

OVER THE TOP



By Dan Jackson, Retired Assistant State Forester

Look at my hard hat, and it tells a story. There are many memories associated with every scratch, nick, mark, and decal on it. While it serves as an important piece of safety gear (Personal Protective Equipment or PPE), it can also reveal a lot about a firefighter.

Of course it always starts out brand new, but along the way the hard hat picks up all the marks and stickers. It tells of numerous 'close calls' and it causes the wearer to reflect back on the bad fires. It may be remembered for having been used to scoop water or dirt to throw on a fire! Some guys have even used their hard hat for a pillow or a seat. Some have humorously used it to fend off yellow jackets. Every drop of sweat on the individual's head speaks of difficult but fulfilling work, and the hard hat was there, along for the ride.

There are those times we're really angry with the boss, or a policy, or 'the man,' and we haul off and toss it into the woods or a firebreak. However, we invariably go pick it up, because it's part of us.

The 'old timers' didn't use hard hats, and early versions were very simplistic. Today some firefighters go for the full brim or metal design. Although there are different styles and colors, for most of us, yellow is the standard; it's how we choose to be identified.

My hard hat brings to mind all the different groups of people I've worked with or spent time around over the years. . . the volunteer and paid firefighters, the landowners, the cooperators, the

federal firefighters, the non-profit organizations, and certainly my brothers and sisters that wear the Alabama Forestry Commission emblem (past, present, and those to come).

The stickers on a hard hat, if there are any, also indicate a lot about that firefighter and the things that are meaningful to that person. Whether it be organizations, football teams, interesting symbols, favorite schools, memorialized persons' names or initials, major fire incident names, position levels, or many other (sometimes peculiar) logos, it expresses what is important to that firefighter. Some would say the person that wears it is a walking billboard, and if that be true, those signs on the hard hat show the 'advertisements' that are special to him/her.

During a fire prevention program, some have placed the hat on the head of a grade school child. That student is just enamored that they were chosen to 'wear' the hard hat. It may seem like nothing much to the firefighter or instructor, but oh, to that kid, he or she is the top dog among his/her peers!

Underneath that hard hat are the incalculable hours of training, preparation, and experience that enables the wearer to go out, meet the fire, and deal with it. Not everyone is cut out to wear the hard hat and all that goes along with wearing it. However, those that do are the experts and professionals in the wildland firefighting business!

So, the hard hat. It states who I am. The yellow plastic shell may look innocuous, but there is so much more to it.👒