

... Fire on the Mountain

Our straining ears could pick up snatches of the fire report as it was received by telephone at the parachute loft in Missoula. It was a fairly large fire, near Riggins, Idaho, on top of a mountain in the Salmon River country. A hasty glance at a map divulged the encouraging knowledge that this was labeled the "Land of No Return."

Fire Call

There must have been twelve or fifteen eager jumpers in the loft that Sunday afternoon, August 6, 1944, all loudly proclaiming their availability. A truckload had just come in from the camp at Nine Mile. But the eight next on the jumping list were given the nod. We threw ourselves and our equipment upon a truck and sped out to Johnson's Airport, while, in traditional Smoke Jumper fashion, the rest continued waiting and praying for more fires.

We suited up before boarding the waiting Ford Trimotor, loaded our fire-equipment and chutes into the cabin, climbed in, and soon were in the air. Vic Carter, Parachute Project Administrative Officer, came along as spotter, and Bob Johnson was our pilot.

We had ahead of us a two-hour ride over some typically jagged and forbidding Idaho mountain ranges. As plane rides to fires go, this was a smooth one. The three motors growled and roared; the sun shone over the lonely peaks; the wind rushed past the door; and we sat stiffly in the crowded cabin, looking like a football team from another planet. There was, of course, some of the usual pre-jump horseplay: fellows pugnaciously inviting each other to step outside, pretending to vomit, and other delicate touches of humor. When we were about twenty minutes from the fire we began putting on our back pack and emergency parachutes—the front one just in case the back one doesn't.

Jumping Area Located

Then someone saw the fire—sure enough, a lot of smoke rising from a long, high, steep ridge. As we pulled in closer we saw that it was near the end and top of the ridge, about two or three thousand feet above the notorious Salmon river, a silver ribbon in the afternoon sunlight. And, as we circled the ridge, we picked out the grassy clearings, seeming very small from two thousand feet up. Carter put out two drift chutes, finding that the breeze, though slight, blew toward the river, with an up-draft at the summit of the ridge.

Ad Carlson and Wilmer Carlsen, two second-year jumpers, were to jump first. They fastened their static lines. Ad knelt in the door. Wilmer crouched right behind him, waiting for the signal. With hand signals Carter directed the plane along a line which made allowance for the wind. As we neared the jumping spot his hand went up—suddenly swung down. The plane motors coughed out, the plane pitched into a glide, and Carter

slapped Ad on the back. Right with the swing Ad was up and out, with Wilmer almost on his head. We could hear the chutes crack viciously. We would have sympathized with the boys except that we were moving toward the door for our own jumps. As we came around on the second pass we saw Wilmer Carlsen's chute hang up in a high tree.

"Stay Out of the River"

George Robinson and Walt Reimer went out on the second pass, the writer, Gregg Phifer, Al Thiessen, and George Leavitt following on the next two. The last thing I remember from Carter was, "... And for God's sake stay out of the river!"

We had to do some manipulation of the chutes to keep from drifting over the ridge-top, but everyone came in safely. I had the pleasure of hanging up in a tree, very gently, my toes just grazing the sod. Reimer brought his chute down squarely over a sharp, stubby snag, doing very little for the canopy but otherwise landing nicely. Wilmer Carlsen somehow managed to tie himself into a bowline, high in his tree, and Ad had to take another rope up to him, via climbers.

McCall Jumpers Appear

The plane roared over on several cargo runs, dropping our fire-packs, saw, and other equipment, then turned back toward Missoula. Within three hours of the time the call had reached the loft we were ready to tackle the fire. Just at that moment we were surprised to see Homer Chance and Merle Hoover, whom we hadn't met since they had left for McCall, Idaho, early in June, walking calmly toward us, bearing fire packs. The McCall Travelair had come over right before ours and had dropped them a little farther down the ridge. Eldon Whitesitt and Gordon Miller, also from McCall, had jumped earlier in the afternoon.

We slid down about a quarter mile and had a good look at our fire. It was narrow, two or three hundred feet wide, and, as we were to learn early the next morning, extended down the slope almost half a mile. When Whitesitt and Miller arrived they found the fire burning merrily, advancing steadily up the forty-five degree slope. Happily the mountain-side had an endless supply of loose mineral soil, and they were able to throw enough of this at the head to cool it down to the point where they could dig a fire line around the top of the burning area.

Fire Stopped but Dangerous

When our contingent arrived, the fire was spreading more slowly. It was definitely stopped at its head. But it was still a big fire and, given a little favorable wind could have become quite dangerous.

We had fourteen men for fighting the flames. The alternate ranger from Riggins had come in on horseback and

a man from a nearby lookout had joined the twelve jumpers. We jumpers split into two crews and went down either side of the fire building the controlling fireline. We had reached the fire about six Sunday afternoon, but it wasn't until five the next morning that we had a line completely around the fire. Then, after the long steep climb to the head of the fire, we did a little first-class sleeping.

Early that morning a twelve-man crew hiked up from the river road, making twenty-six men on the fire. After four hours of blissful slumber we joined the recent arrivals in the ambitious project of mopping up the fire. At noon a packer arrived with food and equipment for a fire camp. We had a hot meal Monday night, a welcome relief even after only one day of the delectable K rations.

Fire Breaks Over Line

Monday afternoon a breeze sprang up. The fire jumped our line, sending up a lot of smoke and looking tough; but the jumpers nearest the break-over dug a new line, and the fire again came under control. We had to do quite a little hiking Monday evening to get our parachute equipment from the ridge top down to the fire camp. The packer, happily, had been up there once, but had vowed he'd never take his mules up there again. We could see why.

By Tuesday morning the fire was quiet. Looking from the fire camp a quarter of a mile below, we saw only a little lazy smoke hanging low over the fire. In the meantime, both Missoula and McCall were scraping the bottom of the Smoke Jumper barrel. We were released by the alternate ranger Tuesday morning, hiked down to the river, boarded a truck, and were driven some twenty-two miles to Riggins. From there the four McCall boys went south, while we were driven to Grangeville. A Johnson Flying Service Trimotor returned us to Nine Mile, taking just seventy-five minutes for the air ride. Another squad arrived at Grangeville two hours later, taking two days to reach Missoula by bus and train.

Ranger Praises Jumpers

The ranger at Riggins, John Fallman, was very generous toward us in his report, crediting jumpers with holding the fire to 14 acres, and going on to say, "An outstanding fact was that during all this time none of these fellows ever complained about anything at all . . . they deserve a lot of credit for their work and their ability to take it on the chin and still be cheerful about it all." It is fortunate that the ranger could not read the mind of at least one jumper at about four o'clock Monday morning, but we appreciate his generous praise.



Photo by U. S. Forest Service

Map Reading

Spotter, pilot, and jumper are looking over the map of the territory in which a fire has been reported. The pilot wants to know how to get there, while the jumper is especially interested in where he will jump and how he will get out once the fire has been suppressed.

The Berg Mountain Fire was but one of about seventy-five blazes which the Smoke Jumpers attacked last summer. Each one offered special problems both in jumping and in fire-fighting. At the Lemhi fire the boys had to dodge rattlesnakes. On Granite Ridge there wasn't any dirt. Schumacher and Hulbert found one ideal jumper fire: right at the edge of a meadow, forty yards from a spring, only a quarter-acre in area, plenty of mineral soil—the perfect text-book example. But you never know what it will be when you hear "Fire on the Mountain!"

—Murray Braden