

Chariots Of Fire

Diesels In Civil Service

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY JIM ALLEN

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There are a lot of ways to use a diesel pickup, both for pleasure and business. You've probably seen many variations of both. 1st Attack Engineering builds something not so commonly seen... they "recruit" diesel pickups into one of the noblest professions, firefighting. These trucks are used as the basis for what's known in the firefighting biz as a first-attack brush truck. 1st Attack also builds rescue rigs (remember Emergency's "Squad 51"?) and even small foam trucks for airports.

A brush truck is designed to work grass and brush fires. Their advantage is mobility. Compared to a full-sized engine, a brush truck is a go-cart and can get into areas a bigger truck can only dream of. They can also be used as mobile drafting stations, to pump water from rivers, ponds or pools when the larger trucks cannot get close enough. Getting there first and early can make as much difference as a bigger, better-equipped truck.



Here's how a first attack truck starts. Two '08 Ford F-350 cabs and chassis await conversion at 1st Attack's Auburn, Indiana, facility.

The company 1st Attack Engineering, formerly known as Wild-fire Manufacturing, has been building brush trucks as a company since 1999, though owner Jeffrey Cook has been building them since 1995. Cook has an interesting history that's given him unique insights into building fire trucks. First and foremost, he's a firefighter. From 1991, until quite recently, he was a volunteer firefighter with the Jackson Township Fire Department, finally giving it up when the pressure of work got too great. The first truck was for Cook's own department and his experience "behind the hose" gave direct insight into what was needed.

Insight was translated into reality by the mind and hands of a custom fabricator. Cook's experience building show-winning customs and monster trucks earned him high marks in those areas.

Here's the end result of an earlier F-350 brush truck conversion in use by the Crane Township Fire Department in Cecil, Ohio, for a number of years. You'll see the utility of the outward-facing jump seats in another photo.

Jeff built monster trucks and drove for several teams starting in '91 but later built down to the legendary "Wally" and campaigned it from 1993 to 2003. Honing his skills as a designer and fabricator has given him the inspiration for some of the more unique and useful features that make 1st Attack brush trucks so popular.

Though he had to leave monster trucks behind, Jeff hasn't stopped building custom trucks. He built two for his business—"Silly Willy" and "Lil Squirt." Both are show-winning trucks that are regularly seen on the show circuit and promote the fire truck business. They are built on monster truck underpinnings but are also fully functional brush trucks that use products from the 1st Attack inventory. If only we could get Jeff to rip out those gassers and install diesels!

Most of 1st Attack's brush truck conversions have been on 1-ton diesel truck chassis, but there has been the occasional ton-and-a-half and a even few three-quarter and half-ton conversions. Though 1st Attack has standard packages, they routinely make custom changes and additions according to the needs of the department ordering the truck. Most trucks are built on modestly optioned, commercial cabs and chassis, but every once in a while, a department will ask for a top-drawer trimmed outfit.

Typically, the conversion will start with the 1st Attack rear body, which mounts a water tank, a fire pump (up to around 500 gallons per minute), two outward facing jump seats (a feature unique to 1st Attack) with a 3/4-inch hose reel for each. Light bars, toolboxes, equipment racks are all included, as well as the myriad equipment details seen on all fire trucks.



Hosers! "Reel" ones! The Crane Township (right) and Thorncreek Township Departments play a little before getting some real world refresher on brush trucks. This wheat stubble field was set alight and the two trucks took turns attacking the flames.



Lil Squirt is a custom show truck that's built in the monster truck style and powered by a blown 800-horse big-block... but it's still a fire truck and proves it here.

Modifications to the truck chassis often include a suspension upgrade, both a lift and to uprate load capacity and improve stability. Larger tires for floatation and traction are also usually fitted. The electrical system is upgraded to add in all the radio gear and lights. A fast-idle circuit is usually added to the engine.

The converted trucks are a relatively low-cost, easy to maintain alternative to fire companies and 1st Attack has sold them all over the country. Little did you know that your diesel pickup is a hero at heart. **UDBG**



The life of a brush truck. The front bumper nozzles both dampen the fire and create an escape route for the truck if needed. The valves are controlled by the driver.



With the brush bar-mounted nozzles and firefighters on both sides in jump seats, you can see how the 1st Attack brush truck can be an effective tool for a grass fire. The bed frame doubles as roll cage, protecting the personnel in the seats. This setup is a signature feature of a 1st Attack conversion.



The Thorncreek Township Fire Department ordered a Lariat spec '08 F-350 Crewcab. Only the best for the Thorncreek bunch! They also specified a number of other modifications not usual to most brush rigs. Most likely this made the truck more useful in multiple roles, such as a rescue or hazmat rig, or a tender.



Thorncreek spec'd a big pump and an elaborate manifold, likely for drafting. It mounts a 200-gallon square poly tank and a big, 500-gpm, 34-horse diesel pump. Separately powered pumps are usually preferred over PTO-driven pumps because brush trucks are often moving when pumping water. Water output would vary too much with a PTO pump and the vehicle in motion at different speeds.



Underhood, the Thorncreek truck stayed stock '08 6.4L.



The Dodge-based Sterling Bullet trucks were a popular conversion platform until the recent demise of Sterling trucks. This one mounts a 300-gallon water tank and a Darley-Lombardini diesel fire pump that cranks out up to 300 gpm at 80 psi. The 11x20 wheels are a 1st Attack exclusive and mount 36-inch Mickey Thompson MTZ tires. 1st Attack also built the 4-inch lift that allows the bigger meats to be fitted. Power is from a common rail Cummins with California Clean Idle Certification, a relatively new certification that puts stringent emissions standards on diesel trucks that have to idle a bunch. Fire trucks are not immune to emission rules in the Golden State.



1st Attack is no stranger to GM trucks. This '08 Chevy Duramax was built for the Harrisonville, New Jersey, Fire Department. Besides the fairly standard 1st Attack conversion, it was given a 6-inch lift with Mickey Thompson Claws on Eagle Alloys, and a front Warn 9,000-pound winch.



Jeff hopes 1st Attack never gets so big that he can't get out into the shop. There's a lot of Cook's personal handiwork in each and every conversion. This is the Harrisonville Chevy under construction.



Usually, plain interiors are preferred but the Thorncreek unit is a decked out with leather and a killer stereo and Navigation system alongside the console-mounted additions needed for firefighting.



This is a MERV... the acronym short for Mini Emergency Response Vehicle. 1st Attack builds them alongside the big stuff. Many are on diesel-powered UTV chassis, as is this one. They are handy in parks, fairgrounds, stadiums or any other densely packed areas.

Source

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