

A Servant's Tale

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He's been a firefighter since he was 16 years old, when his Eagle Scout values and a desire to serve others led him to the profession. And although seriously injured on his last call, he would return again to the work he loves. "People say we're crazy. Everybody else is running out (of burning buildings) and we're running in," said Greg Fletcher, 40, of North Wilkesboro. Fletcher is still recuperating at home following a fire on November 21 at the American Drew Plant # 12 on D Street in North Wilkesboro. He is thankful to be alive, and grateful to be able to tell his story and thank the man who saved his life. A senior customer service engineer for the Xerox Corporation, Fletcher had just returned home from a service call in Hickory when his pager summoned him to the scene of the fire. "It was pretty routine," said the North Wilkesboro Fire Department firefighter and first responder. "How many times have we been there? We set up like we always did; two trucks, the pumper and the aerial." It was a Sunday and the



Thanksgiving holidays were approaching. Many firefighters were already out of town or otherwise unavailable for the call. Only 11 men from the North Wilkesboro Fire Department's roster of 23 were able to respond. The usual turnout on a structure fire is 14 or 15, according to NWFD Engineer Joe Berrong. Fletcher and fellow firefighter Bobby Shumate crossed the 60-foot-high catwalks to the American Drew silo. The men observed that the fire was in the augur assemblies, filled as usual with highly combustible sawdust.

"We opened the covers off of the augurs and disassembled the vent holes to inspect it," Fletcher said. Their initial inspection done, they returned to the ground for other duties. He estimated that the fire department spent about two hours working at different tasks, assessing the situation and getting the fire under control. During this time, American Drew's own fire brigade team was assisting with the fire. Although not in "turnout gear," the protective clothing worn by firefighters, the brigade members and boiler room operators were in and out of the boiler room. Firefighters were clearing the augurs of fire and sawdust. Areas in the silo were still burning. "It was difficult to see, it was so full of smoke," Fletcher said. "It would clear up and then get worse, from time to time." After a break, Fletcher found that it was his turn to return to the fire. Although clear when he left it, it had since smoked back up. "It was just as smoky as it ever was," Fletcher said. "I could see a flicker of fire in the smoke up above. That's what we were going after, was to knock that fire down. What we got in return was an explosion." Fellow firefighter and CPR instructor Robby Gentle stood in front of Fletcher, directing the fire hose's stream of water onto the flames. Fletcher stood behind him to support the hose. "We were on about a five-foot tall platform to access the hole in the silo," Fletcher said, explaining that the water was directed through the hole to the flames. "Ralph Pittman (another NWFD firefighter and detective with the North Wilkesboro Police Department) was below holding the hose. "Just like that," and Fletcher snapped his fingers for emphasis, "it went off just like a bomb. It felt like a blowtorch in my face. Even now, I can see the fire coming out of the access hole. It blew me backwards.



"I remember flying backwards, out of control, just tumbling through the fire, and I'm burning the whole time. "I remember the impact of my leg hitting. I don't know what I hit. All the force was on my (right) knee. They told me later that I came down on top of Ralph. "I remember opening my eyes and looking and seeing little embers falling on me. I remember thinking, 'My leg won't work.' "I was telling myself to get on my good leg, and my arms, and my haunches, and crawl out. I knew my escape route but I didn't know where I was," Fletcher said. At this point, firefighter Pittman was himself heading for the door. But he turned around, saw that Fletcher was not moving, and came back to get him. The flashback explosion had been so fierce it literally blew Robby Gentle out of the building. He sustained first-degree burns and a broken arm. The force blew Pittman's helmet off and he suffered burns to the neck. However, he managed to grab the 145-pound Fletcher by his 20-30 pounds of turnout gear and pull him to safety. Bobby Shumate met Pittman at the door. Each man grabbed Fletcher under the arms and ran from the burning building. Meanwhile, the firehose ran wild, loose and unmanned until it was shut down. If Fletcher had not been rescued, it is likely that he would have suffocated under the wall of wet sawdust that fell down in the building only moments after his exit. Once in a safe area, Fletcher was treated for his injuries. The explosion had blown his glasses off of his face. They were never found. Cool saline water was poured on his facial burns to prevent blistering. His kneecap was broken in three places. EMS splinted the leg and took him to WRMC.

Meanwhile, Pittman was phoning Fletcher's wife, Jan, to tell her the bad news. She had been listening to the scanner throughout the fire and had heard the call go out, "Fireman down." When Pittman reached her, she asked, "It's Greg, isn't it?" Jan's father had passed away only a month earlier, and now she had to arrange for neighbors to stay with the couple's three children while she joined her husband at the hospital at 10 o'clock that night. "I was not calm," she said, smiling, knowing that she enjoys a reputation among friends and family for being "the calm one." "I was just praying, basically, praying that he would be OK. I was wondering how badly he was burned." Despite temporarily losing his eyebrows and mustache, the emergency saline

treatment had done the trick, and Fletcher today bears no scars from his burns. The knee, however, is another situation. Following surgery at WRMC, he returned home on Thanksgiving, and began physical therapy at Northwest Therapy. "It's awful, it's horrible, the pain," Fletcher said with a stoic grin, "but I know it has to be done." At first he balked at taking pain medication, but then relented at his therapists' request and learned to take it one hour before physical therapy "so I could tolerate therapy." Prohibited from returning to work by his doctor, he hopes to regain enough mobility to return to Xerox and, if at all possible, fire fighting. "I'd love to be right back at it," Fletcher said with enthusiasm. "Or at least, first responder. I know there's plenty that I can do. I don't know if I'll be able to crawl again, or climb the ladder." "Even in the hospital, I knew he'd stay in it," said Jan. "It's sort of like being a cop, I guess." Does he feel anything special toward his rescuer, Ralph Pittman? "Yeah, I'm kind of fond of him," Fletcher grinned. Then, more

"Yeah, I'm kind of fond of him," Fletcher grinned. Then, more seriously, he added, "It's just the grace of God that the three of us didn't get killed. We all recognize what we went through and how lucky we are." "Greg wants him (Pittman) to get a medal," Jan nodded. "All those guys at the (North Wilkesboro) fire department are great, they give 110 percent. I thank them for their prayers and support. I know they're praying for me now, every one of them," Fletcher said. As another thought strikes him, he asked, "Can we make this a plug for recruiting? We need firefighters, both men and women. The fire department meets the first and third Thursday of each month." If you have the heart of a servant, and a desire to run into burning buildings instead of out of them, you'd be more than welcome.