



**Cindie Schooner-Ball** is a retired captain whose 28-year career in the Florida Fire Department has been shared in her new book: *Sister in a Brotherhood: Stories from My Life as a Female Firefighter*. She talks to Features Editor **Lorna King** about her remarkable journey

# Sister in a brotherhood: Life as a female firefighter



**C**indie wrote the book to answer the numerous questions she received throughout her career about how she survived nearly 30 years in a demanding, male-dominated profession and she tells her story of resilience, hard work and commanding respect with honesty, humour and passion for the job.

Cindie told me: "I didn't want [the book] to be a series of stories about different calls. I wanted it to encompass my story and how I got to this point and how I navigated my career. I'm not perfect, my career wasn't perfect, but if I can share a little wisdom and give a little advice to someone who loves the career but is feeling like maybe this isn't for me, that's my goal."

Cindie's story does not start with a child's dream of becoming a firefighter, in fact it is quite the opposite. She says: "It was kind of a strange journey for me because I didn't grow up wanting to be a firefighter, it had never crossed my mind, so I always say: I didn't find the fire service, it found me."

## Introduction to the Fire Service

Cindie was 30 years old when she joined the service in Florida. Her life up to that point is a rocky road of good and bad decisions that are all detailed in her book if you choose to read it, so I will not spoil it by going into too much detail here. Her first introduction to the life of a firefighter came long before she made the decision to sign up when her boyfriend at the time decided he wanted to be a firefighter. Cindie was working full-time as a waitress, a bank teller and a model, so she paid for him to go into the local fire academy. When he was hired by a small fire department in Fort Lauderdale, Cindie would often visit him at work and join the crew for dinner.

One night, during a conversation where Cindie voiced concerns about her future, the chief said: "You should go to the academy and become a firefighter. You have a really good temperament, you're in great shape, and we'll help you get familiar with how everything works before you enter the academy."

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This was Cindie's response, quoted from her book: "The guys on shift stopped eating and stared at me expectantly. I, on the other hand, looked at the chief like he was completely out of his mind. He must surely have a hole in his head. He must be missing his brain... the most involved I intended to be with the firehouse was to look pretty when I visited [my boyfriend] there. Now here was the chief telling me I might as well be one of the guys?"

"You're kidding me, right?" I said, looking down the long table at the guys on shift, waiting for them to start laughing at the joke. But they didn't. One after another spoke up, agreeing with the chief.

Cindie politely declined the chief's offer but the seed of an idea had been sewn and one year later, after a break-up with her boyfriend of 12 years and dwindling employment opportunities, Cindie needed a new focus. She told me: "At this point I was desperate. I wanted to sink my teeth into something that meant something and I wanted to help people and make a difference in the world."

### Low Expectations

Cindie grew up in a small town in Ohio where expectations were low and as she describes in the book: "Too many of the people I grew up with in that depressed little hometown ended up in prison, hooked on different distractions, or dead! Not only was she trying desperately not to follow in their footsteps, she also spent a childhood forced to feel ashamed of a heritage that was just not accepted by the majority."

She adds: "My great grandfather on my father's side was a full-blooded Mohawk Indian and though I never knew him, his legacy haunted my childhood. In the small Ohio town where I grew up, being of Indian heritage was not anything to be proud of. This was the land of cornfields, blue eyes and blonde hair, and dark skin was not welcomed."

But the torment and discrimination Cindie experienced growing up in Ohio was about to become her golden ticket out of her growing despair. A sign in the local unemployment office read: "If you are an American Indian, call this number," so she did. After an initial meeting with a career specialist, Cindie decided she wanted to take the advice of the fire chief more than a year earlier and sign up to the fire academy, and the American Indian support service was able to fund her place at the academy and provide living expense until she qualified and found work.

Cindie says: "From the moment I started at the academy I never looked back. It was awesome. I had a sense that this is what I should be doing."

Physically, Cindie has always looked after herself. She describes exercise as her "jam," and is passionate about keeping fit, describing running and jumping rope "like a boxer" as her favourite past-times. She continues: "Even though I was very confident in my physical skills, [the academy] definitely pushed me further than I've ever pushed myself. Running and push-ups and jumping rope is pretty lightweight compared to what I went through in the academy! I just kept pushing myself when times were super-tough. At that point I had this inner confidence and I knew this is what I'm meant to be doing."

The academy was tough, but not nearly as tough as the boot camp Cindie had to endure at her first posting as a





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rookie firefighter. “We called it death camp! It was five and a half weeks of timed activities and if you didn’t keep up, you were out. They really try to break you down because they want to see how you cope physically and psychologically. We had to endure zero visibility, tight, confined spaces, darkness and smoke, but that’s the job. That’s the reality of being a firefighter... It was exciting and I felt empowered. My instructor used to say: ‘confidence builds competence.’”

Cindie started her first posting in 1987, a time when not many women were seen working as firefighters. She says: “I was with one other woman and I was really lucky to be working with a lot of people, a lot of men I should say, that had my back. And those that didn’t, I didn’t care.”

### No-nonsense Attitude

I asked Cindie about her experience of being a woman in a male dominated profession and she replied: “I won’t kid you, I’m not sugar coating anything, I had some difficult times with some of the men who had preconceived notions of what women should and shouldn’t do, but that was their problem. I would always say, I’m a woman, I never wanted to be a man, but I’m a part of this crew and that’s how I played myself. I didn’t play the woman card, I wasn’t all cutesy and feminine. Guys just naturally wanted to help me, but I would say: ‘I have my job to do and you have yours, that’s how it works. If I need your help or have a question, I will ask you.’”

Cindie’s no-nonsense attitude earned her a lot of respect from her colleagues from the start. Later on in her career she mentored new female firefighters and taught them valuable lessons in how to handle themselves on the job. She says: “They felt like they had to talk the lingo and

be crude and rude, and I said: ‘No! Draw your line in the sand. Once you draw that line, everybody knows where you stand.’ There were things that I absolutely wouldn’t put up with. Was I a prude? No. Was there [filthy] language in the fire house? Absolutely! It doesn’t help you to get your feeling hurt that easily in a job where sometimes that’s the lingo and the language, but you don’t have to sit there and listen to crude talk because you’re a woman either.”

Cindie had a strong work ethic that complimented her confident attitude and she set her sights high, but it was a long road to promotion. She writes in the book: ‘I chose to bust my ass, requesting placement at the busiest stations to gain experience while working towards my degree in fire science. Earning that associate degree would lead to a pay increase, but more importantly, it would allow me to start taking promotional exams for both driver-engineer and fire lieutenant... I became an upgrade driver and an upgrade fire lieutenant, taking the test every two years for approximately twelve years until I earned my promotions. During that time, I drove fire engines, ladder trucks, tanker trucks, and once I became a paramedic in 2001, rescue trucks too. I might have grumbled sometimes, but I wasn’t about to give up until I got promoted.’

### Embracing Diverse Roles

Cindie loved being a paramedic as much as she loved being a firefighter. She says: “I liked the diversity. I really liked being able to work on a fire truck one day and maybe the next day work on a rescue truck. At one time I was working the ninth busiest [fire station] in the United States. We would run 25-30 calls a shift. We never slept. And I was going to paramedic school.”



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Paramedic training was intense and to further her learning, Cindie was allowed to observe some of the autopsies taking place at the coroner's office, which happened to be right next door to her fire station. Cindie says: “It was really fascinating to see these doctors doing the most horrendous work, but science is science, and they weren't grim about it! They played loud music and wore multi-coloured caps on their heads, so it wasn't all doom and gloom – until we went to the last autopsy [on a] little girl. Then the air went out of the room. That was totally different.”

Our discussion quickly moved onto the topic of trauma and PTSD – a harsh reality for all first responders. I asked Cindie how she coped with all the traumatic scenes she must have witnessed. She says: “You will always remember them. I talk about ghosts in the memory banks [in the book]. They will always be there; it's how you deal with them. I used exercise as a way of expelling those scenes both physically and mentally.

“I have a way of looking at it and that is – you can't save everyone. As long as you do the best you can and work well together as a crew, that's all you can do. I had guys on my truck who had kids, so if we had incidents that involved kids, I would send them back to the truck. The nursing homes bothered me because my mother had Alzheimer's and spent the last year and a half of her life in a nursing home.”

### **Rules to Live By**

On Cindie's first day at emergency medical technician training, her instructor gave everyone three rules:

1. You must have empathy, not sympathy.
2. Their crisis is not your crisis.
3. Stress is what you create for yourself.

In the book, Cindie says: ‘I try to live by those rules every day, and I've added one more that I learned in fire

academy: be aware, because if the rescuer goes down, who will rescue the rescuer?’

I asked Cindie to reflect on what her career really meant to her. She says: “I know that by helping people and having good people work with me, that we made a difference; there are people walking around because of the actions that we took. We'd show up on the worst day of their lives and hopefully mitigate the crisis. I genuinely feel that civil servants make a difference and anybody who has a yearning for something different and isn't afraid of a challenge, I say go for it! I wasn't the best, I wasn't the most brilliant, I was the person that kept her nose to the grindstone and some things came naturally and some things did not!”

Retirement for Cindie did not come easily. Instead of waving stoically goodbye to her illustrious career and taking time to relax and enjoy the time off she has so deserved, Cindie struggled to step away from doing what she loved and talks openly and honestly in the book about her battle with anxiety and depression immediately after retirement: “Yes, it was much more difficult than I had ever imagined to leave this career that had meant so much to me – that had given me my first experience of stability, of putting down roots. People, including myself, relish the ‘countdown to retirement’ but what I learned is that retirement may not be as perfect as we imagine. I needed something to give me a renewed sense of purpose and for me, through the depression and recovery, writing became that something.”

Cindie's book has been her therapy and a way to help her accept her retirement from a job she has loved so fiercely. With her newfound passion and skill for writing, Cindie is planning her next book to be about PTSD – how it is prevalent among first responders and advice and guidance on seeking help and support.

For more information about Cindie, her career and her writing, visit: [www.sisterinabrotherhood.com](http://www.sisterinabrotherhood.com)