



Event Type: Initial Attack Entrapment and Escape

Date: July 4, 2026

Location: Chelan Hills Fire, Washington

The Story and Lessons from this Initial Attack Entrapment and Escape Incident

"In about 10 seconds, we went from blue sky to ash fallout to ember fallout—then spot fires then established fires around me and it was time to go."

—Crew Boss

Background

Mid-afternoon on July 4, numerous events occurred during initial attack on the Chelan Hills Fire located outside of Chelan, Washington.

One Crew Carrier and one Type 6 Engine were burned, resulting in the total loss of both vehicles. Another Brush Truck received fire damage to paint and decals and a window was destroyed. An agency pickup truck was also damaged from striking a stopped civilian vehicle it encountered in zero visibility.

These events resulted in several cases of both smoke inhalation and burn injuries to fire personnel.

Narrative

The Chelan Hills Fire was reported at approximately 0029 hours. Responders were on scene within 30 minutes. Suppression actions were taken all night with multiple resources ordered, including a state mobilization of engines from municipal fire departments with four task forces ordered at 0430 hours.

Prior to 0700 hours, a local Type 3 Incident Management Team was ordered to take over this emerging incident. (They assumed command at approximately 1800 hours.) By 1000 hours, the fire was approximately 1,000 acres and multiple homes and properties were threatened. A Red Flag Warning was in effect from 1300–2100 hours for high temperatures, low relative humidity, and strong southwest winds.

Crew 1

Crew 1 arrived on scene at 1400 hours with: two 5-person Crew Carriers, one 10-person Crew Carrier, and two pickup trucks driven by the Crew Boss and Crew Boss Assistant.

At 1422 hours, Goat Peak Lookout reported a wind shift from the east to the north.

Crew 1 received a tactical briefing at the Beebe Staging Area located at the bottom of McNeil Canyon Road at the junction of Highway 97. Assigned to Division A, at 1450 hours they travelled up McNeil Canyon Road approximately five miles where they rendezvoused with DIVS A at the bottom of Mountain Spring Road for additional briefing and tactical assignment.

Crew 1 was assigned to structure prep on the south side of McNeil Canyon Road, east of Mountain Spring Road. At 1524 hours, they stopped at the junction of the first road they encountered, Sunflower Lane, to examine maps and make a game plan. It was decided to travel up Sunflower Lane, stopping at the first house to unload the crew where, at 1534 hours, the Lookout started up the hill to find a vantage point.



Figure 1.—The Safety Zone as seen from above by Crew 1 as they left Sunflower Lane.

DIVS A Directs Everyone to Go to the Safety Zone

At this moment, the Crew Boss and others heard several things over the scattered radio traffic, including that an engine was “entrapped” and that the fire had crossed McNeil Canyon Road down canyon of their location—and was burning in their direction. As ash and embers fell around the Crew Boss, he made several attempts to reach the crew via radio but was unsuccessful due to the volume of radio transmissions. This included “bleed over” onto their intra-crew channel.

Fortunately, at 1537 hours, a Squad Leader heard the original radio traffic and gave the order for the crew to load back up and head for Highway 97. As they loaded, the Crew Boss rejoined the crew in his vehicle and followed them back down toward McNeil Canyon Road. As they travelled down the hill, they could see the Safety Zone below them. Engines were already driving into it as someone overheard DIVS A direct everyone to go to the Safety Zone.

At the junction of McNeil Canyon Road, the decision was made to travel the one-half mile downhill to the Safety Zone. They rearranged the vehicle order to appropriately place vehicles with high-visibility flashers in front of and behind vehicles that did not have them.

This new travel order: Crew Boss in pickup; 5-Person Crew Carrier with flashers; 10-Person Crew Carrier (without flashers); 5-Person Crew Carrier with flashers; and the Assistant Crew Boss in a pickup at the rear of the crew.

Driving Through the Flaming Front

Within minutes, they were driving through the flaming front of the fire with full-flame impingement from both sides of the road for more than 200 feet of roadway—with zero visibility. They therefore utilized the rumble strips located in the middle of the road to drive “by feel” toward the Safety Zone.

At 1544 hours, they exited the main fire into an already burned area, with the vehicles creeping along at 5 mph. This is when the Crew Boss’s lead pickup truck struck a stopped civilian vehicle in the road—that, due to smoke, he was unable to see.

Within a few seconds, the civilian vehicle moved forward and continued down the highway. At this time, Crew 1 realized that its convoy had reached the Safety Zone entrance, where a Water Tender was blocking access—spraying water on a spot fire, and then onto their vehicles.

One minute later, Crew 1 observed smoke and then flames coming from the engine compartment of the second 5-Person Crew Carrier (4th of 5 in the convoy) and its engine died.

The Crew Carrier occupants evacuated immediately. They, along with other Crew 1 crew members, attempted to suppress this engine compartment fire with fire extinguishers. However, the metal was too hot to fully open the

hood and two extinguishers were defective. As two additional extinguishers were used, it became evident that there was no way that they could put this fire out.

The burning Crew Carrier occupants all jumped into one of the pickups. Once the Water Tender moved out of the way, they were transported into the Safety Zone.

Several of the crew members walked back to the burning Crew Carrier to retrieve what gear and personal items they could safely remove before the vehicle was fully engulfed.

Crew accountability and status was reported to DIVS A who watched the episode take place. They remained in the Safety Zone for just over an hour while the fire passed by around them.

At 1705 hours, they egressed back to Beebe Staging and then to ICP where they bedded down for the night. That evening at 1900 hours, the crew met with Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) personnel.

Fire Jumps McNeil Canyon Road – Task Force Instructed to Go to Safety Zone

Task Force 1, consisting of 4 Engines, 1 Water Tender, and a Strike Team Leader, had arrived on scene at 1430 hours and was briefed by Operations at Beebe Staging. At 1510 hours, they engaged in structure protection measures on Mountain Spring Road.

At approximately 1530, DIVS A informed the Task Force and other resources that the fire had jumped McNeil Canyon Road and to immediately disengage and egress to the Safety Zone, which was a quarter mile up McNeil Canyon Road from where it intersected with Mountain Spring Road. They began an orderly withdrawal down Mountain Spring Road with Engine 1 following Engine 2.



Figure 4.—Photo taken by Engine 2 crew members looking back toward their engine as they egressed to take refuge beside a nearby building.



Figure 2.—The location of the burned Crew Carrier ("Buggy 1") and Safety Zone ("SZ").



Figure 3.—Looking down at the Safety Zone from the burned Crew Carrier's location.

As they neared the bottom of the road at the junction with McNeil in a series of corners, with fire all around them, they lost visibility.

Engine 1, the driver and two passengers, nearly went off the road. But its tire struck something (rock or stump on the edge of the roadway) which gave the driver a chance to correct and maintain the course.

At this point, at 1536, a window exploded on Engine 1 driver's side from the heat of the flaming front. Smoke filled the cab as the engine experienced direct flame impingement.

They continued slowly down the hill, turned up McNeil Canyon Road and drove to the Safety Zone where, at 1600, they parked their damaged engine.

The driver was treated for smoke inhalation and burn injuries on the left side of face, neck, and left ear. The passengers were uninjured. The driver was treated and released.

Engine 2 Drives Off Roadway in Smoke

Meanwhile, at 1537, Engine 2 with the Engine Boss and one crew member mistook a pullout for the road due to the same lack of visibility. The engine left the roadway, travelling downhill approximately 250–300 feet down the slope, knocking over several small trees as it travelled. (“Eng 2 Left Road” on Figure 5.) Just short of merging back onto Mountain Spring Road, the engine became disabled. (“Eng 2 Final” on Figure 5.)

Two minutes later, threatened by fire, the crew immediately evacuated the engine and took refuge behind a nearby building. (“Eng 2 Area of Refuge” on Figure 5.)

A member of the public driving down the hill attempted to stop and give the engine crew members a ride—but was forced by intense heat to continue down the hill.

At approximately 1610, as they evaluated the need to deploy their shelters (getting their shelters out and in hand), the Task Force Leader arrived onsite, got the crew members into his vehicle, and evacuated them the 0.26 miles to the Safety Zone.

The driver was treated for smoke inhalation and burn injuries on the left side of face, neck, and left ear. The passenger had burn injuries to the face and was also treated for smoke inhalation. Both were kept at the hospital for a 24-hour evaluation and then released.

Fire Carried Through Portions of the Safety Zone

It should be noted that although the Safety Zone was a safe and secure location, the area’s short, mowed grass still carried fire through portions of the Safety Zone. Multiple units had to utilize pump and roll tactics to protect apparatus and personnel.

Flame lengths were 15–24 inches. Approximately 75 percent of the Safety Zone area received some fire activity. While parked in the Safety Zone, several apparatuses lost airlines or received other minor damage from flames burning underneath the vehicles. No other injuries or serious damage was reported.

Additionally, after this initial attack entrapment event, a member of the public was found deceased in his car near where Engine 2 left the roadway. This vehicle was on a corner approximately 100 feet from where the engine left the roadway—but, in the smoke and chaos, was not visible to the Engine 2 crew.

At the time of these events, the temperature was in the mid-80s, relative humidity was in the low teens, and the wind was nearly 20 mph, with a gust tracked at 30 mph. During this event, the Chelan Hills Fire tripled in size.

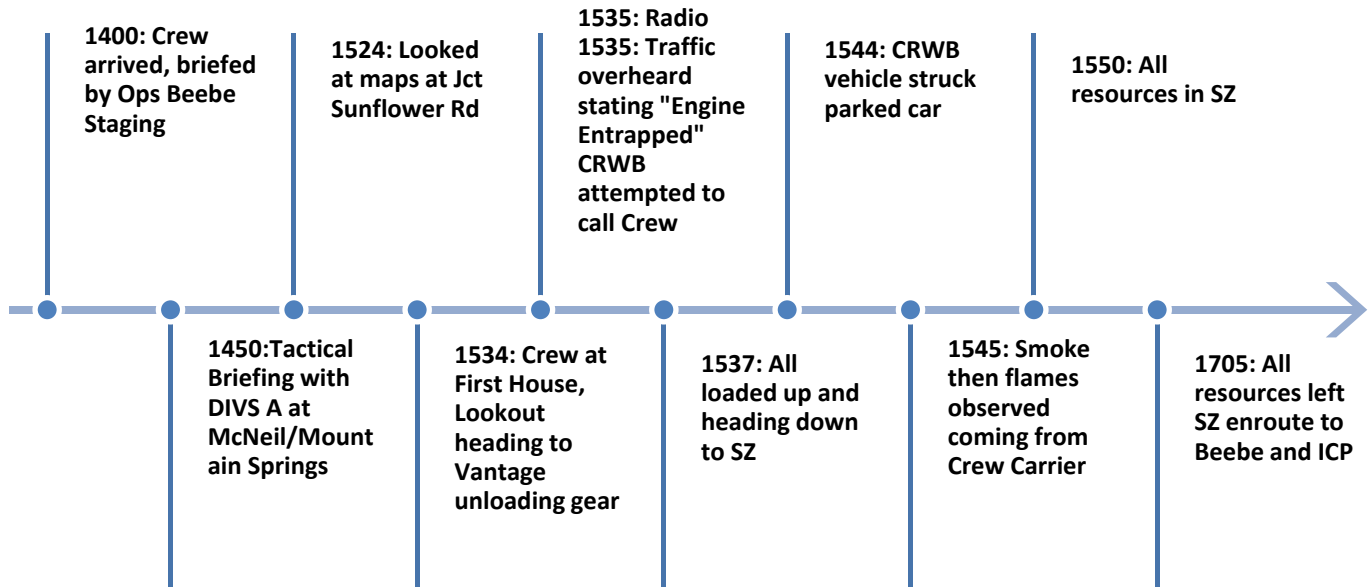


Figure 5.—Engine locations. “CF” is the location of the civilian fatality.

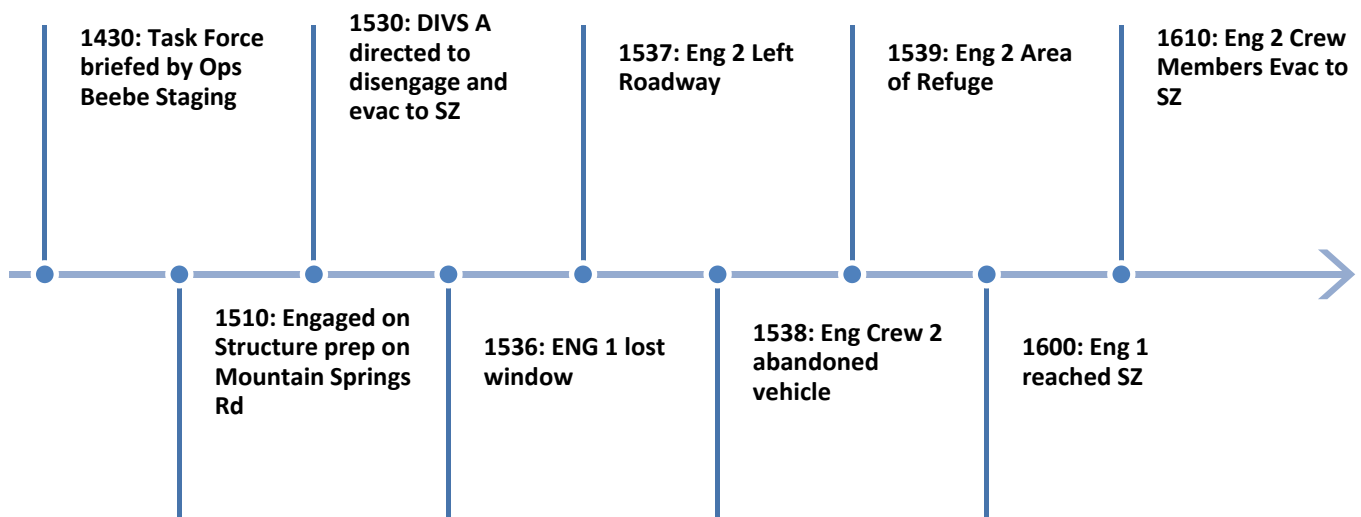


Figure 6.—The Engine 2 crew members evacuated the engine and took temporary refuge behind this building—now burned—in the foreground. The Task Force Leader arrived and the crew members evacuated in his vehicle.

Crew Timeline



Engine 1 and Engine 2 Timeline



Lessons

Communication Breakdown

1. It is very difficult to ensure that all resources have the same information—a common operating picture—in a dynamic, fast-paced fire environment. Communication responsibility is Sender AND Receiver.
2. Be aware of the time wedge and ensure assignments and LCES account for fuels, weather, and topography.
3. The volume of radio traffic during this event overwhelmed all channels.
4. Many resources were still maneuvering to engage after the fire jumped McNeil Canyon Road. Ensure adequate margin within LCES.

Lookout Location

1. One of the Lookouts was only able to see the fire after it crossed McNeil Canyon Road. In hindsight, perhaps a Lookout placed farther out would have been able to give advanced warning.
2. Each unit provided their own Lookout. Coordination of intel between units did not occur due to time wedge and communication breakdown.

Working Around Private Homes

1. Structure prep and point protection around homes is challenging and often increases a sense of urgency to get the work done. This mindset often pushes firefighters to reprioritize mission over risk.
2. Do not assume that all landowners have left. On this incident, traffic from private citizens increased road congestion.

Mission Creep

1. The Water Tender operator blocked the Safety Zone access to put out spot fires—not allowing people to effectively enter the Safety Zone. The Water Tender Operator was most likely not aware of the “big picture”—the order for the Water Tender and others to evacuate to the Safety Zone.
2. A bias for action due to the threat to homes was reported by several responders. Several responders felt that pressure for the “first time” in their fire experience.

Equipment

1. Two fire extinguishers malfunctioned.
2. Pre-filter screens on air intake for vehicles may be warranted, much like the emission screens required on chainsaws and logging equipment.
3. Responders reported embers inside the cabs of vehicles due to permanently open vents and damaged door seals.

Time Wedge

1. Many crew members believed that several Fire Orders and Watchout Situations were unmitigated—but didn’t speak up. The timeline was so short, there was no time to discuss between realization and evacuation from the line.

“Lots of ‘Watch Outs’ were experienced, but we kept working and nobody spoke up.”

—Crew Member 1

"The timeline was too fast to speak up!"
—Crew Member 2

This RLS was submitted by:
Eric Risdal, Mark Munns, and Mike Harris

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