

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Thunderstorm Influence on IA

Date: July 14, 2016

Location: Tok River Fire, Alaska



The Tok River Fire as the helicopter arrived on scene.

The IC had only gone about 200 feet when he began to feel the heat from the fire. He looked up to see the smoke column rotating and moving in the direction of the tussock (Landing Zone).

NARRATIVE

At 1700 hours on July 14, a lightning-caused fire was reported to an Interior Dispatch Area (Alaska). A Type 2 Helicopter was dispatched with four Firefighters and a Pilot. As soon as the helicopter lifted off, the Incident Commander reported that the smoke column was in sight and that it was leaning toward the Glenn Highway/Tok Cutoff, a principal access route from Tok to Anchorage. While the helicopter was in route to the fire, an Air Attack, tankers, and scoopers were requested to assist.

Upon arrival at the fire, the helicopter made several revolutions around it to assess the situation. While the

IC sized up the fire, the Pilot and Helicopter Manager surveyed the surrounding area to evaluate potential landing zones and water sources. At this time, the IC and crew also noticed thunderstorm build-up in the general area.

It was determined that the fire was in a full-suppression area and that the values at risk were the Glenn Highway and the town of Tok, as well as native allotments and one cabin.

The IC estimated the fire to be 10 to 15 acres and burning in black spruce with flames 50 to 75 feet high at the head. The requested resources were diverted to a higher priority fire. Radio issues made it difficult to talk with Dispatch.

The decision was made to land the helicopter, unload firefighters and equipment, and prepare the helicopter to begin making bucket drops. With the wind blowing out of the southeast, a tussock near the heel of the fire to the north and east was selected as a Landing Zone.

Tussock Believed to be a Good LZ Location

The Helicopter Manager and Pilot both felt that the tussock was a good location because it was close to the heel of the fire and the proximity of water sources. In addition, the IC felt that the tussock was in a good location and of sufficient size that it could be burned-out to create a safety zone in a worst case scenario.

When the bucket was attached, the helicopter left to begin making water drops on the heel of the fire. The IC began walking across the tussock toward the heel to size-up the fire from the ground and make a plan for containment. As he negotiated the uneven ground of the tussock, travel was slow and difficult. The IC had only gone about 200 feet when he began to feel the heat from the fire. He looked up to see the smoke column rotating and moving in the

direction of the tussock area where crew had landed.

The winds had shifted approximately 90 degrees. Now the heel of the fire, which moments before had been burning with low intensity, began actively burning—heading toward the IC and his crew.

The helicopter Pilot had just filled his second bucket. He quickly dropped the water when he noticed the wind shift and flew back to the landing zone.

The IC turned around and headed back toward the Landing Zone. He got about half way back when the helicopter returned to the Landing Zone and turned on the siren to alert the fire crew.

The pilot was concerned that if the column dropped too close on the ground, he wouldn't have enough visibility to lift off.



Decision Made to Leave Their Gear and Board the Helicopter

The helicopter in the Landing Zone as the fire turns.

The crew disconnected the bucket and began loading gear back on the helicopter. When the crew began packing the bucket, the Pilot told them to leave it and get on the helicopter.

The smoke column was leaning over the tussock and the pilot was concerned that if the column dropped too close on the ground, he would not have enough visibility to lift off.

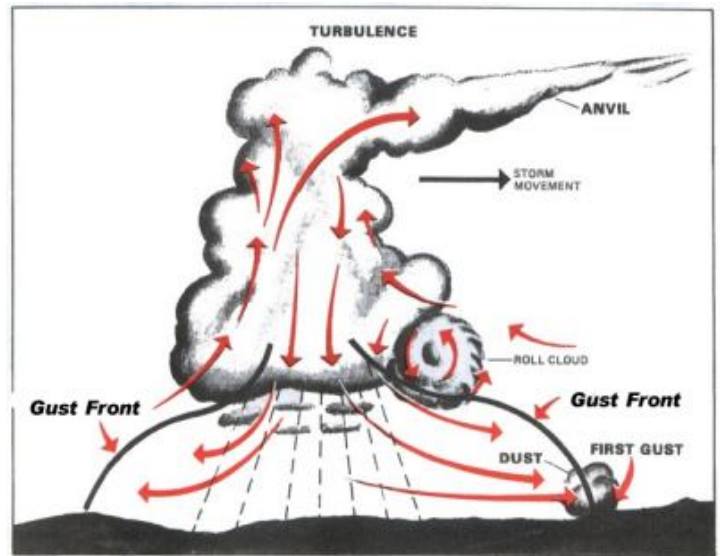
The fire crew did not believe that they were in imminent danger and that they had plenty of time to load the rest of the gear before they would be affected by the flaming front. However, there was concern that if they lost visibility they would be stuck in the landing zone.

The decision was made to leave the rest of the gear and get in the Helicopter. After taking off, the helicopter made several revolutions around the area hoping to be able to land again and retrieve their gear. The fire continued burning in the direction of the Landing Zone, growing from approximately 16 acres at 1730 to an estimated 100 acres at 1810. The helicopter bucket, a chainsaw, a pump, and a flight helmet were all eventually consumed by the approaching fire.

The helicopter bucket, a chainsaw, a pump, and a flight helmet were all eventually consumed by the approaching fire.

LESSONS

- ✓ Remember the potential for wind changes near thunderstorms and the potential impacts on your plan.
- ✓ Whenever possible use a lookout or air attack to report on thunderstorm cell movement.
- ✓ Be cautious about landing zones: use the “**PACE** Model: **P**rimary, **A**lternate, **C**ontingency, **E**mergency”.
- ✓ Have IC in left front of helicopter to get better eyes on fire for size-up: ROS, Winds, Fire Behavior, and Spotting Potential.
- ✓ Have a good personnel experience mix with every load.
- ✓ Ensure good radio communication prior to engagement.
- ✓ Stop, Think, Talk, then Action.



This RLS
was submitted by:
Unit Overhead

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?
Click this button:

Share
Your Lessons