THERE ARE EIGHT MILLION WAYS TO DIE ON THE STREETS OF COMPTON, CA. DEPUTY FIRE CHIEF MARCEL MELANSON LIVES TO STOP THEM.

BY CHAUNCEY HOLLINGSWORTH
PHOTOS BY RUSS QUACKENBUSH

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF LOS ANGELES, THE CITY OF COMPTON has just been hit with a 7.8-magnitude earthquake. The situation is grim. Power is down throughout the city, as are landline telephones, cell phones, Internet connectivity, and the entire 911 emergency system. Almost every area highway is reporting damage ranging from moderate to severe, and rail lines have sustained severe damage. Multiple fires are burning throughout the city even as damage to water lines has left water pressure low or nonexistent. Hundreds of citizens need shelter, and getting assistance from surrounding communities is not an option.

Welcome to hell on earth.

Marcel Melanson is concentrating on a panel of radios, the communications interface for Compton Fire Station 3, as he works on a laptop. Lean and good-looking with close-cropped black hair and skin the color of sand, he is perhaps the antithesis of the stereotypical firefighter. He has no gut and no mustache (unless you count the one tattooed down his index finger). The tattoo of flames and wind bars that snakes up his arms and the Japanese kabuki masks that peek over the edges of his black shirt collar seem almost perverse against the backdrop of his crisp fireman's uniform, as if a maelstrom of furies is bursting out from beneath his otherwise professional exterior. Leaning back, his fingers tack away at the keyboard as he works through a series of error messages. With his striking hazel-green eyes, he looks more like a futuristic fleet commander or the leader of an alien legion than the deputy chief of the Compton Fire Department.

A clipped burst of static comes through on the radio: at last, a clear connection. "Loud and clear, over," says a terse voice. Melanson nods with satisfaction.

This dire screenplay is a drill for the Compton Fire Department, where 33-year-old Melanson is deputy chief—one of the youngest in the nation to hold that rank. In southern California, where earthquakes are common and the 6.7-magnitude Northridge quake of 1994 killed at least 57 people and caused about $20 billion in damage, the scenario is all too real. A multiagency report from 2008 found that southern California has a 97 percent chance of suffering a similar quake within the next 27 years.

"You know it's going to happen one way or the other," says Melanson. "It's like anything else—if you have a craft, you want to practice your craft. If we never got to use our skills, it'd be great, but the fact of the matter is that we do, and we know it's going to happen."

Working in one of the five busiest fire departments in California, firefighters in Compton practice their craft more than most. The department—84 employees, four fire stations, nine frontline emergency vehicles—handles an average of 10,000 emergency calls per year. The department's average response time? Four minutes and 30 seconds.

That made them the perfect choice for *First In*, a reality TV series on BET that follows Melanson and his fellow firefighters as they battle everyday calamity on the streets of Compton. Around Los Angeles, even the firefighters moonlight in the entertainment industry, but the difference between Melanson and other reality TV stars couldn't be more stark. While Heidi and Spencer eat ice cream and shop for Uggs in *The Hills*, Melanson and his crew saw through security bars and kick open doors so they can run into burning buildings. They are the first on the scene in the most terrifying moments of Compton citizens' lives and deaths.

RIDE-ALONG: THE STREETS

A ride-along sounds suspiciously like a drive-by, but it's the only way that "probies"—aspiring firefighters who endure an 11-month probationary period prior to becoming volunteer firefighters—can learn the trade. By riding along on fire trucks and shadowing firefighters on their emergency calls, the probies are able to familiarize themselves with firsthand encounters while the experienced veterans monitor the action.

Like most people in southern California, Melanson spends much of his day in an automobile, and an extended ride-along is the only way to interview him. From Fire Station 3, he will drive his government-issue Dodge Charger with tinted windows to his administrative office at another fire station—a cluttered,

Deputy Fire Chief Marcel Melanson at work.

Clockwise from left: Melanson at work; Melanson with wife, Emily, and kids, Gunnar and Cody; Melanson speaks to members of the Los Angeles County Fire Department Explorer Program.

wood-paneled room that looks like the principal's office in an antiquated elementary school, a place where Melanson seems particularly out of place. Then he's off to another town to attend a meeting with fire officials, then back to the fire station. In transit, his two BlackBerry smartphones are in a state of constant agitation, and he excuses himself to field phone calls, e-mails, and texts from both the department and his wife. Believe him when he says he loves his job; his persistent animation is incredible. He does not stop for coffee or food the entire day, yet his energy never flags.

The city of Compton is an area of 10 and a half square miles that is home to about 100,000 people and approximately 75 known gangs. It is the acknowledged base of the Crips and the Bloods, two of the most notorious street gangs in the world, whose territories more or less evenly divide the city. According to data tabulated from FBI figures, it was the 12th most dangerous American city in 2009.

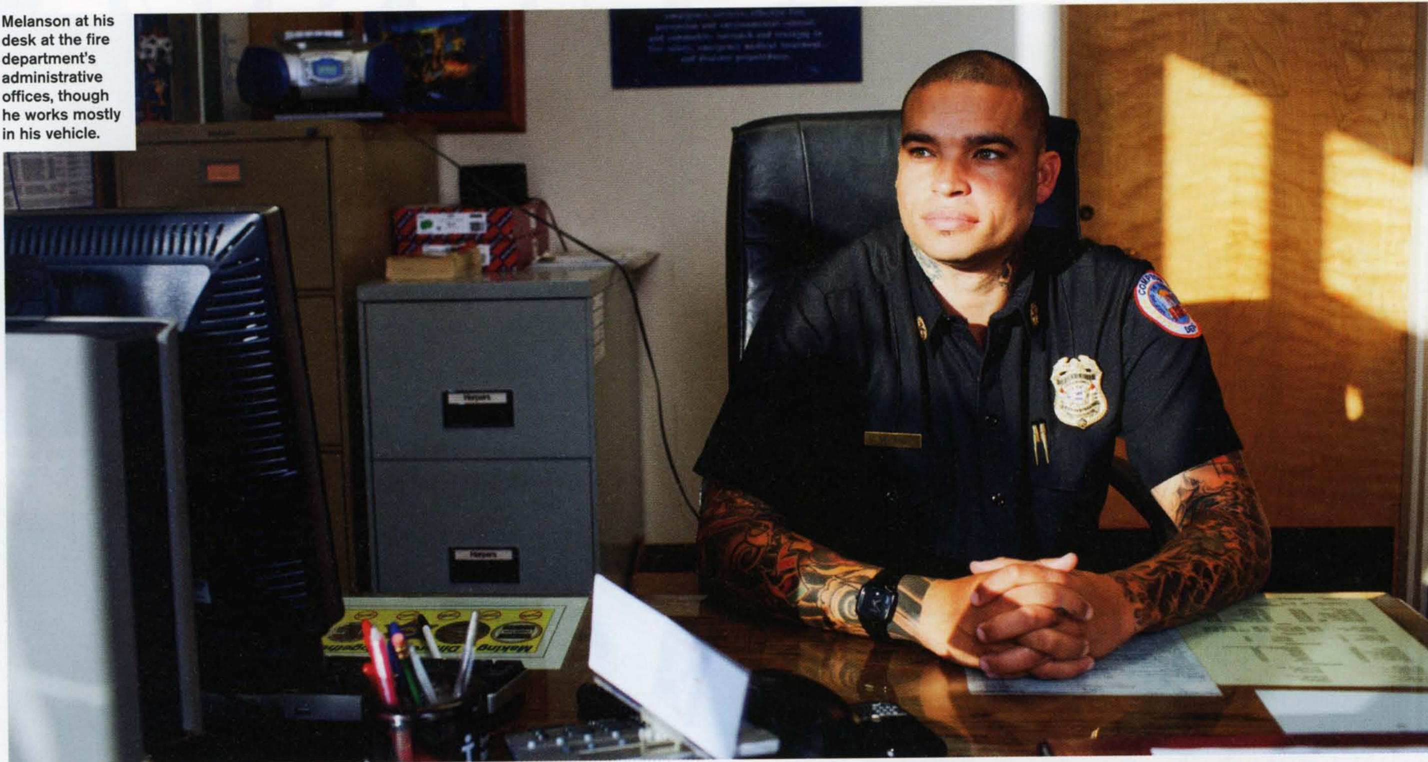
"Compton has a rich gang history. The sad part is, it defines Compton," says Melanson. As we drive past one-story houses and tidy yards that look as if they might belong to any south L.A. subdivision, he's eager to point out how the real Compton varies from the version put forth by gangsta rappers N.W.A. in their genre-defining classic *Straight Outta Compton*. "The Crips didn't start here. The Crips started in South Central L.A. as a group of individuals who were associated with the color blue because of the school color of the high school they went to. The Bloods started here in Compton because there was a group of individuals that was tired of getting beat up by this other group of individuals, the Crips, so they started their own gang. It became the Bloods, and the color of their high school was red. That's where it all began, the red and the blue. It's that simple."

Melanson shows me a drive-through funeral home where mourners can stop under a carport to sip a latte and pay their respects as they observe the deceased in a long, bank-style window. On another block, a man in a white T-shirt, jeans, and bright orange patent kicks comes out to the car. A professional comedian named Louie G., he explains that the house next to his was gutted by fire; he met Melanson when he was putting out the flames. "He saved my house," he says. "This guy's a real-life hero. Everybody likes the show. But who do they like? Who do they know? Mr. Tattoo." We pass a group of Hispanic men in cowboy hats breaking in a small, brown colt in the middle of the street. They pay us little mind, but the horse stares with wide and crazy eyes, as if to acknowledge that this whole scenario is just a bit out of the ordinary.

Melanson outlines the biography of Compton: how the whites took flight in the '50s and '60s as blacks moved in, how the Hispanic population is now predominant but is haphazardly represented because of the often uncertain citizenship status of its members. A lover of history, Melanson talks about the origins of the first civic fire departments and medieval firefighters in Japan, from whom he first acquired his love of tattoos.

"When I was about 16, somebody related [the idea of] the fireman as a modern-day samurai, a public servant," he says. "So I started reading about them and what they did, and in that same era, among the working class, there were people who were firemen. They were heavily tattooed like the samurai were, and that would show their bravery. And when you go back to other times and places where people were heavily tattooed, it was a ritual, it was a rite of passage. It was to show bravery—it showed that you could endure pain. In line with Japanese mythology, they would tattoo dragons on themselves that were surrounded by water. The dragon is a protector, and they would surround it by water to protect them from being burned."

Melanson at his desk at the fire department's administrative offices, though he works mostly in his vehicle.



"PROFESSIONALLY, IT TOOK SOME THOUGHT TO BE TATTOOED BECAUSE IT ISN'T THE NORM TO SEE A FIREMAN FULLY SLEEVED WITH THEIR NECK TATTOOED. ... I KNOW THAT PEOPLE SCRUTINIZE EVERYTHING THAT I DO BECAUSE OF IT, AND I GUESS I WAS WILLING TO ACCEPT THAT SCRUTINY. I LOOK AT THAT SCRUTINY AS A CHALLENGE FOR ME TO STAY ON MY GAME."

So it's fitting that Melanson's first tattoo was a Japanese-style dragon among waves on his hip. "A friend of mine did it at his house with a homemade gun with a guitar string," Melanson laughs. "I've gained a little weight since then so I thought it was going to blow up to be Puff the Magic Dragon, but it still looks good."

Like the man himself—the sleeved-out bad-boy role model, the fireman who smokes cigars, the family man with a wife and two kids who drives a custom lowrider Cadillac while listening to Johnny Cash—Melanson's tattoos are a contemplation of opposing elements. On one arm, arching flames and a skull wearing a firefighter's hat—"you know it's a ghetto fireman because it's got a gold tooth"—on the other, smooth black wind bars, water, and dice.

As a child of a black mother and a white father who divorced when he was a toddler, this duality extends deep into his identity. "My whole life, I've never fit in," he says. "I was always too white or too black. People that are multiracial know exactly what I mean because I lived in the black neighborhood with my mom and I was known as the white boy, and then I moved in with my dad in an all-white neighborhood and I'm the black guy. To this day, there are people who are disappointed because I'm not black enough or because I'm not white enough, or I'm too white or I'm too black. I've always been on the fringes."

As a permanent outsider, he embraced tattooing without hesitation. "What I've gone through in life has aided me in being tattooed," he says. "You're an outcast, for lack of a better term, when you decide to be fully sleeved, especially when you decide to tattoo your neck. You've crossed that line. I think there's even a line beyond that when you do your throat, you do your face. I look at that like, Whoa, that's a little crazy. But because I've lived my whole life as an outcast, it wasn't a big mental block for me to go and be tattooed."

The prejudice and judgment that was heaped on him because of his race has morphed into a different form now that he's a fireman. A profession known for its traditionalism, the American fire service prides itself on its uniforms, on its status as community heroes and role models. It's long forgotten its medieval Japanese predecessors, if it ever acknowledged them at all.

"Professionally, it took some thought to be tattooed because it isn't the norm to see a fireman fully sleeved with their neck tattooed. I knew that I was going to be scrutinized. I knew that there were going to be people who believed it wasn't professional. I know that people scrutinize everything that I do because of it, and I guess I was willing to accept that scrutiny. I look at that scrutiny as a challenge for me to stay on my game. I guess I was lowering people's expectations on purpose," he laughs. "Coming in under the radar."

Not all fire departments allow their members to be tattooed, and Melanson has encountered many peers who openly question his qualifications as a representative of the field.

"I hear it all the time: 'Is that the best look for the fire service?'" says Melanson. "We all wear a uniform where we're so much alike that we have a unified front. Do tattoos make you that different to where you can't fit in? We should be a representation of everybody, and are we potentially going to rub somebody the wrong way? I understand that side of it. It's a valid point. I get questioned very often about professionalism."

One wonders if the questioners would continue their line of thinking if they saw the firefighter emblazoned on Melanson's back climbing into the mouth of a raging blaze as skulls emerge from the smoke around him, or the Maltese cross on his wrist, an ancient symbol of firefighting.

"The knights from Malta were fighting against the Saracens and they wore this cross on their armor," he says. "The Saracens used fire when they fought."

Scenes from Compton Fire Station 3 and the training facility where firemen stage emergencies on the burn tower.

"SOMEBODY RELATED [THE IDEA OF] THE FIREMAN AS A MODERN-DAY SAMURAI, A PUBLIC SERVANT. ... IN [THE SAMURAI] ERA, AMONG THE WORKING CLASS, THERE WERE PEOPLE WHO WERE FIREMEN. THEY WERE HEAVILY TATTOOED LIKE THE SAMURAI WERE, AND THAT WOULD SHOW THEIR BRAVERY."

RIDE-ALONG: THE FIREHOUSE

The next night at the firehouse, Melanson and his fellow firefighters Wayland Davis and Shon "Halvo" Halvorsen are hanging out in the kitchen—Halvo dicing steak in preparation for the firehouse's chili cook-off, Davis nursing a sore shoulder. A mixed martial arts fight is on the TV in what serves as the fire station's living room. It's a slow night. Unlike the summer evenings documented on the show, November's chill means that fewer people are outside drinking, drugging, or shooting. The conversation quickly goes to what the men have seen when the nights aren't so kind.

"Remember the train versus taxi cab?" Halvo asks Melanson. They use the term 'versus' when two things collide: train versus taxi cab, vehicle versus motorcycle, vehicle versus pedestrian. There's rarely a question as to the winner. "There's shit where there are body parts everywhere, but that doesn't really affect you like some other kind of things affect you," Halvo continues. "Remember when that family got killed? That was probably the gnarliest thing I've ever seen. Drunk driver hit this family that was at a taco stand, the dad had just got a promotion at his job, took his whole family out for dinner. Mom and dad, four kids, killed 'em all. Babies hanging out of cars, the whole family wiped out. People who saw it were passing out. It was just carnage. They didn't know where all the body parts were. It took 'em hours to take the people from underneath the dashboard."

Burnout comes suddenly. "We had a captain who had gone for 30 years and he saw a kid get taken out with an AK-47," Halvo says. "A child, 5 years old—blew his head off like a watermelon—walking with his mom in the center of town. Just random violence, shooting at someone else and a stray bullet hit him. We have a saying, 'Everybody's got a limit.' Even firemen have a limit of how much they can take in terms of the job. That captain finally said, That's it. He left that scene and retired. You wonder where your limit is."

The horrors of the job are immediately dismissed and the talking stops on a dime when the loudspeaker beeps three times and a dispatcher announces a call. The feel is almost military as we run to the engine and pile in, a band of brothers going on a mission. Part power, part exhilaration, part pride, it's every boy's dream to be where Melanson is, looking down at the road ahead as the sirens blare, the driver blasts the air horn, and cars pull out of the way for a real American hero.