

PRELIMINARY REPORT  
(ROUGH DRAFT)

FIRE SHELTER INCIDENT ON AUGUST 1, 1986

SUMMARY:

On August 1, 1986, a seasonal firefighter employed by the Wallowa Fire Zone, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, was involved in an incident requiring the use of a fire shelter while working on a wildfire for the State of Oregon. This incident occurred on the Powwatka Ridge Fire approximately 30 miles north/northwest of Enterprise, Oregon. The individual sustained no injuries from the fire which essentially over-ran him.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

This fire began on August 1, in the late morning hours on ground protected by the State of Oregon. A request for support in attack of the fire soon followed. Helicopter 616 with crew was dispatched from its base at Memaloose at approximately 1150 hours. The crew consisted of foreman Bob P. and four others.

FIRE SHELTER DEPLOYMENT:

At about 1600 hours the four crew-persons were detached from the helicopter operation to be used as firefighters, with foreman Both staying with the ship. At about 1800 the crew began constructing fireline after receiving instructions from a State employee by the name of Swanson. The crew was building line on the edge of the fire working downslope toward Mud Creek. The slope was estimated at 60%+, with fuels consisting of mixed Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. At this time the fire size was estimated to be 300 to 500 acres and was apparently backing downslope toward Mud Creek.

The crew worked down hill and were becoming more nervous about their situation. They sent Jim Adams out ahead to see exactly what the fire was doing beneath them. It was estimated that they were about 8 to 10 chains away from where they had last seen Swanson. They had no communication with Swanson as their radio was on local FS net while Swanson had a State radio. Their only radio communication was with the helicopter pilot as he worked the area in a bucket operation.

As Adams got out to a good vantage point the fire apparently made a rapid run back upslope re-burning much of the brush and reproduction that had burned earlier in the day. He attempted to get back upslope to the other three individuals but it became obvious to him that he would not have time to get to them.

At this point (about 1845 hours) Adams located a spot inside the burn to climb into his fire shelter and did so. He remained in the shelter for 10 to 15 minutes as the fire burned over the top through the brush canopy that had scorched and burned earlier in the day. At about 1900 hours he came out of the shelter and worked his way further into the burn area eventually finding Swanson and the other members of his crew at about 2000 hours.

The crew was removed from the fire scene later that night and returned to Enterprise where they documented what took place.

EXPERIENCE OF INDIVIDUALS INVOLVED:

Jim Adams has approximately 6 seasons fire experience.  
The person in charge of the four person crew once they were detached from the helicopter and foreman was Susan Goheen has six season's experience including time spent on a Hotshot crew.

ANALYSIS:

The information for this report was gathered from a meeting with the four individuals the morning after the incident. Though this was a quick meeting lasting only about an hour it became obvious that several of the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders were not followed resulting in a bad situation.

Fortunately the FS crew had the required safety equipment including the fire shelter and gloves. In addition they had training and experience to recognize a bad situation and dealt with it in a manner that resulted in no one being injured. However the situation never should have occurred.

David M. Lukens  
Zone F.M.O.  
August 2, 1986



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Forest  
Service

WO

RA to: 5130/6700

Date: AUG 13 1986

Subject: Firefighting Safety

To: Regional Foresters, Station Directors, and Area Director

Our safety record has been good so far this fire season. However, renewed emphasis on safety is extremely important at this point as crews become fatigued. Enclosed is an account of an actual incident which recently occurred. As you can see, several of the 10 Standard Fire Fighting Orders were violated. Also, and maybe even more importantly, the crew failed to react to the 13 Fire Situations That Shout "Watch Out."

Use this account to reinforce to your crews and overhead the importance of constantly evaluating and reacting to their situation on the fireline, and the necessity of following the 10 Standard Orders at all times.

It is also important that we continue to maintain a good aviation safety record. Of particular concern is the operation of call-when-needed aircraft. Personnel and pilots are often unfamiliar with one another and sometimes lack current experience. It is critical that emphasis be placed on following the step-by-step procedures required for safe operation of these aircraft by qualified personnel.

Assure that all personnel clearly understand our policy of fighting fire aggressively, yet safely. Aggressive control is often essential, firefighter safety is always essential.

  
ALLAN J. WEST  
Deputy Chief, S&PE

Enclosure

Limited Distribution





On August 1, 1986, a seasonal firefighter was involved in an incident requiring the use of a fire shelter. The individual sustained no injuries from a fire which essentially overran him.

The fire began on State-protected land on August 1 late in the morning. A helitack crew was dispatched to the fire at 1150. The crew consisted of Helitack foreman, John, and four others. At about 1600 the four crewmembers were detached from the helicopter operation to be used as firefighters. Foreman John stayed with the aircraft. After receiving instructions from State employee Pete, the crew began building fireline on the edge of the fire working downslope toward a creek bottom. The slope was estimated at 60%+, with fuels consisting of mixed Ponderosa pine and Douglas fir. At this time the fire was estimated to be 300 to 500 acres, and was apparently backing downslope toward the creek.

As the crew worked downhill they became more nervous about their fire situation. They sent crewmember George out ahead to see exactly what the fire was doing beneath them. They had no communications with Pete as their radio was on the local Forest Service net while Pete had a State radio. The crew's only radio communication was with the helicopter pilot as he worked the area in a bucket operation.

As George got to a good vantage point the fire apparently made a rapid run back upslope, reburning much of the brush that had burned earlier that day. He attempted to get back upslope but it became obvious that he would not have time to reach the rest of the crew. At this point (about 1845) George located a spot inside the burn to deploy his fire shelter and did so. He remained inside for 10 to 15 minutes as the fire burned over top and through the brush canopy that had burned earlier in the day. He emerged from his shelter at about 1900, and worked his way further into the burn area where he eventually found Pete and the other crewmembers at about 2000.

*Powderka Fire*

