

Wildland firefighting in America—a family affair

by Doug Newbould

When it comes to families, I believe I am especially blessed. Not counting the family of man, I am a member of four special families: my immediate family, my extended family, my church family and my firefighting family. In the American branch of the wildfire family tree, I have roughly 30,000 relatives. As with my extended and church families, I don't know all my firefighting relatives. But I do know more people in my fire family than in the other three families combined. The good news about my fire family is that I never feel guilty about failing to keep in touch with any of them. You see, we all know the odds are good we will cross paths again one day, out on the line or in some fire camp.

I guess you could say I was adopted into the American firefighting family almost 25 years ago, just a pup really—a nineteen year old, wet-behind-the-ears college kid. I got my basic fire training on the Bridger-Teton National Forest in northwest Wyoming, during the bicentennial year 1976. I remember cutting my firefighting teeth on a couple of small (less than one acre) duff fires that summer, digging fireline and mopping up. My second summer in Jackson Hole I got a few more fires under my belt, and to my excitement—my first real wildfire.

I have several distinct memories of that first timber fire. It was a remote lightning-caused fire in spruce-fir forest near Afton, Wyoming. We flew into that fire in a helicopter (my first helicopter ride). I was lucky enough to fly in with the Fire Boss (they call them Incident Commanders these days). The Fire Boss wanted to “recon” the fire, so we flew round and round the smoke column until he felt familiar with the fire's environment and its behavior. I'll never forget the exhilaration of looking straight down at a hundred-foot roman candle (a torching spruce tree), as the pilot laid that ship on its side so the Fire Boss could see the action.

I remember chasing spotfires and digging a handline around a spotfire at the base of a tree. I remember finding that same spot again the next day after the main fire had burned over it, and realizing with pride that the line I built to keep the spotfire contained had actually kept the main fire from burning the tree

within. I remember when the fire blew up that first shift, and feeling the air I was breathing getting sucked into the inferno at almost 100 miles per hour. And I remember waiting for the helicopter to take us back to civilization, and the Fire Boss telling the helicopter foreman, “Get him outta here” (in reference to me as I lay sprawled on my back—exhausted after a 24-hour shift).

I have fought many wildfires in the twenty-plus years since that time. Some have long since been forgotten. Others I will never forget. The big ones tend to stay with you for a long time—the fire names and locations, the episodes of extreme fire behavior, the unusual experiences, old and new friendships, and especially the fallen comrades. I'll always remember Gallagher Peak in '79, the Chaos and Garden Valley fires in '86, Clover Mist (Yellowstone) in '88, the A-Rock Complex (Yosemite) in '90, and so many others. The most memorable experiences for me are always the hand-crew assignments, as a crew boss or crewmember. Whether the incident lasts three days or three weeks doesn't really matter. When you work side by side with 15-20 other firefighters in extreme conditions, fighting a common foe, there will always be lasting relationships and memories.

Last October I was dispatched to a 130,000-acre fire in northern California, the Big Bar Complex. My assigned position was Felling Boss. A felling boss normally supervises one or more tree felling teams, each team consisting of a sawyer and a swamper (helper). These felling teams usually cut the largest hazard trees (dead trees, burning snags and leaners that threaten firefighters) along fire lines and roads within and around the fire perimeter. The Big Bar was the largest fire in California last year, burning big chunks of the Shasta-Trinity and Six Rivers National Forests and threatening many private homes and the Hoopa Indian Reservation.

My assignment only lasted a week, but I will have some lasting memories: the ancient stand of Douglas-fir at Groves Prairie, the Trinity River gorge near Burnt Ranch, and the distant roar of the crown fire that consumed thousands of acres of forest in the Tish Tang a Tang drainage in a matter of minutes.

But my favorite memories from Big Bar will be of my family, both old: “sister” Traci who I had not seen since Yellowstone in '88, “uncle” Mike from my years working on the White River National Forest in Colorado, and “cousin” Dave from the Midnight Sun Hotshots in Alaska; and new: “brothers” Tommy from Virginia and Dave from Cecilville, CA, and “cousin”

Joe the guitar wizard from Eureka, CA...until we meet again!

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