



In the line of fire

After spending a day with firefighters, Eugene Yiga finds out what it means to be a hero

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I step into the boots and pull up the trousers, suspenders over my shoulders. I put on the oversized jacket, like a child playing around in his father's suit. I have the oxygen tank strapped onto my back.

'Stomach in, chest out,' the instructor says with a smile as he tightens the belt. He checks the oxygen levels. 'You have 45 minutes of air, which should be plenty for the 15-minute exercise,' he says. 'Just make sure you don't panic and breathe too much.'

As much as he tries to put us at ease, I struggle to laugh. I'm nervous, which makes sense. And then I start sweating, even though we aren't even close to the flames. What on earth have I signed up for?

Everyone else seems to be having more fun than the situation calls for. 'I want to be a fireman,' a trainee keeps saying as he dances around in his sweltering suit. How he can move so freely is beyond me. All the

equipment weighs over 30kg, making me feel like an astronaut, barely able to take one small step, let alone one giant leap.

The training exercise involves putting out a petrochemical fire with towering flames spewing black smoke. It's a battle to overcome the blaze, but the power of teamwork wins in the end.

Once the exercise is over, we step out of the smoke into a wall of photographers. It feels strange to have so many people treating us like celebrities, even though normally incidents aren't this controlled and glamorous, nor do real firefighters get this kind of attention in everyday life.

Indeed, it didn't take me long to realise that all the people I met are ordinary men and women who made the choice to do something extraordinary with their lives. And it is a choice. We can all be heroes if we're prepared to bring a level of excellence to our work.

There's no reason to feel embarrassed about having an 'ordinary' job. Just because your work doesn't require you to put your life on the line, it doesn't mean you can't bring an element of bravery into it too.

And yet we so often waste the privilege. For some reason, we live in a society where fewer and fewer people seem to care about their work. You see it in the dead eyes of cashiers and you hear it in the dull voices of people in yet another seemingly pointless meeting at work.


Seriously, if the toughest thing about your life is that you get too many emails a day, you've got it easy. Either do something to fix your career (and your life) or stop complaining about being overworked and underpaid. The world expects better of you. And you should demand better of yourself. 

IMAGE: GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES/STIEVECOLIMAGES