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## Tom Boatner email interview about United States - Russian smokejumper exchanges

Tom Boatner

National Smokejumper Association

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Email correspondence from Tom Boatner to the National Smokejumper Association, September 2023, in response to background information in preparation for *US–Russian Smokejumper Exchanges: 1976–2004*.

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**Question: Any idea of formal documents around this time [1998] at BIFC/NIFC?**

I don't know any details about a formal agreement being signed between any of the agencies at NIFC and the Russians. I do know that when he was the BLM Fire Director, Les Rosencrance wanted to establish a small international program similar to the one the USFS has had for a long time. To organize and manage this new program, Les hired Tom Frey who was working for the USFS in DC managing their International Disaster Assistance Program. Before going to DC, Frey had been a longtime USFS and BLM firefighter and manager. When he left the BLM for DC and the USFS, he was the Coordinator of the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center in Fairbanks, AK. Tom came to NIFC from DC after Les hired him and began building a program for the BLM. I'm guessing this was around 1997-98. I know that with Tom in place, the exchanges became more organized.

**Question: “...program similar to the one the USFS has had for a long time...” What was your awareness of any FS programs–bases, regions? Who would they have coordinated with?**

I think USFS bases would have coordinated with their Regional Offices and their National Office on any exchanges. I don't remember being very aware of what the USFS jumpers were doing with the Russians. We were not coordinating with them to the best of my knowledge.

**Question: "When he [Tom Frey] left the BLM for DC and the USFS, he was the Coordinator of the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center in**

**Fairbanks, AK.” Was he aware (I’m not asking you to read his mind) of previous AK-Russian participation?**

I'm not positive, but I'm guessing that Tom participated in some of the exchanges with the Russians while he was still with the BLM and the Alaska Fire Service. [Refer to correspondence from Tom Frey, September 2023. -Ed.]

In 1999, I left Alaska and was the State FMO for BLM in Montana. Our national office asked me to host 3 Russian fire managers in Montana for about 10 to 12 days. Two were FMOs from Siberia and one was a young up and comer from their national office in Pushkin, outside of Moscow.

They went all over eastern MT looking at our fire program. I also took them to Yellowstone National Park, where we were briefed by Jim Kitchen(a former AK jumper) on the 88 fires and NPS fire management and then taken on a tour. I also took them into Mann Gulch on the 50th anniversary commemoration. We met Bob Salley just above the cleft of rocks he and Walter Rumsey ran through, and he told us the story. The next day we went to a ceremony at the State Capitol honoring the Mann Gulch fallen.

The 3 Russians were very impressed with the way we honored our fallen firefighters. They also threw out the first pitch at a semipro baseball game in Billings along with Smokey Bear at Fire Prevention night. In Miles City, they went to a ranch, got fancy spurs, were mounted on horses and helped some cowboys move cattle from one pasture to another. They thought that was pretty cool.

**Question: "Our national office asked me to host 3 Russian fire managers in Montana for about 10 to 12 days.” Was that a hosting in 1999? You took them to see Kitchen that year?**

Yes, that was the summer of 1999 and that is the summer I took them to see Jim Kitchen. Jim was the Yellowstone NP Fuels Program Manager at the time.

**Question: After Les Rosencrance, who may have been influential in fostering NIFC exchanges?**

Larry Hamilton had replaced Les, who retired in 2000, as BLM Fire Director. He was invited [in 2001] to visit Russia for about 8 to 10 days for the 75th anniversary celebration of Avielsukrana. Tom Frey accompanied him, and they invited me because of my work hosting the 3 Russians in 1999. We visited various places around Pushkin and Moscow, saw demonstrations of all their firefighters and fire equipment. We also visited Petrozavodsk in Karelia north of Leningrad close to the Finnish border. I remember at that time that the Russian government was going through a lot of political instability and none of the Avielsukrana people had been paid in months. The young man who was translating for us was making ends meet by selling bundles of twigs to people to be used in saunas. I think the reason that the exchanges came to an end around this time is primarily because the Russian government was falling apart. People in Avielsukrana were trying to survive and had no time for exchanges. Incidentally, we left Moscow on 9-11-2001 for home, heading for JFK in NYC. Halfway across the Atlantic, we were mysteriously turned around and sent to Dublin, Ireland. We spent 3 or 4 days there because of the 9-11 attacks before we were able to fly home.

**Question: What do you know of the Russian KAP-3, the automatic opening device used on Russian chutes, and NIFC's R&D review of it?**

I remember their automatic opening device. We, the BLM, were very interested in it because we were trying to develop an effective Ram Air parachute deployment system, and the Russians were already doing it. Like all of their gear, the AOD was crude and simple, but effective. I can't remember if we tested it or not. My guess is we tested it on some dummy drops, but I can't remember. We did copy their drogue parachute to solve our problem with body stability on exit. Pulling a drogue release handle after a 5 second count released the drogue and it helped deploy the main. The drogue being used today by both the BLM

and USFS is an evolution of our direct copy of the Russian drogue.

**Question: Did you meet either Nicholas Andreev or Eduard Davidenko? (Just trying to triangulate past Russians responsible for exchanges)**

I met both of these guys both in Alaska and in Russia. I think Eduard was the head of Avielsukrana. Larry, Tom, and I had lunch at his Dacha outside Moscow during our visit.