line of work that requires us to answer harrowing calls, to face the fiery dragon's breath, to give of ourselves oftentimes "that others may live."

And on many occasions, we place our own welfare in the hands of our brothers and sisters. We enjoy in our line of work a rare and sweet camaraderie that can only be forged through shared adversity. We are a band of brothers and sisters, and the glue that holds our band together is the ever-present knowledge that we have all "been there, done that." We have all responded to some pretty hairy calls, and we know that any given shift could be our last. In short, we can relate to one another the way no one else can.

In a profession historically punctuated with line-of-duty-deaths, we are mindful to never take for granted the time we have with our brothers and sisters. Again, that gold watch and pension are

not a given for us. Suzi and Danny remind us of that. Of course we do all we can to work safely — we look up, look down, look all around, but we can never remove the dangers 100 percent. If we did, it wouldn't be rangers. It wouldn't be firefighting.

I'm not saying we should acquiesce, throw caution to the wind and surrender ourselves to the attitude of "if we die today, oh well, then we die today." Of course not. I'm simply saying we cannot send firefighters, law enforcement officers and rescue professionals into their respective arenas and expect that line-of-duty deaths will never happen. Sooner or later, they will. And when they do, we remember our fallen. We pay tribute to them. We honor them.

We most recently sought to honor Suzi and Danny. We graced their caskets with our national colors, we rendered crisp salutes as they passed by one last time, we played sorrowful ballads on the pipes, and we shall engrave their names on our walls.

But we can honor them best by picking up their rifle, by picking up their Pulaski and carrying on where they left off. We go back to work doing the same work that snuffed out their light so tragically early. And we do it because we know they would have done the same for us. They were our sister and our brother.

Suzi and Danny died doing what they loved. They died serving their country. And they died with their boots on.

~ *Kevin Moses, Big South Fork*