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By Jennifer Hane, Director of alumni relations, UCCS

The wildland fires that Colorado and the West have experienced the past several years have been devastating. Affecting communities throughout multiple states, and particularly in Fort Collins and Colorado Springs, it is evident that severe drought conditions and an abundance of vegetative fuels have led to a dangerous situation and extreme fire behavior in many cities, towns and neighborhoods.

That's where UCCS graduate Luke Labella, '11, and the Pike Hotshots come in. Based in Monument, the Pike Hotshots are a small team of elite wildland firefighters who battle blazes in remote and dangerous locations. Earlier this year, the Granite Mountain Hotshots from Prescott, Ariz., sadly brought the risks of this profession into the spotlight after 19 of their team members were killed while fighting the Yarnell Hill Fire.

Labella well knows the risks of his profession. He also knows hotshot firefighting teams are like family. "Being on a hotshot crew is like living with an extended family for six months,"

Labella said. "You spend every waking moment with the same 20 people day in and day out. A hotshot crew relies completely on each other and when a dangerous situation arises it is the cohesiveness and tight structure that enable us to respond safely and effectively."

While Labella does not believe that his life has directly been at risk, he has seen close calls with several of his teammates. During Montana's Skyland Fire in 2007, several of Labella's fellow crew members were trapped on a grassy knoll when the fire suddenly changed direction – an incident eerily similar to that of the Granite Mountain Hotshots. Thankfully, Labella and the team had been working a burnout operation when the shift occurred, so many of the fuels in the area had already been removed.

"The surrounding timber torched out, and the team members had to stay in the safety zone while extreme heat, smoke and embers engulfed them. The rest of the crew was in a separate safety zone as the fire passed through the ranch we were protecting," he said. "We established radio communication with the trapped team and were able to maintain contact to ensure their safety. Throughout the ordeal, which lasted several hours, we could hear their difficulty breathing and keeping embers from landing on them."

When the danger subsided, the trapped crew members were able to hike to safety where oxygen was waiting.

One common misconception about wildland firefighters is that they are able to extinguish structure fires as well, which is not the case. "As wildland firefighters, we do not have the necessary equipment or training to extinguish an engulfed structure," Labella said. "The tactics we employ are designed to reduce fuels near structures and eliminate the potential for ignition. Often we will conduct a burnout operation, intended to preemptively consume fuels in the areas surrounding structures such that when the head of the fire reaches the location, there won't be any fuel to ignite."

After fighting both the Royal Gorge and West Fork Complex Fires this summer – in addition to many other enormous blazes over the years in 12 different states – one might wonder how Labella became attracted to such a dangerous profession. Apparently, bravery runs in the family. "My father is a wildland firefighter and he is the reason I got started," Labella recalls. "Originally, hot-shotting was just a summer job that enabled me to pay for my education. But by the time I graduated from UCCS in 2011, I had come to enjoy working in intense situations with a crew of amazing people."

Although Labella is not working in a profession typical for a graduate with a degree in biology, he is grateful to UCCS for the experiences and opportunities he had there. "Fighting fires during the summer and into October meant that I would often only be able to attend classes for one semester a year. The professors were accommodating and helped greatly in transitioning from work to school," Labella said. "The smaller class sizes enabled close connections between students and professors. I enjoyed getting to know fellow students and utilizing the learning centers to develop further depth of knowledge in the material we were learning."

In addition to attending classes and working toward his biology degree, Labella was able to work in the Institute for Bioenergetics and in MIND Studios, both of which exposed him to aspects of research that expanded his academic experience and allowed him to work among colleagues and mentors. "UCCS is a great university that nurtures an environment of education," he said.

Labella's determination to achieve his degree while working multiple jobs now plays out in the field every day. "Firefighting pushes the physical and mental limits to which we often constrain ourselves," he said. "It challenges us to work as a team and develop a sense of camaraderie rarely seen."

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Intro:

UCCS graduate Luke Labella, '11, and the Pike Hotshots are a small team of elite wildland firefighters who battle blazes in remote and dangerous locations.

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