

April 2022

## Smokeyumper Magazine, April 2022

National Smokeyumper Association

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## Message from the President



by **Bob McKean**  
(Missoula '67)

I CAN STILL feel a Pulaski in my hands. After 14 years of fighting wildfires, 11 as a smokejumper, and countless all-night digs, the feeling of swinging a Pulaski is as natural to me as swinging a baseball bat was in my youth. A few years ago, in a moment of being “possessed,” I tried to find a quality Pulaski to buy. I went through stacks of them at the Axman and similar locations in Missoula, but I could not find one with the proper handle and the right feel. My quest ended in disappointment.

I am profoundly troubled by the impact of wildfires as they have evolved and ravaged the West. The millions of acres burned, the smoke-filled air, the loss of beautiful places, the loss of whole towns and livelihoods, and the loss of lives.

There was a time when I was a good firefighter. I had solid knowledge of wildfire behavior, at least from the perspective of a smokejumper.

I could swing a Pulaski with the best of them. But that was over 40 years ago. My career took me in another direction. And I was never a professional in silviculture or the management of fires larger than those we jumped.

Nevertheless, there are several factors about today's wildfires that are clear: Climate change has led to warmer, drier years, squirrellier weather (probably including significant wind events), and longer burning seasons. I write this on the heels of the Marshall Fire in Colorado which burned 1,000 homes in January. There is an over-abundance of fuel due to human activities and/or lack thereof. People have increasingly built in the wildland urban interface (WUI), putting themselves, their communities, and firefighters in harm's way. These factors together add up to more fires, extreme fire behavior and, all too often, mega fires. Finally, wildfires are going to be with us no matter what we do and, in some important ways, need to be.

I have done some research about this situation which I reported to you in my President's Message in the April 2020 issue of *Smokejumper*. Subsequently, I periodically shared additional thoughts about the current wildfire situation through this venue. As I

*Continued on page 4*

## Amazon Purchases Can Help NSA

Every one of your Amazon purchases can generate a donation to the National Smokejumper Association.

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5. Remember, only purchases at [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com/) or through **AmazonSmile** activated in the **Amazon Shopping** app will support your selected charity.
6. Ask every one of your friends to designate the National Smokejumpers Association as their **Amazon Smiles Charity** and then to make all of their purchases at [smile.amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com/) or through **AmazonSmile** activated in the Amazon Shopping app.

## Having Your Correct Email Addresses Is Very Important

In order to save the NSA time and money, Chuck Sheley is sending renewals and the merchandise flyer via email. The National Reunion has been **postponed until August 12–14, 2022**, in Boise. We will be sending information on that event via email whenever possible. Sending via email is a good cost-efficient move.

To see if we have your correct email address, go to the NSA website at [www.smokejumpers.com](http://www.smokejumpers.com). Click on “News and Events” at the top of the page. Click on “Jump List” on the pulldown, type in your *last* name.

Please contact Chuck if we need to update your email. His contact information is on this page.

**Opinions by *Smokejumper* authors are their own and do not necessarily reflect those of the NSA.**

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#### *Smokejumper* base abbreviations:

Anchorage.....ANC	Grangeville .....GAC	Missoula .....MSO
Boise .....NIFC	Idaho City .....IDC	Redding .....RDD
Cave Junction .....CJ	La Grande .....LGD	Redmond .....RAC
Fairbanks .....FBX	McCall .....MYC	West Yellowstone WYS
		Winthrop .....NCSB

### Get *Smokejumper* One Month Earlier

Many NSA members are switching to the digital version of *Smokejumper* delivered by email instead of the printed edition. It is sent as a PDF identical to the hard copy issue.

Advantages include early delivery (a month ahead of USPS), ease of storage, and NSA postal expense savings.

NSA Director **Fred Cooper** (NCSB-62) says: “I will opt to have my magazines delivered electronically rather than via USPS to save us direct \$ in printing and mailing, not to mention your hand labor in processing. I think I mentioned in an earlier message that I’m having other magazines/newsletters delivered electronically.

To request email delivery, contact Editor **Chuck Sheley** (CJ-59) [chucksheley@gmail.com](mailto:chucksheley@gmail.com). 📧

have done so, I have tempered my comments with the realization that a lot of my practical knowledge and expertise about fire was at a certain operational level and based upon times and conditions that have changed significantly. In short, I realize it is impossible for me to fully comprehend the conditions, considerations, and parameters that those engaged with forest and wildland health and, more specifically, those engaged in addressing the current wildfire situation confront. That said, clearly much more needs to be done on any number of fronts to address the devastating wildfires that have ravaged the West.

With respect to the Nation-

al Smokejumper Association and its publication *Smokejumper*, my primary message to you about this topic follows:

1. *Smokejumper* is intended, in part, as a forum where issues such as those about the current wildfire situation may be aired. The intent is to educate our readership through presenting various perspectives and, by doing so, remain consistent with the part of our mission which states "...maintaining and restoring our forest and rangelands resources..."
2. **Opinions expressed, including those by the president, editor, or those who contribute articles to *Smokejumper*, are those of the authors and not the**

**positions of the NSA unless so indicated.**

3. The NSA, especially the president and editor, solicit varied opinions in the form of written articles or responses to same on important topics **especially from those who have expertise.** We want *Smokejumper* to include various views, especially from knowledgeable people. If you have important expertise on an issue, consider writing an article. If you know of someone who has important expertise on an issue, please consider contacting that person and asking them to write one or contact Chuck or me so that we may approach the individual about writing an article. 🧑🏻

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## *Standing Tall—Making a Difference*

# Merv George, Supervisor Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest

by Murry Taylor (Redding '65)

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**T**he big man leaned across the table, folded his hands, thought for a moment, then said that he wanted to make one thing clear right from the beginning, What we did on our forest this summer was partly due to the specific character of our geography, our climate, our roads, and our fuels. The big man who made this statement is Merv George Jr., Supervisor of the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest (RRSNF). And the *What we did* was referring to the initial attack of 60 fires and keeping the total acres burned at a little over fifty. Note that in the summer of 2020, they had the same number of

fires and only burned 20 acres. That is not counting the Slater Fire that came over onto their forest from the Klamath N.F. and burned its way up into Oregon. No fault given as it was unstoppable right from the beginning. Sitting not far from Merv was **Dan Quinones** (RAC-02), the FMO on the RRSNF. Note, I'm not using quotation marks with these statements unless I can remember exactly what was said. Words are important to these two men. I want to make sure that's understood.

Given the heartbreaking news of Western fires during the 2021 fire season, it was a breath of fresh air when **Chuck Sheley** (CJ-59) and I met



with Merv and Dan last October. Many of us, including a lot of *Smokejumper* magazine readers, have been pushing for years to get the Forest Service back to rapid and aggressive initial attack. Chuck has led the charge and now that effort (in some areas) seems to be paying off. Bill Derr's (Ret. USFS) email thread includes several retired Forest Supervisors, FMOs, Type 1 ICs, Operations Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, and Air Resource Officers. The National Wildfire Institute based in Fort Jones, California, has been steadily at it as well. Add in former Deputy Chief Michael Rains' "The Call to Action," and James Petersen's "First Put Out the Fire," and you have major voices calling for an immediate change in how the Forest Service deals with fire these days. As you would expect among these people, it's fully acknowledged that fire plays an important role in forest health. But, given the longer fire seasons in the West, the massive forest fuel buildup due to less logging, and the critical low fuel moisture due to climate change, it's clear that, for the time being, we need to put out all fires as quickly as possible. It's also understood that some fires will, even with the best effort, escape containment and go big. So, for those concerned about getting fire back on the landscape, it's likely that plenty of acres will end up in that category anyway.

That said, you can imagine how excited we were hearing from the RRSNF about their IA success in the summers of 2020 and 2021. More on that later, but now some history. In early summer 2019, Oregon Governor Kate Brown established The Oregon Wildfire Response Council (OWRC). It seemed a good idea. I felt that a state like Oregon might make real progress on the mega-fire issue plaguing the West. First, as a relatively small state, they are more politically agile—certainly more than California. Secondly, the timber industry has had, and still has, a strong influence in Oregon politics. And thirdly, both private industry and the Oregon Department of Forestry, with its emphasis on strong initial attack, have historically leaned on the Forest Service to put stronger emphasis on more aggressive fire suppression.

So, I did some research and got in touch with Ken Cummings, Regional Manager at Hancock Natural Resources Group in Central Point, Or-



*Merv George*

egon. He was on the OWRC and put me in touch with Committee Chairman Matt Donegan and concerned citizen Guy McMahon in Brookings, Oregon. Kate Brown's office wrote back and put me in touch with an aide to Senator Jeff Merkley. Within a month **Jim Klump** (RDD-64) and I went to Salem to attend an OWRC meeting. Senator Merkley's aide was there. After speaking with both the aide and Matt Donegan about what might be done locally, I decided to contact my two local Forest Supervisors, Merv George Jr. on the Rogue River-Siskiyou, and Rachel Smith on the Klamath.

When Merv George Jr. agreed to our first meeting, I took a half-dozen copies of *Smokejumper* magazine to give to him. These were the ones in which Chuck beat the "strong initial attack and keep them small" drum hard. Early in the meeting, not long after I'd brought up the subject of strong IA, Merv leaned forward and told me straight-faced that you're looking at the most aggressive IA Supervisor you've ever met.

He went on to explain that his Hoopa Native American heritage has helped him understand the need for fire back in the woods, and most importantly, the right times to put it there. He went on to explain that he was sent to the RRSNF by the Regional Office in Portland to “fix” the problem. The “problem” being the big fires of late on the forest—the Chetco Bar (192,000 acres), the Klon-dike (175,258), and the Taylor (53,000 acres), to mention three. That got me thinking that there could be a big success story if the RRSNF could showcase that, with the right preparedness and IA effort, you could put out most fires.

Then, on Duzel Rock Fire Lookout this summer, I got a call from Dan Quinones. That was late July. At that point, they had had 48 total fires, 31 lightning and 17 man-caused. Total acres burned, less than ten. Then he said the other thing (adding to Merv’s comment about being an aggressive IA Supervisor) that made me want to write this article: “Our crews are going around with smiles on their faces. We’re having fun.” I smiled and thought, *This is it*. This is what most old-time firedogs have been saying all along. If you encourage your crews to get out there and go after fires and put them out small, they will naturally become excited and connect with the passion of good firefighting. Such passion comes directly from successful initial attack. It comes from those times when a crew hits a fire, works into the night, works until they feel tired and hungry and miserable but keep going, digging deep, and finding that better part of themselves—that part they instinctively hoped was there. Then, once they catch their fire and walk off the mountain in the morning, they feel like kings, and nothing can ever take that feeling away. It’s the tough times that build the kind of character that make great wildland firefighters. They are transforming and empowering. I think this point is not widely understood by many current wildland fire managers. Time after time I’ve heard from various crews, “Murry, they’re ruining firefighting. They’re holding us in camp too much. They’re not letting us do our job.”

I heard it again this past summer and not just from crews but from a Central California Type 1 Incident Commander, his Ops Chief, and Plans Chief. Too many times, they said effective work

could have been done. Too many times crews and related resources were held back by the local forests. The IC told me straight out, “It’s this safety thing. The safety card is played too much. Too many times it’s too steep and too rough.” He went on to point out that by backing off and slacking off, these fires go way big and expose crews to thousands of miles of road trips, often when exhausted, thousands of helicopter rides into unimproved helispots, and tens of thousands of miles of fireline with burning trees and snags.

I heard from others as well. Guy McMahon from Brookings wrote in an email Sept. 23, 2021, “Good morning, Murry. Besides the extinguishment of this year’s fires, there is some good coming out of the organization of folks at RRSNF. You said in your email to me that Dan Quinones told you ‘My people are going around with smiles on their faces. We’re having fun.’ And I can state categorically, Dan has our best interest at heart. He has worked with us to verify OUR found lightning strikes and put people on the ground to make sure no fires were brewing. Contrast that to the former RRSNF Supervisor who didn’t give a rip, didn’t verify strikes, and allowed a 22-day set of strikes to be accidentally discovered by an airline pilot. There’s a stark difference between discovery and a 192,000-acre mega-fire.”

During the meeting Merv made it clear that the Regional Forester in Portland had backed him all the way in his new approach to putting fires out small. Dan wanted Chuck and me to also understand that he had had Merv’s full backing as well. And that he had told his crews that he backed them all the way. So, there you have it—the line authority of Supervisor, FMO, and crew leaders backing each other in the decisions they need to make when working fire.

The RRSNF approach: They didn’t depend solely on agency resources but went proactive with contract crews and engines during times of critical fire danger. They prepositioned smokejumpers from both Redmond and the BLM. They had a 20-person rappel crew and one hotshot crew, the Rogue River Hotshots. Rappel crews from other forests were called in as needed. This was all part of a preparedness Phase One and Phase Two program created and initiated on their own forest that went beyond the regular (Regional and National)

preparedness level programs. It involved prepositioning Type 1 helicopters, Type 3 helicopter w/ modules, rappel crews, smokejumpers, engines, water tenders, etc.

As far as those critics who questioned how much money this cost, Merv George Jr. told us that he had spent nearly 500 million on this forest fighting fire since I got here. So, I'm not averse to spending money up front. One example he mentioned was when a contract engine responded to and stopped a half-acre fire near Merlin that had potential to go big. If that fire had gone big, those savings alone could have made it all worth it.

As Merv made clear, we all know that fire needs to be returned to the forest landscape. The RRSNF is on pace to have a record year with prescribed fire. But it does NOT need to be there in summers of record low fuel moistures and record high fire danger. These fires must be put out early and fast. If they're not, then you end up facing August with exhausted crews scattered all over the West, people from other areas and maybe even agencies working fire on your turf, and skies filled with smoke so that air resources cannot be used effectively.

When it comes to safety, this is something Merv George Jr. thinks about a lot. It's a gamble to encourage vigorous IA since it can mean extra risks early in most fire suppression efforts. Such actions can put people in harm's way. But to hold back and risk a fire growing large where it can really do a lot of damage and injury is not, in Merv's opinion, the most responsible choice.

As an example of just how tough this can be, Merv related a story from the summer of 2021. As he told it, the big man grew somber and spoke in a voice of deep concern. He had received a phone call from a fellow Forest Supervisor who had just had a firefighter fatality on his forest in Region Six. The young man, 56 years old, was hit and killed by a falling tree on the fireline. The Forest Supervisor explained to Merv that he would normally go to the family with the news but, at this time, it was impossible for him to do so. So, he asked Merv for a favor. Would he go to the home in Medford and tell the wife? Merv said he would. He was in Medford at the time and had his full uniform with him. He contacted a human resources person from the forest and a local police

officer, which is protocol. As you can imagine, the emotional courage it takes to deliver such a message, one that changes peoples' lives forever, must be steeped in a full commitment to do your best in your role as a Forest Supervisor. The three went to the door and knocked. A woman came. At first, she was happy to see them. She was a cheerful and happy middle-aged lady with children in their mid-twenties. Then it suddenly hit her that something could be wrong. And that's when Merv had to tell her that her husband had been involved in an accident and that he would not be coming home. The woman collapsed to the floor and sobbed for ten minutes while they tried to comfort her.

This is how serious the safety issue is to Merv and, I think, to most fire leaders. It was one of the hardest things Merv has ever had to do. He concluded his story by saying that it is his firm belief that putting out "bad" fires quickly and putting more "good" fires on the landscape will lead to less knocking on doors in the future.

When I wrote about our meeting in Bill Derr's email chain, one of the main contributors wrote back saying he couldn't see how they could have been so successful on the RRSNF when what he saw this summer, while observing Forest Service fires in Northern California, was so very different. I wrote him back that it was leadership. Bold leadership! What I call administrative guts. Hopefully, the word of what was possible on the RRSNF forest last summer will spread, that fire managers and forest supervisors will see that there *is a way to reduce the number of catastrophic fires*. I think it will have to come from the forests who decide to resist Washington and Region pressure and take up the initial attack banner on their own.

Some say the wildfire problem in the West is the most important environmental issue of our time. I think they're right. The Rogue River-Siskiyou leadership has accepted the challenge and has shown that this problem can, to a great degree, be mitigated. Fires are being put out small. Crews are going around with smiles on their faces. Like the German playwright Goethe once said, "In boldness there is genius and magic." That's happening on the Rogue River-Siskiyou N.F. these days. Let's hope it can happen on other Western forests as well. 🙏



# Oakus of the Doakus on the Gobi

by Mike McCracken (Cave Junction '60)

**A**s a kid growing up in White Plains, New York, in the 1950s, smokejumping didn't appear to be on my career path.

However, both of my parents were smokers and, on occasion, would leave matches lying about. On some of the match book covers were ads proclaiming that I, too, could leap from an airplane to combat forest fires by simply enrolling in their forestry mail order course. This easy program would make me a full-fledged forest ranger! I was a skeptic.

It wasn't until my first year at the University of Virginia that I was introduced to the idea of going west to fight fires. My roommate had spent the prior summer on a remote fire tower in Idaho and talked incessantly about his experiences. When I dug out the Rand McNally map, I discovered Idaho to be west of places I had only heard of in cowboy movies. You get the idea. I was not cut out to be a geographer.

I made application for a position as a firefighter and caught on for the summer of 1959 with a crew on Idaho's Sawtooth N.F.

Smokejumping came into focus when my fellow pounders and I were hiking to a small blaze just outside of Featherville, Idaho. Suddenly a small, red, twin-engine plane appeared overhead, and four parachutes eventually blossomed above us. By the time we hit the fire scene, these supermen were mopping up and a couple were sacking up their gear. Hot damn, this was for me!

With only one season of firefighting under my belt, I made application to every jumper base in the country and caught on at Cave Junction—the Gobi. We ran and then ran and then ran some more during training. All the while I was aware of a pervasive little bush that some of my fellow rookies knew to step around. Not this kid. I hired out to be tough and powered right through 'em. Unfortunately, that little bush, poison oak, would be my Waterloo.

In time I healed enough to make a fire jump in Northern California and, you guessed it, the

area was covered with poison oak. Days later, while laying on a rubber sheet in an infirmary in a place ironically called Happy Camp, I was only too aware that my huge blisters had spawned their own smaller blisters. I was a mess!

Visitors would pop in to see an injured logger or a sick relative, catch a glimpse of me in the corner, and mutter to one another unhelpful asides such as “look at that poor bastard will ya!”

My condition became painfully humorous back at Cave Junction when my buddies would stop by my cot in the barracks to offer a kind word. I was still on a rubber sheet with the poison oak fully covering my groin and a dark recess or two. The swelling of the “equipment” had now reached mega size. Soon my bros were coming to my cubicle to witness McCracken's Oakus of the Doakus. Some suggested that Roy Roger's horse Trigger might be envious.

Alas, it was not to last as the swelling subsided and was normal until the next fire jump, and then it was “Katie bar the door”—here it comes again.

The story has a happy ending though. Base Manager Jim Allen, the best boss I ever had anywhere, arranged for a transfer to McCall. I spent a number of great summers there, eventually becoming a squadleader.

However, when the buzzer sounded and the PA would blare out that a plane load was needed to boost Redding, you could find me hiding behind the nearest shed, quaking in my Whites, and scratching subconsciously at some very private parts. 🦋

## National Smokejumper Reunion

August 12–14, 2022

Boise, Idaho



# ODDS AND ENDS



**Chuck Sheley** (Cave Junction '59) Congratulations and thanks to **Tom Fink** (MSO-00), **Gary "Jiggs" Parker** (WYS-79), **Eric Hansen** (MSO-62), **Dave Sutton** (MSO-60), **Jerry John** (CJ-62), **Randall Cribbs** (MSO-69), **Bill Robertson** (MSO-57), **Brian Kopka** (MSO-95), **Jim Scofield** (MSO-66), **Gene Minnich** (RAC-80), **Jerry Waters** (MYC-75) and **Manny Diaz** (NIFC-90) who just became our latest Life Members.

*Sheridan Media:* Wyoming Republican US House Representative **Liz Cheney** is supporting a bill designed to overhaul federal wildland firefighters pay and benefits. It is named after Cody smokejumper **Tim Hart**, who died earlier this year while parachuting into a wildland fire in New Mexico.

Cheney says, "Across the West, smokejumpers and their families make so many sacrifices on behalf of us all, and it's critically important that we take steps to ensure that they receive adequate compensation for the dangerous work they undertake on a daily basis."

The bill's main sponsor is Democratic Representative **Joe Neguse** from Colorado and is supported by several organizations including the U.S. Hotshots Association and the National Smokejumper Association.

As part of the NSA History Preservation Project, sending a copy of all books written by smokejumpers to the archives at Eastern Washington University has been one of my goals. I recently received a copy of **Roland "Sam" Grotte's** (MSO-55) book, *A Life Or As Much Of It As I Can Factually Recall*. Sam had a long aviation career flying for the USAF and American Airlines. With this extensive background, it is significant what was handwritten on the opening page of the copy he sent me: "To All Smokejumpers—There are none better." (Ed.)



**John Scholtes** (RAC-69) comment in his bio: "I still maintain very fond memories of the esprit de corps that was so quickly developed with each of us bonding together, encouraging, and supporting each other. I had never experienced that before and sadly never since. The following summer, I trained and served as a member of a 'Helitack Crew.' It, too, was exciting, but not the same as being a member of the smokejumpers."

**Kelly Esterbrook** (RAC-86): "A celebration of life for **Mark Corbet** (LGD-74) was held in November at the Corbet Ranch. It was a grand affair, hosting an estimated 100 plus with food, drink, bonfire and a Mark Corbet picture show. Donations were made by Mark's fan club (\$525) to go to the NSA Scholarship Fund."

**Dan Thompson** (FBX-86): "I read your safety article and then the shorter piece by Murry Taylor. I felt compelled to ask you if you are familiar with Mike Rowe, of the TV show 'Dirty Jobs' fame. After eight years of doing his show and putting himself in many very nasty situations, he put out some good interviews on the concept of safety first being a detriment to getting anything done. He goes on to argue, without being flippant at all, safety should be third. It's great stuff especially to us folks from the good old days looking at how things have changed."

There will be a memorial in Winthrop June 11, 2022, for **Doug Houston** (RAC-73), who passed away December 31, 2021. Contact **Bill Moody** (NCSB-57) for details @wdmoo39@gmail.com

**Kirk Hale** (LGD-79): "**Denny Lewis** (NCSB-68) had the highest work ethic. One of his rules at La Grande was 'From top to bottom, everyone always volunteers for the worst jobs.'" 🧠

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# The Homecoming

by Karen Weissenback Moen

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The past and present merged one morning in 2015. After years of dreaming of the day when I could travel to a small town on the upper Mekong River, I found myself in a SUV heading on Route 13 over what was once known as the Chinese Road—a place strictly off limits to American planes during the Vietnam War because of the Chinese artillery crews.

As we traveled on that January day in 2015, enormous Chinese earthmovers, trucks, and road crews were working to stabilize mountains that had eroded away during the last monsoon season. Buses bringing Chinese workers to work on the nearby dams passed when two-way traffic was allowed. At times, we were pushed to the road's edge where I could see the narrow valley thousands of feet below. As we traveled that day, the words spoken to me by my young husband, **Edward Weissenback** (CJ-64), came back to me: "You've already decided to go, so there is nothing more to do except enjoy it and see what happens."

Ed and I came to Laos for the first time in the summer of 1968. We'd just married after I received the most unromantic and persuasive proposal of all times. Laos was to be our home as Edward began his work as an Air Freight Specialist with Air America. Our first home was a wooden bungalow on the banks of the Mekong River in Vientiane. We'd inherited that house from **John Kirkley** (CJ-64) and **John Manley** (CJ-62). I fell in love with the view of Thailand which lay across the river and adapted to a life unlike any I'd ever known.

Prior to my arrival, Ed had worked hard to find a house to rent and a servant who cleaned and did all the laundry. He had purchased some furniture and kitchen supplies from departing Americans. Just before I left, I received a letter in which he proudly announced that he'd also found a "best friend" for me—Mary Gossett, the wife of **Lee Gossett** (RDD-57). We've remained friends to this day.

It was a life filled with the sounds of morning and evening temple gongs, of trips to the morn-

ing market for fruit, vegetables, pork, fish, beef, or snakes, snails and frogs if you preferred. Or there were trips to the American Commissary/PX for American-style groceries and liquor so inexpensive everyone had a full bar in their homes. Even though Vientiane could seem to be the end of the earth, it was filled with inexpensive restaurants with delicious and exotic French, American, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Thai dishes.

In the market there were Indian fabric merchants and jewelry stores with the cheapest 20 and 24K gold items in SE Asia. There were small local Buddhist temples in every neighborhood, impossible heat part of the year, humidity, roadblocks, and curfews. It was sometimes a lonely life for wives. There were more days of the month than not when we had no idea where our husbands were working and knew only that they might be home in three or four days. And there were always "accidents"—the aircraft that crashed. Crews sometimes survived and sometimes did not.

I often read late into the night, or as long as the large temple candles would last as the electricity went off on a regular basis. My home in Vientiane was the first home where I had stayed alone. It was easier to read late into the night than to go to bed and wonder about all the sounds outside the house. Slowly, in a beat-up car purchased from a departing American pilot, I began to learn my way around town. When home, Ed began collecting the animals that always seemed to surround him: a mynah bird, parrots, a cat or two, then a couple of exotic lizards, and Siamese fighting fish. Eventually, we also added a bull mastiff puppy to the mix along with a wild snake purchased at a local market.

We had settled into this strange new life, but it all came to a sudden end when Ed was among a group of employees furloughed in May 1969, and we returned to the United States—Ed to work as a Redmond smokejumper and me to set up an apartment in Ashland, Oregon, where we would attend school the next year. All the while,



Ed dreamed of returning to Laos where he had enjoyed the work and the challenge. After talking with Air America officials for months, Ed received a letter at the start of the 1970 jump season saying he had the option of being rehired by Air America and would be based in Vientiane, Laos.

Unfortunately, Ed had an accident on his first fire jump that season and had injured his back. However, he was able to convince Air America officials that he was needed at Redmond and was able to hold off reporting for duty until he was able to pass his physical. He'd spent the summer working in support positions and was more than ready for adventure by the time we left to return to Laos. We found a house, purchased furniture, purchased a used car with illegal Thai plates, and set up our new home as neighbors of Lee and Mary Gossett, **Gary Granquist** (RAC-65), **George Rainey** (RAC-68), and **Chuck** (RAC-65) and **Karla Yeager**. This time I was more familiar with what to expect and was able to secure a job at a USAID English Language School for senior Lao and Hmong military officers. We lived on my modest salary and saved most of Ed's. Every month, funds went off to his parents to deposit in our account as we built up a "nest egg" for our future.

By 1970-71 the war in Laos had become even more intense. The men seldom talked about their work at home. You might have a sense of their assignment if you happened to see one of the flight pickup schedules posted around key neighborhoods in town. I quit believing that much was truly secret when I saw that one of the posting sites was directly across the road from the Russian Embassy and another was near the Chinese Embassy in another part of town. I also could check the schedules when I would drive out to Air America's compound for the mail and to fill up containers with potable water. We weren't given much information as schedules were always changing or the mission might be a secret one.

We all knew that planes, helicopters, and air crews were going down because of weather, navigation mishaps, or enemy fire. As a family member, you worried, but you also went on with life. When Ed was home, he would ride his bicycle for miles, work out in his home gym, talk with friends about animals and future adventures, and share smokejumping stories with other jumpers.

All this came to an end for the crew of Air America #293 on December 27, 1971. The plane was first listed as overdue following what was supposed to be a routine supply trip from Udon Air Force Base in Thailand to a remote site in northern Laos. For unknown reasons, but probably due to poor weather conditions, the plane ended up north of the Mekong River on a direct path over the Chinese Road and the artillery crews guarding the road. By 3:00 in the afternoon, Lee Gossett, who was home that day, reached our house with the news that the plane was overdue and presumed missing. Subsequent search and rescue efforts produced no sightings of the plane or its crew. Search planes were shot at and pulled back out of the area. Large rewards were offered for information leading to the recovery of the men or their remains. Before leaving Laos in mid-1972, I met with someone who said he was a trader heading up to the "golden triangle area" and indicated he would try to find out some information. He even took a letter I'd written to Ed along with a photograph of our daughter Amber. We never heard from him again.

Searching for information about Ed and the other members of the crew of Air America #293 was at times a futile effort. Air America was the CIA's "secret airline." No one was particularly interested in civilian casualties nor was much publicly acknowledged about Air America and its relationship to the CIA. The only U.S. official who provided any assistance was Montana Senator Mike Mansfield who carried a letter from me when he went to China with President Nixon in 1972. Of course, the Chinese offered no help, but I was told officials did politely accept the letter.

Once I returned to the States, I completed graduate school and set about raising the daughter not yet born when Ed disappeared. Unfortunately, Amber is developmentally disabled but as an adult has been able to understand her relationship to the man she sees in the pictures, has had frequent visits with her father's family, and was able to go with me in 2014 to visit the POW/MIA Identification Laboratory in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Six months after the crash, I ceased believing that Edward was alive. This was confirmed when I was called by a member of the State Department in February 1973 with information that

Ed's name was not included in the list of names of POWs to be turned over to the U.S. by the governments of North Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. There was no additional information—just the fact that none of the crew of Air America #293 were named on the list. Nearly three weeks later, I sat alone and watched television as the first of the American POWs began arriving at U.S. military bases, and Operation Homecoming became a reality. But for Edward and the other crew members of #293, there was no homecoming.

I returned to Laos in 1973 with an idea that I might find a job and return to live there. However, the American presence in Laos was growing smaller and Air America was downsizing. There were no jobs for single women. With the help of staff at the American Embassy, I met with Soth Petrasi, the Pathet Lao emissary in Vientiane. We met for about 90 minutes, but he said he had no information about any Americans in Laos who might not have been returned in the prisoner exchange. He did take a letter I had written for Edward but told me he had no expectation it could be delivered to him.

Once Air America ceased to exist at the end of the Vietnam War, our case was transferred to the Department of State. The Department's liaison officer periodically forwarded copies of reports received from the Department of Defense's POW/MIA research and identification. These reports were heavily redacted and sometimes contained rumors, false leads, or information that was later found to be inaccurate. I often found the reports disturbing and extremely uninformative. I would share the reports with Lee Gossett and Jerry DeBruin, whose brother **Eugene DeBruin** (MSO-59) was also MIA. They also helped me sort out reports or "tips" I'd sometimes receive from "unofficial sources."

In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a cottage industry in the sale of information about scores of men supposedly left behind in SE Asia. Working with Lee and Jerry, I was able to avoid some of the mistakes made by others who sometimes advanced money for information that was almost always unfounded or outright lies. I was last approached by someone "with information" in 2015, so those efforts to find gullible, desperate people does, unfortunately, continue.

Through the decades, the official/legitimate reports would still arrive periodically but seldom contained any new information. I was amused that the names of the other crew members were always redacted even though the other two American wives and I would always check with one another to see if our reports matched.

In 1997 a U.S. search team was granted permission by the Lao government to travel to Ban Dan Keo village to look for a missing American plane. After several days on site, it was confirmed that this was the crash site of Air America #293. And then nothing more. "It is too remote." "It is too difficult to access with our limited resources." "The Lao government won't give us permission to go there again." "It doesn't fit in with our current scope of work." These were the official responses when we asked about possible excavation and recovery efforts.

Following a trip to Laos in 2012, I became more active in the POW/MIA National League of Families and began regular correspondence with the son and daughters of other crew members. While in Vientiane in 2012, I met with the head of the U.S. search team and once again pleaded our case. Since the crash site was located in 1997, why hasn't it been excavated and the area searched for remains? Many reasons were given, but none were particularly persuasive to a family member inquiring about a loved one missing for decades.

In 2013, our case was transferred from the Department of State to the Central Intelligence Agency. During our annual in-person briefings, we began asking for a CIA letter of inquiry to be forwarded to the Defense Personnel and Accounting Agency (DPAA) urging that the crash site be excavated and a search for remains undertaken. In late fall 2015, we received word that the letter of inquiry had finally been signed and transmitted to DPAA.

In 2015, I had an opportunity to return to Laos with the son of the plane's chief pilot. Our goal: Find and visit the village where the crash site was located. We found ourselves traveling across that same road that had been so carefully guarded in 1971 and where four good men met death in December 1971.

With the help of our travel agent, the son of a pilot killed in Laos while working for Air America,

we had hired a guide/translator who helped us identify the right village. He helped us meet with the farmer who owns the land today but was a young teenager who witnessed the crash in 1971.

It turned out that the crash site wasn't so remote and difficult to access after all, a point we made repeatedly once we returned to the United States. The gardener at the hotel where we were staying drove us to the site, parked at the edge of road, and we walked across the cabbage and corn fields to the dry rice paddy where the remains of Air America's missing C-123 lay. As I told the head of DPAA and the Vice Chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, my new hiking shoes barely got dusty crossing the fields.

The location of the crash site is beautiful. It is adjacent to the river in a narrow valley surrounded by forested mountains. As I looked around, I knew it was the sort of place Edward would have loved: a rural setting with mountains to hike and a river for rafting. Today it is peaceful and serene. At some point, the area will become a popular hiking area for tourists but for now, the crash site is a part of a rural farming village.

During this visit, we were greeted by the farmer and members of his family. He told us what he remembered that day and how the Chinese troops kept villagers back from the smoldering wreckage. Villagers never saw any bodies but assumed people had died as they didn't see any parachutes. During the visit, the farmer, a fellow villager, and our guide conducted a Buddhist ceremony in the rice paddy in honor of the men. It was touching and very unexpected. Food that we had purchased for a picnic was left in the field for the men along with any gifts we wanted to leave. Women and children from the village took a break and sat on the paddy's edge during the ceremony, and one older woman kept wiping tears away as prayers were said. I wondered what her story might be.

I left photographs with the farmer including my favorite one of Edward with a large snake wrapped around his neck. When he saw Ed's photograph, the farmer suddenly became very excited and swore he had seen Edward. This was startling news until we learned it had been a man with a snake in a dream who gave him winning lottery numbers. His sister-in-law used the numbers and won a large jackpot of \$100. He kept looking at



*Ed Weissenback*

the photograph and kept saying it was exactly the man in his dream. We let him know that other Americans might come one day, and we hoped that the plane could be excavated someday. We assured him he would be compensated for his crops. We felt we left behind not only food and photographs but good will, as well.

From 2015-2017 we kept the pressure on pleading and asking for DPAA to excavate our site (since its remoteness and inaccessibility was no longer a viable excuse). Thanks to the efforts of one of the co-pilots daughters, we were invited to meet with CIA Director Mike Pompeo when we went to Washington DC to attend the 2017 National League of Families Annual Meeting. This meeting, along with the personal interest of the former and current directors of DPAA, resulted in a call to us in summer 2017 that Air America #293 would finally be fully excavated in an effort to find remains of the crewmen. The excavation was scheduled to begin in October 2017 and go through the month of November. Negotiations with the farmer had been successful. He had no problem with the season's crops being ruined since full market price was to be paid for the crops.

Once again, I set off for Laos and met up with members of pilot George Ritter's family. We headed downriver by boat to Pak Beng. Our guide from our previous trip traveled upriver to meet us.



We visited the excavation site while work was in progress and were able to watch as teams of U.S. military worked in the field alongside villagers who had been hired to help dig.

We watched and talked with DPAA munition and aircraft specialists as they continued their work and carefully examined bits and pieces of metal, possible bone fragments, teeth, and even an Air America insignia sifted out in the washing stations. It was a large archeological dig with dozens of people working in the field. Overseeing it all was the Colonel who headed up the Lao team and local officials. Representatives must be present during each and every excavation effort and all expenses are paid by the U.S. Government.

We were careful not to be a distraction as it was very unusual for family members to be in the field or even visit crash sites, as most are hard to reach. Excavation teams are allowed in-country for a limited number of days each year and they must be very efficient with the time they are allotted. Our site was allotted 3-4 weeks. The American commander was concerned about his team being distracted and wasn't happy that we were there.

I knew that we were going to make him more unhappy when I told him that a Buddhist monk was coming to bless the work. This had been arranged by our guide and the farmer but had not been negotiated in advance. The commander was concerned about how the Lao officials would react as for many years after the communists took over, religious practices were banned.

It turned out that the Lao were less concerned about it than the American commander. Permission was granted for the monks to bless the missing men and to tell them it was time to leave this resting place. Each man's name was called out, prayers said, and each man was told it was time to leave. I must say "Weissenback" was a hard name for that poor monk to deal with, but he managed an approximation of the name.

This time, the bottle of Chivas Regal the Ritter family brought for their father was poured on to the ground and the food we'd purchased was taken back to the local temple for the monks to eat or give to people in need. I noticed that during the service several of the crew working in the field came over and quickly bowed to the monks. It was a beautiful thing for our guide and the farmer

to do for us even if it hadn't been officially sanctioned in advance.

Once we left Pak Beng, we continued downriver to Luang Prabang the ancient, royal capital of old Laos. From there we went on to Vientiane where our former homes were located. We were invited to breakfast at the American Ambassador's residence to discuss our trip with her. We thanked her and her predecessors for their support of the work done in Laos to recover the remains of American airmen missing from the Vietnam War.

In December 2017, the formal transfer of remains from the excavation efforts took place in Vientiane, and the recovered remains of individuals from three different crash sites began their journey to DPAA headquarters in Honolulu.

After years of hoping and searching, lobbying and cajoling, I received a call on December 21, 2018, from the Director of DPAA, Gen. Kelly McKeague (Ret.), telling me that Ed's remains (a bone fragment) had been identified using DNA donated by his mother and sister in 1998. The identification had been completed that week, six days before the 47<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the disappearance of Air America #293. The remains of all three Americans working together that day had been identified. Edward was finally coming home to friends and family.

On September 16, 2019, I met Ed's sister and their husbands at DPAA Headquarters in Honolulu. After touring the facility, we were able to see and spend time alone with Ed's remains. Then a military honor guard joined us for placing the remains in the cherrywood urn that I had made in southern Oregon. It was lined with the handkerchief I carried on our wedding day in 1968. The St. Christopher medallion that Ed's mother gave him when he was drafted and sent to Vietnam in 1965-1966 was also put into the urn. At the conclusion of the formal ceremony, we were escorted out of the building and down a sidewalk lined with the men and women who work for DPAA, all solemnly proud of the work they had done.

Ed's remains will be buried at the Eagle Point National Cemetery June 17, 2022. In the meantime, the urn and its contents rest on a shelf in my office awaiting placement near my parents on a hilltop in a valley overlooking the mountains of southern Oregon. 🙏



# RECORDING SMOKEJUMPER HISTORY



## 1944 Rookies—The Civilian Public Service Years

NSA History Preservation Project

*Now we enter the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the CPS (Conscientious Objectors COs)—Program. Seventy-one rookies trained in 1944, the great majority were Missoula jumpers. Cave Junction and McCall were established in 1943 and must have had a good return rate even though these bases were smaller than Missoula. Remember that the Missoula jumpers were at Nine Mile and not actually at Missoula. Cave Junction had three rookies and McCall had 15 rookies.*

*CPS Camp-103 was the designation for those men in Civilian Public Service who were smoke-jumpers. The camp was directed by a civilian director, Roy Wenger. There were approximately 250 CPS men who were smokejumpers over the three years of the program. Their achievements increased by the year. Wait until I get to the 1945 season!*

*During WWII there were about 12,000 COs in 218 CPS camps throughout the U.S. Certainly not all were religious objectors.*

*Mark Mathews, in his book Jumping on the Western Fire Line, describes these men from home movies: "They are handsome men with well-defined physiques. Their expressions exude a mixture of adventure and trepidation. Intolerant Americans verbally and physically attacked the COs. They were frequently spit on or had to dodge stones thrown by teenagers or older, irascible patriots. The historic peace churches have long faced similar persecution. Many CPSers had heard legends passed down by family elders of atrocities endured by their ancestors in Europe that included torture and execution for their religious beliefs."*

*This group of smokejumpers has been excluded, in many cases, from smokejumper history. They gathered at Missoula for the 1995 National Reunion only to be left off the program and told "we don't deal with cults."*

*My wife and I went to the CPS-103 Smoke-jumper Reunion in 2000 in Oskaloosa, Iowa, at William Penn University. I immediately felt a "cool"*

*atmosphere and later found out there were people still smarting from the 1995 snub in Missoula. Over the week we "mended fences" with these men. I attended a later reunion in Hungry Horse, Montana.*

*I heard stores of doing humanitarian work in Palestinian Refugee Camps dodging bullets during the 1982 massacre in Lebanon. Were these men "yellow bellies?" Certainly not.*

*I've maintained contact with the CPS Smoke-jumper group for the last 20 years as it disappears into little-known history. I can say that I would be honored to be a friend and live with the CPS jumpers. They had the guts to stand for their beliefs. Here is the class of 1944, all MSO unless otherwise noted. (Ed.)*

**Jack Allen**—A Marine 1938-42, one of the few rookies not a CPSer.

**George Anderson (MYC)**—Open-pit miner, carpenter after the war.

**Roy Anderson**—Another Marine (Para-Marine), might have been discharged (1944) due to wounds in action.

**Lew Berg**—Master's from Syracuse, teacher at college level.

**Hubert Blackwell**—Logger, killed in logging accident 1952 Cave Junction, Oregon, uncle of **John Blackwell (MYC-64)**

**Murry Braden**—Ph.D. Mathematics, Dean of Faculty Macalester college, designer of Wankel rotary engine.

**Chuck Chapman**—Mennonite, Research Physicist.

**Bob Cochran**—Career truck driver, suicide 1987.

**Dale Entwistle**—"Whistle" worked railroad 25 years. *Missoulain* said in his obit "Dale was happiest when he could do a good deed for someone."

**Dick Flaharty**—Master's U. Pittsburg, child welfare worker, key person in keeping CPS-103 records.

**Erling Gamble**—Ph.D. North Carolina U., career soil scientist USDA.

**Jack Gregory**—Degree Montana State, rancher in Montana.

**Jim Hain**—Cornell College, career logging and construction.

**Lee Hebel**—Lutheran Pastor, Dr. of Divinity. Regarding his life: "If we were called upon to make the choices again, we would be Christians, a Christian Pastoral family, and Christian pacifists."

**Nick Helburn**—BA, Master's, Professor Montana State, became the first director of the Education Resources Information Center for Social Studies. He joined the Geography Department at the University of Colorado in 1971 and served as chairman for three years. He was also elected president of the Association of American Geographers.

**Merle Hoover** (MYC)—Master's, school administration.

**Lloyd Hulbert**—Ph.D., moved to Kansas in 1955, taking a teaching position at Kansas State University. Lloyd felt his crowning achievement at K State was the establishment in 1976 of Konza Prairie, an 8,600-acre outdoor laboratory. Even while stricken with cancer, Lloyd "climbed out of his sick bed" and gave his lectures at the University.

**Oliver Huset**—NY City engineer, teacher University of North Dakota.

**George Iten**—M.D., career family physician.

**James Jackson**—Alaska logger.

**Marshall Jensen**—Career Pacific Telephone.

**John Johnson**—Baptist, career accountant Homelite Chainsaw.

**Ed Kirk**—Badly injured on 1945 jump, career pump company.

**George Leavitt**—Ph.D. U. Calif. Berkeley, Professor Psychology Fresno State University.

**Dean Lehman**—Master's U. Colorado, teacher.

**Wallace "Pic" Littell**—Master's Columbia Univ., head of US Information Agency Moscow (Russia), 1947 NCAA Wrestling Team Champions.

**Gordon Miller** (MYC)—Divinity degree Southern Methodist Univ., pastor in small towns in Texas.

**Lee Miller**—Mennonite, Caterpillar dealership

in Iowa.

**Norman Miller** (MYC)—Distance runner Univ. Kentucky, career in Agronomy.

**Larry Morgan**—Disciples of Christ Church, 57 years in photography business, owned one of the largest photography businesses in northwest.

**Frank Neufeld**—Master's USC, Principal/teacher, Jail Ministries.

**Elmer Neufeld** (CJ)—Career USFS Smoke-jumper NCSB.

**Joe Osborn**—Master's Univ. Michigan, teacher Purdue Univ., Lehigh Univ., Montana State Univ., and Michigan State University.

**Bob Painter** (CJ)—Career M.D., "My patients are my friends. There is something of God in every person."

**Art Penner** (CJ)—Mennonite, career brick-layer.

**Ray Phibbs**—Brethren Church, Yale Divinity School, senior pastor United Church of Christ, Doctor of Ministry Degree. In his bio, Ray's wife said of him, "Throughout his life, he dared to stand against injustice, poverty, bigotry, and the prejudices which dehumanize people."

**Gregg Phifer**—Methodist, Ph.D., 45-year career Florida State Univ., nationally rated Track & Field official.

**Michael Ritzman** (MYC)—Born in China to missionary parents, Exec. Director YMCA Chester, PA., lifelong Pacifist.

**Geo. Robinson**—Baptist, fire chief 44 years.

**Charles Rogers**—Quaker, degree NY Univ., Met Life Insurance career.

**Hubert Rohrer**—Methodist, broke leg fire jump 1945, career Public Health.

**Laurel Sargent**—From Kansas, "School was an abject boredom for me. My ideas of a perfect day would be to stay at home and work the crosscut saw." Career farming and ranching.

**Karl Schmidt**—Not CPS, ex-Army paratrooper.

**Chas. Schumacher**—Univ. Cincinnati grad, career Bechtel worked master plan for world's largest gas field in Qatar.

**Lowell Sharpes**—Brethren, owner, and developer of Holly Farms.

**John Shipp**—Brethren, career farmer Harrisonburg, VA.

**Paul Shrock**—Mennonite, career farmer/



carpenter.

**Bradshaw Snipes**—9<sup>th</sup> generation Quaker, developed Snipes Farm & Nursery rated among top 100 garden centers in U.S.

**Bennie Spangler**—Brethren, Univ. education, admin. Dillard Paper Co.

**Ralph Spicer**—Univ. education, City Engineer Cleveland, Ohio.

**Harold Toews**—Brethren, career farmer Montana.

**Ed Vail**—Quaker, worked with Montana Press in Missoula.

**Harvey Weirich** (MYC)—Mennonite, V.P. Starcraft Marine (boating).

**Gilbert Weldy** (MYC)—Brethren, Ph.D., teacher Kansas State Univ.

**Eldon Whitesitt** (MYC)—Methodist minister, Ph.D. professor of Mathematics at Montana State Univ. Bozeman.

**Merlo Zimmerman** (MYC)—Mennonite Central Committee (20 yrs.), killed in farm accident, overturned tractor 2002 at age 83.

**Sam Zook**—Mennonite, career logger, lost leg in 1962 accident. ☠

*Turn Your Pins and Patches Into*

## Helping Other Smokejumpers

*and Their Families*

Send us your Smokejumper or other pins, Trail Crew pins, and/or patches that are hiding in your sock drawer. We'll sell them to collectors on eBay with all money going into the NSA Good Samaritan Fund and acknowledge you in a later issue.

*Send to: Chuck Sheley—10 Judy Ln—Chico  
CA 95926*

## Still Looking for Your Biography

The response has been good for the bio request. I've got close to 1,500 done. If you have not taken the time to send me one, please sit down and do so. Information in this order:

**Born:** Month, day, year, city, state. **Grew Up:** City, state, graduated from H.S. including location. **Further Education:** Location, degree(s).

**Career:** Chronological order **Military service/Honors/Awards?**

**Your Life:** Have been getting good extra information—go for it!

If you can send in an email or Word document, it saves me a lot of typing.

Please do not send in pdf. Otherwise, I'll take it written longhand. (Ed.)

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- National Smokejumper Association Meeting Minutes
- Publications on Smokejumping
- Smokejumper & Static Line Magazines
- Smokejumper Base Crew Pictures
  - Redmond • Cave Junction • NCSB • LaGrande • Silver City
- Tom Carlsen Film on Smokejumping (1939)
- Triple Nickle Photographs from the National Archives

# NEW LIFE MEMBERS SINCE APRIL 2021

410	CRUES	JOHN	MISSOULA	1970	427	SIEMENS	ROGER	MISSOULA	1959
411	BOGGS	LARRY	REDDING	1963	428	BLACKWELL	JOHN	MCCALL	1964
412	BESTWICK	DON	MISSOULA	1980	429	SHELDON	BEN	NO. CASCADES	1974
413	LITTLE	JIM	MISSOULA	1962	430	MARSHALL	CURTIS	REDDING	1968
414	OLSON	CLAIRE	MISSOULA	1968	431	FINK	TOM	MISSOULA	2000
415	WILKINS	STEVE	REDMOND	1965	432	DIAZ	MANNY	NIFC	1990
416	NICOL	BOB	MISSOULA	1952	433	PARKER	GARY	W. YELLOWSTONE	1979
417	PERKINS	PHIL	FAIRBANKS	1976	434	HANSEN	ERIC	MISSOULA	1962
418	HALE	KIRK	LA GRANDE	1979	435	SUTTON	DAVID	MISSOULA	1960
419	ROBERTSON	PHILIP	MISSOULA	1962	436	JOHN	JERRY	CAVE JUNCTION	1962
420	HUDSON	RICK	BOISE	1973	437	PRIDE	PETE	MCCALL	1983
421	HORNER	C. J.	MCCALL	1965	438	ROBERTSON	BILL	MISSOULA	1957
422	WEST	RUSS	GRANGEVILLE	1978	439	CRIBBS	RANDALL	MISSOULA	1969
423	WELCH	LARRY	CAVE JUNCTION	1961	440	KOPKA	BRIAN	MISSOULA	1995
424	EDWARDS	LARRY	MISSOULA	2002	441	SCOFIELD	JIM	MISSOULA	1966
425	CRAMER	MIKE	CAVE JUNCTION	1959	442	MINNICH	GENE	REDMOND	1980
426	HICKMAN	JIM	MISSOULA	1952	443	WATERS	JERRY	MCCALL	1975

## NSA's Most Successful Membership Drive

Editor

Our NSA database is divided into three categories: Members, non-members, and those for whom we have no contact information. There are approximately 1800 in that last category. Not to be overlooked are the 200 Associate Members (non-jumpers but supportive of the NSA). We appreciate these people.

During 2021, I started doing people searches to find mailing address for the "lost" jumpers. Takes time and a lot of sleuthing as there are many people with the same name. Many of the "lost" are deceased, and I just have not received that information.

In November 2021, I sent out 1,400 letters to the non-member group telling them about the NSA and encouraging membership. Membership keeps us as a functioning and strong organization. We currently have close to 1550 members which

is exceptional considering the limited number of smokejumpers in U.S. history and the number of obits I've written in the last ten years.

The mailing has, to this time, resulted in the addition of 101 new or returning members. Most importantly is that the great majority of these people are those for whom we have not had any contact since the early 2000s or late 1990s. Out of that group, five went from non-member to Life Member. Wow! On the other end, we have 2021 rookie **Matt Thesis** (MYC-21).

Welcome all to the National Smokejumper Association. You will find us an organization that records and preserves smokejumper history, awards annual scholarships totaling \$20,000, and a group that has supported smokejumpers and their families in times of need to the tune of almost \$300,000. 🙏



# SOUNDING OFF from the Editor



by **Chuck Sheley**  
(Cave Junction '59)  
MANAGING EDITOR

I WAS GOING to address this subject with a few lines in the Odds/Ends column, but I want to put it front and center. After the October issue, I was forwarded an email by our President, **Bob McKean** (MSO-67). It reads: "Please cancel my subscription to *Smokejumper* magazine. So much is happening in today's smokejumper world, but you'd never know it by reading this magazine. It has become a **pathetic repository** for pictures and stories about military service. The magazine is supposed to honor smokejumpers not veterans. If you can't figure that out, I don't want any part of it."

I'm disappointed whenever we lose a member as I spend so many hours researching and enlisting members. At the same time, I know that everything that is published in *Smokejumper* will not please

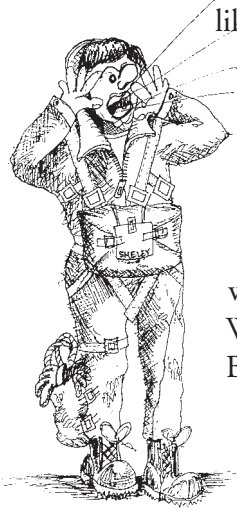
everyone. When I suggested in a prior editorial that hiring should be based on job skills and not ethnicity, we lost two members.

From the teacher part of my career, I always encouraged the expression of a good opinion backed by facts. As a magazine editor, I say that if you don't like the article, turn the page!

I grew up on a military base during WWII, but I am not a veteran. I looked back on my editorial written just after 9-11. The news media, talking heads, et al, were wanting to strike back, get revenge for this attack on our country. Hit back, get someone, somewhere, quick. The crux of my editorial was not to jump before we had the facts.

We did hit back quickly, and, in my opinion, with faulty intelligence. That said, I have never been hesitant to honor those men and women who served and serve the U.S.

If the magazine has been honoring veterans/military, I'm not going to apologize—just turn the page and read something else if the article offends you. Better yet, write something yourself. Take a stand and defend it! Other members



liked the October issue.

Feedback: "*Smokejumper* just arrived. I thumbed through to stop at the center picture of Ben and family. It took my breath away. I went outside to show my wife. She too was awestruck. We counted seven brothers to Ben. What a beautiful family. I then went back and read his first article. What a wonderful testimony to you and the smokejumper brotherhood and the work that goes into the magazine. Then I read Ben's second story. Amazed and inspired again. What a class man. Thank you for printing—a wonderful testimony to a great man and family and to you as our editor."

"The latest *Smokejumper* arrived today. You have again hit the ball out of the park."

"I just wanted to say to you—THANKS for the issue honoring the vets. It was very cool to read a bit about the background of a lot of these jumpers. There are some great guys in this group. It feels a bit like I'm getting to know them through the magazine."

"I just received the latest issue of *Smokejumper* and was just awestruck by the amazing story of M/Sgt Ben Musquez. When I saw the family tree in the center of the magazine, I was taken back by the total dedication to service to this



country by the entire family.”

“In my extended family, there are only three service members (WW 1, Korea, Vietnam), but his family is awesome. If you have any way of contacting him, please tell him of my total appreciation to him and his family to which I have total respect and admiration for. We need about another million like him and his family (maybe more).”

“Just received my *Smoke-jumper* issue, HONORING OUR VETS and what great issue. Amazing the Ben Musquez story and his relatives that served. I especially zeroed in on the 1946 Rookies—The Post WWII Era. What a great list of heroes to all of us and how they returned to the homeland to become model citizen in all walks of life. We, the present crop of smokejumpers, walk in their shadows.”

Let me assure you that the content of each issue is gone over many times. First, I need to establish a core group of four—five articles that are “feature” articles. Then I balance out the content so that there are numerous different articles—”short pieces” is my term. Getting anything from current jumpers is almost impossible. They write on social media but not here.

Let’s get down to the nitty gritty. Out of our 1400 members, only 33 have rookied since 2000. I write to the core group. **100% of our donation income** comes from those of you who rookied before 2000. You are my target audience. Here’s what I know about you:

Large majority only jumped a few seasons while you got your university degree; a large number went on to work for the USFS in professional positions; bachelor’s and advanced degrees were earned by about 80% of you; the Vietnam War directly affected many of you; the number that served in the military is high; the highest number of you went into or started private businesses; you say your time as a smoke-jumper molded your attitude in future life; you are proud of the “can do” attitude.

It has been over five years

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*Out of our 1400 members, only 33 have rookied since 2000. I write to the core group.*

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since I did a “Veterans Day” issue. The October issue fit that bill. My goal in that issue was to honor an individual I respect for his service and as a fellow smokejumper.

Up to the October issue, I had covered the bios on the smokejumpers from 1940-1942. The 1946 rookie class was probably 95 percent veterans of WWII. I had done extensive research on this group. What better issue to honor these men than this issue? Sure, we cover veterans, but they were also smokejumpers.

There is more to come. In this issue I’m going to print an extensive article from the wife of **Ed Weissenback** (CJ-64). Ed was killed December 27,

1971, when the C-123 he was flying in was shot down near the Chinese border. I had the privilege of being one of the rookie trainers for Ed’s group. He was one tough son-of-a-gun. His nickname was “Animal Ed.”

On July 13, 1964, I jumped the Pyramid Peak Fire on the Klamath N.F. Out of the eight of us, six were rookies, as that was all that was left at the base. The fire was crowning when we arrived with the first load. I told Spotter **Mick Swift** (CJ-56) that four more guys sure would be a help. Animal Ed and three more rookies arrived on the second load. Key factor—we got there an hour after the fire was started by a lightning strike.

Four of us worked one side, four the other, and we had it lined by midnight. That night the fire went ballistic. Never seen something burn so hot and loud at night. The next morning nothing was left to burn. It was just a landscape of smokes. We gathered our gear and choppered to Happy Camp where there were at least 200 firefighters waiting to attack that fire. What a feeling of pride as we walked by these men. “It’s out, guys.”

Ed’s remains will be interred in the Veterans Cemetery June 17, 2022, (11:00 a.m.), in Eagle Point, Oregon. I’ll be there along with the others who remember Ed.

This is just a note to those who have trouble with articles about veterans and what they did. Turn the page! 🔔

# That First Season—An Almost Love Affair

by Jack McKay (North Cascades '57)

During the hot, dry days of the summer of 1957, we were waiting for our first jump to a forest fire. Of course, in addition to preparing for fighting fires, we were also interested in meeting the local girls. Things were slow around the base until word got out that Shirley was coming home for a week. The older jumpers described her as an attractive, athletic, and outgoing girl in her early twenties. Even more interesting to us was the rumor that she enjoyed “doing it with smokejumpers.” That prospect was exciting enough for us to fantasize.

The possibility of the chance to meet Shirley was remote for me. Based on their authentic stories, it seemed that most of the older jumpers were far more experienced in women and seduction. The talk was that Shirley was coming up to town and wanted to meet a few of the new jumpers. It was said that she simply liked sex and particularly with smokejumpers.

We were told that Shirley had been married for about a year and that her possessive and abusive husband was the cause of a breakup. Her husband, a stockade guard at a nearby Air Force base, was known as a tough guy. Apparently, he was more interested in guns and hunting than meeting his marriage obligations. The following is true, but the names were changed to protect the guilty.

For some unknown reason, I was selected as one of two rookie jumpers that Shirley had heard about while she was in town. While surprised that I was chosen, I was thrilled about being one of two who would have a special time with Shirley.

The deal was that Ron and I had to buy two cases of beer: one case for Shirley and one case for Gene and Bill, the two guys who were setting up our meeting with Shirley. To say the least, I was excited about the evening with Shirley, even though I wasn't particularly excited about having Ron along. But, at this stage of a long and somewhat lonely summer, one needed to be flexible

about such things.

Arrangements were made for me to drive my car out to an abandoned ranch house where we would meet Shirley. I was told that when I reached the ranch house, I was to signal her by turning the headlights on and off. So, that special evening, the four of us drove to town, bought two cases of beer, and continued to the abandoned ranch house in the nearby hills.

When we arrived, I could hardly see the ranch house. I parked the car in the driveway about fifty yards from the porch and turned the headlights on and off. A flashlight was turned on and off, signaling us to come on up to the house.

Both of us were nervous about this whole arrangement, but we got out of the car and started walking up the driveway with a case of beer. About halfway between the car and the ranch house, I saw a bright flash and heard a very loud explosion from a shotgun. Bang! Another shot was fired. I dropped the case of beer and ran as fast as I could down a steep hill into a wheat field. I heard someone, presumably, Shirley's husband, yelling, “F\*#k my wife, will ya.” Bang and another shot hit the ground close to me. I continued running and crawling through a couple of barbed wire fences. On the ground, I was too scared to move. My heart was pounding so loudly, I thought this guy with the gun would hear it pounding.

One minute we were nervously laughing, then suddenly Shirley's husband was shooting at us. Besides being scared, I was trying to figure out what happened to Ron. I wasn't going to speak up for fear Shirley's husband might hear me and start shooting again.

After what seemed like fifteen minutes, I heard a groan. I was thinking the shotgun blast had hit Ron. Fearing for my life, I decided to crawl out of eyesight and then run the five miles back to town to get the sheriff and get help for Ron. Here I was in the middle of a field on a dark night, not quite

sure where I was, and Ron was possibly injured. Not quite as important, my car was still back at the ranch.

After crawling and running across some fields and through fences, I found a dirt road. I was thinking maybe a car would come by and I could get a ride to town. After a few minutes of walking and running down the road, I could hear a car coming. Fearing Shirley's husband was looking for me, I jumped into a ditch hoping that I wouldn't be found.

Slowing, the car came down the road and stopped about ten yards from where I was. It was my car. Someone got out of the car and yelled, "Jack, you can come on back, it's safe now." Thinking this was a trick to draw me out so he could shoot me, I didn't move or say anything. I recognized that the voice was Gene, one of the guys who arranged this tragic adventure. They drove down the road and, after about ten minutes, came back. This time they stopped and someone else yelled out that it was safe to come back to the car. This guy sure sounded like Ron, but how could he be in the car, when he was wounded about twenty minutes ago?

Still, I wasn't going to come up from the field and possibly get shot at again. Those in the car stayed there while I lay in the ditch. I could hear the guys in the car laughing. Why were they laughing? Ron was shot. I almost got killed myself.

I suddenly realized what was happening. Here were my so-called "friends" in my car drinking my beer while I was lying in a ditch—cold, scared, my new shirt torn by the barbed wire, and my knees and elbows bleeding. I finally figured out that all the things leading up to my time with this beautiful woman were not making sense.

Starting to understand what was going on, I crawled out of the ditch and walked up the hill to my car where my friends were drinking my beer. I had been set up! Even Ron, my partner in this sexual fantasy, was in on this escapade. I had fallen for the great "Shirley" hoax.

Reluctantly, I joined in on the laughter and the already embellished stories about how I had dropped the beer and run off into the field leaving my wounded partner dying in the driveway.

I should have been more curious about this

whole arrangement. First, who of my so-called friends would be willing to share an opportunity to be with Shirley, this beautiful and "wanting" woman? The guys I knew always talked about such a woman. If they were ever to find such a woman, I know they would never let anyone else get near her. Second, why would Shirley know about me and want to meet me? Crazy as that sounds, I believed it. Third, Ron didn't have any money to buy his share of the beer—I should have known because Ron never had money to buy any beer. And fourth, Shirley was just too good to be true—could there really be such a woman?

The next day, some of the other rookies asked about my date with Shirley. I said that although I was a little nervous, Shirley was very beautiful and understanding and that she lived up to all my expectations and more. She said that I was great! I told them if they were interested in meeting Shirley, I thought she was coming back to the valley in about two weeks.

Over the years, Shirley has revisited the valley many times. She is said to have a continued interest in meeting the rookie jumpers. And it is said that her husband is still extremely jealous and stays quite busy fixing his guns. And to my knowledge, the sheriff has never been called about someone being shot while out with Shirley. However, there was a rumor going around amongst the ranchers that for some strange reason, the barbed wire fences out at the abandoned ranch had to be repaired about every two weeks during the hot summer months. 🍷

## Listing Native American Smokejumpers

I'm working with **Mike Pepion** (MSO-82) to establish a list of Native American Smokejumpers for the NSA History Preservation Program. Besides names, we would like to record their tribe. If you have any additions, please send to me (*Ed.*) [chucksheley@gmail.com](mailto:chucksheley@gmail.com)



# Siskiyou Rappellers—A Force That Does the Job

by Chuck Sheley (Cave Junction '59)

The success of the Rogue River-Siskiyou N.F. in putting out wildfires this season was not an accident. Refer to Murry Taylor's feature article. Forest Supervisor Merv George and FMO **Dan Quinones** (RAC-02) have provided the leadership and set the mindset needed to stop the tremendous amount of burning that is happening each season and will continue to happen.

I bleed Siskiyou Smokejumper Base blood. I have never experienced working with a bunch of people so talented and off-the-wall in my life. The "Gobi" was an experience. I think that historical records will show something like 800-plus acres burned a year 1943-81 when we had jumpers at Cave Junction. Since the base closed, there have been fires totaling over a billion dollars. We jumped the 200-foot Siskiyou trees because that was all we knew and were trained to do. We didn't dry run a fire!

The hiring was done via recommendations from the current jumpers at the base. That was it. Our washout rate was only less than 10 percent.

On to the present day. I do not know a single individual on the Siskiyou Rappel Crew, but I admire and respect what they are doing. Let's look at these individuals. They are listed at being a 21-person crew based out of Grants Pass, Oregon. Their fitness requirement looks very similar to that of smokejumpers. "The first five weeks of the season, starting in early May, will be dedicated to extensive physical fitness, classroom, field training and the National Rappel Academy. **The Mission:** To be effective, efficient and safe aerial-delivered firefighters, highly trained and motivated to be self-sufficient in our efforts to manage wildland fires and care for the land."

The R/R-Siskiyou N.F. had an outstanding season. Anyone of any profession would be ecstatic to do the job they accomplished during the

extreme 2021 fire season.

Let's take a look at what this crew did during the 2021 fire season. They rappelled 16 fires in R-6, catching 15 of them during Initial Attack. That statistic alone stops me. These people are good! Any other forests out there take notice? Going on: four fires Crater Lake N.P. all caught, five fires Roger River/Siskiyou N.F. all caught, Umpqua (dreaded jump forest) one fire caught, and on and on. Get the point?

I must congratulate Merv George, Dan Quinones, and all the personnel on the forest. Everyone had a part in showing the other forests that fire is a part of our ecology, but there is a time and place.

All this shows what is lacking in our USFS at the present time. The climate change needs to be recognized. The effects of wildfire smoke on the human population needs to be considered when the fire management teams determine the size of the "box" they will burn. Have a fatality on a wildfire—a national issue. Kill a couple thousand down the line due to smoke particulates in the air—not in their ballpark. What a way to shift the responsibility for our citizenship.

Bottom line: Thank you for the leadership provided by Merv George and Dan Quinones. They must be the tip of the spear in changing the way we address wildfire in the U.S. I told them in a meeting that the "tip of the spear" would get a few dents from the "let-burn people." The pendulum will slowly move from the "let burn" model to put out the fires. This will take a period of years. The Rogue River/Siskiyou N.F. has proven it can be done.

At the same time, I know they will be the recipient of "stones thrown" for deviating from the let-burn policy. Let's hope that they will not be brought into the mind-think of the current wildfire policy. Kudos from the "can-do generation." 🙏

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# Ring of Fire

by Harvey Harden (Idaho City '59)

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**T**he Song—Many smokejumpers, with one or more fire seasons under their belt, remember “Ring of Fire.” The song was immortalized by Johnny Cash in 1963.

It has often been said that the inspiration for Johnny’s hit was when he reached for the Preparation H but got the Ben Gay instead. In reality he was probably inspired by a few crazy smokejumpers. He recorded the song in March of 1963, and it is ranked number 87 on Rolling Stone’s list of the 500 greatest songs of all time and number four on the list of 100 greatest country music songs as listed by “Country Music Television.” It is a great song with lyrics that every smokejumper can identify with.

*I fell into a burnin’ ring of fire  
I went down, down, down  
And the flames went higher,  
And it burns, burns, burns,  
The ring of fire, the ring of fire.*

## Ring of Fire—The Fighter

One evening in the summer of 1959, after a hard day of training for the NEDS and an easy day of refresher training for the old timers, it was time for rest and relaxation. A popular place to unwind was “The Cellar” in McCall. “The Cellar” was a basement restaurant and bar with attractive decor and a swimming pool. George Logan, aspiring world heavyweight champion from Boise, and his entourage also liked to spend time in “The Cellar.” Logan fought Ezzard Charles, former world heavyweight champion, in Boise on July 30, 1959. He won that fight by a knockout in the 8th round. He also fought Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali) April 23, 1962. He lost that fight in the 4th round when the fight was stopped by his corner because of bleeding. What happens when a group of smokejumpers and George Logan and friends spend time together in “The Cellar”? The jumpers decided that it would be fun to take Logan’s shoe and play

“keep away” with it. Not the best decision, but it seemed like a good idea at the time. George had a ring of fire in his eyes, and the game escalated into a tussle. Before better heads prevailed, there were a lot of wet watches, wallets, testicles, and spectacles. Some jumped in the pool to escape the mayhem. Some ended up in the pool because they were thrown in. When the evening ended, the parting was congenial with no hard feelings and chuckles of disbelief. When George Logan retired from professional fighting, he became a Police Officer in Boise. He was a good officer and was loved by the community. He died February 1, 2021. George Logan was a skilled boxer and probably would have been the heavyweight champion of the world except that he cut easily above his eyes. Many of his losses were stopped fights due to bleeding. **Toby Scott** (MYC-57) and I attended the fight in Boise when Logan defeated Ezzard Charles.

## Ring of Fire—The Goat

It was the typical two-manner, lightning-strike fire covering approximately four hundred square feet. The ring of fire was out the night before, and we were up the next morning having our breakfast. It was a stretch to call it a breakfast, but the nightly fast was broken with some good old cold spam. We were sitting on the ground eating and watching for smoke when we first saw it about 100 yards away. It was running straight toward us, kept coming, and we did not move. It was big, beautiful, and running closer and closer. We thought the mountain goat would see us and change course, but it just kept coming. The goat ran straight through the burn about twenty feet from where we were sitting. There was no indication the goat saw us, and it was still running when it disappeared. We figured he was probably being chased by a predator because he was winded.

## Ring of Fire—The Burn

Why is the ring of fire burned by the typical

lightning-caused forest fires getting larger? Some would say more fuel is the cause. Some would say drier climatic conditions are the cause. Some would say changes in logging practices and forest management are the cause. All are true, but a contributing reason is that the USFS is not as responsive as it once was. Smokejumpers were the SWAT team of the USFS and were used to provide rapid initial attack. According to my sources, when a fire is now reported, they start having meetings and eventually someone is dispatched to put out the fire which is no longer a small two-person fire.

The fire detection techniques like drones, remote cameras, and satellites are apparently

not working as well as staffed lookouts and spotter planes because “about twenty-five percent of the fires that grow to one thousand acres, or more are reported more than a week after they were ignited.” Western wildfires are becoming bigger, and they are happening more often. According to the NFPA, between the years of 2008 and 2012, the average fire started by lightning burned 402 acres. Budgets and politics have always been a factor in fire suppression but more so today. The old fire bosses would say, “Do it, do it right, do it right now.” It seems that the USFS still does it and still does it right, but they do not appear to “do it right now” on a consistent basis. 🔦

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## The Silent Mountain

by Karl Brauneis (Missoula '77)

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They were U.S. Forest Service, and they were firefighters and they searched and hunted for smoke or fire. Sometimes they simply stood still and faced the wind and strained to smell a whiff of smolder. They could not find it. Several times a short stringer of blue had risen above the forest green to be reported by different people on different occasions. They had seen the smoke, but not even an air patrol detection plane could find it.

And the mountain was silent. It had not always been so. At one time a lookout stood above the Warm Springs Mountain. It was in a glass and wood and steel house that climbed 40 feet above the mountain on stilts where a lookout watched over the Wind River's, the Absaroka Range, the Ramshorn, and the Great Divide. But that ended years ago, and now the mountain was silent. They said it cost too much to maintain and staff a lookout. Now we have airplanes to sentinel the forest.

The fire must have gone out, or maybe it was the counterfeit mist and fog that often appears after a storm above the trees in pockets. What the forest rangers call a “water dog.” A false sighting. The firefighters got back to their truck and headed

into the ranger station. It was late. If the fire had not shown its life in this heat of summer afternoon, then it must be out. Dead out. If it ever was.

But the fire had only receded to that place, where it always goes to catch its breath, to build its strength and creep into a more receptive energy. Oh, it sent up short stringers of blue at times, but you could not have seen it unless you were atop a nearby mountain with a good vantage point.

It took 500 firefighters to stop it. The fire\* rose like a boxer from the canvas at the count of six, and it rose with a fury that consumed thousands of acres of prime forest timber land and millions of dollars of taxpayer money in both cost and investment in forest resources lost. And there was smoke and lost businesses and homes threatened and trees destroyed. But that was then. Today, again, the mountain stands silent. But to the west, near the Togwotee along the great divide, another lightning storm is brewing. 🔦

\*Lava Mountain Fire 2016. First reported on July 10<sup>th</sup> and blew up on July 16<sup>th</sup>.



# Gates of the Arctic National Park— Alaska

by **Walt Vennum** (Fairbanks '62)

Virtually everyone who jumps more than two or three summers in Alaska will eventually pass through Bettles, a formerly quaint, sleepy Native village close to the confluence of the Koyukuk and John Rivers, about 180 miles NW of Fairbanks. On June 21, 1963, **David Ames** (FBX-62), **Larry Ferguson** (MSO-62), **Max Kees** (ANC-63), and I jumped the Kavet Creek Fire along the divide between the Noatak and Kobuk watersheds. After the fire was history, we packed out, entirely downhill, to the Noatak River where we were picked up by what would now be considered a museum relic—a Sikorsky S-55 helicopter. Joe Saloy, the person flying the “chopper,” was a legendary 1950s-1970s Alaskan bush pilot. He and I had met and become good friends two years earlier when we both worked with an oil exploration company along the coast of the Gulf of Alaska between Cordova and Yakutat. Contrary to the then crop of BLM administrators, Joe liked smokejumpers and respected us for the work we did. On our way to Bettles, he gave us a flight-seeing tour over the nearby Arrigetch Peaks.

At that time, my sole knowledge of mountaineering and rock climbing came from scrambling up several non-technical peaks in Montana’s Glacier N.P. and a lazy summer’s day cruising the low 5<sup>th</sup> class Koven Route on Mt. Owen in Wyoming’s Tetons. Despite my naïveté, I recognized the Arrigetch for what it was, a fairyland of tightly clustered, unclimbed granite spires and small glaciers in a remote alpine setting. It was a small-scale version of British Columbia’s Bugaboo Range which is widely regarded as the Valhalla of North American alpine climbing.

Much to my surprise, the 1965 American Alpine Journal contained an article detailing the activities of the first climbing party to ever visit the Arrigetch, just a few weeks after the Kavet Creek Fire. Other climbers also ventured into this area in the mid-late 1960s, but those excursions



*Shot Tower*

were largely exploratory and only the smaller, easier peaks were ascended. This situation changed after the 1972 AAJ published an article by David Roberts, arguably the preeminent mountaineering author of the last 50 years, which described his and Ed Ward’s magnificent first ascent of Shot Tower, a pinnacle shaped like a fire plug that is easily the most impressive granite spire in the entire Brooks Range.

In July 1980 I and three friends flew from Bettles to Takahula Lake. We walked up the Alatna River through dense brush for a day and a half before entering Aiyagomahala Valley where we set up a base camp. The following day we received an air drop of enough food, fuel, and climbing gear to enable us to stay for three plus weeks. During our mini expedition, we climbed 11 peaks including the first ascent of Slot Tower, new routes on Wichmann Tower (the SW Ridge Direct) and the Pyramid (the West Ridge), and the 3<sup>rd</sup> ascent of Shot Tower).

Other than the occasional airplane that passed overhead, we saw no other people from the time we left Takahula Lake until we returned there. Except for a few discarded caribou antlers, the only wildlife we encountered were some quite pesky rodents

who continually tried to molest our food cache. The eerie atmosphere of complete solitude was akin to living in a deserted valley on another planet. By the time we hiked back to Takahula Lake, the water level in the Alatna River had dropped low enough that we were able to trudge down the sand bars and mud flats along the riverbanks. We avoided most of the brush, but followed in the enormous tracks of very large bears. Forty plus years later, I still regard our Arrigetch Peaks adventure as my most enjoyable climbing trip and Shot Tower as the finest alpine rock climb I ever did, sentiments shared by all three of my companions.

Mid-August 1993 I and five friends flew from Bettles to Pingo Lake (there are at least a dozen Pingo Lakes in northern Alaska and the Yukon). We retrieved three previously stashed canoes and spent the next 12 days floating 360 miles down the Noatak River to the village of Noatak where we turned our canoes over to the postmaster and flew to Kotzebue. The logistics couldn't have been simpler. Very few parties float downstream beyond Noatak as the river soon splits into several sluggish distributaries before emptying into the shallow water of Kotzebue Sound.

The Noatak does not offer challenging white water, stunning mountain scenery, or the possibility of savoring a total wilderness experience (to use that trite, overhyped expression). This was an opportunity for six close friends to spend almost two weeks together traversing an isolated, still pristine landscape while watching wildlife and partially subsisting off the land. The river flows mostly through tundra and brushy rolling hills backed up by forested slopes and is not difficult to canoe there, being only a handful of class 2 or easy class 3 rapids. Although there are no permanent habitations between Pingo Lake and the village of Noatak, we did see five other groups during our first 10 days. Once within 25 miles of Noatak, the river filled with numerous motor-driven skiffs whose main purpose seemed to be noisily racing up and down the river at high speed. This behavior mirrored that of the village inhabitants' main pastime which appeared to be blasting around the town's gravel roads on massive ATVs.

Our journey coincided with fall migration of the Western Arctic Caribou Herd, and we encountered literally hundreds of these animals,

many of them swimming the river. We also saw several moose, red fox, at least a dozen swans because we were there in mid-late August. Prior to the start of our trip, we agreed to not camp at any location that showed signs of recent bear activity. Although we saw no bears, this decision soon became laughable. Every beach we came ashore on was blanketed with their tracks and partially buried by massive piles of droppings. We caught grayling in every side stream we hiked up, pike in Lake Matcharak, and enough Arctic Char at the mouths of the Cutler and Kelly Rivers that we ate mostly fresh fish for the rest of our trip. Several families in Noatak became very happy when we gave away a good part of the food we'd brought along at the end of our trip.

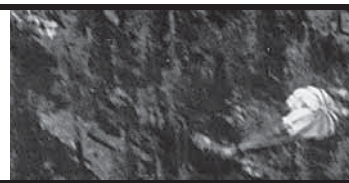
The Arrigetch Peaks and upper Noatak River were incorporated into Gates of the Arctic National Park when the park was established in 1980. Once the Park Service takes control of an area, they habitually turn it into a semi-Gestapo-like police state by initiating numerous totally unnecessary regulations. It is no longer possible to have airdrops in the Arrigetch (legally anyway) without which our climbing trip probably would not have taken place. Nor will you have the Arrigetch or the Noatak River mostly to yourselves any longer. The phrase "If you build it, he will come" is attributed to Kevin Costner in the 1989 movie "Field of Dreams" and is just as applicable to national parks as baseball fields. Slightly over 10,000 people visited Gates of the Arctic National Park in 2016, albeit not all of them went climbing in the Arrigetch or floated the Noatak.

Bettles is no longer a quaint, sleepy Native village, but has reinvented itself as "The Gateway to Arctic Tourism." Bettles Lodge now operates, at least partially, as a bed and breakfast facility. The Park Service has a visitor center there (but no junior ranger program—yet) and several local operators currently offer guided commercial hiking forays into the Arrigetch and float trips down the Noatak, Kobuk, Koyukuk, John, and Alatna Rivers. In recent years it has become quite popular to fly to the inland Eskimo village of Anaktuvuk Pass, then canoe or kayak 140 miles down the John River to Bettles where the opportunity exists to continue another 60 miles on the Koyukuk River to the village of Allakaket. 🐾



# THE JUMP LIST

## MEN OF THE '50s



*This column is part of the NSA History Preservation Project. All information will be kept in the Smokejumper Archives at Eastern Washington University. (Ed.)*

**JOHN B. JACK COBURN** (Idaho City '53)—Jack was born May 18, 1934, in Boise where he grew up and graduated from Boise H.S. in 1953. He then went into the Army where he spent two years, most of it in Korea with the Combat Engineers. Jack was a professional truck driver for 30 years driving over two million miles out of Boise before his retirement in 1996. He jumped at McCall 1953, '56, and lives in Midvale, Idaho.

**ORRIN H. PILKEY** (Missoula '53)—Orrin was born September 19, 1934, in Manhattan, N.Y., and graduated from Columbia H.S., Richland, Washington, in 1952. He received his bachelor's in Geology from Washington State, his master's in Geology from the University of Montana, and his Ph.D. in Marine Geology from Florida State University. Orrin was active in the Army for six months and he served for eight years as a reserve officer in the Corps of Engineers and was discharged as a Captain in 1968.

He taught at the University of Georgia Marine Institute and Duke University 1965-99

as a Professor of Geology. Orrin has made about 45 research cruises in deep sea studies and has co-authored 47 books and produced 250 technical papers. A building at the Duke University Marine Lab is named after Orrin. He retired in 1999 and is living in Durham, N.C.

Orrin jumped at Missoula 1953, '55 and at Grangeville 1954. His younger brother, Walter, jumped at Missoula 1955-56, and they once jumped the same stick on a fire from the DC-3. "Before my three seasons with the smokejumpers, I was a ground pounder in Umpqua N.F., Oregon, for two years in a crew made up entirely of 16-year-olds. I learned to respect those who walked into fires, often exhausted upon arrival which, of course, was the whole point of jumping."

**CECIL B. STEVENSON** (Grangeville '53)—Cecil was born September 11, 1932, in Marshalltown, Iowa. He graduated from Kahoka H.S. in Kahoka, Missouri, in 1950 before getting his bachelor's in 1954 from Central Methodist University in Fayette, Missouri. Cecil earned his master's from Truman State University in 1980. He was in the 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne 1954-57. Cecil coached baseball and basketball for 40 years at schools in Missouri and Illinois before re-

tiring in 1990 and is currently living in O'Fallon, Illinois.

**JOSEPH B. "JOE" STEVENSON** (Grangeville '53)—Joe was born September 11, 1932, and grew up in Kahoka, Missouri, where he graduated from high school in 1950. He graduated from Central Methodist College in Fayette, Missouri, in 1954 with a degree in Education. In the summer of 1952, Joe went to the Mt. Shasta (CA) fire crew and jumped in Grangeville during the 1953 season. He went into the Army 11<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division, Medical Company, in 1954 and was stationed in Germany and Ft. Campbell, Kentucky, where he was discharged in 1957.

Joe was married to Waneta in 1957, and they have been married for 64 years. He went back to Truman State University (MO) and earned his master's degree and coached baseball and basketball for eleven years.

In 1968 he purchased the Western Auto Store in Canton, Missouri, where he worked until retirement in 1994.

**JACK TUPPER DANIELS** (Missoula '54)—Jack was born April 26, 1933, in Detroit, Michigan, and the family moved to San Francisco when he was only six weeks old. He graduated from Sequoia H.S.



in Redwood City, California. Jack earned his bachelor's in Physical Education from the University of Montana, his master's from the University of Oklahoma, and his Ph.D. from Wisconsin. Jack entered the Army where he was on the Modern Pentathlon team. He won a silver medal on the US Pentathlon Team at the 1956 Olympics followed by a bronze medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics.

In his many years as a collegiate coach, he had 30 individual national champions, eight team championships, and coached 130 All-Americans. Jack was honored as the D-3 Women's Cross Country Coach of the Century. Jack's brothers, **Danny (Ronald L.)** (GAC-54) and **Jerry** (MSO-58), were also smokejumpers.

**DONALD E. "DON" MAY-POLE** (Idaho City '54)—Don was born July 7, 1934, in Boise, Idaho, and graduated from Boise H.S. in 1952. He received his bachelor's from Idaho State College in 1957 and went into the USAF Aviation Cadet program in San Antonio, Texas. While an undergraduate student, he was in the Idaho Army National Guard and jumped 1954-56 at Idaho City. Don is a retired Lt. Col., having served as a jet fighter pilot in the Air National Guard (Idaho and Wisconsin), US Air Force and NATO (in West Germany). He also served as an intelligence officer in the Air National Guard.

Starting as a social worker in a state mental hospital in

1961, Don became the assistant director of a bureau in the State of Wisconsin mental health agency in 1969. In 1971, he became the executive director of a new 3-county community mental health center in Wisconsin.

Don entered the Univ. of Minnesota in Minneapolis and received his Ph.D. in 1979. In 1979, he led the development and accreditation of the social work department at the Univ. of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls. His and a colleague's early 1980s research and publications on sexual harassment at work were some of the first in the nation.

In 1986, he became the head of the new graduate social work department at the Univ. of Minnesota Duluth in Duluth, Minnesota, and led its accreditation. Before retiring from UMD, he taught courses in universities in Portugal, Lithuania, and Latvia and gave lectures in China, Egypt, England, and Qatar. He enjoyed being an invited visiting professor in the 2002 teaching project of the (Canadian) Univ. of Manitoba at the university in Lviv, Ukraine.

Don received three Fulbright Teaching Awards, a Rotary International Teaching Award, a letter of appreciation from a Wisconsin governor and a certificate of appreciation from an American embassy.

**LEONARD L. "BLIX" BLIXRUD** (Missoula '53)

Blix was born August 8, 1934, in Choteau, Montana,

grew up on a ranch west of there, and graduated from Choteau H.S. in 1953. He took extension courses in real estate and accounting and was the owner of an Independent Insurance Agency until 1973 when he went into cattle ranching and managing an irrigation co.

"When I came home from smokejumping in 1953, I was injured bucking out a horse. It went over backwards, and the result was I almost lost my ankle. The injury was bad with bone infection. It wasn't until modern medicine that I was able to get it fused." Blix jumped at Missoula during the 1953 season.

**WILLIAM E. "BILL" FRAME** (Missoula '53)

"I was born on Valentine's Day in 1933. My mother was at my Grandma's house about three miles from Northfield, Minnesota. I understand they were worried about getting my mother to town because of the predicted snow and cold weather, but she made it to the hospital.

"I grew up outside of Northfield on a dairy farm of 200 acres and graduated from Northfield H.S. in 1951. I started college at St. Olaf College in Northfield, but after two years, I was on probation. My father said that it was my sister's turn to go to Carleton College. He couldn't pay for both. I understood and got a job in Heppner, Oregon, as a fire guard on the Umatilla N.F. and hitchhiked back to Minnesota in the fall. I got a

ride with an ex-smokejumper who told me all about it and where to apply. I did apply and began jumping in the summer of 1953." Bill jumped at Missoula 1953, 55, 57, and at Grangeville 1954.

"The next Spring quarter, I went back to school, but this time at Mankato State Teachers College in Mankato, Minnesota. It is amazing how my grades improved when I had to pay my own expenses. I continued smokejumping the next two summers, in fact I went to New Mexico in 1955. The next summer I skipped smokejumping to go to summer school so I could graduate in 1957. I graduated with degrees in Math and Science. I married Sandy Hamann a week after graduation, June 7, 1957. I had to get to Missoula to do the refresher course the next week.

"I started teaching school in September 1957 and was awarded a National Science Foundation (NSF) fellowship to go to San Diego State College for the school year of 1959-1960. I went back to teaching when I returned. I got three more summers through NSF at the University of Montana, finishing my master's degree in 1966.

"I continued teaching Math at John Marshall H.S. in Rochester, Minnesota. We bought a farm near Pine Island, (about 25 miles from school). We had some beef cows, and I did some crop farming on my Dad's farm in Northfield when he retired from his dairy farm. I then

retired from teaching in 1991, having completed 33 years at John Marshall.

"We recently sold the farm and now live in a senior living apartment in Rochester, Minnesota. We have one son and two daughters in Minnesota, 10 grandchildren, and 9 great grandchildren, the 3 oldest being in the 8th grade. Pretty bad for a couple that once belonged to the Zero Population Organization in the 70s & 80s!"

#### **GAYNE G. "GUS" ERDMANN** (Missoula '53)

Gus was born at home May 20, 1933, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Together with best friend **Fritz Wolfrum** (MSO-53), he graduated from Wauwatosa H.S. in 1951. He took pre-forestry classes at the University of Wisconsin and drove to Montana in 1952 where he worked for the USFS on a trail crew and as a Lookout. Gus rookieed at Missoula in 1953 and also jumped the 1957-58 seasons. He was drafted into the Army where he served as a Sergeant in a field artillery division. Gus returned to the University of Montana where he earned his bachelor's and master's in Forest Science in 1960.

Gus worked for the USFS as a Research Forester at Iowa State University for six years. In 1966 he transferred to research in Management and Ecology at the Northern Hardwood Project in Marquette, Michigan, and later spent six years in Wisconsin with the North Central States

Experimental Station. During his career, Gus wrote or co-authored more than 40 scientific publications. He retired from the Forest Service in 1989.

"Gus loved smokejumping and 30 years with the old Forest Service." In later years he liked being a consulting forester with small woodland owners. He is passionate about deer hunting, fishing in Canada, and being in the woods in Wisconsin.

#### **DONAL W. "DON" HAL-LORAN** (Missoula '53)

Don was born August 3, 1933, in Boston, Massachusetts, and grew up in Newton, MA, where he graduated from high school in 1951. He earned his bachelor's in Forestry from the University of Massachusetts in 1955, with additional graduate work in Ecology at the University of Colorado 1963-64 and the University of British Columbia 1964-65. While in college, Don jumped at Missoula 1953-55. He served in the Navy as a 3<sup>rd</sup> Class Medic 1956-58.

##### **Career:**

1965-97—Associate Professor Biology University Wisconsin System

1968-69—Canadian Wildlife Service radio telemetry of Grizzly Bears

1973-75—Peace Corps—Established a Wildlife Education Unit in Botswana

For eleven summers U.S. Park Service seasonal naturalist at Bryce Canyon and Glacier NPs.

"For the past 20 years, I have been involved with

conservation lectures in Wisconsin. I have rekindled my interest in flying my 1948 Piper Vagabond and restoring Model A Fords. Have also enjoyed wilderness canoe trips in Montana and Utah. Have also traveled back to Africa, Europe and Central America."

#### **RONALD L. "RON" SIPLE** (McCall '53)

Ron was born April 16, 1933, in Weiser, Idaho, and graduated from Homedale H.S. in 1951. He then earned a degree in Business Finance from the University of Idaho. Ron was in Naval ROTC at the university and received his commission and took Basic Officer training at Quantico in 1954 and was on active duty with the Marine Corps through 1957.

Upon discharge Ron went to work for General Electric selling major appliances to franchised dealers and builders. His last position before retirement in 1989 was Manager of the Mountain West Region, responsible for sales in all parts of the western states.

Ron was the Youth Governor of the State of Idaho in 1950, President of Beta Theta Pi Fraternity, Univ. of Idaho; Board of Directors Better Business Bureau, Cincinnati, Ohio; and active for 17 years in the Colorado Open Futures and Celebrity golf tournaments. He is a Life Member of the NSA and active in the Trails Program. Ron jumped at McCall during the 1953 season.

#### **GUSTAV M. "GUS" UL- RICH** (Missoula '53)

Gus was born October 3, 1931, in Cortland, New York, grew up in rural Duplin County, North Carolina, and graduated from Hope Street H.S. in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1948. He earned a bachelor's in electrical engineering from North Carolina State in 1954 and a master's in public administration from Syracuse University in 1962. Gus served in the USAF 1955-58 as a Captain and Engineer at Wright-Patterson AFB and 1965-66 as a C-121 pilot in the Air National Guard. His work career involved working in local government management in various small towns in North Carolina. He is currently living in Southern Pines, N.C. Gus jumped at Missoula during the 1953 season.

"I was informed of the smokejumper program by an ex-paratrooper majoring in forestry on the NC State campus. Having always wanted to see the northwest and being intrigued by the jumper program, I sent in an application but never received a reply. I wanted to see the northwest so intensely that I decided to take my chances and travel to Missoula anyway. A friend flew me in his Luscombe to Denver, a bus to Cheyenne, and hitchhiking the remaining distance to Missoula, arriving late Saturday night during a Lions Club convention. The only rooms available were in the upper floors of a bar where mostly short-term customers were

being entertained. The next morning at the Federal Bldg., I learned the disappointing news that I had been rejected. But Fred Bauer, good guy that he was, said he'd accept me anyway with the rationale that some who were approved wouldn't show up. Because of the unusually busy fire season, I was able to make more fire jumps than most guys made over several seasons. It was undoubtedly one of the best summers of my life.

#### **WILLIAM A. "WILD BILL" YENSEN** (McCall '53)

Bill was born November 10, 1932, in Brighton, Colorado. He grew up in Colorado, Nebraska, and Idaho and moved to Coachella, California, at the end of his sophomore year. Bill graduated from Coachella H.S. in 1951 and was the outstanding pitcher and MVP on the baseball team.

Baseball got him tuition help through the University of Redlands where he pitched all four years on his way to graduation in 1956. He then went to San Diego State to earn his California teaching credential. The U.S. Army called, so on his last day at Redlands he took a final, married his wife, Arlene, and headed to Fort Ord. Bill was shipped to Germany where Arlene joined him until his return to the states in 1958.

Bill had started jumping at McCall in 1953-54 and got 11 fire jumps his rookie year. He came back to McCall in 1961 and stayed there until 1986 jumping summers. Bill had



an amazing career at McCall finishing with 30 seasons, 181 fire jumps, and 325 total

jumps. His teaching career was at Sweetwater and Mar Vista high schools in the San Diego

area of Southern California where he coached football, wrestling, baseball, and golf. 🏈

# Travel Air NC8182 Is Flying Again

by Fred Cooper (North Cascades '62)

**N**C8112 taxied from the Travel Air Airplane factory in Wichita, Kansas, on March 18, 1929, assigned serial number 884 by the factory and registration number NC8112 by the Department of Commerce. The first owner was Pittsburg Airways and subsequently had five owners in Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio over the next ten years. It was used for flying airline routes, charter and sightseeing services, cargo operations, banner towing, and in-flight weddings. During the initial ten years of operation, NC8112 had been in at least four accidents and had acquired the nickname "Old Iron Bird."

The "Bird" was purchased by Johnson Flying Service in Missoula June 12, 1939, and used for numerous USFS, State of Montana, and Idaho Wildlife Service activities flying hunters and fishermen into remote airstrips and sightseeing excursions. On July 19, 1941, it was involved in an accident at Six Mile Field, a temporary airstrip near the junction of Nine-Mile and Six-Mile Roads north of Huson, Montana. Smokejumpers were

using it as a temporary airstrip. Repairs required a new engine mount, axle, replacement of the right wing, different propeller, and landing and longeron gear repair. Johnson was obviously anxious to get it back in service since it resumed flying less than a month after the accident. NC8112 was one of ten Travel Air 6000's owned by the Johnson Flying Service.

After fifteen years of ownership by Johnson, NC8112

passed through the ownership of two other parties before being purchased in 2008 by the present owners, Mid America Flight Museum. During a 2018 inspection, it was determined that the



*NC8112 Moose Creek R. S. July 12, 1940, first fire jump. (Courtesy Jim Alexander)*

airplane was not in the best flying condition, so it was flown to their Urbana, Ohio, facility for a complete restoration by Doug Smith and many volunteers. After restoration in July 2021, it was flown to Oshkosh, Wisconsin, for the EAA AirVenture Oshkosh Air Show where it won the Antique Grand Champion prize in the Vintage Aircraft class.

NC8112 is famously known to smokejumpers

for flying two smokejumpers, the first of many, to their first fire jump. On a very hot day in rough air on Friday, July 12, 1940, pilot Dick Johnson dropped smokejumpers on a hang-over lightning fire on the Selway Ranger District, Nez Perce N.F. The fire was 12 miles across a mile-deep canyon from the nearest smoke chaser, and western Montana was experiencing a high fire danger. Dick recorded in his pilot's logbook, "First Smoke Jump on a fire—Rock Pillar fire on Marten Creek—Rufus Robinson & Earl Cooley."

NC8112 arrived at the remote Moose Creek Ranger Station at 3:05 from Hale Field in Missoula. Sixteen minutes later, Dick took off with Merle Lundrigan, spotter, and smokejumpers **Rufus Robinson**, age 35 and **Earl Cooley**, age 29. Travel time from Moose Creek R.S. to the fire, dropping the smokejumpers and fire packs, and returning was recorded in Dick's logbook as taking one hour and fifty minutes.

Upon reaching the fire, Dick circled while Merle dropped a drift chute with it floating "quite a bit down the canyon." There was a downdraft at the head of Marten Creek canyon making the

jump hard for the "new men." Rufus jumped with a radio with instructions to contact Dick, giving him "the dope" on his jump before dropping Earl. While circling in the rough air, Earl began to get sick, so Merle had him jump before making radio contact. After landing, Earl called Dick on the radio telling him they were OK. Circling lower, the fire packs were dropped, one at a time. Using prescribed procedures for dropping cargo in 1940, Merle opened the burlap cargo chutes holding them in one hand while pushing a fire pack with the other hand. With the rough air, he discovered how dangerous it was to have an open chute in the airplane. From that time on, the fire packs were packed together and a single silk, later nylon, cargo chute was rigged to open outside the airplane.

Rufus and Earl controlled the three-acre fire and were relieved by a four-person crew that arrived the following morning. If the smokejumpers had not controlled the fire, George Case, District Ranger, wrote that travel time would have consumed an additional 24 hours for a 25-person crew to reach and control the fire. 🌲

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## Pick Your Own Tree

by Roger Cox (Missoula '69)

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**T**imber jumps are not uncommon in the tool kit of smokejumping techniques. My experience landing in a tree was usually uneventful if you can say that parachuting intentionally into treetops is ever uneventful. Most of my treetop landings were not planned, just bad steering or, as **Bernie Hilde** (MSO-69) would say, "a product of the devil winds." The worst part of tree landings was usually damage to your main chute and the effort required to retrieve your chute. The value of timber jumps was if there was no opening nearby, it still gave you the option of manning the fire. Our jumpsuits were designed for such events as landing in a tree. Every jumper carried 100 to 150 feet of tubular nylon, in the event it was needed, to descend the last few yards to the ground. And every jumpsuit was made with

D-rings to accommodate the "letdown," as it was coined. Climbing spurs were standard equipment in every jump aircraft to aid in chute retrieval. Rookie training included at least one timber jump. We were prepared and trained. That did not mean there was no room for error. It is in the smokejumpers DNA to occasionally have a brainstorm and snatch defeat out of the jaws of victory. This story is an example of that.

August of 1973: I was the last man in a ten-man load over the Nez Perce forest. The fire season was in full swing, and we were having a good summer with lots of jumps. The fire we were circling had some potential. It was in old growth in rugged terrain and would require the entire load of jumpers for control. Our selected jump spot was an area of old growth fir just below the

fire. There were no openings nearby, so the timber appeared to be our best bet. Fir trees were among the more desirable species to land in. The needles were soft compared to spruce, limbs were flexible, and the branches were oriented for easy climbing. Although old growth, this stand was not all that tall. Our 100-foot letdown ropes would reach the ground even if we hung up in the very top.

By the time I got in the door, there were multiple canopies scattered in a tight group in the trees. Wind drift was not a problem, and it appeared that we could concentrate our landings in a small area. The decision was made where I was going to land. I saw no problems. The jump was going to have a routine landing in timber. After opening, I began to steer my way into the area. I did remember from past experience that the chute retrieval would require some effort from timber this size. Probably involved climbing 50 feet or so with spurs to the first limb and then working my way to just below the chute where I would cut the top, chute included, out of the tree. But what if I landed in the same tree where another chute was already hung up? We could retrieve two chutes at the same time. What could go wrong with that?

I steered into the area and picked a tree that seemed to fit the bill for an easy hang-up. I did not make any last minute corrections because this was an untried theory and the specifics were yet to be determined. I went directly into another canopy just below the top of the fir. As usual everything was limbs and needles as I descended thru the treetop. In a moment, I was successfully hung up where the limbs were bare of needles and seemed to be quite secure, except for a screaming sound. It wasn't me. I was quite comfortable suspended some 60 feet above the ground. But it was obvious that someone was unhappy about something.

I recognized **Frank Solf's** (MSO-67) voice a few seconds later expressing discontent about his situation. I could not locate him, so I yelled an "are you alright" comment. Frank was obviously upset and stated he thought his chute was breaking free. That could result in a nasty ride to the ground. Frank seemed to be close, but I still could not locate him. As I looked around, I discovered I had good visibility for some distance from where I was hung up. Still, I couldn't find Frank. Frank spoke again saying that he couldn't find me, but

I sounded very close. I started doing a letdown. Frank continued to be concerned about his chute tearing out of the tree. I figured the best I could do was get on the ground where I could give him assistance.

While I was threading my letdown rope through my D-rings, a couple of other jumpers came down the slope and walked under the tree I was hung in. They immediately started laughing. I didn't understand what was so funny, and Frank was not in the mood for humor. Frank shouted he wasn't hung up well and that he didn't know where I was. The jumpers, still laughing, said,

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*But what if I landed in the same tree where another chute was already hung up?*

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"Frank, look up." I spread my feet and looked down at Frank's face about two feet below. This discovery was even funnier to those not hung up in the tree. I felt stupid. Frank was easy going and had a sense of humor and needed both at this point.

We did our letdowns, Frank first. Not much was said. We had work to do. The next afternoon while finishing the mop-up, a jumper told me they had retrieved our chutes, which were hopelessly tangled and they would untangle them back in the loft. Apparently, I had gone through his chute's slot and weaved my way down his lines. No wonder he thought his chute was slipping. I never got the chance to ask Frank what it felt like having me dive bomb his tree. Maybe that was the scream I heard when burrowing down through the tree's canopy.

The fire season put us right back in action, and there was no time to dwell on past action. I never did talk to Frank about the event. He apparently forgave me, and we remained the best of friends. Wherever you are, Frank, thanks for your understanding. If a new jumper or any jumper ever asked me about hanging up, my advice is to pick your own tree. 🌲

*Frank lives in Essexville, Michigan, and Roger in Kamas, Utah. Both are NSA members. Hope to see you both at the Reunion in Boise next August. (Ed.)*





# Touching All Bases



by **Patrick McGunagle**  
(West Yellowstone '19)

WELL, THE NUMBERS are in, and let me tell you, the data suggests a “surge” in cases of smokejumpers jumping fires over the period of summer 2021. Yeah, I know that after all that talk of cases simmering down around Fall 2020 (remember, zero cases from November to May!), we’ve circled back to square one in June 2021, another surge. Now, the data isn’t clear as to the likelihood of a particular jumper contracting a case of the “good deal” variant that everyone’s looking for. The “bone” variant seems to still be in the mix.

Still, sampling from 2021 for overtime (oats) in Pay/Compensation Rate stubs (PCR) shows high amounts of oats spread among active jumpers. All of us contracted the conflagration contagion at some point. Currently there are zero cases of jumpers in the woods, which is bittersweet as even in January, many of our dreams are still full of whispers of “boosters to Alaska.” Yes, more boosters. Please give us more!

Dr. Ernie over at the CDC (Center for good Dealz and Conflagrations) gives this mostly sobering report of just what he prescribed in 2021.

The BLM injected 792 smokejumpers to 113 separate outbreaks of jumper fires. The USFS inoculated 208 fires with 1,064 doses of smokejumpers. In total, smokejumpers spent 16,615 days in the woods on 321 fires in the Surge of 2021.

There were 439 active smokejumpers in the United States ready to be shot out the door. The BLM had 170 active jumper square doses and the USFS has 299 jumpers, of which the final 22 rounds remain. It doesn’t appear that a jumper with a round or square is more likely to contract the “good deal” variant, though the “people upstairs” (yeah, conspiracy folk, we hear you) have phased out many of the rounds. Even NCSB trained rookies on squares for 2021 and 24 rounds were converted among RAC,



MYL, WYS, and NIJFC. We’ll call these “breakthrough cases.”

Pounders, the less ideal but still effective way to reduce rapid spread (same amount of oats when examined via PCR), were common. USFS bases and outstations pounded 59 fires, BLM pounded 21. Smokejumpers are also well known to be great doses of leadership and skill. Jumpers filled 608 single-resource requests for nearly 8,000 shifts, skewed toward USFS at over 6,000 shifts on 470 requests.

Collectively, the smokejumper herd stayed up-to-date with 6,497 practice jumps against 1,856 fire jumps. The USFS trained 35 rookies,

the BLM trained 14 rookies, and, yes, even rookies were effective at combating rapid spread (we were all there, once upon a time).

Smokejumpers aren’t the only dose of aerial fire support. The USFS injected just shy of 40,000 pounds of paracargo (PC) on 16 missions out of Miles City, RDD, RAC, and NCSB. Redding was so busy with fire jump missions that its PC numbers were lower than average due to aircraft availability. The BLM PC world is of course dominated by Alaska’s 186,000 pounds on 23 requests. With some support missions in the Lower 48, the total smokejumper PC load for 2021 is approximately one quarter of a million pounds. The JPAD system continues to evolve in USFS operations, and I enjoy receiving random text messages from Hotshot buddies stoked on getting food and water via “robot parachute.”

Those folks monitoring the daily smokejumper status report probably noticed seemingly all-time jump numbers in WYS. However, while 21 jumps is nearly double the ten-year average, it appears that there were higher jump seasons back in the Trimotor days of approximately 30 jumps per year.

Redding was busy, hosting 30 boosters on 36 fires. Redding is the only base to have more fires jumped than personnel (36/35), a metric I use to define a stellar season. Redmond sent 26 boosters

out but also had 29 fires. McCall was profitable out of Price, UT, and Winnemucca, NV, with 43 jumps in total from all operations. NCSB jumped the fewest fires (still a healthy 13) and MSO had the most pounders (29). GAC jumped 21 fires and pounded eight, an overall stellar season with 29 actions and 27 personnel. NIFC and its outstations continue to jump about twice as many fires as any other base (74) and was also stellar with 13 pounders, 87 actions to 75 personnel. Fairbanks jumped 39 fires and received only 34 boosters during a slower season for Alaska. Fairbanks sent 44 boosters down to the Lower 48 bases, and these folks jumped 75 fires in total.

The big DHC-8 aircraft came down from Alaska at the end of the season and IA'd several fires from Boise with its complement of 12 smokejumpers. Mechanical issues with several agency Sherpa aircraft meant USFS bases shared some Casas and opera-

tional Sherpas during busy times.

Missoula opened Coeur d'Alene and Miles City while Redding operated Porterville as outstations with fire jumps and pounders successfully occurring at all of these.

Late in the season, perhaps the first case of the "Drone Bone" variant occurred for a potential dose of NIFC smokejumpers on a fire near Bozeman (the load eventually floundered from Bozeman airport). This same drone grounded air resources on subsequent shifts. We'll see if the Washington office continues to deny the anti-drone craft turrets, rockets, nets, and many other creative smokejumper campfire-talk solutions to this problem.

The smokejumper program continues to evolve and it's a joy to be along for the ride. Perhaps Dr. Ernie will prescribe an all-time Surge of 2022 with the elusive "exceptionally good deal" variant finally afflicting us all. It's worth a shot. 🍀

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## 2021 Dunton Smokejumper Leadership Award Selections

The selection committee is proud to announce selections for the 2021 Al Dunton Smokejumper Leadership Awards:

**Norman "Joe" Rock** (WYS-05), West Yellowstone Smokejumpers, was selected from the USFS due to an innate ability for leadership that consistently encourages and motivates those around him to perform at their highest levels. His dedication in taking the time to learn and master a role for the purpose of thoroughly teaching and sharing the knowledge was noted along with his sustained efforts in building strong working relationships with a wide range of fire organizations outside of the smokejumper community.

**Matt Bowers** (MYC-95), Great Basin Smokejumpers, was selected from the BLM due to sustained high performance in a wide range of smokejumper and fire roles. He consistently performed these roles in an exemplary, role model fashion with a high degree of approachability, honesty, reliability, and resiliency. His versatil-

ity, dependability, demeanor, and teamwork were noted in a wide variety of roles including Acting Base Manger, Operations Section Chief, Spotter, IC, and smokejumper. 🍀



*Matt Bowers*

# Interviews with Smokejumpers Who Left—Most for Local Fire Agency Jobs

by John Culbertson (Fairbanks '69)

**W**ildland firefighters pay and work conditions are in the national dialogue. The October 2021 issue of *Smokejumper* commented that smokejumpers and hotshots who want better pay and benefits are finding jobs with local agencies. I wondered what those who had recently taken these jobs thought. After talking it over with *Smokejumper* Editor Chuck Sheley, we agreed that for the public good a survey should be conducted, and the results made available to the public and decision makers in addition to publishing this article in the April 2022 issue of *Smokejumper*.

To remain unbiased, I used a fixed set of questions like those used in business when interviewing for needs or solutions. The respondents were kept anonymous.

Twenty ex-smokejumpers who worked at USFS or BLM bases were interviewed. Of those, 17 have left the federal government to take jobs with local agencies in Southern California and the Sierra Nevada. Three have transferred to other Forest Service fire management positions. All smokejumper bases were represented, as are all Southern California Counties with significant fire activity. Eight jumped within the last five years, seven within the last ten years, and the other five jumped within the last twenty years and are in management positions.

It has been a busy fire season, and all were working when interviewed. Ninety percent of those interviewed either got a call while we were interviewing, had just returned from a call, or were on an overhead assignment. Most interviews involved multiple phone calls, many over multiple days. The persistence, positive attitude, and cooperation of the jumpers has been remarkable. What I found has been both encouraging and surprising.

The smokejumpers averaged six years of crew experience prior to jumping for the USFS or BLM. Experience included Initial Attack crews,

Interagency Hotshot crews (IHC), and Helitack crews. Prior work with the USFS, BLM, NPS, and state and local fire agency crews is represented in this survey. Contact with an ex-jumper, frequently a supervisor or fire manager, was part of the path to jumping for almost all.

**Over half had taken a decrease in pay, GS grade, or resigned an appointment to jump in the GS-5 rookie position.** Most had been at the crew overhead level and had an AA degree, professional certificate or higher. Less than half were veterans. Years jumped averaged three.

There were two distinct groups. About half jumped one or two seasons while the rest jumped three to six seasons with one significantly more.

All spoke highly of their smokejumper experience and prior hand crew experience.

Almost all had discussed leaving jumping in detail with a spouse, ex-spouse or significant other. Time away on fire assignment, the need for significant overtime to support a family, desire to purchase a house, a stable location for family and schools, lack of employment opportunity for spouse in jumper towns, and the lack of upward movement in the jumper organization or back at a home forest unit were all frequently cited as issues discussed.

Seven hundred and fifty hours of overtime was the average families depended on while jumping. Due to Federal pay structure, this equals about fifteen hundred hours away from home. **Time away from family figured into this issue.**

**Many had hope of a future in the Forest Service, BLM or NPS and were willing to compromise and receive less pay than local agencies to make this happen but were thwarted by the federal hiring system.** A typical comment was that they received no replies to inquiries regarding positions with Federal Agencies. **The centralized federal hiring and personnel management system was frequently mentioned as frustrating to deal**



**with.** An exception to this were jumpers on detail and one who sought out an apprenticeship program appointment.

For those taking local agency fire jobs, most mapped out a course and began a transition while still jumping. This included completion of online college and fire academy classes and contact with potential employers. The average transition time was three years with 60% taking transitional wildland fire or EMS jobs with local fire agencies.

Those taking transitional jobs with local agencies on IA, vegetation management programs (VMP), and EMS crews all took on positions of responsibility such as lead, squad, or foreman. This allowed them to be available for interviews, become known locally, and complete training classes such as fire academy or EMT classes.

Many local agency fire managers assisted these jumpers in their transition to full-time local agency fire jobs even when employment was found at another agency. **For many, this filled the mentoring and career planning need they had not found at the jump base.** Full-time paramedic training and internship was a considerable undertaking. Three couples lived on the spouse's earnings while the ex-jumper used savings from jumping to go through a year and a half of classes and internship. Department of Defense (DOD) fire employment was another avenue of transition. Designation as a firefighter and DOD pay structure provided a living wage for a family without the lengthy overtime requirements cited above for the Forest Service and BLM.

With a few exceptions, the local agency fire jobs required the smokejumper to go through the same highly competitive application and testing process with all other applicants. Smokejumping was simply an added plus to meeting the education, academy, EMT, written and physical test requirements. Contact with local agency managers and local wildfire transition jobs also helped.

Adapting to this process was noted as an adjustment by many. Interview skills were something that had to be developed. Once hired as firefighters, the smokejumpers, like all recruits, had to meet stringent probationary requirements that included frequent testing and evaluation. **Pay structure during probation varied by agency but was greater than that received as a smokejumper.**

Average age on obtaining local agency probationary status was thirty-three with average interview age of thirty-seven.

On completion of probation, the new firefighters starting salary averaged about \$80,000 plus significant benefits. The range of starting salary was \$68,000 to \$92,000. **All noted the salary was sufficient to support the family without overtime.**

Adjustment to the new job was noted by most. These adjustments were to the call load, witnessing human tragedy, sleeplessness, need to study, commuting, and working with people that lacked the camaraderie of crew and smokejumpers the firefighters had worked with in the past. This was not a criticism but an acknowledgment of the reality of living in a fire station. In some cases, jumpers considered a return to a natural resource agency job for a simpler life, although none did. Discussion with a spouse or significant other was described as part of this process. **All noted the clear-cut mission and service to the public of local agencies.**

Some chose to compete for and take wildfire or vegetation management jobs within these local agencies. Some aspect of vegetation management programs, prevention, IA crew, dozers and helicopter operations exist with many of the local agencies. After completion of probation, some were able to return to their transitional crew in a leadership position. **Multiple jumpers noted that local agency VMP and IA crews are both efficient and increasing in number.**

**All noted the importance of the portal-to-portal pay structure** with a huge factor being fewer hours spent away from home and simplicity of paperwork. Local agency overtime is compensated on a portal-to-portal basis, be it for shift work, filling in at a station, short term call back to cover draw down, or out-of-town assignment.

While on probation, all were used for out-of-town wildfire assignments with engine strike teams. All were able to use their qualifications for overhead assignments on completion of probation, and most interviewed had been on multiple extended attack and large fires this season as overhead or had occupied backfill positions at the station for the wildfire draw down.

Looking back at their smokejumper jobs, all

felt improvement in pay was in order and this extended to their thoughts about crews in general. **Inconsistency of jumper use for Initial Attack between bases and agencies was noted by most.** “Sitting on the ramp at PL5 (Highest national fire preparedness level)” was a repeated phrase. This extended to winter work for those on some form of permanent status. “Sewing canteen covers (in the winter) is not meaningful work.”

All wanted the best for Federal wildland firefighters, and many felt re-classification to firefighter from forestry tech was important. Parity with state wildland agency pay was frequently mentioned as was looking at other Federal fire models, such as DOD.

Flexibility in use of employment status and underutilization of existing appointments was mentioned by more than half the jumpers. This related to both the need to retain jumpers that had other things to do during the winter, such as ski patrolman, as well as the needs of those that wanted permanent jobs and the importance of mentoring those that desired a return to the districts with fire management and district ranger tracks in mind.

Jumpers who had advanced to management roles, including those who returned to the Forest Service, were particularly concerned with the potential use of solutions already available. **Making incremental but meaningful change kept coming up.** Retention of GS grade (or equivalent) and appointment status when training as a jumper was considered important. Second-year (GS-6) jumpers automatically receiving a 13 and 13 appointment (if they did not already come on board with one) and starting to accrue retirement and access to the TSP (Thrift Savings Program) were frequently mentioned as possible solutions. **All those now in management roles felt there was a strong need for local hiring and administration of personnel matters at the Forest, District, and Program level. This included local administration of injured firefighters.**

Frustration was frequently voiced over the encouragement of and even the counseling jumpers on how to sign up for unemployment. Jumpers wondered why that money was being wasted by the agencies on unemployment when so much could be done with the money by simply running programs that further the employment and

well-being of crews.

**A repeated phrase in the interviews was that those that stay with jumping in the Forest Service feel stuck and not valued.**

What stood out to me on completion of these interviews was that these jumpers represent skilled, experienced, and motivated people with high agency loyalty and an outstanding positive outlook. If I were seeking people to manage our National Forests and public lands or any fire agency, I could not find better candidates. Any loss to the agencies in training dollars and administrative costs when jumpers leave for other fire jobs is small in comparison to the loss of talent and initiative.

**It is my opinion that the Forest Service and BLM are dealing with career-focused employees (in this case) and yet not providing a professional career environment for them to work in. Pay is one of several significant factors.**

One could take a blunt view and say the Forest Service took a simple job and made it complicated with no net gain in efficiency. Something seems wrong. I think there is some truth to this as it relates to the work force and agency needs. I was left wondering what the Forest Service mission for jumpers is.

My more pragmatic view is that, except for pay and a cumbersome personnel management system, things are OK. Smart people within the Forest Service and BLM, including the jumpers, Interagency Hotshot Crew overhead, and fire managers at the district and forest level, are working to make things better. The Forest Service and BLM continue to attract talented and motivated individuals that receive excellent training and experience and then go out into the world of fire and enrich many agencies in this most important work. For this, the Forest Service and BLM should be proud. 🧡

*I want to note that in the process of tracking down jumpers, I talked with several IHC and IA overhead as well as fire managers from many agencies. Many expressed similar concerns and made thoughtful comments. I feel surveys of these highly skilled and experienced people would be meaningful to any agency seeking improvement. There are many solutions and great strength in the diversity of thought I encountered.*

# Federal Wildland Firefighters—Use And Throw Away

by **Chuck Sheley** (Cave Junction '59)

**L**ynn Sprague (MYC-59) forwarded me an article from “BuzzFeed News” titled “Wildland Firefighters Are Relying On GoFundMe To Survive After Getting Injured On The Job,” written by Brianna Sacks and posted 12/13/2021. It was well written but too long to ask for permission to reprint in *Smokejumper*. After reading, I was depressed and mad. There was nothing new as it had been commonplace before the '60s for jumpers to hobble back to school hoping they had saved enough money and C-rations to get through the fall semester.

What is really depressing is that nothing has changed to help the firefighters—jumpers in my working experience. I'm going to just hit some of the points that the author had researched. We know that **Tim Hart** (GAC-16) was killed on a fire jump last season. Tim's wife, Michelle, gets medical bills and requests for paperwork connected to Tim's injuries. The article goes on with many other examples of a broken system and examples of our agencies abandoning the key to success—the employees.

If I am correct, when an employee gets hurt, he/she needs to file a claim with the Dept. of Labor Workers' Compensation Program (OWCP). Research for this article shows that OWCP “has sometimes taken months to process claims and authorize treatment, forcing firefighters to pay for their medical care out of pocket or through their own insurance.” The more a person reads, the more you as a fellow or former wildland firefighter remembers the lack of support that has been going on for over 70 years.

A person can get lost in reading the many examples of employees getting lost and forgotten by the “system.” I must come at this with some simple questions: Why hasn't the Forest Service solved this problem? Where is the leadership?

Quoting the article: “Leadership in the Forest Service failed to do a damn thing to address our

issues with OWCP despite us repeatedly asking and offering solutions,” Buddy Byrd, a former safety and occupational health manager for the Forest Service's Region 6, which spans Oregon and Washington, told BuzzFeed News. “OWCP is a piece of a bigger systemic failure on behalf of the US Forest Service.”

**Bob Beckley** (RAC-83) also forwarded me this article and related his experience with this broken system. “I'm one of those who has a story to tell. I broke out of a tree on a jump into Moose Creek and fell 80 feet. Died twice before they got me out. Could have stayed on OWCP forever due to my injuries but, if I wanted an easy way out, I wouldn't have become a jumper. Had to fight the FS to take me back, and when they did, they took away my firefighter retirement because I was no longer a firefighter. Had to work 30 years instead of the 20 that my non-injured brethren did.”

For years I've heard how **Gene Hobbs** (IDC-61) was failed by the system after he was yanked through the side of a DC-3 near McGrath, Alaska, in 1973. How he even survived this accident is a miracle. Most in the plane thought he was dead as there was no movement as he laid on the tundra. Gene was a boxer and wrestler, and his physical conditioning was attributed to his survival. He was a teacher and later a school Principal. I do not know the details but have heard he was one of those abandoned by the system.

I know that many smokejumpers were school teachers. Handling injuries through other insurance was much easier than working through OWCP.

In the January issue of *Smokejumper*, **Fred Rohrbach** (MSO-65) was featured. He went from selling small statues to running a multimillion-dollar business. Fred always says the key to a successful business is to treat your employees well and pay them well. Great example between a success-



ful business and a broken operation we have with the USFS.

Why can't the USFS create a division to help and handle the maze of bureaucracy an injured employee must navigate? Should a firefighter have to be an expert in paperwork? This problem has been going long enough that it is not an unknown—it is ignored. Why not sit down and solve it? Easy answer—once you get into the higher ranks, just forget those seasonal employees. There will be more to fill the ranks.

The newspapers are filled with articles about the USFS not being able to recruit firefighters and jobs not being filled. I've pointed out on many occasions that it is now impossible to have local hires. The young person looking to work for the Forest Service might be living in Fort Jones, Cali-

fornia, in the Klamath N.F. He/she wants to work on the Klamath and live at home. However, they must navigate the Albuquerque hiring system and are offered a job in another state where they can't afford to live. Broken system.

The handling of our injured wildland firefighters is similar. A broken system which screws over our employees and discourages people from even wanting to work for the agency.

The best way to handle a problem is to recognize that there is a problem, and then fix it. Hiring and injuries apparently are not problems that are recognized and fixable—at least by the leadership who are sitting in a comfortable position. Please give our wildland firefighters the support they need. They should not be treated as expendable. 🙏

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## Good Sam Fund and Other Projects At Work

**T**he last part of the NSA Mission Statement reads: "...responding to the special needs of smokejumpers and their families." Since 2004 we have responded with close to \$300,000 in the Good Sam Fund (GSF) and scholarships for our members and non-members. This last quarter we gave financial help to the wife of a former jumper who was strapped with medical bills for her husband after he passed, and a former jumper who also needed some help to get by with medical expenses.

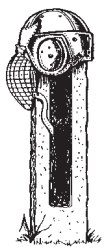
This last summer rookie Missoula Smoke-jumper **Jackson Spooner** (MSO-21) was severely injured on a fire jump. Working with Missoula Base Manager **Tory Kendrick** (MSO-00), we supplied financial aid to help with expenses for Jackson's parents as they traveled to be with their son in the hospital.

I again want to thank and congratulate you members for the support of the NSA in our endeavors. We are a caring membership for smokejumpers and their families. It is important to note

that the majority of the GSF aid given to current jumpers is to non-members. It is us, the smokejumpers of the past, who are supporting the needs, in many cases, of the jumpers who are doing a great job under difficult wage and working conditions.

Another major endeavor is our Historical Preservation Project. Thanks to those of you who have sent in your bios. One of my main goals is to preserve as many smokejumper bios as possible at Eastern Washington University. Your financial support for this project has been encouraging. The future generation needs to know who were the people that took smokejumping from 1940 to the current day. (*Ed.*)

**From Jackson Spooner** (MSO-21): "I want to thank the NSA and the Good Samaritan Fund for all the support my family, friends, and myself received during my injury. The smokejumper community has been a huge part of my successful recovery and I could not imagine ever working for a better group of professionals." 🙏



## Off The List

Remember and honor fellow jumpers with a gift to the NSA Good Samaritan Fund in their name. Hard times can fall on many of us at any time. The NSA is here to support our fellow jumpers and their families through the Good Samaritan Fund. Mail your contribution to:

Chuck Sheley  
10 Judy Lane  
Chico, CA 95926

### **Douglas Wayne “Doug” Houston** (Redmond ’73)

Doug died December 31, 2021, at his home in Salmon, Idaho. He was born in Omak, Washington, where he grew up and graduated from Omak H.S. and starred in baseball, basketball, and football. He received his bachelor’s in Recreation and Park Administration from Eastern Washington University and served two years in the Army.

Doug worked summers with Washington State and Federal fire crews before starting his smoke-jumping career at Redmond in 1973. He jumped at Redmond 1973-77, 81-89 and at NCSB 1978-80, 1990-00. In 1990 Doug moved to Winthrop where he served as Base Manager 1990-00. After 29 years as a smokejumper, he retired in 2009 with 324 career jumps.

Doug continued working fire as an Air Tactical Group Supervisor in the Bitterroot Valley in Montana. He also started Flyboy Angler Business selling fly fishing flies over the Northwest and Canada. Doug was an NSA Life Member and served as NSA President 2004-08.

### **Albert N. “Al” Boucher** (Cave Junction ’49)

Al died January 7, 2022. He was born October 4, 1928, in Joplin, Missouri, and moved to Medford, Oregon, in 1943 and graduated from Medford H.S. in 1946. Al joined the Navy out of high school and was stationed in Oakland, California. After leaving the Navy, Al returned to Southern Oregon and got a job as the cook’s helper at the Cave Junction smokejumper base in the summer of 1948.

The following season he was hired as a smoke-jumper and rookie in 1949. Following the 1950 season, he was recalled to the Navy during the Korean War and was stationed in Japan through 1951. He returned in 1952 to jump at Cave Junction and continued through 1954. In 1955 and 56, Al operated the Shell Gas Station in Cave Junction. He

returned to jumping in 1957 and remained at Cave Junction until 1964 when he transferred to the new Redmond Air Center as the smokejumper foreman. He made his last jump on his 40<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1968.

Al continued at Redmond until 1971 when he moved to Ogden, Utah, to become the regional dispatcher for Region 4. In 1974 he returned to Oregon to be the Assistant Fire Staff on the Mt. Hood National Forest until his retirement in 1978.

Following retirement, he and his wife, Ruthie, moved back to Redmond due to their love of Central Oregon. Following Ruthie’s death in 2016, Al continued to live in Redmond until 2018 when he moved to Hillsboro, Oregon. Al always liked to remark that he lived longer in retirement than he did working for the Forest Service.

### **Ryan Ray Desautel** (Grangeville ’04)

Ryan died January 7, 2022. He was born January 6, 1977. Ryan graduated from Omak (WA) H.S. and attended Fort Lewis College in Colorado. He worked for the Pleasant Valley Hotshots before his rookie year at Grangeville where he jumped 2004-10. **Matt Smith** (GAC-01), “Ryan Desautel was a unique individual loved by many, misunderstood by some, unlike any other. Rest in Peace brother.”

### **Roger M. Siemens** (Missoula ’59)

Roger died December 30, 2021. He was born January 6, 1939, in Belmond, Iowa. He grew up in Goldfield, Iowa, and graduated from Boone Valley H.S. (Renwick, IA) in 1956. Roger graduated from the University of Montana in 1964 with a degree in Wildlife Biology.

Roger then began an extensive career with the USFS that included positions on the Bitterroot N.F., Beaverhead N.F., Gallatin N.F., Custer N.F., and the Deerlodge N.F. He held positions as Fire Control Officer, Forester, District Resource Assn’t, and District Ranger, retiring in 1994. He lived in Silver

Star, Montana. Roger jumped at Missoula 1959-63.

Roger and his wife, Rita, owned R&R Resources and assisted local ranchers and landowners with predator control and rattlesnake management. His expertise in snake work has been featured in numerous news and magazine articles.

### **Dann Jay Hall** (Anchorage '72)

Dann, 74, died November 28, 2021, in Seattle, Washington. He was born August 28, 1947, and graduated from Sandpoint (ID) High School. He owned and operated the Ross Hall Photography Collection in Sandpoint for many years. Dann jumped at Anchorage in 1972 and Fairbanks in 1973.

### **Gary T. Anderson** (Missoula '63)

Gary died November 26, 2021. He was born in Missoula in 1942 and attended the University of Montana where he majored in business. He did the rodeo circuit where he rode bulls, broncos, and was even a clown with the bull-torn clown pants to prove it. He was an avid water skier and snow skier where he was on ski patrol. Gary jumped at Missoula 1963-68.

### **William Everett "Bill" Hornung** (Missoula '59)

Bill, 83, died November 14, 2021, in Austin, Texas. He was born July 31, 1938, in Tucson, Arizona. "Bill was an attorney, an Officer in the U.S. Navy, an F.B.I. agent, a farm and ranch hand, a smokejumper and forestry aid, a professor of criminal justice, a student of history, a writer and storyteller, and a European traveler. He was also an avid hunter—not only of wild game in his youth, but of corruption, crooks, and Klansman, of books, beauty, and bargains.

"Bill had a special connection to the Texas landscape, its ruggedness and its rockiness, and he would often take his sons on treks to scout and re-home rocks so heavy they seemed impossible to move—their size almost comical in the bed of his pickup—as he worked to sculpt his enchanted land in Sunset Valley. Over a period of 50 years, Bill built and maintained perhaps some of the most intricate and personal dry stacked stone walls in Texas, each individual stone self-harvested from the native soil of his land and placed by hand with technical

precision and a sacred sensitivity." Bill jumped at Missoula during the 1959 season.

### **Ronald M. "Ron" Van Noy** (Missoula '53)

Ron, 87, died November 3, 2021. He was born March 7, 1934, and grew up in Tacoma, Washington, where he graduated from Lincoln H.S. in 1952. Ron continued his education at the University of Washington graduating in 1957. He served two years in the Army.

Ron began his career as a geologist with the U.S. Bureau of Mines in 1956 retiring in 1985. He was athletic and played golf, handball, volleyball, and tennis. He was proud of summiting Mt. Rainer twice while in college. Ron jumped at Missoula during the 1953-54 seasons.

### **Dan M. Howells** (McCall '74)

Dan died October 24, 2021, at home in Eugene, Oregon. He had been battling esophageal cancer for the past year. Dan was born in Buffalo, Wyoming, and received his bachelor's in Forestry from Colorado State University and a master's in Forestry from University of Washington. He started his outdoor career on a trail crew in the Big Horn N.F. and jumped at McCall 1974-75. His degree in forestry led him to his 40-year career with the Bureau of Land Management in Eugene, Oregon. While at BLM, he served on Incident Command Teams, as Air Support Supervisor and Heli-base manager. He was also appointed to be BLM's Leave No Trace representative for the state of Oregon.

Family cross country ski adventures and Boy Scout snow camping inspired Dan to join the Back Country Ski Patrol. He started as a volunteer in 2003 and became a National Ski Patrolter. The Outdoor Emergency Preparedness courses he took as a patroller motivated him to attend and become a Wilderness Medicine Instructor for the Wilderness Medicine Institute and for the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and most recently for REI. And after the Leave No Trace Task Force was formed in 2006, Dan was recruited to join. He remained an active member of the Outdoor Ethics Committee until his health forced him to step down December 2020.

After retiring from BLM in 2010, Dan spent 10 years as a sales associate at REI. An active Scouter and dedicated volunteer, he brought a wealth of out-



door leadership experience and was a fierce defender of the inclusion of risk management in all Leave No Trace course offerings. From 1999-2018 Dan led trainings or taught BSA Leave No Trace Master Educator Courses around the US.

### **Wallace D. “Wally” Henderson** (McCall ’46)

Wally, 92, died around October 14, 2021, in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He was born on March 19, 1929, in Hot Springs, SD. Moving to Oregon he attended Ontario High School, graduating in 1946.

In 1947, Wally attended Parks Air College, then transferred to the University of Colorado. In 1949, he attended Naval Flight Training in Pensacola, Florida. He attained a BS in Engineering Physics and a MA in International Relations in 1966.

Wally had a remarkable military career, first with the Navy flying Corsairs and having to jump out of one in 1950. On to the Air Force as a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt, he was assigned to the 319<sup>th</sup> Fighter Interceptor Sq. in Korea, having to bail out once. Wally used his smoke-jumper parachute training when he was shot down near Seoul, Korea. After a year and 72 missions over North Korea, Wally returned to the states assigned to multiple bases. Eventually he became an Air Force Advisor to the Maine Air National Guard at Bangor ME. Significant positions held included managing programs dealing with aspect of nuclear weapons, Naval War College, National Reconnaissance Org member, and Director of Intelligence & Warning Systems. Wally retired in 1973 as a Colonel, and with multiple civilian jobs fully retired in 1999.

Wally continued to fly light aircraft, hot air balloons and gliders, when not traveling the world from his current home in Albuquerque, NM.

Two months after Wally’s 17<sup>th</sup> birthday, he became a smokejumper assigned to McCall (1946) then Missoula for the 1947 fire season. He jumped 29 times in those two years. Wally was an NSA Life Member.

Kathi Henderson: “Several days before his death I asked Wally what part of his amazing life was he most proud of. He didn’t hesitate in his reply when he said ‘smokejumping.’ For his final day, I put his smokejumper T-shirt on him and gently wrapped him in his smokejumper quilt. He was also cremated in a smokejumper T-shirt and blue jeans. Smoke-jumping was such an impactful part of an incredible

life lived to the fullest!”

### **Charles Edwin “Charlie” Cummings** (Missoula’ 55)

Charlie, 87, died October 30, 2021, in Eureka Springs, Arkansas. He was born April 5, 1934, in Eureka Springs. Charlie grew up in the Locust Grove area. Over the years, he had lived in Albuquerque and Los Alamos, NM. He would later relocate back to Pryor, OK, to help care for parents, until settling in Canoe Brook in the spring of 2021. He worked at Los Alamos National Labs (LANL) from the 1960s until retiring in 1996. His time there allowed him to work on many strategic projects, including Lunar Rockets to Top Secret projects that will never be known about. Charlie earned a bachelor’s degree in Mechanical Engineering from Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, OK.

Charlie jumped the 1955 season at Missoula and was severely injured on a fire jump. He loved flying, one of his favorite trips was when he flew to Alaska in a small engine plane. He loved the outdoors, especially time spent hiking and camping.

### **Charles Dale Rea Jr.** (Missoula ’67)

Dale, 77, lost his fight with Parkinson’s Disease and died on October 15, 2021. He was born in Shreveport, LA. on April 27, 1944. Dale retired as Fremont County Sheriff, moving up the ranks being elected twice. He was a teacher and coach. Dale graduated from Durango H.S. where he played football and wrestled. He then graduated from Fort Lewis College in Durango, where he also played football. Dale and his wife, Juli, ran the Texas Creek Trading Post and were successful in getting a post office at Texas Creek in 1983. Dale jumped at Missoula 1967-70.

### **Gary Clark Hannon** (Missoula ’60)

Gary died October 10, 2021, after a brief battle with Parkinson’s. He was born in Hamilton, Montana, November 11, 1938, and graduated from Darby H.S. where he was a star running back and selected for the East/West Shrine game. Gary attended college in Dillon and Bozeman and graduated with a degree in Education. Gary was one of the smokejumpers recruited by the CIA and worked in Marana, AZ, and Laos. He married Betsy in 1965 and their twins were born in Thailand in 1970.

# NSA Good Samaritan/Scholarship Fund Contributions

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Kirk Hale (LGD-79) .....	Denny Lewis (NCSB-68)

Contributions since the previous publication of donors January 2022

Total funds disbursed to Smokejumpers and families—\$276,200

Mail your Good Samaritan Fund contributions to:

Chuck Sheley, 10 Judy Ln., Chico CA 95926

After returning to the U.S., Gary worked for Sierra Pacific Airlines until his retirement. Gary jumped at Missoula 1960-62 and was a Life Member of the National Smokejumper Association.

## **Paul H. Evenson** (Missoula '73)

Paul, 81, died October 9, 2021. Paul was born March 21, 1940. Paul's younger years were spent in

Minnesota where he attended elementary and high school. Following high school graduation, he joined the Army and served for three years.

He served on a lookout, became a smokejumper (MSO 1972-82), and was the Regional Helicopter Operations Specialist in the final years of his career. He traveled extensively either fighting fire or teaching others to fight fire safely around helicopters. He

was recognized by several federal agencies for his work in standardizing procedures and policies to ensure safer working conditions for people on the ground fighting fires.

Following his retirement from the U.S. Forest Service he found a new job—volunteering back to the Forest Service. He volunteered much of his time at the Rocky Mountain Ranger Station where he had quick access to the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

He often said it was the best job ever. His duties involved using horses and mules to supply food and other supplies and equipment to wilderness sites in the Bob Marshall Wilderness.

#### **Faron Limberhand Sr.** (Missoula '78)

Faron lost his battle with cancer and died September 18, 2021, in Lame Deer, Montana. He was born February 25, 1957, in Los Angeles, California. Faron went to elementary school in Lame Deer and high school in Busby, Montana, where he was an outstanding runner in Track & Field. He jumped out of Missoula during the 1978 season and worked as a firefighter, truck driver, school bus driver, and backyard mechanic.

Faron was a member of the Cheyenne Tribe and is survived by his wife and six children. He loved the outdoors, was an avid reader, and always liked to know what was going on in the world.

#### **Hal Hawley** (NCSB '67)

Hal died June 26, 2021, in Wenatchee, Washington. He was born March 5, 1945, and grew up in Entiat, Washington, graduating from high school in 1963 and attending Wenatchee Valley College. Hal got his bachelors in Education from Washington State University, his masters from Cornell and his Ph.D. from the University of Montana. Hal worked as a Principal and Superintendent of schools in Montana and received the Distinguished Service Award from the executive board of Montana in 1996. Hal jumped at NCSB during the 1967 season.

#### **Thomas Roy Black** (Missoula '62)

Tom died September 28, 2021. He was born April 30, 1939, and was living in Grand Junction, Colorado. Tom had a bachelor's in Anthropology from the University of Montana. He worked as a

fire control aid for the National Park and was Fire Control Officer for Grand Junction BLM. Tom jumped at Missoula 1962-69 and at West Yellowstone 1970-74.

#### **Gerald Evert Schmidt** (Missoula '54)

Jerry, 97, died July 25, 2021, in Billings, Montana. He was born July 2, 1924, in Bloomington, Nebraska. Jerry jumped at Missoula 1954-56. He graduated from Franklin H.S. in 1942, enlisted in the Navy and served in the Pacific during WWII. Following his discharge, he used his GI benefits to attend college and earned his law degree from the University of Denver. He was self-employed as a business and estate planner in Wyoming and Montana during his career. Jerry jumped at Missoula 1954-56.

#### **Jack Edward Price** (Idaho City '50)

Jack, 92, died June 5, 2021, in Centerville, Virginia. He was born December 24, 1928. Jack earned his degree in Forestry from Utah State University and jumped at Idaho City during the 1950 season. After graduation he joined the USAF and was trained in pararescue. Jack moved to Seattle in 1953 and began working for Boeing while taking night classes in Aerospace Engineering. He joined NASA's Apollo Program and served as part of the design team for the Lunar Rover and worked for NASA until his retirement in 1993.

#### **William David "Bill" Steck** (Pilot)

Bill was born January 20, 1938, in Missoula, Montana, and was raised in Orchard Homes, graduated from Missoula Country High School and the University of Montana. He was a pilot in the Army in Vietnam and retired as a colonel.

He was a bush pilot while living in Alaska. Later employed as a commercial airline pilot with Continental and Alaska Airlines, was a long-haul trucker to Prudhoe Bay, Alaska, and once flew a load of musk ox to Siberia. In addition, he taught aviation at a Missoula technical college. Later in life, Bill co-owned an aviation company in Missoula, Montana, that serves the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management with smokejumper firefighting efforts in Montana and Western states. He passed away on October 27, 2021. 🕊



# 1971 Missoula Rookies Gather

by Joe Stutler (MSO-71)

FOR OVER EIGHT months, a small group of the 1971 MSO Rookies have been planning the 50th Reunion for our group. Of the 39 rookies, 17 were able to attend the September 2021 event. We were joined by other MSO jumpers that served as overhead for our class and remained friends over the years.

Those that were able to attend were Bob Austin, Joe Chandler, Willis Curdy, Dan Derrick, Bill Duffey, Gary Elmore, Grant Godbolt, Larry Jansen, Al Kyles, John Lammers, Bob Parcell, Gary Pitts, Keith Powley, Joe Stutler, Steve Vittum, Perry Whitaker, and of course “Iron Man” Larry Wright.

On September 21, the event kicked off at the Mountain Flying Museum, which hosted our event. Special thanks to Pat Collins for being a gracious host and providing not only the facility, but gave an excellent history of the Ms. Montana aircraft. We had dinner in the hanger under the wings of the aircraft. What an honor. After a catered dinner and a “Trivial Pursuit” event, organized by John (Doc) Lammers, the stories were abundant, some were even true! Special thanks to Keith Powley for the

reunion hats and Gary Pitts for arranging the dinner. Afterwards, we adjourned to the hotel for more stories and comradery, ending the day appropriately.

Afterwards, we convened at the MSO base and toured the “units” remembering the events and tribulations. We met and had a visit with an MSO-21 rookie, and it was great to hear his journey to becoming a SJ. Afterwards, we had a great MSO base tour, bringing back so many memories.

To end the day, there was a “Everyone Is Invited” event at a local brew pub and, appropriately, 75 people attended. We had so many great stories and laughs, remembering those that were officially “Off the List.”

As we ended the event, the event planning group talked about a 55<sup>th</sup> or even a 60<sup>th</sup> Reunion. Given the age/health of our group, we opted for another option. In early December, we will host a virtual (Zoom) meeting for our group and invite other SJs to attend. If this method resonates with people, we will continue on a regular basis just to share stories and stay in touch. 🧠

When Lookout Reigned - The Skies Were Clear  
Not So Today  
**Lessons in Cause and Effect**

Black Mountain Lookout  
BIGHORN National Forest

Early Detection  
Fast Initial Attack  
Protect a Managed Forest  
American Jobs  
Low Lumber Prices  
Happy Moose

Beautiful Regenerated Clearcuts in this View  
From atop Black Mountain  
All pictures taken July 22 – 23, 2021 by Karl Brauneis

KB

# Help—We Need You

by Tommy Albert (Cave Junction '64)

Smokejumping has gone through many evolutions over the years. Seems our popularity peaks and ebbs. Use of jumpers varies as upper managers come and go along with their program priorities and directives. Since few jumpers today move up through the ranks, as was common in the past, we don't have the support from the upper echelons we once enjoyed. Few see the effectiveness of smokejumpers because our work is accomplished far from the eyes of the head shed and public. This is unfortunate as public opinion is "politically" important these days. We can't afford to sit idly by and not publicize our story.

As most of you are aware, the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base (SSB) was closed after the 1981 fire season. The property was given to Josephine County by the USFS, and the County was set to bulldoze the buildings. Through what turned out to be an epic battle, the base was spared and transformed into a Smokejumper Museum in 2011. The first year saw a couple of hundred visitors. This number grew every year, and we had 8000 visitors in 2019. This year visitation is rapidly building back up and the 8000 mark is projected for next year. Visitors, many of whom had never heard of a "smokejumper," thoroughly enjoy their visit and find "our" story very intriguing. This makes being a tour guide so rewarding.

The museum was originally designed to have both self-guided and guided tours (pending the availability of tour guides). The following text greets visitors at the starting point.

**Smokejumping??? You bet. Do we have a story for you!**

The SSB was one of the four original smokejumper bases established by the USFS by 1943. It has been completely restored and is now on the National Register of Historic Places. From the moment you walk onto the base, you can sense the excitement, the intensity, and adventure that prevailed. Close your eyes for a second and you can almost hear the fire siren blaring, hear the old Twin Beech engines cranking, and envision the

fit young men racing to the Ready Room to don their protective jumpsuits and parachutes.

Did you know that the Japanese bombed our country's west coast during World War II? Yes, they did. Learn about the daring Japanese raid on the Siskiyou N.F. near Brookings, Oregon, and how this became the catalyst for establishing the base near Cave Junction. You will be taken on an intriguing, guided tour. As the tour progresses, you will appreciate the many hazards involved in parachuting into rugged mountainous terrain topped by a nearly unbroken canopy of 200-foot-tall trees.

In the oldest existing parachute loft in the United States, you will see the equipment used by the smokejumpers. You will be amazed by the ingenuity used to develop and manufacture the specialized equipment. Then you will be shown how it functions. The tour guide will discuss the rigorous training "rookie" smokejumper candidates completed to become a smokejumper. Learn techniques used to fight wildfires and how fire-fighting has evolved over the years.

The museum provides a platform to let the public know who smokejumpers are and the important role we play in protecting our nation's natural resources. As stated, the base closed in 1981 and most of the remaining Gobi jumpers are well into their senior years. Fewer and fewer are available to perform as tour guides. We need your help.

We have an expanded and condensed guidebook to aid you, ad lib stories of your experiences are just as important. You can volunteer for whatever period you can spare, be it several days to a week, or even longer.

Should you be interested, Gary Buck is the contact. Gary will answer any questions you may have regarding accommodations, timeframes, etc.

Cell: 541-441-4804

Email: [joebuck47@gmail.com](mailto:joebuck47@gmail.com)

Address: 412 Airport Dr., Cave Junction, OR 97523 📍

# Candor Fire Observations

by John Berry (Redmond '70)

**B**eginning in the 1990s, the Eldorado N.F. has been impacted by a series of large fires and two mega-fires beginning with the Cleveland Fire (1992), Star Fire (2001), Fred's Fire and Power Fire (2004), King Fire (2014) and now the Caldor Fire (2021). The largest of these was the Caldor Fire at 221,775 acres. The total acres burned by these six fires is 383,277. There is some overlap of the Cleveland, Fred's, King and Caldor Fires. This has been a huge impact on the Eldorado N.F. that only has a total acreage of 596,724.

During my tenure as Forest Supervisor of the Eldorado N.F. (2000-2006), we began aggressively implementing the fuel treatment objectives of the Sierra Nevada Forest Plan as Amended in 2004. These included areas around Pollock Pines, Georgetown, and along Highway 88 in Amador County.

The Caldor Fire started on August 14, 2021, near Grizzly Flats and Omo Ranch, California. The fire rapidly spread to the north and east threatening the communities near Pollock Pines, CA. Over the last 20 years, the Eldorado N.F. and Cal Fire have treated and maintained over a thousand acres in and around Pollock Pines. These treatment areas did not stop the Caldor Fire but did allow firefighters (including the Eldorado Hotshots) to backfire, creating a buffer between the Caldor Fire and the Pollock Pines communities.

The Caldor Fire was one of very few fires in the last 100 years to cross the Sierra Nevada crest. On August 30, 2021, the Caldor Fire reached the crest of the Sierra Nevada and first spotted into untreated forest in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Extreme flame lengths in the untreated forest were more than 100 feet. The fire had to cross through fuel treatment areas before reaching the communities of Meyers and Christmas Valley. The flame lengths dropped from 100 feet to 20 feet in the treated areas and allowed the direct attack of crews, dozers, and engines. As a result, not a single home was lost in South Lake Tahoe. The Caldor Fire literally backed down to the backyards of homes on both sides of Meyers and Christmas Valley, CA.

Most of the 922 homes and structures lost in the Caldor Fire had minimal to no fuel treatments in their surrounding area.

So, what do fuel treatment areas do? From Gwen Sanchez, Acting Forest Supervisor, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit: "They represent opportunities. It changes the environment so our firefighters can get in, do it safely, and be much more effective in their fire suppression efforts." Are fuel treatment areas alone the answer to high intensity wildfire? "Fuels treatments don't stop wildfires. But they do a couple of things for us: they change the environment enough so we are able to engage that fire, and we are able to engage it safely. The firefighters have a safe way to get in, to actually take suppression efforts on that front."

Why has the Lake Tahoe Basin been so effective in planning and implementing fuels treatments? "It's easy—partnerships. We have worked over decades in these communities with our partners hand-in-hand to create these fuels treatments. Not only on USFS lands, but across all our partnership lands as well. It's all about relationships and the partners here are second to none." Can the fuel treatment areas here in the Lake Tahoe basin serve as an example, a model? "This is the gold standard of fuels treatment and should be modeled across the entire country. What we have been able to accomplish here with our partnerships is second to none. We've been working over decades to accomplish the treatments in and around South Lake Tahoe. It showed off, it paid off during the Caldor Fire."

The Pacific Southwest Region (R5) of the USFS recently produced an excellent series of seven short videos. The "California Forest News" covers topics of fuel treatment areas, lessons from the Caldor Fire, prescribed fire use, and the Eldorado Hotshots. These were produced by Joe Flannery and available on: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/r5/news-events/audiovisual/?cid=FSEPRD958639> 📺

*Quotes of Acting Forest Supervisor Gwen Sanchez are from Episode 3 of the "California Forest News".*



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# Caldor Fire Up Close and Personal

by Nancy J. Gibson (USFS Ret.)

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**O**n August 24, 2021, I was heading northwest from my home in South Lake Tahoe, CA, and happy to be out of the choking smoke. In summers like this, we are occasionally expected to make the best of other area smokes that cascade over the granite boulders and settle onto the cool waters of Lake Tahoe. The year 2021 was no exception as the Tamarack Fire, on the Humboldt-Toiyabe N.F., provided several days of smoke and ash from a July 4 ignition. On clear days, the plume was breathtaking and not just a little frightening for those unaccustomed to such things.

My destination was the Klamath N.F. where I would be supporting fire suppression efforts on the River Complex and Antelope Fire. Though I've been retired since January 2015, this would be my 16th assignment as I've basked in this so-called retirement. As an AD "casual" worker called back for emergency support, I do my best to pass along my knowledge to others, both as a former Forest Supervisor and Administrative Officer, with hope that my 37 years of experience can entice current employees to pick up where we retirees left off. Selfishly, I'd rather not be doing this into my 70s.

Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU), the last formal assignment of my career, provided a very focused appreciation on a number of fronts. Primarily, "it's all about the water" as Lake Tahoe and its 62 tributaries, is the main economic driver for the 20 or so communities surrounding the Lake. Additionally, this is a skier's paradise with 12 public and private ski areas and resorts within easy driving distance. Another key area is partnerships. What is accomplished in this area, particularly with respect to hardening homes and businesses against the threat of wildfire, is likely unmatched most anywhere else.

In June 2007, the Angora Fire, started from an illegal campfire, burned 3,200 acres and destroyed 254 homes within hours. The aftermath of this devastating fire set off a Bi-State approach to addressing wildfire within the wildland urban interface (WUI) that is, essentially, all the Lake Tahoe area. Some

of the unique features of this dynamic landscape include approximately 155,000 acres of National Forest System (NFS) and nearly 30,000 acres of public land under California and Nevada state management. Land management decisions resulted in the Urban Lot Management Program creating a broad smattering of public land acres interspersed between private homes, businesses, and within other protection jurisdictions such as local government fire departments.

In addition to a host of FS-owned recreation facilities, infrastructure improvements, roads, trails, and administrative sites, the LTBMU manages 594 recreation residences scattered throughout these NFS lands. What should have gotten more airtime following the Angora Fire was a regional report, produced by Region 5, titled, "An Assessment of Fuel Treatment Effects on Fire Behavior, Suppression Effectiveness, and Structure Ignition on the Angora Fire." What we learned then should now be common knowledge.

Angora Fire lessons evolved into the Tahoe Fire & Fuels Team (TFFT) comprised of 22 organizations from the local, state, and national levels. The efficacy of disrupting the fuel bed, through numerous fuels reduction projects planned and implemented within the Angora burn area, became self-evident in this Assessment, basically turning tragedy into proof. Not only is removing dead and down vegetation a necessary evolution of treatment areas within the WUI, even the piles themselves provide some measure of protection in helping keep ground fires within acceptable flame lengths for on-the-ground suppression efforts.

The significance of a broader, land-based approach to fuels treatments, as opposed to maintaining jurisdictional boundaries, cannot be over-stated. While each entity develops their own projects within the constraints of their respective jurisdictions, the fact these proposals feed into the area-wide TFFT Forest Action Plan speaks volumes about this approach. Now, back to my Caldor story.

When I left home, I was aware the Caldor

Fire was chewing up a bit of ground on the El Dorado NF. I, like so many others, had no fear of it remotely affecting the Lake Tahoe Basin because history has shown a fire outside the Basin had never encroached inside the Basin. Our hopes all hung on those sentinels of protection—the granite boulders surrounding us. So, I went happily along my way to help the Klamath in my old stompin' grounds.

My red card status afforded me the opportunity to actively engage with Klamath leadership, which was particularly important as I was servicing two major incidents at opposite ends of the Forest. As my first week of assignment progressed, not only was I hearing news of the Caldor Fire on the morning IC calls, my personal cell phone was abuzz with messages of concern that encouraged me to start tuning in to the Caldor public meetings being live streamed through the Cal FIRE website.

On Sunday, August 29, the evacuation warning quickly turned to an evacuation order. First for the communities of Christmas Valley and Meyers (where my home is), then for the entire city of South Lake Tahoe. Crossing fingers and pressing on, I concluded my tour on the Klamath and headed...where? South Lake Tahoe remained evacuated with notifications informing those that grocery stores, restaurants, and other services had been critically curtailed and would take at least a week to regain their footing. In the initial hours of the evacuation order, thanks to my Nest camera, I was able to get still photos of



*Nancy Gibson (Courtesy N. Gibson)*

activity in my front yard.

Once home I put 2 and 2 together and learned what transpired in those early hours of August 31. First, we all felt so very fortunate that the fire had been stopped and not a single home was lost. The battle was fierce as a fire brand blew about a mile ahead of the main fire, across those protective

boulders and into Christmas Valley. As this spot fire escalated in drought-stricken receptive fuels, it continued mid-slope over the next ridge and into the back hills of the Meyers area. Now, viewing these images within the proper context, the story unfolded:

First, mutual aid municipal engines came to do reconnaissance and turn-arounds in one of the few flat driveways in the neighborhood. Next, the dozer came to build a protection line at the edge of NFS lands. Finally, we saw the glow of a flame-front that was not from the oncoming spot fire. It was from the burn-out operation that took advantage of the hundred yards of Forest Service fuels-treated land that was the protective buffer between this row of neighbors and the spot fire heading our way. Crews worked this area, and the El Dorado Hotshots found a decent bivouac in my driveway. Just knowing of their presence was a comfort, and their hard work continued throughout patrol and mop-up for days and weeks ahead.

Continuing my own patrols and observations, it was evident the fuels treatment areas throughout Meyers, Christmas Valley, and the Highway 89

corridor did exactly as they were designed: reduce 100+ foot flame lengths to something manageable for suppression by hand crews.

The Caldor Fire was officially declared contained on October 21 at 221,835 acres. The devastation of Grizzly Flat and other area communities on the west slope and south of Highway 50 was difficult to grasp in that it didn't seem to take any time at all for the fire to rise and rage across the dry landscape. This was reminiscent of Angora that suffered the most property loss within the first burn window. When Caldor hopped over the Sierra Crest and South Lake Tahoe was evacuated, it was uncertain to what we would return. Of the roughly 10,000 acres that burned in the Basin, the fire, somewhat miraculously, tended to maintain a mid-slope progression leaving the uplands and lower slopes generally intact. The degree to which interagency fuel treatment areas were incorporated for on-the-ground defense became the real exclamation point to their effectiveness. I see it in the slopes in front of me. Yes, there are burned trees, but it isn't a moonscape. Yes, according to the subsequent BAER (Burned Area Emergency Response) reports, the soils fared better than the vegetation. We've already experienced both an unusually early snowfall (~2") and an atmospheric river event in late October; yet the debris flow into our yards and roads was not nearly as extreme as anticipated.

I've spent a career working with the public, and it's safe to say many people don't pay much heed to generalized public information unless it has an immediate bearing on their day-to-day lives. After signing the January 2012 Record of Decision (ROD) for the South Shore Fuels Reduction & Healthy Forest Restoration Project, encompassing roughly 10,000 acres, I set about to resolve an Objection to this very project. A heightened awareness of wildfire, thanks again to Angora, encouraged the Upper Echo Lakes summer cabin owners to step forward with a simple request: Include their recreation residence tract to the same extent as Lower Echo Lakes was identified in the ROD. The existing ROD would move forward and, because of the limited acres and special authorization providing for Categorical Exclusions (CE) on fuels treatments of 100 acres or less in the Basin, we quickly produced this CE and began to immediately move ahead as weather and funding permitted. That is until a stay of action was

filed with the court. Interestingly, this was done by a party to the Objection.

Thanks in great part to a staff that fully understood what was at risk in this high mountain watershed, 100 acres were pile-treated, though never burned. That is a controlled burn. Again, Caldor has provided a teachable moment in that within our forests, it's not a matter of if, but when. We had the opportunity to further reduce the risk of wildfire but, instead, 42 cabins were lost in the Lower Echo tract and, as I understand it, Caldor skirted Upper Echo as it steamed ahead toward the Desolation Wilderness.

I hope that in the months and years to come, we all take personal responsibility to better understand the wild nature of the places we call home and accept that we are part of this ecosystem and must defend it through our own actions. If you live in or anywhere near a wooded area, work with local fire safe councils, fire districts, or national and state vegetation managers to identify and act upon ways to mitigate risk and improve your chances of not just defensible space, but survivable space. Think to yourself, "If no one was here to defend my home, what can I do to help it survive?"

When I finally returned home on September 23, my husband and I walked the slope where we often visit at sunset overlooking the town of Meyers. Fire apparatus and crews continued to patrol the area. We came upon a firefighter from New Mexico who was scouting for any signs of heat. We chatted for a few minutes, and I gave him a rundown of what I'd just walked through. He called in the few "candlesticks" that were smoldering but could do no harm within the blackened slope. When I asked him how his assignment was going, he responded, "Yeah, it's been a lot of work and me and my crew have been hitting it nonstop. I did get to go see the lake the other day. Ya know, it's still just so beautiful here!" And ya know, he's right. 🌲

*Nancy Gibson: Served 16 years as Forest Administrative Officer on the Klamath National Forest in a highly complex and recurring fire environment.*

*Selected as Deputy Forest Supervisor on the Six Rivers National Forest in a record-breaking 2008 fire season.*

*Served as Forest Supervisor on the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, 2011 to early 2015.*