



**Episode 50: Crew No. 7**  
**Air Date: November 24, 2020**

**Tom Meeuwen:** Hi. This is Tom van Meeuwen, Ear Hustle listener from Santa Barbara, California. The following episode of Ear Hustle contains language that may not be appropriate for all listeners discretion is advised. [abstract transition sound montage comes in - sound of car motor revving followed by voices chattering and heavy metal door closing shut]

[in the field, a classroom setting - instructor speaking to class]

**Instructor:** So, welcome to the program. I'll have more for you later, you know, in regards to it, when the camera is not...

[as narrator]

**Nigel Poor:** A little while back, E and I went ... to class.

**Earlonne Woods:** We did. And it was... very classy. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** I could tell by your face what you mean. It was a little dry.

[instructor continues speaking to class in a low, monotone]

**Earlone:** It was the first day of class for a group of formerly incarcerated men who are training to become California firefighters at a spot about a hour north of L.A.

**Nigel:** It's the Cal Fire Ventura Training Center. It's this cluster of buildings not that far from the coast.

**Earlone:** We're in this one big classroom with seventeen guys sitting at tables. They've each got a little nametag in front Oneof them. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** Very "first day of school feel." [Earlone laughs] And the guys had all just gotten out of prison. Some of them had been out for a few weeks ago, and others a few months. And the mood in the room was a mix of nerves, anticipation. And E, I have to say as a teacher, I definitely recognized a little bit of boredom.

**Earlone:** Oooh. [both laugh]

**Nigel:** But then, these two guys got up to speak.

[in the classroom, speaking to class]

**Bay:** And it's not going to be easy, guys. We're going to tell you right now it's not easy.

**Ariel:** No.

**Bay:** *You* are here, given an opportunity, and it's ain't going to be easy.

**Ariel:** It's not going to be easy.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** These were two formerly incarcerated men who are now professional firefighters. And as soon as they started talking, the energy in the room just changed.

**Earlone:** These guys were looking *sharp*. [Nigel affirms] They were dressed up in these crisp, navy blue uniforms, Cal Fire logos on their arm, shiny silver badges on they shirts...

**Nigel:** And one of them, a guy named Bay, starts telling the group a story about a time from when he was in prison, in his cell in Folsom. And E, do you remember those “scared straight groups”?

**Earlonne:** Yeah, you talkin’ about the group of like high schoolers, they’re taken into the prison and individuals inside show them what could happen to them if they didn’t clean up their bad grades or their act.

**Nigel:** Exactly. And it was pretty aggressive. California prisons don't do that anymore; but back in the '90's, Bay was in his prison cell when one of those scared straight-type groups came through.

**Earlonne:** And Bay realizes – *he* was the thing that was supposed to scare these kids.

[in the classroom]

**Bay:** I am an example of how not to be. Don't grow up to be like this! This is what society puts away. This is that ugliness of the world...

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Bay, like a lot of the guys here, had a long history of drug addiction. He spent years cycling in and out of the prison on drug charges. But that moment with the scared straight kids, that changed things for him.

**Earlonne:** So, while he was in prison, he got clean. *And* he got involved in firecamp. Those are minimum-security facilities where incarcerated people fight fires.

**Nigel:** This is something we’ve talked about on the show. There’s a long tradition in California of incarcerated people going out to fight fires.

**Earlonne:** And this state really relies on them, Nyge. [Nigel affirms] They get paid a dollar an hour to risk their lives fighting fires.

**Nigel:** But, once you’re out of prison – if you keep it up, there’s a possibility you can make good money doing it. That’s what Bay did. He got released, he worked toward his certification, and eventually, he got a job with Cal Fire.

**Nigel:** Now, he has that badge, that crisp navy-blue uniform, and everywhere he goes, people treat him like a hero.

**Bay:** We can't go away or any restaurant where somebody will be, "Oh, thank you for your service. Thank you so much for your service, for what you do." I'm so grateful and humbled. *Humbled* by the fact that I am was once an example of how not to be and today I'm here to tell you that that is not me today...

**Nigel:** That was amazing. I mean, you could just tell from the expressions on those guys faces – that was really landing with them.

**Earlone:** Yeah. It was like, *you can be one of these guys*. Like, *this is a path that can be done*. And It was really powerful.

[in the field, students clap at the end of Bay's speech] [Ear Hustle theme comes in]

**Nigel:** Earlone, we've talked to guys on the show before who had a really hard time getting out of prison... and staying out.

**Earlone:** I mean, getting out of prison is overwhelming. It's really stressful. Particularly for guys who had a drug problem before they went in. This is where they get tripped up at.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah. But one major thing that can help is if you have a job to come out to. And that's what this firecamp is all about.

**Earlone:** This program is specifically for guys – and yes, just guys [Nigel affirms] – who were on the fireteams while they were inside but need to do the training to get certified as firefighters now that they're out.

**Nigel:** In this program, they get paid, and their room and board is fully covered. And, if they can stick with the program for the full eighteen months, you graduate on the path to a career with a good salary, pension, all of that stuff.

**Earlone:** But Nyge... *eighteen months!* That's a long time for a guy. Like, you know, you spent the last five years of your life in prison, you want to be out here in the world! You don't want to be busting your ass out here in the sticks. They wanna be *badda-bing badda-bang* bustin' your ass. [both laugh]

**Nigel:** OK, exactly right. OK, I get it. So, this fire camp, it might be more than some of these guys are willing to put up with

**Earlonne:** I'm Earlonne Woods.

**Nigel:** And I'm Nigel Poor. This is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia. [theme fades out]

[ambient noise from firecamp training program - leader says, "Crew 3 moving!" and students respond one by one with "Moving!"]

**Earlonne:** So, that first class we met, those guys were just starting out. It was Day One for Hell Week for them.

**Nigel:** But not far away, we met another group of guys, another class actually, who had been I think for about three months.

**Earlonne:** Right. And these guys were practicing winding up hoses, you know, getting all the water out of them.

**Nigel:** There were two firefighters, and each of them had something like 100 feet of hose. [a participant shouts a command in the background]

**Earlonne:** And they make this windmill motion to wrap the hoses around their shoulders.

**Nigel:** It was so to watch it. It's like this kind of synchronized ducking and weaving. I mean honestly, it could be a dance.

[ambient noise from team wrapping hoses]

**Nigel:** This team is tight. I mean, they are firing on all cylinders.

**Earlonne:** Yeah, those guys are on it fo' sho'.

**Nigel:** Meanwhile, the class that started today, those guys are still finding their bearings.

[in the field]

**Levi Rosier:** What's up?

**Earlone:** We met Levi Rosier around on the other side of the building. He has long blonde hair...

**Nigel:** Oh Earlone, I noticed it in the classroom. [Earlone laughs] It's actually longer than mine.

**Earlone:** ...And he has a real southern California surfer vibe. [Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** Honestly, I was surprised he had shoes on.

**Levi:** [in the background] Leave this on? Or take this off?

**Earlone:** Levi had only been out of prison for two months when we met him. He'd been in and out of the system since he was twelve.

**Levi:** I was in the foster care system and then I got transferred to the delinquency system. Then it was just in and out of juvenile hall because I didn't have anywhere to live. And I would run away from the group homes and then it's just been in and out of jails and prisons since then. So, that was my sixth term. And all of them are about three years, two years, you know, four years.

[to Levi]

**Earlone:** So, if anybody in this program is hungry, it's you then.

**Levi:** Yeah. Yeah, I really want it.

**Andrew Morales:** My name's Andrew Morales and I'm here at the Ventura Training Center. [sprinklers spraying rhythmically in the background]

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** Andrew Morales is also part of the new class. We sat down with him at a picnic table in this grassy area next to the dormitories where these guys is gonna be shackled up for the next eighteen months.

**Nigel:** I swear, those sprinklers were going *all the time* down there. All the time.

[to Andrew]

**Nigel:** What was the conversation last night like in the dorm... with people?

**Andrew:** Um... it's still just hitting everybody. Everybody's just, *man, this is crazy. This is crazy.* And people are just... they can't believe like this is where we're at right now. This is what came out of all the trouble that we've put ourselves in.

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** I can see that. Everything's new, you know? And this whole new chapter in your life is just happening so fast.

**Nigel:** And Andrew knew from being a firefighter inside that the work is grueling and exhausting. But he stuck with it because he knew it could lead him somewhere better.

**Andrew:** The way I see it was that when I got out, I had this waiting for me. I was like, *I'm just going to keep pushing it because it's going to benefit, not just me, but my family.* And that's what just kept me going. My little ones, uh, they're six and ten. They're telling everybody, *my daddy is a firefighter.* They're proud. I still talk to them every day... it's good.

[in the field]

**Earlone:** Then, these here are dumbbells. I'm gonna go for the thirties based on...  
[dumb bells clink as Earlone picks them up]

[as narrator]

Right past the picnic table where we were talking to Andrew, there was a weight pile with a gang of different weights and exercise machines. [metal weights clinking]

**Nigel:** These guys are gonna be carrying sixty-pound packs up mountains. So, they have to be in really good shape.

[ambient noise from Earlone and Nigel playing with exercise equipment]

**Earlone:** I got on the weights, and I hit a few sets. [Nigel affirms] And I was like, *man if I had these, I'd get that bedroom physique back in no time!* [Nigel laughs] And Nyge, I seen you over there on them ropes, too.

**Nigel:** Oh yeah, battle ropes, I love those.

[ambient noise in the field – repetitive sound of battle ropes hitting the ground followed by grunting and soft chatter]

**Earlonne:** Over by those weights, we met Barrett Brown.

**Nigel:** And you could tell by looking at him that he spent a lot of time on those weights.

**Earlonne:** *Yeah.* He had that swoleness.

**Nigel:** He'd been in the program for a while, so we wanted to pick his brain. And right then, the new class walked by.

[in the field, to Barrett]

**Nigel:** Here's the new cohort right now

**Barrett Brown:** Yeah, I see them.

**Nigel:** Do you think they– [to cohort] Hey! Good morning! [to Barrett] How do you think they slept last night?

**Barrett:** Mmm... on edge. [laughs] It's just new. I mean, anytime you go to a new environment, it's not comfortable. You're trying to figure things out. It's hard. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** Barrett applied for this program while he was still locked up.

**Nigel:** It's pretty competitive; not everybody who applies gets admitted. And Barrett did. But still, he wasn't totally sold on it.

**Barrett:** So, on one of my collect phone calls to my family, I just mentioned it. And they– my sister basically said that I would be stupid if I didn't do it. I ran it by a friend of mine who, you know, who was more into the street life out there. And she said, I would be stupid if I didn't do it. So, I had opinions from both worlds. And I put it in my head and I just started shooting for it. And that was my only goal in sight.



**Nigel:** After he got here, though, he wondered if he'd made a big mistake.

**Earlonne:** A lot of the other guys in the class were asking themselves the same question.

**Barrett:** It was hell for us. We felt like we were no longer free again. We went through all kinds of changes, emotionally. Some of us, including myself, contemplated leaving. I was on the edge for a while.

**Earlonne:** He said arriving at firecamp brought back memories of the first time he was locked up in a tiny cell.

**Barrett:** But, if you can imagine getting put in your restroom for - let's say the first two and a half years fighting your case or something - if you can imagine what that mentally does to you, it damages us. So, when we get out, our thinking isn't as clear as it should be. We don't want to feel like we're locked up. But then you get here, somebody's putting you back in that box. And that's how you feel. You feel like you're being put back in that box. [music fades out]

[in the field, to Levi]

**Nigel:** So, today was your first day here, right? [Levi affirms] What is honestly going through your mind? [voices chattering in the background]

**Levi:** A lot of things changed from what I thought I was signing up for. So, I'm kind of a little irritated and questioning it... 'cause a lot of stuff changed.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Levi, the guy who'd been in the system since he was twelve, says he's wanted to be a firefighter since he was young; he loves the idea of helping people and saving lives.

**Earlonne:** But on his first day, he was already having misgivings. [Nigel affirms]

**Nigel:** He told us he thought he was going to be able to go home to San Diego every weekend. But now, it looks like that's not the case. Also, the program is eighteen months. But he came in thinking he might get a job with Cal Fire in like six.

**Earlonne:** Then, there was "Shortgate."

**Levi:** I just brought shorts because I figured, *OK, we're getting uniforms*. Well, I guess they took my dress and my demeanor as not being serious about the program. And then, they were like, *well, it's regulated that you are not allowed to wear shorts here*. So, I'm from San Diego. I don't even have pants! So, she was like, *well, I need you to go buy pants today*. And then today I went in there, they gave me a verbal warning for basically a dress code violation.

**Earlonne:** But, when he thinks about throwing in the towel, there is a big thing holding him back.

**Levi:** If I do say, *screw it*, I'm going to have to go back to my family and with my track record, all they're going to see is, *oh dude, you fricking got our hopes up again? You lied to us*. Like, *you're back? What are you doing?*

**Nigel:** But E, you're really rooting for Levi. [Earlonne laughs]

**Earlonne:** I am. He's like the underdog to me. [Nigel affirms] It's like in the movies. He's the scruffy guy over there that's going to end up being the hero. Watch.

**Nigel:** Alright.

[in the field, to Levi]

**Earlonne:** I say stick it out, man. I mean, shit. If this is what you want, I mean, it's on you.

**Levi:** Yeah. I think it's a good opportunity.

**Earlonne:** Definitely.

**Levi:** And it's work history, if nothing else.

**Nigel:** So, you're gonna stay the night? Or are you going to take off? Are you done with it?

**Levi:** No, I'm probably going to stick it out because it seems like it's still worth it...  
[music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** I dunno, E. I was a little bit like, *c'mon guys!* I mean, this seemed like a really good deal, you know? Like, the food is good, everything's paid for. And they're being paid to train for a totally solid career.

**Earlonne:** Yeah... but I think if you haven't spent time in prison, it's hard to understand what it does to you, you know? [Nigel affirms] Like, it's really hard to be released and then feel like you're getting your freedom limited all over again!

**Nigel:** Yeah. I mean, that's exactly what we heard from Barrett Brown, that guy who'd been with the program for a while. [music fades out]

[to Barrett]

**Nigel:** But so how can someone like me be sympathetic. Because I did start to feel judgey, like, *come on you guys, this is an amazing opportunity.* [Nigel affirms] So, give me advice on how to not be judgey.

**Barrett:** Just try to be more— try to be understanding of what we come from. It's something that's ingrained in us in prison. And at any time we get a little feel of that, we just feel like caged animals. And we don't have a word. We don't have a say. We don't have anything. We have no freedoms. So, that's why we run so hard when we get out. [music comes in]

[in the field, to Eric]

**Nigel:** Can you just give us a list of all the injuries you've had since you've been here or other medical things?

**Eric Kesselmark:** Nah, that poison oak was really bad. That was the worst thing. Blisters, cuts, bruises. Shoulder injuries. Back, neck, tendonitis in the elbows, you know, I mean...

**Nigel:** And you're only twenty-eight.

**Eric:** Yeah. [laughs]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Eric Kesselmark started at firecamp a few months ago. And this course is pretty much his first shot at having some kind of stability in his life.

**Eric:** I was homeless off and on since I was thirteen years old. At that age, I thought it was an adventure. I didn't know what that struggle was.

**Nigel:** Were you on your own or were you with your family when you were homeless?

**Eric:** I was in a van with my mom. [Nigel affirms]

**Earlonne:** Like living in a van, what is that like? Are you in the same spot or are you in different spots?

**Eric:** I'll go to sleep at a truck stop, right, we'll get chased out... I'll go to sleep at a truck stop, I'll wake up at a park. And then, I'll go take a bird bath in the restroom [chuckles] while my mom standing guard at the door. And then, I'll go right to school. [laughs]

**Nigel:** Right, I mean... was normal, I guess, for you, right?

**Eric:** Yeah. Oh yeah. It was an adventure. I didn't see nothing wrong with it. [Nigel affirms] But once I came to grasp that, *oh, man, this is what we've been doing this whole time? And this is what my mom been going through this whole time?* You know, struggling. [Nigel affirms] You know, trying to find the next meal. She would pawn off her rings so we can get something to eat and then somehow try to get them back.

**Nigel:** What is the worst thing you've seen in your life?

**Eric:** Truthfully? Mom getting beat. Yeah. And seeing her getting carried out in the ambulance because a guy tried to snap her neck. Yeah. That's the number one reason why we were homeless because she couldn't work anymore. Yeah. So, that was— it was kind of crazy.

**Nigel:** How old were you?

**Eric:** I was... seven? Seven. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** Eric was put in foster care and spent some time living with an older brother. By the time he was eighteen, he was on meth. When he was twenty, he got arrested and sentenced to ten years.

**Nigel:** When he got out, he had nowhere to go. He realized he was homeless again.

**Eric:** I broke down. I broke down and cried. I did. I was like, *not again. Here we go.* And then I was out on the streets for two days, two nights.

[to Eric]

**Nigel:** So, during those two days, what did you think was going to happen to you?

**Eric:** I didn't know. I was praying. I was praying. *Lord, please not again.* I've been seeing— I'm walking down the streets and I'm seeing these guys filthy. I'm seeing this guy defecated all over himself. I'm seeing... I'm like... I broke down. I was broken, right there. I was like, *no, I don't want to be like this. I do not want it to be like this again.* I mean, I kept clean when I was homeless. I always took a bird bath, took a shower wherever I can. But when I saw those guys barefooted, seeing the guys on a cardboard and just sitting there wasting their life away. I'm like, [sighs]... yeah.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Eric was going to do everything he could not to end up like those guys. [music fades out]

**Earlonne:** One of the first things he had to do was meet up with his parole officer. But her office was ten miles from where he'd been dropped off after getting out. He had no money, so he had to walk there.

**Eric:** And I had a seventy-pound duffle bag full of property [laughs]. I was hanging it out like this, I was like, *oh my goodness, this sucks.* And so, I ended up giving this guy a watch. I was like, *man, I'll give you this watch, if I can have that stroller you got so I can push my stuff 'cause this thing is getting heavy.* [laughing] My ankles were swollen.

[to Eric]

**Nigel:** And he went for it?

**Eric:** Oh yeah. He was like, *alright, cool*. But what sucked was, I was going, you know, wheel fell off after a while. Some odd reason, I guess, from the friction, it got hot and melted off. I'm like, *ah, you gotta be kidding me*.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** He did finally get to the parole office. He actually ended up sleeping outside of it.

**Eric:** They said I have to be over there by a certain time. So, I was like, *man, I'm not going to violate my parole*.

[to Eric]

**Earlone:** You slept close to the parole office?

**Eric:** Oh, right there on the front porch. Right behind a bush.

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** When he finally did meet with his parole officer, she got him set up with a room at the Salvation Army.

**Nigel:** He says if she hadn't been there to help him, things could have gone pretty differently.

**Eric:** I don't know what that path would have been, to tell you the truth. That's a pretty scary thought. [music comes in]

**Nigel:** Eric had been on the waiting list at the Ventura Training Center. A few days before Christmas, they called him to let him know a spot had opened up.

**Earlone:** He started a week later. And says his dream is that when he finishes, he'll be able to go rejoin his mom.

[to Eric]

And where is she at now?

**Eric:** She's in Georgia. She's in... I don't know why she's in Georgia but...

**Earlone:** How she doing?

**Eric:** [hesitates] She's doing OK. I mean, I can see in her eyes that she's losing it. And... yeah. I hope that's not the case. But I pray for her.

**Nigel:** What do you mean losing it?

**Eric:** Like... reality? [Earlone affirms] And so... but...

**Earlone:** So, in about another ten months, you'll be ready.

**Eric:** Hopefully. I'd love to take care of her.

**Earlone:** Yeah. That's what I'm saying. You'll be ready going on your own career.  
[crosstalk]

**Eric:** [crosstalk] She deserves it. She deserves one of her sons to take care of her.

**Earlone:** That's what's up.

**Eric:** And I think that's me. That's the reason why I stay here. That's what gives me the drive. I told her, I said, "Mom, I need you. Stay with me. 'Cause you're gonna get that ranch. You're gonna get your horses. You're gonna get your horses." So...

**Nigel:** What's that about?

**Eric:** She was a horse trainer.

**Nigel:** She was a horse trainer? She is a horse trainer?

**Eric:** Yeah. She was a horse trainer for fifteen years. [music comes in]

Before we were homeless, we had a nice house. It was a two-story building. It was in San Jacinto. It was on Tiger Lane, right across the street from the high school that my brother went to. Nice neighborhood, you know, nice people. And she would come home smelling like horse, you know, the horse crap. [laughs] What's crazy though, is that when I smell it, it brings back that memory when she comes back home. We all run to mom, you know, like, "Mom!" And she used to take us to the ranch. We would go ride the horses.

**Nigel:** So, once you do this, and if you end up going to take care of your mom, what will it be like?

**Eric:** What would it be like? I'd give her a purpose. I'll give her a purpose of the day. 'Cause that's the main thing. I'd love to give her something to do. Take care of the horses, take care of the garden. Just give her something to do instead of being in her mind. Take her out of her mind. [Nigel affirms quietly] Just give her some tools to come back.

**Nigel:** When we get back, we put on our packs, and head up the mountain. [music fades out]

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[in the field – sound of students running outdoors past Nigel] [music comes in]

**Nigel:** *Go, go, go! Good morning!*

**Speaker 1:** *Let's go, dig deep baby. I can see it in your face, you're digging deep right there. Let's go!*

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** It's Wednesday morning, the third day of class, and it is *on*.

[participant runs by and says, "Ear Hustle!" and Nigel laughs]

**Nigel:** When we get to the training center, the guys are already into their first big test: a physical exam. If anyone cannot finish each part of the exam, Earlonne, they're out of the program.

**Earlonne:** Mmph. So far, they've already passed the pullups, the pushup, and sit-up test; and now, they have to run two miles in under *eighteen minutes*.

**Nigel:** Oof.

[in the field]



*Go, go Levi!*

**Earlonne:** Hey, alright Levi. [Nigel laughs]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Yeah, he was doing it, man!

Everyone was cheering each other on. And they all finished the run, no problem. [voices chattering, students cheering each other on]

**Earlonne:** Soon as they was done running, [sound of water running as students fill water bottles] they all start filling up their water bottles. It was time for the hike. [voices chattering in the background]

**Nigel:** Right. The hike. And Earlonne, I was a little nervous. It's three miles, straight uphill. Which may or may not sound like a lot, but it's kind of the desert out there, and there is no shade, and the day was already heating up.

**Earlonne:** Plus, when we talked to him earlier, Barrett had made the hikes sound kind of rough.

[in the field, to Barrett]

**Nigel:** Yeah. What are these hikes? We've been told about these hikes. Describe them please.

**Barrett:** Pretty much hell on earth, for me.

**Nigel:** Shit, why?

**Barrett:** Because they're pretty intense. Yesterday we gained almost a thousand feet elevation in an hour. My mind was telling me so many crazy things. So many crazy things. Uphill, in sand, in the heat. And I was like... I couldn't breathe. I couldn't walk. I was wobbling. I was just going and going and going. One step, one step, one step, one step. And it was, I can't... coming back down that mountain, I couldn't even fathom how I made it up. [students chattering in the background]

[in the field, speaking to students]

**Captain Easley:** OK. Good morning.

**Students:** [in unison] Good morning.

**Captain Easley:** This is going to be your qualification hike...

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** We took a forty-five-minute drive to the trailhead. [Captain speaking in the background] All of the students gathered around the captain who was gonna be timing them.

[in the field]

**Captain Easley:** This is a timed three-mile hike. It will finish in sixty minutes. This is one of the tougher parts. There'll be a truck behind you. If you are sick, you're not looking good, you'll be told to step out. And you'll get in the truck and we won't debate it.

**Captain:** Alright. So, this is the starting point, the orange line right here.  
[shouting] Captain Easley, are you ready for time?

**Captain Easley:** [in the distant] Ready!

**Captain:** OK. On the count of three ... One, two, three, begin!

[students running on gravel]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Earlonne, they were cruising.

**Earlonne:** And I was back there just like taking selfies [Nigel laughs] and I wasn't even tripping. And next thing I know, they was like *way* up there.

**Nigel:** Oh, I know. And I'm gonna say, I'm in fairly good shape, but I could not keep up.

**Earlonne:** We were immediately *way* in the back. Our producer Bruce was carrying the recorder, trying to keep up.

[Bruce breathing heavily, and some mic wind interference while following students as they run]

**Earlonne:** Soon, the only guy we could see was my boy, Levi. The underdog in the back of the pack.

**Nigel:** Yep. And one of the captains gave him a gentle prod.

**Captain:** We're about a half mile in. We're at ten minutes. Copy?

**Levi:** Yep.

**Captain:** Yes sir, right?

**Levi:** Yes sir.

[students continue running]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Oh man, I was worried about Levi.

**Earlonne:** But remember what happened [Nigel affirms] as we were getting close to the halfway mark?

**Nigel:** Oh yeah. Levi dug in, he found something within himself, and he just started passing people.

**Earlonne:** [making sound effect to indicate speed] *Pshew, pshew, pshew, pshew...*  
[laughs]

[in the field]

**Bruce Wallace:** That's Levi, just running by the other four. [students continue running]

**Captain:** Guys, you're at twenty-three minutes, twenty-four seconds. This is the halfway mark. You don't have to go any faster. If I were you, I won't go any slower. But you don't have to go any faster...

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** Speaking of the halfway mark, that's where we met back up with the guy who was timing the hike. And how about that, Nyge? He was in a jeep! [voices chattering in the background]

**Nigel:** [under her breath] Thank God.

[in the field]

**Captain Easley:** Would you like to go up with me?

**Earlone:** Of course.

**Captain Easley:** Just climb on in there.

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** And Nyge, we were right there at the finish line when the first guy crossed. [voices chattering as students continue running]

**Captain Easley:** Who's in front?

**Andrew:** Morales!

**Captain Easley:** Who's behind you, Morales?

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Andrew Morales. The guy we met back on the first day. He won the race! [Earlone laughs] He was the first one up there!

**Earlone:** And right behind him was Joseph.

[catching their breath, someone says, "Oh shit man, you kept me going"]

**Joseph:** Good stuff, man.

**Andrew:** Still got it!

**Earlone:** You're in the front of the line.

**Andrew:** Oh, yeah.

**Nigel:** So, you did it right? That's it?

**Andrew:** That's it. For now. [Nigel laughs]

**Joseph:** What are you?

**Andrew:** Twenty-three. He's got ten years on me though...

**Joseph:** So, I couldn't let him pass me.

**Andrew:** Yeah, exactly. [laughs]

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** A few more guys crossed the line. [students encouraging one another as they finish hike] And then, with time to spare...

[some students, Nigel, and Earlonne cheer other students on saying, "Let's go Levi! Finish strong!", "Levi, Levi! Levi!", "Let's go baby. Double it up." Earlonne says, "Levi jumped in front."]

Levi.

[participant exclaims, "C'mon, c'mon! Don't give up!"]

**Earlonne:** My Boy. [Nigel affirms]

[captain reviews students' statistics and says, "Everybody passed" and group claps]

**Captain Easley:** Badass, gentlemen.

So, I have an announcement to make, so this is class seven. You guys are battalion seven, OK. You guys are the first class out of all seven where there is not a single retake on the physical fitness portion. [students clapping] I expect you guys to be breaking records this whole time, OK? Great job. [music comes in]

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** Before we left the top of the hill, the group gathered to take a picture together.

**Students:** [in unison] Battalion seven! Woo!

**Nigel:** But I noticed that... Levi was kind of standing off to the side a bit. Kind of apart from the group? [Earlone affirms] So, later I asked him how he was getting along with the other guys.

[in the field, to Levi]

**Nigel:** Are you reaching out to anybody, making connections?

**Levi:** With time, we're all going to get to know each other, you know? [Nigel affirms] So, sometimes it's better to take that type of thing slow and really kind of see or feel out who people are.

**Nigel:** What do you think you're going to be feeling in a couple of weeks? Where you think you're going to be emotionally and physically?

**Levi:** Um, I don't know? The classroom part, I'm kind of a little nervous about that. So, I'm not sure.

[abstract industrial sounds transition comes in]

**Earlone:** [over the phone] Hello?

**Levi:** [over the phone, distracted] Yeah. Can I get three chicken flautas? A large jamaica?... Hello?

**Earlone:** Are you there? This is Earlone, Nigel and Bruce.

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** A couple of weeks after we came home from firecamp, we gave Levi a call.

[to Earlone]

**Levi:** Who are you trying to call?

**Nigel:** Levi [in the background]

**Earlonne:** We're trying to call Levi.

**Levi:** Yeah, this is Levi.

**Earlonne:** Alright. Do you remember us? Nigel and Earlonne that interviewed you when you was in...?

**Levi:** Oh yeah! How are you guys doing?

**Nigel:** We're OK. How about you?

**Levi:** I'm doing good.

**Nigel:** We wanted to catch up with you.

**Levi:** Yeah, I'm just eating right now. [Nigel laughs] It's no big deal.

**Earlonne:** So, while you're waiting on your food, do you mind if we ask a couple of questions and record it?

**Levi:** Go ahead!

**Nigel:** Can you give us an update on what's going on... in your life?

**Levi:** Um, well... the clutch on my car is going out, so I'm buying a new clutch. I'm working my old job, doing rebar. I got a raise. \$20 an hour.

[as narrator]

**Earlonne:** Yeah... turns out Levi left fire camp the day after we did.

**Nigel:** He told us the final straw was when the captain told him he needed to take some more classes so he could get his high school diploma.

**Earlonne:** Which pissed Levi off because he had his GED already.

**Levi:** I told him there's no way I'm going to be able to do the fire curriculum, all the physical stuff, *and* the high school classes.

**Nigel:** But let me ask you this: after that conversation, you just packed up your stuff and left?

**Levi:** Yeah.

**Nigel:** How'd that feel?

**Levi:** Well, what sucks is that I had to come back and after, you know, of course, my family is probably thinking I just gave up...

**Nigel:** How did you describe it to your family and how did they take it? 'Cause I remember when we talked to you, you said you were worried, they would say, *Oh, another thing I didn't complete.*

**Levi:** Well, yeah. I don't know what they really feel. I would imagine... me, I would think, *yeah, this guy...* you know. They had their hopes up really high. But they just kind of knew how much I wanted to do the firefighting thing. So, they're like, *man, that sucks. But keep your head up and keep pushing for it.*

**Earlone:** Hey, you know, in that program, man, you was the underdog for me. I knew you was gonna, you know, be the man in that program, you know what I'm saying? So, it's like...

**Levi:** Yeah, but...

**Earlone:** I just found out today you were no longer in the program. That's crazy.

**Levi:** Yeah but, you can't be a sucker, or you'll always be in a sucker's position, you know?

[as narrator]

**Earlone:** You know, I wish Levi well.

**Nigel:** Yeah, I do too.



**Earlonne:** We also caught up with Andrew Morales, the guy who finished the hike first. And he was, not surprisingly, still all in.

[to Andrew]

**Nigel:** So, wait, how is the new crew bonding?

**Andrew:** [over video audio] Well, today was really cool. We laid out 1100 feet of hose together as a crew and went up against Crew One that's been here for twelve months, and we beat 'em!

**Earlonne:** What?!

**Andrew:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, that was cool. That was exciting. We've been doing all kinds of things together. Everybody's finding their spot and everybody's clicking and everything's changing for the good. It's crazy. I never thought this would be my life. It's insane, man. It's crazy.

**Nigel:** That's great. I know you can't see us, but when you're talking, you're smiling so much. So that tells me that things are really good. [Andrew affirms] Like, you're feeling good about yourself. [laughs]

**Andrew:** I am! Everything... like I said, everything's going smooth and everybody's happy here. And everybody that's here wants to be here. You know, that brotherhood, that bond. We're like road dogs.

**Nigel:** Would you be shocked at this point if somebody else dropped out?

**Andrew:** There ain't nobody gonna leave.

**Nigel:** OK. [quietly]

**Andrew:** Nobody's gonna leave. That's not even a thought.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** All the little rituals of being a firefighter were becoming routine. Like, polishing your boots every night.

**Andrew:** So, we're right here sitting next to each other and we're trying to get it the best we can. And see who can get the shiniest boots. After you get back from whatever you're doing, straight to the boots, shine, shine, shine. [laughs] I've never had to do that in my life. It's a pain in the ass, but we're all getting the hang of it.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** But at the same time, I think the reality is setting in that this is a really hard life they've chosen.

**Earlonne:** And a dangerous one too. [Nigel affirms]

**Andrew:** I actually woke up... it was, I think it was Monday. And, um, I stood up and I'm looking around and I just asked myself, like, *what the fuck am I doing here?*

**Earlonne:** A few days before, Andrew had gotten some news about another formerly incarcerated firefighter who had been through the same program.

**Andrew:** He got hired with the Orange County Fire Department and he was on that Blue Ridge fire in Orange County. And he got 50% of his body burned and he's not doing good at all.

[to Andrew]

**Nigel:** Oh... wow.

**Andrew:** Yeah, so I think his doctors induced him into a coma because of all the pain; I guess that helps him. But he had all of his crew... there's like forty-five men that went to go visit him. His mom and dad were there. And so, the chief went over there and got him to understand like, *look, we're all here because we're a family. We're here to support you and we're here to support each other. And when one goes down, we all go down.*

**Nigel:** Wow. But that's intense. No wonder you like woke up feeling weird. [music comes in]

**Andrew:** Yeah, I really did. For like two days, I was just like a zombie, I guess. I was just, *OK, I'm here. I'm just gonna go line up.* We still don't really know what happened.

**Nigel:** I imagine when that happens, doesn't everyone think, *shit, that could happen... like, that could be me.*

**Andrew:** Of course. I called my girlfriend because I needed to talk to somebody about it. I called my daughters and, you know, I just wanted to talk to them and want to see them. And it's just like, *wow.* Like, I told my girlfriend, "I don't want you to think this can't happen to me because any day." And I needed her to know like that's how quick things change.

**Earlone:** Does she ever say, *Mijo, come home!*

**Andrew:** All the time. [Earlone and Andrew laugh] All the time. But it's been hard. It's been a lot of tears.

**Nigel:** What are the tears about?

**Andrew:** Me being gone and them missing me. They want to make plans, but I don't know up until the last minute. We don't know when we're going to get the day off or if we're going to get a couple hours off or the whole weekend off.

**Nigel:** Right, and that's not going to change, right? It's always going to be like that.

**Andrew:** For the rest of this career.

[as narrator]

**Nigel:** Fighting fire has always been a hard job. It's dangerous, and you're away from home; but it's becoming even harder.

**Earlone:** Yeah! I mean, with global warming, California's fire season is getting rougher every year. [Nigel affirms] The fires are getting bigger fires and it's causing way more destruction. [music fades out]

**Nigel:** Oh, yeah. And you know those guys we heard talk to the class at the top of the show?

**Earlone:** Who? Ariel and Bay?

**Nigel:** Exactly. They have been out going from fire to fire, away from home, for like, four months now.

**Earlonne:** That's *crazy*.

**Nigel:** Oh, it is crazy. OK, but we do have some good news: that guy Andrew told us about, who was burned badly... well, a few weeks ago, he came out of his coma and he still has a long recovery ahead of him, but he is truly getting better every day.

**Earlonne:** Definitely wishing him a speedy recovery.

**Nigel:** Yeah, absolutely.

--

[music comes in]

**Andrew:** Thanks to Michelle Garcia, Jeremy Brandt, and Michael Salas at the Ventura Training Center.

**Barrett:** Ear Hustle is produced by Nigel Poor, Earlonne Woods, Rahsaan "New York" Thomas, John "Yahya" Johnson, and Bruce Wallace.

**Andrew:** This episode was engineered by Antwan Williams, with music by Antwan and David Jazzy.

**Barrett:** Amy Standen edits the show, and Julie Shapiro is the Executive Producer for Radiotopia. Ear Hustle would like to thank Acting Warden Ron Broomfield, and, as you know, every episode of Ear Hustle has to be approved by this guy here. [music fades out]

[to Lieutenant Robinson]

**Earlonne:** Alright, so, what's your thoughts on this episode, man?

**Lieutenant Sam Robinson:** [over video] Man, you know, I was thinking about all you brothers who've been on that ride. You know what I mean? Been incarcerated and did extraordinary things inside. And got the opportunity for another chance at life, man. And I was just kind of just going through the mental Rolodex of where you guys are and how you guys are back in the community and are doing good things, man. And it definitely

gave me something on that tip to be thankful about. And with that I say I approve this episode! [music comes in]

**Andrew:** This podcast was made possible with support from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative...

**Barrett:** ...working to redesign the justice system by building power and opportunity for communities impacted by incarceration.

**Earlonne:** Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX. Radiotopia is a collection of independent, listener-supported podcasts.

**Nigel:** Yep, some of the best podcasts around.

**Earlonne:** That includes us. [Nigel laughs] Hear more at [radiotopia.fm](http://radiotopia.fm).

**Nigel:** We wanted to extend a warm welcome to Shabnam Sigman.

**Earlonne:** Wuddup, Shabnam!

**Nigel:** She just joined the team as our new Digital Producer, and Earlonne, as you know, she is awesome.

**Earlonne:** Fa' sure. Before we go, we want to give thanks.

**Nigel:** That's right. A special thank you to some people who donated to Ear Hustle's last fundraising campaign. Originally, we were going to say their names in credits, but then we decided to do something a little more special.

**Earlonne:** Yep. We thought... let's let our sound designer Antwan do his thing and bring you some fire.

**Nigel:** Yeah. [music fades out]

[soft instrumental comes in]

**Antwan:** Alright. [reverb effect on voice] So, we're going to do it like this. Look. [clears throat] This is a thank you from the entire Ear Hustle team.

[rapping]

Where would we be?  
I sit back and think  
Who knew appreciation could run this deep?  
If we never speak  
Or get a chance to meet  
You should still know how much it means

So, thank you for everything [thank you for everything]  
For real [yeah]

Thank you for everything  
For real [truly]

Thank you, thank you for listening  
To focus on humanity is how we change conditionings  
We all play a part in this world that we livin' in  
We can change the outcome if everyone is pitchin' in

So, let's get started  
We got  
David Arden  
We got  
Kerri Hoffman  
We got  
Laurie Kaufman [Yes]

I'm not flossing  
I promise, not tryna brag  
We can only go up  
With Elena De la Paz

All facts  
These people do more than listen  
Mary Miner  
Rachel Janes  
And of course, Janelle Dixon

And I'm not kidding  
No magic, this no illusion  
You people wield real power  
Like Liz Hughston

See what I'm doing  
I know it's kinda clever  
I'm confessin' when I'm talking  
With Nadia Bolz-Weber

It's gets better and better  
Barbara DeNevers  
And we would do more if the world will let us

And once you listen to the story  
You start feeling like you family  
Tell 'em Robin Cory

You didn't do it for me  
You did it for the whole  
You did it, Jan Clark  
You did it, Nina Gold

Now we golden  
Victoria Golden  
Open up your heart and let these names start to soak in  
It's so important  
These voices matter

Thank you, Laura Belzer  
Julia Bator

We gon' do it major [major]  
We gon' do it major [major!]

I say her name  
Justice for Breonna Taylor  
We cannot waiver  
We gotta be strong

C'mon Philippe Audi  
Catherine Long

It's gon' talk backbone  
But it's needed in a leader

C'mon Griffin Reilly  
C'mon Katie Peters

If life is but the teacher  
Then we all students  
And today's lesson  
Is that we all humans

This how I commend you

It takes the whole to fix the whole  
and surely you contribute

This is just a gift  
I get to present you with honor  
A thank you that's monumental

Thank you

Where would we be [c'mon man]

Where would we be  
Sit back and think  
Who knew appreciation could run this deep?  
If we never speak  
Or get a chance to meet  
This is a thank you from the Ear Hustle team

So, thank you for everything  
Thank you for everything [truly]

Alright, let's it do it like this  
Look, alright, alright, before I drop the mic  
We gotta thank Amanda Aronoff  
And Alfred White

Kathy Margulies  
Dig me like gardening  
Pam Tindall  
Sara Tysdal, they're all part of me

Like hearts need arteries  
You are now a part of me  
You have been a blessing  
Thank you for your offerings

And I'm just a man of candor  
So thank you Lindsay Kanter  
J.J. Panzer

Everybody stand up!  
Zephy McKanna  
If we work together  
Then y'all Secret Santas

Together we can answer any question that evolve



With Marilyn Werst  
Wynne Burchenal

Get involved, get involved,  
We prevailin'  
Tell em Deanna Cannon  
Tell em John Helling

Thanks Felix Elling  
We owe more than a favor  
To y'all, Bill Resnik  
and Laura Shumaker

Christian Gamit  
And Steve Kaplan  
Susan, I see you  
McDonough  
What's happenin'

Love, I'm tryna package it  
And ship it out to all of y'all  
Sofie Vanderputte  
And all of those that's called upon

Love can never break up  
Kirsten Lathrop  
And the donors slept on  
The world's about to wake up [wake up]

And this is all that I can offer  
A sincere thank you  
Michelle Laufer  
Alan Pomerantz

Jeremy Marmer  
Your support got the team feelin' stronger than armor  
We wish the best karma on Camilo Ruiz  
And I can't forget Luciel, merci

Where would we be?  
Who knew appreciation could run this deep?  
If we never speak,  
Or get a chance to meet  
You should still know how much it means

So, thank you for everything

From me  
And everybody part of the Ear Hustle team  
Sincerely, truly

Thank you  
For everything

[music fades out] [Radiotopia jingle]

**END OF EPISODE.**