

**You should not reproduce any of these items without written permission from Carroll Gambrell, unless, your complying with the Copyright Fair Use Doctrine. Simply acknowledging the source of copyrighted material, is not a substitute for obtaining actual use permission. Visit the US Copyright Office at <http://www.copyright.gov/> for further (c) enlightenment.**

Blazing Parachutes or Fighting Forest Fires for Fun and Profit  
by Carroll Gambrell

To  
Johnson Flying Service  
And  
The guys who got us there  
And  
To the memory of Gene Tuniga  
And all the guys who didn't come back  
"Those were the days, my friend;  
We thought they'd never end..."

A Special Thanks

To my tireless staff: Ginger, Cookie, Ralphie, Gussie, Snooky, and Doris, who read every word of every chapter, sometimes several times. I didn't always agree with their comments, but I will have to admit they were usually right. They offered encouragement when I was down, inspiration when things weren't going well, and praise when I found the right word. There is no way I could have finished this without them.

You have my eternal love and gratitude, Ginger, Cookie, Ralphie, Gussie, Snooky and Doris. It only seems as if you are several people.

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	134
1. You're in the Army now	135
2. Call me mister	145
3. Retreads	151
4. An Early Burst in Oregon	158
5. Pony Peak; it's a small world	163
6. Happy Camp	168
7. Blessed is the peacemaker	175
8. Through the gates of hell	183
9. You can't hurt in but one place at a time	190
10. Arranging Ligneous Detritus	194
11. Rescue	200
12. The dawn patrol	208
13. The big, Big Creek bark beetle bash	212
14. Slaying the dragon	217
15. Little Joe	225
16. Long days and short rations	232
17. A farewell to flames	241
18. Open road	xxx

EPILOGUE: A GATHERING

## PREFACE

This is a work of fiction, but if there is an old smokejumper alive today who can say, "That ain't the way it wuz," let him step forward and declare himself. All I can say is, we may have different memories; some faded, some exaggerated, some lost entirely. Even if you think that's not the way it was, maybe that's the way it should have been. At least, this is the way I remember it after half a century.

I changed some of the actual names in order to protect the guilty, but I expect some of you may recognize yourselves in some of the characters and events - many, but not all, of which actually happened. Also, I may have blunted a few sharp edges when the memories became too keen..

If you are an old geezer, hark back to the old Tri-motor-C-Ration days, and relive your best moments. If you are a youngster, I'm sorry you missed it.

Enjoy.

Carroll Gambrell  
Walhalla, S.C.

## Chapter 1 - "...Now is the time..."

As Thomas Paine once wrote, "...now is the time for all good men to heed the call of their Country..." Unfortunately my Country called before I could finish school. The Draft Board, completely unimpressed with the "D" I made in Organic Chemistry, sent me a letter denying future deferrment. Korea was winding down, but the Army was breathing down my neck.

Since it was going to happen anyway, I figured I might as well get ahead of the Draft Board and apply for the Air Cadet program and learn to fly. At least if I was flying the plane, I wouldn't need to jump out of it, unless it was on fire or something.

Ha! Fat chance. I went to Moody AFB at Valdosta, took the exam, and, since there were no questions regarding organic chemistry, I passed the written with flying colors.; even qualifying for pilot, navigator, or observer. After that, there was nothing in the way but the physical - and look out Flight School. I'd been running track since high school, and was in great physical shape. I knew there would be no trouble with the physical, except for one little thing...I found out I was color blind, and had been all my life and didn't know it. I could not pass the fool proof Iso Hari test. Those people wouldn't even have accepted Stonewall Jackson, if he had been the least bit color blind.

Goodbye Air Cadets, hello Army.

Now, you may not believe this, but being color blind did not disqualify me for the infantry. In fact, they didn't look upon that malady as a short coming at all. They welcomed me with open arms, and for the next twenty-one months I toted a rifle and washed pots and pans and peeled a mountain of potatoes while on KP..

I did catch a break not long after Basic. They opened airborne training to draftees. Since I had already been there and done that, I figured that was right down my alley. I could just go airborne, start jumping, and collect \$50 jump pay every month. That is where I erred again. It didn't matter a great deal that I

had jumped before; nor did the fact that the smokejumpers taught the Army to jump way back in 1940 cut much ice; nor the fact that I had more jumps than anybody in the Company except the First sergeant when I joined my Company in the 82nd. Once again I found myself running around the airport in the hot Ft Bragg sun in the middle of June. No one ever asked me if I had been a smokejumper, although it was in my personal file. However, sometime while I was either playing run-around-the-Regiment or pushing on North Carolina clay, M/Sergeant Burleson read my file. When I rejoined the Company after six weeks of jump school, he told me I didn't have to go to jump school at all. Thanks sarge.

The way the Army works, if you are qualified to do something, they make sure you end up doing something else. It wasn't that I was all that crazy about jumping, either, but I was trying to save money so I could finish school, and jump pay would help.

If every man has his price, as the old adage goes, I guess mine was \$50 a month. I figured it was worth a brief moment of sheer terror between the time you stepped out, turned left, and felt the opening shock. It wasn't too bad. Of course, that \$50 bucks was taxed down to \$37.50 by the time I got it, but it would still come in pretty handy.

I didn't know it then, but a big chunk of that jump pay went for boot polish, brasso, and tailored shirts. The 82nd is "America's Guard of Honor", and you are expected to look the part. I'll tell you right now that anybody who would spit shine a pair of my boots for a quarter would paint a house for fifty cents. I ran out of spit a long time before I ran out of boot.

One of the first things I had learned in basic training down at Camp Rucker was to "keep thy mouth shut." I had caught a real bad cold, which turned into laryngitis. I noticed a funny thing happened when I couldn't talk. No one gave me any orders.

After that vital discovery, I went around whispering a long time after I got over the laryngitis, and everybody left me alone the whole time. It was as if I didn't exist. I enjoyed it right much, too, but eventually I had to start talking again. I was afraid they would send me to sick bay if I didn't, and let some of those jokers over there operate on me. It was safer in the motor pool.

Anyway, I sure kept my mouth shut about having been a smokejumper. You never could tell how they might look at something like that. They would surely expect more than I wanted to give. Or, horror of horrors, they might even want to send me to Officer Candidate School, and that would have meant more time in the Army. I didn't care that much about being an officer, either. Get right down to it, all I really wanted out of the Army was out of the Army. I came from a long line of civilians and meant to keep it that way.

The upshot of having kept my mouth shut was that I had to go through Jump School all over again. Jump School in the Army was about like smokejumper training, except a lot louder, and with more cussing. If we were standing still, we were doing pushups, and if we were standing up, we were running -- but they didn't spend all that much time teaching us to jump.

However, a little while after I got out of Jump School, Burley, although it wasn't like him to feel guilty about the Jump School business, must have felt some pangs, because he promoted me to the same rank as Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolph Hitler before they went power mad. I wondered if it would have the same effect on me. I guess it didn't, because I stayed a corporal.

The main occupation of nearly everybody in the Army is to avoid work, and I got as good at it as the next man. For instance, we were getting ready to have a Third Army inspection and the captain thought it would be nice if we had aerial photos of all five drop zones framed and hung up in the day room. Generals like things like that. They think it means the company is ready to go off to war. The captain knew I had been to college some so he handed that assignment to me. I don't know why he thought it took a college education to hang a picture, but I didn't argue. Corporals don't argue with captains. Besides, it looked to me like a good chance to goof off.

The thing about those drop zones is they were so big they spilled over onto three or four photos. To make it look like one picture, you had to carefully fit those photographs together into what is called a mosaic. It takes some special doodling to make it look like one photo. I made a big deal out of it, and a job which should have taken an afternoon, at most, lasted three months. And I didn't have to fall out for PT or anything.

I had to go over to regimental headquarters to pick up the photographs, and that is how I learned that if you folded some papers under your arm, looked as if you were on an important mission, saluted and moved out smartly, you could go about anywhere you wanted on any base in the country. I usually went to a patch of woods at the end of the company street and slept the afternoon away under a big pine tree. The folks up at company headquarters thought I was over at regiment picking up more photographs. Since I did go over to regiment several times a week to pick up photos, they thought I was making mosaics for every company in the regiment. I guess I ended up with every photo they had of the drop zones. After a while I finally got tired of goofing off and finished the mosaics. Goofing off was too much work.

Other than that sickly, sinking feeling you get when you go out the door of the plane, Army jumping and smokejumping were a lot different. For one thing, the Army had these big, soft, sandy drop zones to land in. Trouble was, on a windy day you could hit the ground unhurt but that doggoned parachute would make a sail like a spinnaker and drag you a mile, if you weren't careful. The Army taught you how to run around and collapse your 'chute, but if you weren't quick about it, you were in trouble.

One day I was standing there, about to get unhitched, when a puff of wind filled the 'chute. Quicker than a cat can grab a bird, that thing jerked me off my feet and dragged me about a half a mile before I could ever get up and grab hold of it. Wind surfing across an open field on your back is not my idea of recreation.

You couldn't guide an Army 'chute much. Of course, you didn't have to, with a couple thousand acres in which to land. It did get a little hairy, sometimes, with all those people in the air at once. After you hit the ground, you had to be careful of unsecured rifles and radios raining down on your head. All sorts of equipment would come loose and rain down. There was always a blizzard of rifles and helmets that came loose. An artillery piece let go one day. It must have buried itself five feet in the sand and raised a big cloud of dust, but nobody was hurt.

Another thing was the parachute itself was different from the ones smokejumpers used. I think it was a little bigger and it was packed differently. The canopy of an Army 'chute came out last, after all the slack was out of the shrouds, and there was a lot less opening shock. I liked that part, but, they

did have a tendency to wind up like a rubber band, and you spent most of your trip down unwinding.

It gave you a 360-degree view of the world below. That was the good part, but it could also lead to complications, as when it twisted around my feet and left me dangling upside down like a ham. I was about to plow into the ground headfirst, if I couldn't get loose.

I was a bit disoriented, because, when I looked up to check my canopy, I saw the ground coming up at me, and looking down at my feet, there was the canopy! I didn't exactly know the proper procedure for a headfirst landing, but things soon began to unwind and my feet came free about half way down.

The infirmary was full of hot dogs who had broken something while trying to make a standing landing. The army teaches you to make what they call a parachute landing fall, or PLF in Army language, so you won't hit all stiff-legged and break something. It got so bad with guys trying to make stand-up landings, General Cleland, head general of the Eighteenth Airborne Corps, passed down the order that it was worth a stripe to get caught making a standing landing. He didn't mention what would happen to officers.

It takes a certain technique and a lot of experience before you can execute a perfect standing landing, and you have to practice those techniques on right many jumps before you ever actually make a decent standing landing. I had been practicing for right some time and had it down pretty well.. What you do is kind of a chin-up on your risers, and, at just the right time, let go and drop real fast for a few feet. Your parachute will catch and pull you back up just before you hit the ground, and you step down as if you were stepping off the bottom step. Timing is the key.

I had gotten it down pat on the last three or four jumps, and this time I was going to do it, if I had the chance. I was last man out, which should have put me nearest the woods, and I didn't think anyone would be looking.

It worked to perfection. I let go of the risers at just the right time, and the 'chute caught and deposited me gently on the ground. It was like stepping off the bottom step onto the ground and was the easiest landing I had ever made.

I stood there unbuckling my harness; but when I raised my head, I was looking squarely into the frosty blue eyes of a General Cleland, himself, who had also made a standing landing! We stared at each other for a long moment before we each decided we had better do a PLF, just for the record. I saluted and did one. He returned the salute and did likewise. I kept my stripes and I'm sure he kept his stars. If he never mentioned it, I'm sure I haven't, until now.

That was also the day I discovered why they didn't want any color ignorant paratroopers. We had been given orders to assemble on the magenta streamer. I planned to simply follow the crowd. Problem was, nobody knew what color "magenta" was. They were as lost as I. From what I could tell, color blindness isn't nearly as big a problem as color ignorance.

Someone said our streamer was between puce, for A Company, and chartreuse where Headquarters Company was supposed to meet. That didn't help a dab. No one knew those colors, either.

It took nearly four hours for us to sort things out and find where we were

supposed to be. The umpires on this problem declared us all wiped out. We talked them into declaring us POWs instead, so we could get something to eat. We were starved.

That was the last time an interior decorator chose our assembly colors. Next time it was a simple red, yellow, green, or blue.

You would think that in as big a thing as an infantry division they could find a job I could do, but finding me a job turned out to be a job. After I finally got those mosaics done, old Burley decided I must have some artistic talent, so he gave me a set of Prang watercolors, like we used in the second grade, and told me to go paint signs for the latrine. I composed a few zingers such as, "Out of Order," "Don't Throw Razor Blades in the Toilets" and hung them up.

It beat KP all over the place, but it got more boring than goofing off under the pine tree. I decided to use my imagination, and spice it up a little, which resulted in the following jewels: "Men with Short Bats, Stand Close to the Plate" and "If You Won't Throw Cigarettes in our Urinals, We Won't Pee in your Ashtrays", and "Please Don't Throw Cigar Butts in the Urinals, it Makes Them Soggy and Hard to Light". Burley thought that was right clever.

Anyway, he took me out of the latrine and made me cadre over at the Jump School. That job suited me to a "T." I didn't have anything to do but play "run around the regiment" with a bunch of rookies. As long as I made them sweat, everything was fine. It didn't take much too much to break a sweat in an East Carolina swamp in the spring.

A few of us cadre were taking a break in the shade one day, while we waited for the troops to return from lunch. A Chicano corporal said he would be getting out on an early discharge in a couple of weeks in order to help his uncle plant his crop. He went on to explain that you could do that if you were employed in seasonal work before the Army got you.

Heck fire! Smokejumping was certainly seasonal. Maybe I could qualify for an early out. Korea had wound down, and they didn't need any more troops over there. It wouldn't be as if I was running out on an obligation. Burley hadn't told me about that early-out deal. He couldn't imagine why anybody would want to get out of the Army.

I had a buddy down in personnel who helped me apply, and, sure enough, it went through like a top. I could get out in time to make the fire season in Missoula. To paraphrase what that famous old soldier whom Mr. Truman fired said, "I now closed the books on an Army career that had spanned twenty-one months. And, like that old soldier of the Barracks Ballad, just... faded... away. An old soldier who saw his duty, as Burley gave him the light to see it, and who tried to get out of it every chance he got."

Things went pretty well over at the separation center. We still had to make formations every ten minutes, just to remind us that, until you had that discharge in your hot little hand, the Army still had you. Also, formation was where they picked people for work details. A great, big, old, good-natured, red-faced Georgia farm boy was picked for every detail that came along. Just being next to him assured you of a spot on the same detail, and pretty soon nobody would get within ten feet of him. The poor guy resembled a germ that had caught penicillin. I felt sorry for him, but not sorry enough to stand next to him in formation, if I could help it..

When The Big Day finally arrived, we assembled in a big room, and listened to a lecture on the dangers of civilian life; which was only a lead-up to a tiger talk about re-enlisting for another three years, which most of us declined. I was free at last. I jumped in my trusty Ford and headed for Missoula after a brief stopover at home

## Chapter 2 - The Green Green Grass of Home.

Being home was great. I think Mom did a little special cooking, and I'm afraid I took special advantage of it. There sure wasn't anything much to distract me. None of my old buddies were home. Joe and Ace were still in the Army, and Bud was off in Seminary learning to be a preacher. Ted was in Japan, Jim and John Henry were off in school, and Bob had an important job in the Navy as an admiral's chauffeur. There just wasn't anybody around.

One day I piled a bunch of stuff into the Ford, grabbed up old Cindy, my faithful English Setter, and headed for the Oklawaha River for a float trip and a little fishing.

The thing I like about float trips, you can take everything you want, including the kitchen sink, because you don't have to worry much about weight as you do if you're hiking. On this trip, I took enough stuff to make sure I was comfortable, including a tent, cot, stove, and plenty of mosquito net. Those Oklawaha mosquitoes are pretty vicious.

The Oklawaha flows east out of Lake Griffin on the "spine" of Florida past Silver Springs and the Big Scrub, before discharging into a wide spot in the St. Johns River called Little Lake George. Coming off the highland spine as it does, it's very crooked and swift, for a Florida stream. By the time it picks up the pure, cold discharge from Silver Springs and several dozen other smaller springs and creeks, it's a pretty good-sized stream. Where Cindy and I picked up a boat, at Louie's on Cedar Landing in the edge of the Big Scrub, it's a full-blown river and is some of the best bass waters in the world.

Louie kept half his boats tied up on the side of the river that Cindy and I came to, and the rest on the other side, where he lived. If you wanted a boat, you just left your money in a can Louie had nailed to a post for that purpose, and took off. Louie was a trusting soul and I don't know of anyone who would cheat a man that honest.

We got there just about sundown and it was good and dark by the time I got the boat loaded and headed downstream for Davenport Landing. Distances are not as great between known points in Florida, as in Montana. The sky isn't as big, but sometimes you don't have to travel as far to be in a remote place. Davenport was one of those places. I don't think you could get there by vehicle at all; at least the only way I ever heard of anyone getting there was by water. Davenport Landing was a bluff overlooking the river, about twenty-six winding miles down river from Cedar Landing, and the only place between Cedar Landing and Little Lake George where dry land came all the way down to the river. The rest was a snake-, 'gator-, and mosquito-infested swamp about a mile wide on either side of the river. There was a hand pump well at Davenport, in case you didn't want to drink the tea-colored river water. I don't think the river water would hurt you; it just tasted kind of weedy.

Anyway, the main thing was, you sure didn't want to get dumped into the river at night, if you could help it. You couldn't swim back to Louie's against that swift current, and twenty-six miles is a long way to tread water. There were other hazards, too.

When Cindy and I started off down river, I was seated on the stern seat operating the little 4 h.p. Martin 40 outboard, and had on my battery-powered headlight that I had liberated from the Forest Service before I went in the Army. It came in handy for frog gigging and things like that, but it didn't exactly light up the whole stadium. Cindy was sitting in the bow, scanning the water ahead. I don't know what she thought she was going to see; that little light didn't throw a beam very far, and it was an inky, dark night without the hint of a moon.

It was a warm, muggy spring night and everything from tree frogs to bull 'gators were staking out their territory. Most of us have heard the chirp of a tree frog, whether or not we knew what it was, but if you have ever heard the roar of a bull 'gator on the prowl, you're not likely to forget it. The sound truly defies description, other than saying it stirs memories and fears penetrating from the farthest reaches of our primordial existence. It didn't matter a great deal, because I planned to keep my distance from any bull 'gators that night, anyway - or any other night, for that matter.

If I stayed in the middle of the river, the little beam was bright enough to let me see the way, but it was lighting up a few other things I had just as soon weren't there. Little balls of amber fire about six inches apart reflected in the yellow beam told me there were lots of 'gators in the river that night.

Now I know a lot of you are going to say what happened next was the Hand of God. Some of you will say it was a Guardian Angel. Others will shrug and say, "That's the way it was." At any rate, whatever happened, and for whatever reason, I really couldn't say. Maybe it was something Cindy did; maybe I unconsciously saw something; maybe it was the Hand of God that moved mine. At any rate, and for whatever reason, I swerved the boat, which suddenly rose out of the water on one side and glanced off a log floating in the middle of the river. I don't know that I would have drowned had the boat capsized, but we would have lost a lot of equipment, and I would have been pretty uncomfortable. To tell the truth, I don't like to contemplate the possible consequences, had I not swerved the boat.

I could swim about as well as any of the other guys who grew up around all the beaches, creeks, lakes and rivers we had, and had swum with 'gators before. But I don't think old Cindy would have made it twenty feet before she would have been 'gator bait.. They don't often attack people, but they are primitive predators. I suppose they think humans are hard to digest. But, 'gators love dogs. A lot of dogs disappear around Florida lakes and streams, and people wonder why.

Anyway, Cindy and I made it on down to Davenport without further incident. The moon had risen before we got there and we could see a little easier. Mosquitoes ate us alive before we got the boat unpacked and the tent set up, but they backed off a little when I got a couple of citronella candles lit. We had rib-eye steak ala Coleman Stove. I split that steak with Cindy. With a little luck, we would catch some fish in the morning for tomorrow's dinner and supper. Cindy slept with me under the mosquito net that night. She didn't like those things buzzing around her head any more than I did. In the morning there was a cloud of them stuck to the net, but none flying around.



There is nothing like solitude to clear the mind, and, believe me, for the next three days I had a lot of solitude. We didn't see or hear another human being, unless you want to count airplanes flying over at thirty thousand feet.

There was a brief moment of doubt one night when a Will o' the Wisp Jack 'o lantern rose up out of the swamp and hovered a long time before it disappeared. I figured out what it was after my heart got back where it belonged. I admit it gave me quite a start at first. Old Cindy never was quite sure what it was.

Marsh gas sort of gathers up and glows in the dark. It's eerie looking, and, for a moment, makes you wish you had brought something better to defend yourself with than a fishing rod. The sight of a Jack 'o lantern has made good Christians out of a lot of people who didn't know what it was. It is a scary apparition.

It started raining on the fourth day. I had caught all the fish I wanted, anyway, so I decided to take old Cindy, pack it in, and go home.

Another week or so of hot, muggy weather, and I was ready to head for the mountains. This time I had a car and didn't have to worry about catching trains or hitchhiking. Mom's cooking was hard to leave, but not the muggy weather.

Being in the Army had one big effect on me; if I slept past 5 a.m. I felt as if I was sleeping away freedom. Therefore, it was no trouble to get an early start for Montana. By noon I was way up in Georgia. Supper time found me in Tullahoma, Tenn. That's where I accidentally ran across my old army buddy, Dallas Galley, walking along the side of the road with his thumb out.

Dallas had gotten hurt on the last jump we made before I was discharged. He had left For Bragg that morning on convalescent leave, and was hitchhiking home to Vernal, Utah. He had made it as far as Tullahoma when I drove up. It was sort of like old-home week, although it had only been a couple of weeks since we had seen each other. Running into him was a stroke of good fortune for both of us.

I agreed to take him all the way home. It wasn't more than four or five hundred miles out of the way to go to Missoula by way of Vernal, and I wasn't in that big of a hurry. After all, what are friends for? I was glad to have help driving, and he was glad for the ride home.

By taking turns driving out, a tank of gas at a time, and sleeping in the back seat while the other drove, we made good time. Late-spring snowdrifts were piled high in Rabbit Ears Pass, as we dropped off the Continental Divide into the Utah desert. When we arrived in Vernal, old Dallas was so proud to be home, he presented me with a slightly used model 94 Winchester .30-.30 in lieu of his share of the gas money. I thought it was a pretty good swap, since he didn't have gas money, and I didn't have a rifle.

There was plenty of daylight left after we had polished off the better part of a western steer for lunch, so, turning down an offer to stay the night, I headed out across the Utah hills, and was well up into Idaho before sundown. It was the last I ever saw of Dallas Galley, but I still have the .30-.30.

It was a good time to be alive. Nothing behind me such as debts, old girl friends or the sheriff; nothing in front but the open road. Of course, I still

had plans to finish school, but that wouldn't start until fall. Right now, life was uncomplicated, and all I had to do was to learn how to be a civilian again. In my case, that was no big problem. I come from a long line of civilians. It runs in the family. I wondered if it might be genetic.

The next day, a Friday afternoon, I rolled into Missoula with a vastly more uncluttered mind than the first time. Of course, there was Maggie, but she didn't clutter the mind as Miss Howland had, and we didn't have what you might call a hot romantic attachment, either.

### Chapter 3 - Retreads

Mr. F.O. "Good Deal" Brauer, was fearless leader of the smokejumpers. Whatever else you might say about him, he was not a man to waste his time or yours. Bright and early on Monday morning, he had three or four dozen veteran jumpers, otherwise known as "retreads," assembled on the concrete apron in front of the packing shed and parachute loft - ready to begin training for re-qualification. No matter how many seasons you had been at it, you needed to re-qualify every year - ironclad rule, no exceptions. Re-qualification consisted of a brief refresher course and a couple of jumps.

Most of us had checked in over the weekend, and a lot of the guys were nursing weekend heads. There were some familiar faces, and some not so familiar. But, they all had the looks and carried themselves as people with purpose, who knew what they were doing. Experience does that for you.

Don Sweet was there, and Gene Tuniga, a big, old easy-going laid-back Dutchman, who always wore a grin or was about to. There were Clayton Berg, Fran Polutnik, Ced Blackwell, Odie Powell, Gary Dunford and Cliff Blake. I knew enough of them that I didn't feel like a stranger.

Jim Lowe was among the missing. He was still in the Army. Dave Lodzinski was still in Korea, and I didn't know where Krietzberg was.

The retread process began with some warm-up calisthenics, which didn't do a whole lot for the hangovers. After that, Fred sent us on a full-bore run around the airport. Nobody was ready for that little jaunt. Before we had gone very far we were scattered all around the airport. The boys came straggling in, one or two at a time, over the period of an hour or so. Fred put the early retunees to work making up fire kits.

Fire kits consist of wrapping a lady shovel, Pulaski, paper sleeping bag, headlight, and C-rations into a little square of canvas and hooking the parcel to a small cargo 'chute, ready to drop.

After lunch, we did a repeat of the morning, which just about done us in for the day. The next day was just about like the first, except he let up on us in the afternoon. We just went out of the eighteen-foot tower a time or two to sharpen our exit technique.

Just before quitting time, Fred dropped the news that we would be jumping the next couple of days. Two jumps, and we would be officially re-qualified and ready to go. The fresh batch of trainees would be coming in the next week, and he wanted us on standby in case of any early fires before he got the new men ready. Fred Brauer was not a man to be caught unprepared.

Still, as far as being ready was concerned, I don't think anybody in his wildest dream could ever accuse us of being over-trained. I mean, it wasn't as if we didn't know what we were doing, or why we were there. It was just that we hadn't needlessly spent several weeks going over what we already knew until we were ready to croak. Fred had done his part by getting our lungs cleared out and muscles loosened up. The rest was up to us, and I don't think anyone planned to let him down.

If anyone was going to back out, it would be to keep from having to run around the airport, not from jumping. It was that long run that was a killer for most of us. We were veteran jumpers. There was no question about anyone not jumping when the time came. You don't expect any kind of trouble from a bunch of guys who have been there before, done that, and are ready to go again. We knew what to expect, and were willing to accept the risks. I suppose that's the essential difference between a retread and a rookie.

No one had anything much to prove, and that's what made me wonder a bit about what I was doing here. I surely wasn't driven by unrequited love, as I thought I was before. As far as I was concerned, Miss Barber was a dim figure in the past. Last I'd heard she had eloped with her dance instructor. They'd set up a haberdashery down in Miami, raising babies, and selling hats. I didn't think about it often, but I sort of blushed with shame inside when I thought about how stupid it all had been.

I sure wasn't trying to impress Maggie. She was a matter-of-fact, hard to impress, sort of girl who took things in stride, and thought it was idiotic to jump out of good sound airplanes in mid-flight, if you don't have to.

The only thing I could think of as coming back to smokejumping had gotten me out of the Army three months early. If I quit the jumpers, I might be forced to go back and serve those three months. That was enough to inspire me to run around the airport. It sort of surprised me to think of myself as a veteran, but I guess I was.

The rookies would be in the next week to begin their training. About two hundred are accepted each season, out of several thousand applicants from all over the country. Less than half of those accepted will make it to the first jump. They usually begin dropping out after the first week. Most of the guys who don't really have their hearts in it are gone long before the first jump. The eighteen foot tower weeds out several. I guess the ones who leave just decide they don't like fighting fires after all; or maybe they had just rather walk. I'm not too sure they aren't the wise ones.

After one look at the Tri-Motor, you couldn't much blame those guys if they had second thoughts. It kind of made you want to take up a donation to buy the Johnson Flying Service a new airplane, especially since they were going to be flying you around in the old one.

There wasn't much about a Ford Tri-Motor that would make you believe it could fly. It was square, boxy, and covered with corrugated aluminum. It didn't scream down the runway as most planes did. It more or less waddled, making it resemble a chicken more than an airplane. To complete the illusion, the wings were thick and looked as if they might have been hastily assembled from a couple of barn doors.

The cabin had the lines of an A Model Ford, complete down to the

dashboard, which held the instruments for the center, or main, engine only. Gauges for the two outboard engines were out on the engines themselves. At night, the only way to read those gauges was with the aid of a flashlight.

The sole concession to streamlining, which may well have been an afterthought, was the windshield, which was split in the middle and swept back slightly. It might have looked a little rakish if it hadn't tended to make the whole affair look like a squinty-eyed outhouse. There was absolutely nothing modern-looking about it, and no wonder. It harked back to an earlier era, to before Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic, and before Byrd flew over the pole.

The Tri-Motor was the workhorse of the fleet, the queen of the mountains, the Matriarch of the Skies. This was the plane that had safely delivered more smokejumpers to more fires than any other airplane. It took off, cruised and landed, all at about the same speed - slow. No self-respecting 747 pilot would go anywhere near it. The darned thing was so ugly, you had to love it - and the more you came to depend upon it, the dearer it became. It was ugly all right, but it was a highly respected and honored member of the family.

When we came out of the chow hall that next morning, the honored grandmother was sitting on the apron scowling hungrily into the main office as if it would devour anyone who came out. Beside it sat its only slightly less honored cousin, the only flyable DC-2 in existence, otherwise known as the "Doug," But somehow the Ford always looked as if it was scowling. The Doug, I thought, had a more kindly and benevolent visage.

The two-and-a-half-ton Ford truck was sitting there, too, looking more modern and flyable than its more flighty relative. The truck would meet us at the jump area, a pasture across Clark Fork, opposite Nine Mile, and bring us home.

Word got out we'd have an audience that day - a sorority from the university - and we were warned to be on our best behavior. That meant we couldn't cuss if we hung up, and nobody could take a leak right after hitting the ground, as many were wont to do. If it cramped our style on one hand, it had its compensations. We weren't used to having a contingent of the fair sex on hand to comfort us if all didn't go well, or to applaud if it did.

While we were suiting up, Fred was out on the apron discussing the weather with the pilots. I don't mean they were engaged in idle chitchat; they were talking sure 'nuff weather. The sky was overcast with a fairly stiff breeze blowing. It wasn't what you might call ideal parachute jumping weather. Fred needed to make a decision. On one hand, he sure didn't want anyone to get hurt, but, on the other, he badly needed to get us qualified. For my part, although I all wasn't that anxious to jump in that breeze, I had rather jump in a tornado than spend another day playing "run around the airport."

Fred left the pilots and walked back toward us. He had reached a decision. Like Eisenhower on D-Day, it was "go." We finished suiting up and an hour later eight of us loaded up. The truck was already on its way to the jump spot. It would get there before we did.

Although the mist had burned off and it wasn't raining, the wind was blowing a steady twelve to fifteen knots. It was going to be a breezy jump; the kind where you could get hurt, if you weren't on your P's and Q's.. I wasn't too concerned, but it was just one more thing to think about at a time when, if you were going to think at all, you wanted it to be something good. In any case, the

less you had to think about, the better.

It didn't take long, even in the Ford, to fly up Clarke Valley and locate the jump spot. It was about a twenty-acre mountain meadow - fairly level and not too rough. We could see several people already on the ground and the truck parked in the shade at the upper edge of the clearing. Gathered around the truck, well way from the big, red X that was our target, were the girls of the sorority. If they had been directly in the middle of the X, they probably would have been safer. Nobody was going to hit it that day with the wind as it was. The Doug had already delivered its first load, and parachutes were scattered everywhere all over the surrounding woods, except in the middle of the meadow where the X was.

The old Ford came around and mushed over the clearing, and Carver threw out a drift 'chute to see where to let us out. The next time the Ford came around, it disgorged a jumper. He made it to the clearing, but just barely. Circling again, it was my turn. I hoped Carver had made the right adjustments. I gripped both sides of the door and jammed my right foot onto the outside step. I braced for the tap on the heel I knew was coming.

After what seemed forever, it came, and I shot out the door. I watched the tail go by while I wished I was back in the plane, as usual. Then the 'chute-opening shock told me that at least all was well above me. All I needed to worry about then was what was below me. That was most important, but it never did seem that way.

Old Carver had hit it right on the bazoo; I was headed straight for the X. The only trouble was, when I got there, I was still six hundred feet in the air, and racing lickety split for a collision with the truck. The wind was much too strong to risk trying to turn around to make it back to the spot. I surely didn't want to make a backward landing, as much forward speed as I had. That was probably a bad decision.

Looking at it from my perspective, here was the picture: To my left, the clearing narrowed and trees closed in; straight ahead was the truck, drawing me like a magnet; to the right of the truck was a crowd of young ladies; and rapidly receding to rear was the jump spot. The closer to the ground I got, the fewer my options were.

I had seen what was about to happen right after I passed over the X, and my thoughts had begun to race.

"They won't let me hit the truck," I told myself. "Surely somebody will move it."

But the truck didn't move. My eyes became fixated on it. Still it didn't move. Evidently, the girls on the ground couldn't see what I saw. How could they help it? I was obviously going to smash right into the truck. Still, if the truck remained stationary, I didn't. I was coming in like a martin to his gourd.

Finally, at the last possible moment, with all other options gone, it was a choice of either crashing into the truck or the crowd. I chose the crowd.. The girls looked a lot softer than the truck. I reefed down hard on the right guideline and prayed. Split seconds later, I banged down, not five feet from the tailgate, bounced a couple of times, did a flip in mid-air, and landed squarely in the lap of an astonished coed - a willowy brunette named Jan.

I guess I was as confused as she was. She surely wasn't praying for a stranger to fall out of the sky into her lap, and I certainly never planned to land in a pretty girl's lap without at least an introduction. I did the best I could under the circumstances. After some pretty hasty apologies, I did the only thing a gentleman could do, I got her phone number and ran to help the other guys being dragged across that rocky meadow by the wind. Windsurfing on a sea of rocks wasn't much fun.

To get right down to it, it was a right hairy day. Nobody got close to the spot, though most of us did manage to make it to the clearing. I think I was the only one to land on a coed. I got accused of doing it on purpose, but that was just my pure good fortune.

Gene Tuniga came down hard, was dragged about thirty yards and came up holding his arm. He was kind of sore, but he was tough and laughed it off. After a landing like that, you should expect some bruises.

We made another jump in another meadow the next day, and we were qualified. I called Jan that afternoon and she agreed to take in a movie with me that night to celebrate no more running around the airport. We had a great time at the movie, but it was a long time before I got to see her again.

Come Monday morning, Mr. Brauer and Mother Nature had other plans for us.

#### Chapter 4 - An Early Burst in Oregon

Fred's rush to get us qualified paid off immediately. He didn't even have time to farm us out to a Ranger District to do odd jobs - and a whole lot of fishing - until fire calls start coming in..

I was looking forward to a nice long project in Charlie Shaw's district over in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. No timber was ever cut there, so we didn't need to worry about a brush-piling detail. And fishing in the South Fork of the Flathead was as good as it gets.

But there had been an early-season burst over in California and Oregon, and Missoula was the only smokejumper base in the system that had men qualified and ready to go. There were bases at Redding, Calif., Cave Junction, Ore., Ellensburg, Wash., and McCall, Idaho, but they didn't have anyone qualified. Their retreats were still qualifying.

Fred might have jumped the gun a little, but folks over in Oregon and California were right pleased that he had. We could save them some major headaches, if we got there in time to stop the little fires before they got to be big ones.

Bright and early the next morning ten of us loaded onto a pair of Twin Beeches, and, flying in tandem, headed west across the Bitterroots. The destination was Cave Junction, out near the coast of Oregon. As a ready team of firefighters; we got to see an awful lot of country the average tourist never gets to see. True, you see a lot of it while dangling from a parachute or walking out from a fire, but you also get to see a lot of it flying fairly low over the countryside.

These pilots didn't waste much gas by gaining unnecessary altitude. I

don't mean to imply they flew too low for safety. They didn't waste time and gasoline gaining altitude they didn't need.

We made a stopover in Idaho to stretch our legs and catch a bite of lunch; then we were on our way again. Somewhere along the way the port engine of our plane started making a noise I had never heard an airplane engine make. I didn't think too much of it until I saw the worried look on Bowman, the pilot's face. If he looked worried, I figured it was time for everybody to worry. If there is anything I have learned in life, it's that you don't want to learn your dentist made a C- in root canals, you hate to hear your surgeon say "whoops!" while in surgery, and you definitely do not want to discover you have a worried pilot. We had a worried pilot.

If we'd had parachutes with us, I'm sure there would have been a scramble to put them on, but we didn't bring any because the plan was to use the 'chutes that the boys in Cave Junction packed. Even Gene Tuniga, whose face wasn't used to it, wore a frown. I sure yearned for a parachute right then.

It so happened that Medford, Oregon was just over the horizon and Bowman made for it. The engine was beginning to really cut up and make a lot of racket. There was no sound in the plane, except for those engines. No one was speaking. All eyes were glued to the horizon, looking for the smokes from the sawmills that told us Medford was coming up. It was still far away, but it was getting closer. We might make it. We had to make it!

Wham! Pop! Pop! Wham! The engine spoke again. Bowman winced, but didn't say anything. I had an idea he was praying, and I expect the rest of us were, too. I was.

Wham!

I closed my eyes.

"Lordamighty!"

Bowman spoke for all of us, and I think that was a prayer of sorts because the engine kept on churning. Medford came in sight. Just two more minutes and we'd be down... safely, we hoped..

There it was! The airport! We were coming in on a wing and a prayer.

Bowman radioed for a straight-in approach and greased that plane onto the runway in as smooth a landing as you could ask. We were down, and in one piece!

Between the insane laughter and back slapping, Bowman received the sincere thanks from each of the crew. We even made up a pool to buy him a beer, once we got to Cave Junction. We also began trying to convince ourselves we knew we would make it all the time; we weren't worried.

While we waited, Bowman and a mechanic took a look at the sick engine. After a couple of hours, we were getting kind of fretful at the delay, Bowman stuck his head in the door and called for us to load up.

Tuniga was in the corner fast asleep with the sore arm he hurt on that windy qualifying jump cradled on one of the chair cushions. It seemed a shame to shake him awake, but it was getting late in the day. We still had a few miles to Cave Junction, and we'd better move it if we were going to get there for a late

supper.

Gene did a one-armed, sleepy-eyed wake-up stretch and grimaced before donning his usual pleasant visage, as that sore arm spoke to him.

Bowman informed us that he and the mechanic had gone over the engine and there was nothing wrong with it, except a minor part had come loose and kept getting tangled with a moving part. While in mid-air, any problem raising that much ruckus is a major problem, until you find out differently.

We boarded and took off. The engine sounded fine, but we were still right edgy. None of us put his whole weight down during take off.

Whether it was to test the engine or to take our minds off it, I don't have any idea, but Bowman flew us around what turned out to be an absolutely breathtaking scenic tour of Western Oregon and Northern California. The snow-capped peaks of the distant Trinity Alps were blushing-peach icing in the lowering western sun. The rich valleys, formerly the sole territory of the Nez Perce, appeared a lush bluish green. One might have expected the Jolly Green Giant to appear from behind a nearby forested ridge. The little island in the middle of Crater Lake was a toy resting securely on the mirrored surface of the lake. We flew slightly to the south of it and headed on to Cave Junction. If Bowman had wanted to get our minds off that sick engine, he succeeded - but he failed to get our minds off the supper that waited.

Gene Tuniga and Odie Powell's names came up first, and they jumped a fire the very next day. But the rest of us didn't have anything to do, except hang around the bunkhouse, read the few available magazines, and write letters while we waited for our names to come up on a fire call.

I wrote a letter home, but thought it best not to mention the business about the engine trouble. No need to worry Mom. Pop was even less than convinced that man was meant to fly. I wrote a short note to Maggie and told her how pretty the mountains were. She liked things like that. I didn't mention the engine problem to her, either. I doubt she would have had much sympathy, and I didn't want to hear any caustic remarks, even at that distance, especially from her.

Fighting the boredom of waiting became less of a problem when we discovered a great swimming hole in the Illinois River, about a half mile down a little gravel road from the Ranger Station. It lay in a big bend of the river, which wasn't all that big. At home, we would have called it a creek, and let it go at that, but folks in Oregon think BIG.. It wasn't nearly as large as, say, Black Creek, but in Oregon, water is a little more scarce, and they are apt to call smaller bodies of it "rivers."

The bottom of that river sloped up to a nice gravelly beach and there was a fine wooded island no more than twenty-five or thirty yards out in the main stream. It looked as if it would make a perfect little jaunt to swim out to that island, lie on the beach sunning a while, then swim back to shore.

We skinned off our clothes and, buck naked, prepared to enter the water and swim to the island - with the last one there being a rotten egg. On the count of three we rushed into the water and immediately became the second to walk on water - all eight of us. That water had to have been solid ice not ten minutes before we entered it.



In a great deal less than the Olympic time for the same distance, eight frozen blue bodies scrambled upon the island beach - and then began wondering how we were going to get back. Perhaps the water would freeze over again, and we could walk back. Maybe an ice dam would form upriver and dry it up so we could walk back over. None of us was willing to face the fact that we were going to be forced to either swim back or take up residence on that island. Most of us were ready to exercise the residence option, when the sound of feminine voices approaching rendered that option a necessity for the moment. We headed for the brush, and, like Brer Rabbit, laid low.

It was two young mothers, who made themselves cozy on the gravelly beach while their offspring, none of whom was past the age of three, dabbled comfortably in the icy water. We observed them wonderingly from the confines of our brushy retreat. Those kids didn't feel the cold any more than so many otters. It kind of made us blush with shame at our own cowardice.

After what seemed like hours, but couldn't have been more than forty-five minutes, the mother otters clucked to their kits and departed the scene, leaving us again with the prospect of trying our luck at walking across the not-quite-frozen face of the deep and reclaiming our clothes.

The next day, Clayton Berg, George Laney, and I boarded the Beech for a trip to Northern California and a fire on Pony Peak, twenty-five miles from a place called Happy Camp. The idyll at Cave Junction was about to end.

#### Chapter 5 - Pony Peak: It's a small world after all

Lightning struck an old, lonesome white fir sitting astride the knife ridge just below the top of Pony Peak, and showered sparks down both slopes. After centuries of existence in its precarious position, a bolt of lightning, long-delayed but inevitable, had finally split the dozing giant. In its death throes it belched a fiery vengeance over the mountainside. So far none of the sparks had found tinder in which to spawn, but that wouldn't last long. The giant needed to be felled, and the fire in its belly extinguished before it grew.

Overhead the Beech circled, affording us a bird's-eye view of the problem before we attacked it. Smoke spiraled straight up several hundred feet before dispersing lazily toward the east. That was good news. At least we wouldn't have to fight a stiff breeze on the descent. Heavy manzanita thickets covered both slopes up to the rock-strewn knife-like ridge upon which the ancient tree had found root.

I swallowed hard. This was about as hard to face as that icy bath in the Illinois River - but I didn't have nearly as long in which to contemplate it. The plane had already circled and was slowly coming in on the approach run. I was first man out, which was a dubious honor at best.

With more reluctance than I was willing to show, I took my position, clutching both sides of the door, foot jammed into the step outside. The pilot cut the port engine and, taking a deep breath, I went out the door, not waiting for the usual slap on the shoulder. A moment of uncertainty - followed by the "Whack!" of the opening shock - and then I was dangling in the rare mountain air of the California hills. For lack of a better target, I aimed at a spot as close to the top of the ridge as I could get without landing on a rock, of which there

were plenty around. There were also several snags scattered over the side of the mountain. Victims of an earlier fire that had swept across the entire slope, they beckoned like so many skeletal fingers thrust into the sky. To land on one of them could be fatal. They would snap off after spilling the air from your 'chute, leaving you with a two-hundred-foot plunge to the ground. Truly not an inviting prospect.

Steering well away from the nearest snag, I won't say I hit the ground. It was more like I disappeared into a sea of virgin manzanita, which cushioned my fall. To make things even better, I had to crawl only a few feet to the clearing at the top of the ridge where I was less than fifty yards from the burning tree. Releasing the 'chute, I made myself visible to the circling plane so they could see I was unhurt.

Using my 'chute as a target, Clayton and George followed on two more passes. It was a sweet beginning that quickly soured when we got a close-up look at what faced us. The fir was big one, about seven feet in diameter, which was two feet more than the five-foot crosscut saw we had. Sparks in a steady drizzle fell all around the base of the tree. Every once in a while, without warning, a blazing knot would let loose and fire would cascade down on anyone below.

As if that wasn't enough to cast a damper on most any party, the Big Item in this situation, what really caught the eye and arrested the attention, was about eighty feet up at least half the tree had split off and lodged against a neighbor. It had formed a blazing bridge, one end of which rested on the tops of adjacent smaller trees, and the other end still tenuously hung onto the support of the main trunk. This was suspended directly overhead, and, as both ends were aflame, it could cut loose at any moment. No one could predict when it might let go and send to glory in a fiery deluge anyone who stood below. The sobering fact that it would obviously be a spectacular departure brought little comfort and did nothing to inspire us.

To shield ourselves from the hail of sparks, we cut head holes and made ponchos out of the canvas manties. They weren't fireproof, but they wouldn't burn as easily as cotton shirts. Hard hats protected our heads, but nothing short of extremely fast footwork and good luck could protect us from that blazing half-a-tree, that might give way at any moment.

We could wait until the bridge did fall, but that could be anytime from two minutes to two weeks, or never. That would have been a safe choice, but not the right choice. If we didn't get that tree down soon, we stood a good chance of having fire all over the side of that mountain, and us in the middle.

It was a situation which demanded immediate attention! Wasting no time, we sized up the situation and went to work. Picking out a route for a hasty retreat, Clayton and I grabbed the cross-cut while George kept his eye on the hot heavy-heavy that hung over our heads. I pulled for the first stroke and the saw bit into the tree. Clayton pulled back and it bit a little deeper. The saw got more difficult to pull the deeper we got, until about four or five inches into the cut we just about couldn't pull it at all. That's when we discovered the saw was virtually useless. It had no set!

Since there are an awful lot of people who have never used a crosscut, maybe I had better explain what "set" is. If you look straight down the spine of a saw, you will see that every other tooth is slightly bent out in opposite directions. This makes the cut slightly wider than the saw itself. That is

"set". Without set, the saw will not glide easily through the cut it's making. Setting a saw requires a hammer, anvil, and a special gauge, to make sure each tooth is offset exactly the same amount. We had none of the above..

Any way you looked at it, this was a bum situation. We were stuck with a burning tree, half of which was about to fall on us, a saw with no set, and a tree that was two feet larger in diameter than the length of the saw, even if it had set. If the hanging part of the tree didn't fall and crush us, and if Clayton and I didn't give plumb out, we could probably worry the tree down with our Pulaskis in a couple of days, if the food didn't give out first.

Clayton and I went back to work, but it was slow going. George was plenty willing to spell us, but he wasn't a very big fellow and couldn't last long. By the end of the second day, we had gotten the undercut finished and had gone through about two feet of the tree, with five more feet to go. But the C-rations were beginning to expire. We were getting down to the beans and bacon.. What was left made you put off eating as long as you could, and that tree was not only still standing, it was still burning dangerously.

Help from an entirely unexpected source showed up right out of the blue.

All the logging camps had been turned loose to go fight fires. Whether it's customary, or state law, or just plain common sense, I don't know, but they were surely welcome to us. What's more, they brought a saw with set, two wedges and a single jack. They took a short breather from the long walk up the ridge, while we used the hammer and wedges to extract our practically useless saw still lodged in the cut we had made. They were pretty well rested by the time we got it out.

Putting their good saw to the cut, they had the tree down in jig time. The blazing widow-maker had held until the tree fell. It came down at a right angle to the tree, but it didn't crush anybody. George, Clayton, and I had a line dug around the whole mess before it quit bouncing good.

Now a strange thing happened that really didn't have anything to do with anything. It doesn't affect this yarn at all, but it hit me as kind of quirky.

After we got the tree down and the line dug, and were sitting around relaxing and chewing the fat like people do when a hard job is done and over, I noticed that the big, old, brawny, bald-headed, black-bearded logger didn't speak with exactly a Western accent. In fact, his speech didn't seem at all foreign to me. I knew it wasn't polite to ask, but I asked anyway.

"What part of Georgia are you from," I asked.

"I'm not from Georgia. I'm from North Carolina," he answered.

"The mountains?"

I didn't really need to ask. It was pretty obvious to me. I had been around mountain folk since I was a little squirt and Grandad would take me to the woods with him. The way they move, act, talk and look is a dead giveaway to folks familiar with them.

"My Grandad Ritter is in the lumber business out there," I informed him.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I logged for Mr. Ritter for years. You used to come to the woods with him when you were just a little, bitty fellow. I've seen

you plenty of times. I was wondering what you were doing out here in California."

Now that's the kind of stuff that will knock your socks off, and it sure lowered mine. What are the chances of traveling three thousand miles from home, parachuting onto a remote mountain peak miles from civilization, and running into somebody who knows you? Any bookie would give you pretty long odds against something like that ever happening. I would think the chances of winning the Florida Lottery were much better, but I never had a winner there.

We shared the last of the C-rations with our rescuers, which seemed like an ungrateful thing to do after what they had done for us, but it was all we had. They didn't complain, but they didn't exactly smack their lips and drool, either.

After that, it was time to give the fire a final check before we packed up to leave. We had a long hike in front of us. The loggers were going to another fire that we could see burning on a ridge about nine miles to the east.

In fact, we could see the smoke rising from a small fire across the gorge to the west, too. While we were packing and retrieving our 'chutes, the Nordyne from Cave Junction flew over and dropped two jumpers on it. Things were beginning to heat up; we needed to get back.

## Chapter 6 - Happy camp

Usually we just sacked up our gear and stowed it by the side of a trail, and the packers would pick it up. But sometimes, like this time, when there were a lot of fires, the packers didn't have time. At times like that, we had to pack out our own gear.

By the time we got main 'chutes, reserve 'chutes, harnesses, jump suits, fire tools, canteens and personal gear all sacked up and tied to the pack frame, it made quite a load. In addition to the regular load, being the largest man of the three, I had that stupid, no-set, misery-whip of a crosscut saw bent horseshoe-wise around my load and tied at the bottom. We should have heaved that thing down the mountain, but I wanted to show it to whomever was responsible for dropping us a saw with no set, and let him try to cut a burning tree down with it. Besides, it just went against the grain to throw away an otherwise perfectly good saw.

I was the custodian of the little scrap of a map they gave us that showed where the fire was, and the trail back. It showed a trail down the ridge to an old logging road and out the logging road to a main gravel road, where there was an "X" and the word, "Pick-up," marking the spot where we were supposed to be picked up. According to the map scale it was about ten or twelve miles of rough walking down to the road.

We hadn't covered half that distance before I was hoping a stray packer might come along and take that load off my back. Old George was in rougher shape than either Clayton or I. He didn't weigh a hundred and twenty-five pounds wringing wet, and he was carrying a hundred-and-thirty. He resembled a big turtle under that load. He would move down the trail a few hundred yards all bent over, then he would sit down and rest a little bit before getting up and crouching along another few hundred yards. Clayton and I felt sorry for him, but there

wasn't much we could do. George was a gritty little cuss.

I was having problems of my own. That darn saw kept breaking loose from the rawhide thong I'd tied it with; when it sprang loose, it would knock me ass-over-teakettle into the bushes. About the third time that happened, I threw it into the bushes and left it there. There is just so much a man can put up with. Unless somebody has come along and picked it up, it's there yet, and good riddance.

After scrambling along that rocky ridge for what seemed like hours, the trail dipped down into a little sheltered cove that held a grove of huge sugar pines, the largest I've ever seen. The filtered sunlight gave a cathedral-like aura to the scene, which awed us into speaking only in hushed tones, if we spoke at all. It seemed almost sacrilegious to break the silence. The pines gave off a fragrance that scented the air in the whole valley, and was the very essence of pure nature at her best. The Rev Stan Tate, himself a former smokejumper, describes such rare places as "bio-cathedrals".

The huge cones hanging from the ends of their boughs were immense, resembling large pineapples. There must have been enough timber on just one acre for a fair-sized housing development. It's a shame people need houses, if you must cut timber like that to have them, but I've noticed that the people who scream the loudest about "rich lumber barons" and not cutting timber aren't usually willing to sacrifice their own homes and furniture to save trees.

We crept through the glade, feeling almost like trespassers. Leaving it behind, we reached the old logging road after a couple or three miles. We slogged another mile or two down the logging road until we reached the main gravel road. It didn't appear as if anyone came that way very often, but we shed our heavy packs and rested in the shade, while we pondered our fate.

George was just about done in, and Clayton and I weren't exactly ready to go eight rounds with Ali, either. It had been a grueling walkout.

After about ten minutes, Clayton decided to explore around a little bit for a place to camp. Apparently the Forest Service planned to send a truck by there once a day to see if we'd come down yet. If we missed that truck, we would just have to wait another day or start walking. We were tired, hungry, out of food, and beginning to be out of sorts, and didn't feel like waiting or walking, either. We were contemplating those dismal choices when Clayton, who had disappeared around a bend in the road, came back with the news that there was a truck parked under a tree just around the bend!

Hey! That was sure 'nuff good news. The Forest Service hadn't let us down after all. We gathered around the truck and peered in. I'll have to say, it didn't appear to be a Forest Service vehicle. They usually had forest green trucks, but this one was once red where it had any paint at all. It didn't have a government tag; there was no maintenance logbook on the seat or in the glove compartment, and the bed was all rusted out. The Forest Service always kept their truck beds in at least fair order. The tires were slick, the fenders were sort of flappy, the windshield was cracked and there were no wipers.

The bad news was, this truck didn't fit the description of any Forest Service vehicle I'd ever seen. The good news was, the windows were down, the doors were unlocked and the keys were dangling in the ignition!

Clayton and George decided since I had been entrusted with the map by no

less an authority than an official of the US Government, that meant I was in charge and had to make the decision. Furthermore, I had been the first one out of the airplane. Although my authority seemed extremely tenuous and based upon the flimsiest of excuses, I had to admit they had a better argument than I. Considering our position, we had to do something. We were worn out, hungry, dirty and starving, and faced with the prospect before us, without objection I reached the only possible conclusion; to wit, the Eisenhower D-Day decision, "We go!"

We adopted the view that it was obviously a vehicle the Forest Service had leased and, not having time to constantly check on us, had left it at our disposal. After all, the official map, which I had in my pocket, did have the exact spot marked "pick-up." Well, not exactly where they had marked it on the map, but close, and it was a pickup. That was close enough.

That reasoning seemed to satisfy Clayton and George and, without protest, we threw our gear in the back of the truck and, fenders flapping in the breeze, lit out for Happy Camp, twenty-six miles away. We had never considered ourselves as particularly valuable employees until then, but I guess we were or the Forest Service wouldn't have gone to all that trouble and expense to have provided us transportation. We had to shout above the roar of the gutted muffler; dust and fumes came up through gaping holes in the floorboard but dispersed quickly through the windows, which wouldn't roll up. It was a right noisy trip, but, all in all, we felt pretty good about ourselves.

It was after dark when we finally pulled into the gravel drive in front of the Happy Camp Ranger Station, but lights in the office were still burning brightly and people were coming and going. The Happy Camp Ranger Station was plainly a busy place. We hopped out and went into the office, where we were hardly noticed. A short, bald, paunchy man with a worried expression was on the phone.

"Yes'm," I heard him say. "Yes'm," he repeated three more times. Then he just nodded.

Another guy with horn-rimmed glasses was talking to a bunch of men who looked as if they could out-push a bulldozer. They were talking about moving some heavy equipment from one fire to another. A matronly lady with a bluish upswept hairdo, chewing gum and a pencil behind her ear paused from her typing long enough to peer at us over the pinkish-like glasses that perched on the end of her nose like a butterfly on a big, red flower. She motioned us to some chairs along the wall.

"I just wanted to...", I said, holding up the keys.

"You'll have to wait your turn," she interrupted. "Don't you see all these people ahead of you?"

I had to admit there was a pretty good mob hanging around, but we had just fought a fire, lugged packs that would break a mule's back a dozen mountain miles through a manzanita thicket, and driven a rattletrap truck twenty-six miles over what most folks would classify a detour. And all this since our last meal of C-ration beans hours ago. Outside of being worn out and famished, we smelled like the main course at a buzzard banquet.

I thought I would try again, but this time she gave me a stare that froze the words in my throat. I motioned to the guys to take a seat and took one

myself. The two guys sitting closest to us got up and moved to the other side of the room, leaving the three of us in sole possession of the line of chairs along that wall.

For heroes for whom the Forest Service had gone out and leased a truck, we sure weren't getting much of a welcome.

The fat guy hung up the phone and headed over to the lady behind the typewriter. He was mopping his brow and shaking his head.

"That was Sally Kowalski on the phone," he said. "Howard went fishing this morning and he ain't come home yet, and she wants us to mount a search for him. As if we don't have enough to do with the whole darn district about to burn down around our ears, and not enough manpower to ... What do you guys want?"

"We're the jumpers off the Pony Peak fire, and here are the keys to the truck you'all left for us, and we sure would like something to eat," I blurted out before he could get away from us.

"You're the who? From where? And what truck?" he asked, staring at the keys I tossed on the counter.

"The jumpers from Pony Peak...",

"I heard you, I heard you!"

"...here are your keys, and we sure would like to get fed," I finished.

"We didn't leave you any truck," he said, still staring at the keys as if they were too hot to pick up.

"Somebody did," I insisted. "It's parked right outside, if you don't believe me. You can go see for yourself, but you better get the brakes fixed. I ran over your visitors sign before I could get it stopped, and could we please get something to eat."

He ran to the door and peeked out, then ran back, holding his head.

"Kowalski!" he moaned, running back to the door and staring out..

A little smoke and steam was seeping out from under the hood, and the engine was making popping noises as over heated engines do when they are cooling down. He stood staring at the truck and the small puddle of water that was forming under the radiator.

"How did you get Howard's truck without plunkin' him in the head? Maybe I ought to call the sheriff. Where did you say you got it?"

I brightened a little bit at the thought of the sheriff.

"Will the sheriff feed us?"

"I doubt it," he said. "They done fed supper."

"Then there's no need calling him," I said. "Howard was probably still down there fishing when we found the truck right there where we thought you'all had left it. Here is the map. See for yourself - it's marked on the map, and it

plainly says, 'pick-up.' Besides that, the keys were in it, and we didn't steal no truck."

"'Pick-up' means you were supposed to stay there until we picked you up," he said in "oh no" tones.

I don't like being talked down to, but apparently he was beginning to see how we might have been misled a tad. He began to change his tune.

"We got to get you boys out of here right now," he said.

"Could we please get something to eat first?"

I was pleading with tears in my eyes. We were past hungry by that time, and were feeling the pangs of starvation.

"We don't have time," he said. "Sally Kowalski is on her way down here, now, and she's going to be madder'n hell, and she's going to start askin' questions when she finds out Howard's truck got here without him. So, what we're going to do is sneak Howard's truck back, leave it where you found it, and let Howard 'splain to Sally how he come to be late getting' home. She's a hard-headed woman, an' I don't want to have to 'splain it to her. Let's get crackin', now - we got no time to lose. Sally's going to be here any minute!"

George and Clayton had maintained a discreet silence, as if they were just innocent bystanders who had hitched a ride on a truck they didn't know was stolen, and they really didn't want to get mixed up in it. It kind of left me holding the bag, but I guess that's what they mean when they say, "it's lonely at the top." It's also hungry at the top, but that didn't seem to matter to anyone.

While the ranger hurried off to make whatever arrangements he had to make, the other guys threw our gear into the truck the ranger had designated. I meanwhile made a tour through the kitchen and found two cold leftover baked yams in the refrigerator. I jammed them into my pocket and ran back to the Forest Service truck, which the driver, a young guy with lots of juniority, was warming up. The ranger in Howard's truck, with another truck following in which to bring the ranger back, had already departed. As we were driving out the gate, a car driven by a wild-haired woman in a frowzy-looking dress came screeching in and almost ran us down.

"That was Sally Kowalski," the driver said. "She gets awfully upset when she thinks something might have happened to Howard - and he's missing tonight."

"Yeah, we heard," I said, munching on a yam.

"Wonder why the boss was so anxious to get you guys back to Cave Junction tonight?"

"Don't have any idea," I said. "Maybe they spotted more fires."

Clayton and George, dividing the biggest yam, never spoke.

"You mind rolling that window down?" the driver asked. "It's getting awfully close in here."



## Chapter 7 - Blessed is the peacemaker

Everyone who has ever been infected with it agrees that cabin fever is one of the most insidious and highly contagious diseases known to man. That the ravages of mal de hablis -- its scientific name - rival, and often exceed, that of mal de mar - seasickness - is beyond doubt. Like mal de mar, cabin fever can strike the healthiest of beings without warning and turn them into raving maniacs. The results may vary from the merely unpleasant to the catastrophic.

A case has been documented whereby two men confined to the narrow dimensions of a single life raft overcame the effects of seasickness only to fall victim to cabin fever. They soon fell to blows in quest of single occupancy of the precious space. One was able to toss the other overboard, thereby gaining the coveted space, while his less-fortunate companion furnished a moment's diversion and an entre'' for a passing tiger shark.

An even more classic example is the famous case of the Bounty mutiny. History may record that the primary cause was the tyranny of Captain James Bligh over his first mate, Fletcher Christian and the crew, but there is reason to believe that the real culprit was mal de hablis, and that Captain Bligh was an innocent patsy of historians, who had never suffered the disease - and looked no further than Bligh as the source of the trouble.

On a more positive note, there is a school of thought among certain scholars that the American Revolution was brought about by the most gigantic case of mal de hablis ever to sweep a population. They reason, not without historical foundation, that the population of the colonies, confined to a narrow strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Appalachian Mountains, got tired of looking at each other. They then took out their frustrations on King George III. The results were predictable, and the British, with all their vaunted might, were no match for a population suffering the throes of mal de hablis extremis.

You wouldn't think that men inured to hardship and privation, and with the space available to them under the Big Montana Sky, would be susceptible to the disease. But, that is what is so unnerving about it. It can strike when and where least expected - anywhere men are confined for varying lengths of time. Why else, other than a death wish, would the Pilgrims have chosen so bleak and inhospitable a site for their first plantation unless they were in the final throes of cabin fever? Any place looked better than where they were.

Maybe you'll better understand the minds of those so afflicted after I explain what happened to us: If Fred Brauer was anything, he was a man of action and a man of a few thousand words. He didn't waste many words or time chewing people out, but they knew they had been chewed when he did.

For instance, when we got back from that little excursion out to Oregon, he let us goof around the fire depot a couple of days, making up fire packs. Then he sent a bunch of the crew who had come back from Oregon out to the Black Bear Ranger Station in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area. That was his way of showing us he thought we had done a pretty good job. He might have found out about the business with Howard Kowalski's pickup from the Happy Camp ranger, but, if he had, he didn't say anything to us. For our part, if we had wanted him to know we could have told him ourselves.

We didn't.

Still, I always had my suspicions, but, whether he knew or not, he had sent us to a perfect hideaway. It must have been at least ninety miles to the nearest anything that even looked like a road. If we were trying to avoid anyone, like a sheriff with a warrant or a lawyer with questions, for instance, Butch Cassidy and the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang couldn't have found a safer, more remote place.

Our job, and excuse for being there, was to cut and skid poles to build a more or less elk-proof fence around the airstrip, which afforded the only way of getting in outside of an exceedingly long hike.

We weren't thinking much about a sheriff, anyway - the fishing was too good.

The first thing we did was "odd man out" to see who was going to handle the cooking chores. Nobody ever wanted that job, so the rule was that whoever lost was cook until someone complained. The complainer would take his place. Don Sweet lost the toss and was elected cook. Old Don was a low key even-tempered sort who never complained, but he was the lousiest excuse for a cook ever born.

The very first night, Skip Stoll stood up from the table and sprayed a mouthful of beans all over the wall, vowing they were the saltiest beans he'd ever tasted. Then, realizing his mistake, he tried to cover it by licking the beans off the wall and proclaiming loudly that salty beans were just the way he liked them. He said he'd sprayed the beans in a sneezing fit.

His protests, so sincerely rendered, were to no avail. A majority of his peers, led by Sweet, held his action to be a genuine complaint. Skip became our next cook.

Things didn't improve a great deal. Skip just didn't have his heart in it, although he must have thrown in about everything else. Everyone bore up under soup that looked suspiciously like last night's dishwater and a lemon pudding which bore a strong resemblance to wall paint. But even Gene Tuniga couldn't keep quiet when he found a feather in the chicken pie - which was surprising seeing as how the chicken had come out of a can, and the feather out of either a sleeping bag or a camp-robber jaybird..

Gene probably wouldn't have been a bad cook except he was slowed down by doing it all with one arm. He was still nursing that arm, which had been nearly useless for weeks now. By the time he got the last dish on the table the first stuff he put out was cold and we were starving to death. He also had a hard time peeling potatoes with one hand.

Moved by common humanity, as well as a basic survival instinct, Gene was allowed by a unanimous vote of hands to go back to the woods, but the mood of the group was getting sullen and quarrelsome.

Gene had to be replaced. Sweet and Stoll were exempt on the grounds that they had already served. Besides that, nobody wanted any more salty beans or feathers in their chicken pie. We decided to draw straws and this time I was the one who drew the short one. Now the monkey was on my back.

Cabin fever is sort of like a volcano. It has to rumble awhile before it finally blows its top. We were still in the rumbling stage, but the rumbles were getting louder and more persistent. The explosion would not be long coming

unless something was done, and done soon, to diffuse the situation.

Instead, things got worse. It began to rain, which meant not only were we confined to the cabin, we couldn't fish. And what was worse, in weather like that, we couldn't expect any overtime from fires, or any relief from the crushing burden of cabin fever.

We didn't have any tiger sharks to consume the hapless victims of the rage within us, but there were grizzly bears that sometimes wandered down from Glacier Park. The morning after it quit raining, and about the third or fourth after my election as chief cook and bottle washer, one showed up in our garbage dump. Since he didn't seem too inclined to leave, and no one wanted to go out and face him down, we were further confined to the close quarters of the cabin - and on a beautiful day of sunshine.

That did nothing to relieve the mounting tension and, by the time the boys said to hell with it and ventured forth, the mood was such that, in the case of an encounter, I would not have bet on the grizzly. Catastrophe lurked in the wings. We were as powerless to prevent it as a leaf in the wind.

In what might have been my last rational moment, before preparing cyanide soup and putting the whole crew out of its collective misery, I thought of my mother and what she might have done in a similar situation. Obviously she would not have done what I was contemplating. I know Mama, and she would have done something kind, thoughtful and unexpected. She would have shown by her example that good was better than bad and that a kind word "turneth away wrath."

That's what Mama would have done, and it would have worked. Even the demons of cabin fever were no match for my mother's practical, serene, and cheery soul. As her son, I could do no less than try to match her example, but I couldn't bake biscuits or fry chicken like she could. Besides, we didn't have any chickens, and after the feather episode the crew's taste for yardbirds of the domestic variety had waned considerably.

I poked through the pantry looking for something special to fix for lunch. The Forest Service must have gotten a special deal on pork and beans, because there was a ton of them - and not much else. I'll have to admit that by cutting down on the number of choices a man could make, that might have simplified things for the cook, but it didn't do much to relieve our situation. I don't know who that bean salesman was, but he must have retired a millionaire.

Someone had to make an unexpected kind gesture to break this hideous spell that had come over us. I searched desperately for something to do the trick. Then, over in a corner, in a large pasteboard box, I found what appeared to be the answer to my prayers. The box contained salt, which we didn't need, assorted condiments, and about a dozen pouches of of Kool-Aid.

Well, to be perfectly truthful, it wasn't exactly Kool-Aid, but an Army surplus lime-flavored powder-type substitute. That was close enough for me. Rats had gnawed on it some, but had apparently rejected it. Several envelopes of it were in pretty good shape.

In any case, it was a godsend to me.

There was also ten pounds of sugar and four gallons of pancake syrup and a gallon of prune juice..

It was hot, dusty work cutting, skidding and stacking those poles. Those boys were working like dogs out there, cursing the mules, cursing dust, cursing the dull saws, cursing the poles and, what's worse, cursing each other.

There was nothing they would like more and expect less than a couple of canteens of good, cold limeade - unless it was a cold beer, which we didn't have.

I mixed up two big one gallon canteens of that Army surplus ;lime flavored Kool-Aid substitute, and got ready to take it out to them. I didn't need ice to make it cold. The little streamlet nearby that furnished our drinking water ran icy cold. It was just a matter of adding water and sweetener and stirring it up.

That took a while. The lime powder didn't want to dissolve. It was kind of like trying to melt a brick. But, after some pretty vigorous stirring, the water began turning green. Several more minutes, and most of the powder had disappeared. The water appeared much greener. It even smelled a little limy.

It didn't take long to fill the canteens and head for the woods. I was right pleased with myself for thinking of the idea. Mama would have been proud of me. It was a proper Christian thought, and certainly worthy of my mother. I'll have to say, I might have felt a little pious and above the world, as I went about my mission.

It was a voluntary act of kindness that would put me in a class with the Good Samaritan and Saint Francis of Assissi, and break the dragon spell of the dreaded mal de hablis, which hung over our heads like a sodden blanket, waiting to smother us all.

To my disappointment, there was no one at the landing where the poles were stacked. I would need to wait for my thank-yous and attaboys. I hung the canteens on a limb, along with a note saying I would come back in an hour with a fresh batch and pick up the empties then.

Lunch, consisting as it did of baked beans, pork and beans, beans and weenies, and loaf bread, took less time to fix than the lime stuff. I didn't need to dissolve a bean in anything. But I did need to open cans and build a fire to heat the beans.

By the time I got the beans about ready to start simmering good, an hour had passed. It was time to make a fresh batch of lime stuff, go after the empty canteens, and collect my attaboys that would signal the end of the cabin fever epidemic, which threatened to wipe us out.

As I swung down the pathway toward the landing, I wouldn't say I felt exactly smug, but I did harbor some good feelings. After all, I had identified the problem, when no one else had yet figured it out, and had taken measures to dispel the poisonous cloud that hung over us. I felt a little like the Albert Schwieter of the Northwest. Soon I would receive the plaudits and well-deserved gratitude of my friends, who would also again be friends with each other.

Arriving at the landing, I wasn't exactly expecting a ticker-tape parade, but I could immediately sense something was amiss. What greeted me was a scene of carnage. It looked like an infirmary and smelled like a garbage dump. Guys were sprawled everywhere, moaning and groaning, doubled over with the dry heaves and some not so dry. I stood stunned, bewildered, unbelieving, and unwelcomed...mostly unwelcomed.

Don peered at me through bloodshot eyes and ashen face and uttered a curse I didn't quite understand, but I think it had something to do with my ancestors and the legitimacy of my birth.

Gene Tuniga was on his back, shading his eyes with his good arm. He wasn't smiling; he was groaning. Gary Dunford was propped against a tree, chin on his chest, eyes closed, little bubbles forming on his pale lips.

Odie struggled to his feet and ran to the woods, trying to unbutton his pants as he stumbled along, an impossible proposition. He nearly got them off before disaster struck.

"Oh, me," he groaned.

I could tell at a glance, these were not happy campers..

I stood stunned, trying to adjust my brain to the scene of carnage around me. Running over to Gary, I slapped him a couple of times to get him fully conscious.

"What happened?" I asked.

He motioned me to bend real close to his mouth so I could hear. He barely had strength to talk. "Why did you try to poison us?" he begged in a low, pleading tone I could barely hear.

Gene sat up, looked at me with a wan grin, and fell over again. Skip raised up on an elbow and gave me what I thought was a right malevolent stare.

"I'd throttle you, if I could reach you," he croaked.

In case you're wondering, the wire edge of my good thoughts had been dulled completely this reception. Here I was, expecting at least a thank-you, and what I was getting were promises and threats of bodily injury, curses, contumely, vituperation, and accusations.

Reflecting back on it now, I can understand from their perspective how they might have surmised I hung out two canteens of cyanide for their pleasure to poison them so I could claim all those cans of beans and weenies for myself. Such, of course, was not the case. No matter what they thought or how it may have appeared, my intents and motives were of the highest order.

So the lime stuff did react with the zinc in the canteens and made them a little woozy. All right, so, maybe I should have used the sugar instead of pancake syrup to sweeten it. But there was more syrup than sugar, and I thought I'd better save the sugar. Well actually, maybe it was blackstrap molasses and not pancake syrup. That's a mere technicality, and it was just as sweet as the sugar. Besides, I only used about a pint in each canteen. That much molasses shouldn't have hurt anybody.

Sensing a full scale rebellion in the offing, and minding the old adage that discretion is the better part of valor, I skeedaddled back to the cabin and barricaded myself in.

I was resolved to quit trying. Let them die of cabin fever for all I cared - that is, if the lime juice didn't do them in first. I also took Don's threat to throttle me as a complaint about the cooking. From now on he could cook - or

starve - for all I cared.

As it turned out, barricading myself in wasn't entirely necessary. The crew was too weak to batter the door down. But they badly wanted in. Montana nights are cool, and there was a grizzly bear out there somewhere that might decide to come back. I let them in, but not before I made each make a solemn vow not to harm me in any manner. .

Things improved after that. The guys were happy after they recovered. Of course, I always slept with a large chunk of stove wood for protection, in case there was a backslider looking for revenge. But, they had ceased to snarl and snap at each other. The place was like Sunday School. The guys didn't hate each other any more.

They all hated me.

## Chapter 8 - Through the gates of Hell

Don was sitting on a big rock that jutted into the main stream of the South Fork of the Flathead, as it swept in a long arc around the cabin that was the Black Bear Ranger Station.

It was a perfect fishing spot - easy to cast your fly into a fast riffle, watch the current carry it away, and watch the line get taut. A cutthroat would usually rise to the fly. Don would set the hook and, a few minutes later, land a fine, fat trout, holding it up for us to see. He was cook again, since the limeade fiasco, and he was fishing for our supper. The rest of us were on the opposite shore, fishing for fun.

There is no finer sport in the world than casting flies for trout, and hardly a better stream anywhere than the South Fork of the Flathead, down around the remote and unmanned Black Bear Ranger Station - and we had the undisturbed run of it. Its finny denizens seldom saw an artificial fly, and when they did, were quick to take it. The fly I was using was a Parmachene Belle, a small, delicate dry fly. It seldom lay on the water long before, in a wink, it disappeared, and the joy of the struggle that every fisherman lives for was mine.

They were hitting even better than usual this evening, and all the feathers had been torn from my fly. Nothing remained but the little piece of tinsel used to tie the feathers onto the fly, and they were still hitting it.

We knew we were in God's Country for only God could have created the golden sunset beauty of a cutthroat trout. The cutthroat is one of the most beautiful creatures ever to adorn the universe, and one of the most useful. Rolled in cornmeal or not, its light-pink flesh -- pan-fried, broiled or roasted -- makes a gourmet chef out of even the most inept cook. I know, because we had one of the most inept cooks in the country.

At the moment our inept cook was busy catching the evening meal. Don Sweet had just landed a beauty, which must have weighed three or four pounds. He proudly held it up for us to see before tossing it over his shoulder high onto the bank where it couldn't flop back into the water..

We kept fishing because it was pretty doubtful that the mama bear and her two cubs waiting on the bank, unknown to Don, would leave us many of Don's catch

for our supper. Up to this point he hadn't realized they were back there scarfing up his fish as fast as he tossed them ashore.

From a bear's point of view, I suppose it beat trying to catch fish up in the shallows - and that bear was no fool. If a human being was willing to throw her a fish, she was sure willing to catch it.

Don heaved the next fish in a graceful arc toward the shore, and this time watched it all the way to the waiting bear's outstretched paws. After doing a quick double take and sizing up the situation, mulling things over, all of which consumed about a milli-second, Don concluded that he would be giving away too great a weight advantage to try to duke it out with a mama bear - and two cubs - over a few raw fish.

He opted instead to take his chances with the current. About halfway across he disappeared in some swift water and we could see nothing save his hat being swept away in the rapids. But a moment later he bobbed to the surface, gasping for breath and still clutching his fly rod.

There was no great harm done. The rest of us had caught more than enough fish for supper. Don could easily share his with the bears, if he wanted to, but I'll have to say, when you share with a bear, the bear isn't apt to leave you much.

Don was cold, sappy wet, and a tad shook up when we fished him out, but being a low key, cool daddy rabbit type, he recovered pretty quickly. He was a bit ticked off that we hadn't called his attention to that situation sooner. He rejected outright our plea that we regarded it as none of our business, and we didn't want to interfere. However, he did come to realize the roar of the current drowned out our efforts to warn. Besides, Don was having right much fun catching the fish, and the bears apparently enjoyed eating them..

That night, with amity having been restored by the limeade episode, we had a feast. It was our last night at Black Bear. In the morning the Ford sat down on the grassy strip and ferried us back to Missoula. There had been a lightning storm over in Idaho.

Our party was over for the time being, but we had cut, skidded and stacked enough poles to build a fence around Texas.

Back at Missoula, we didn't have long to wait for a fire call to come in. The next afternoon, late, sixteen of us, including me, Gary Dunford, Don Sweet and Gene Tuniga, were aboard the Doug, on our way to a fire near Snake River Gorge. It was a long flight, clean across Idaho, nearly to Oregon. We had a lot of time in flight to waste.

On a long flight like that, some guys try to ho-hum it and make you believe they are just plain bored with the whole thing, but let me tell you, nobody is bored when they know they're going to be plunging out of an airplane into a rocky wilderness in the very near future. It would be nice to be that blasé', but it just doesn't work that way. You might take it in stride, but you aren't bored with it. Nevertheless, we dozed and sometimes gazed out the window.

I guess we had been dozing the better part of an hour and a half when things suddenly began to stir. We were getting close. Hammond got out his spotter kit consisting of earphones and a microphone and a couple of streamers that he threw out over the proposed jump spot to test the drift before sending

jumpers out.

Al Cramer, the fire boss on this trip, was shaking people awake and checking gear. Gene Tuniga's lanky frame stretched out over several bucket seats in the rear of the aircraft, his head resting on a fire pack. Gene's features resembled those of a prize fighter whose best defense was his chin, a chin almost perpetually covered with wiry blond stubble. Even in repose, his gentle nature was apparent. I couldn't imagine Gene in a fight. But if there was one, I wanted him on my side.

Cramer shook him awake and Gene sat up, rubbing his eyes with one huge paw. Gene was not what you might call delicate, and he wasn't one to baby himself, but that arm was still bothering him badly.

Hammond swung the door back. The rush of air bore a tinge of smoke from the fire below. The smell of smoke and fire grew stronger as the plane circled the fire to give everyone a look. Light from a full, yellow moon illuminated in ghostly iridescence the craggy peaks known as Seven Devils, and flooded the valley, mingling with the smoke. The fire flickering in the shadows below, along with golden-red rays from the setting sun, produced a surrealistic scene reminiscent of Dante's Inferno.

He-Devil, highest peak of the Seven Devils, glowered down upon the dark recesses of Hells Canyon and Snake River, a writhing, silvery serpent below. Nobody mentioned it. Although, with so much to remind them, I'm sure the thought crossed their mind. We were about to jump into Hell.

Cramer, Tuniga and Cliff Blake were the first three out. Gary, Odie Powell and I were slated to go on the second pass. As soon as the first three went, the three of us stood up and hooked our static lines to the cable. I was third in line. As the plane circled for the second run, Hammond checked our gear, parachutes, harness and static lines to make sure all was in order.

My static line, which should have gone from the 'chute directly to the cable, had somehow gotten over my shoulder and under my left arm and then to the cable. That was a particularly dangerous arrangement, and exactly the reason the spotter always checked each jumper. We carefully unwound my line and got it straightened out. With everything and everybody checked out, Al returned to his station by the door and began directing the plane to the spot.

From the time the pilot begins his run until the time the spotter brings him over the spot isn't all that long - unless you're one of the guys waiting to jump. In that case it seems forever. Then, when the signal comes, you go.

The smell of burning woods was strong when Al finally brought his arm down. We rushed out the door one at a time, each man giving the other just enough time to clear the door before he went out. The first blast of evening air was cool on my face, but I knew instantly something was wrong.

The static line was under my arm! Somehow in the brief time between getting it straightened out and going out the door, it had gotten under my arm again. But there was no time to think about it, and it was much too late to do anything about it. From the time one leaves the door until the static line rips the cover off the parachute is not enough time to correct a situation like that, or even think about it.

Wham!



The static line jerked the cover off the 'chute, over my shoulder and out under my arm, all in a split second. The result was that my left shoulder dislocated.

I will tell you right now, a dislocated shoulder smarts, but I was lucky the arm wasn't jerked off. I think I must have passed out on the way down, because I have no recollection of trying to guide my parachute. I only remember the smell of smoke and the feel of searing pain. I remember hoping I didn't land in the fire, or get blown over the rim of the canyon - which wasn't nearly as close as I imagined.

I regained my senses in time to make a reasonably good landing in a soft, sandy sagebrush field. I sat dazed and unable to move until Cramer came running up. He didn't have any idea that I might be hurt. He just wanted to get everybody onto the fire before it started spreading. But when he discovered I was ailing, he helped me to a small campfire that was to be the assembly point for the crew. It was pitch dark on the ground by then; Al needed to lead the way.

Cliff Blake was huddled by the fire, which Gene was feeding. Cliff had broken his ankle. A few minutes later Odie and Gary showed up. Gary was hobbling with a pulled leg muscle. With a sore arm, a broken ankle, a pulled muscle and a dislocated shoulder, we were beginning to resemble a hospital ward more than a fire crew.

So far, Cramer and Powell were the only able-bodied men on the scene - but others were arriving fast. Al contacted the plane on a little handi-talkie radio and informed the pilot of the unusually large number of wounded that was beginning to accumulate. Hammond relayed the message to the Ranger Station, and they promised to send the packer with extra horses to pack us out the next morning.

Tuniga went on to fight the fire with Cramer and the rest of the crew, sore arm or not. Gary, Cliff and I kept the campfire going until pretty late, then finally dropped off to sleep. My shoulder had popped back into joint, but the static line had burned through the heavy canvas jump jacket, a wool shirt, a T-shirt and a good part of my arm. It was sore and throbbled all night. I didn't get a whole lot of sleep, but must have dropped off just before dawn.

We were awakened by the crew coming in for breakfast. Not long afterward the packer showed up with real food so the men wouldn't need to exist on C-Rations. They were happy about that. He also brought three extra horses and we were happy about that. Considering it was a twenty-mile trip, he must have started out the night before..

The packer was a grizzled old cuss who bore a startling resemblance to a cross between Popeye and Gabby Hays, with a tobacco-stained week-old gray beard. He didn't trust automobiles - thought they were a passing fad, and that the horse and buggy was about to make a strong comeback. Anyway, we gratefully struggled aboard the trusty mounts he had brought and set out.

Peavey Pearson, who was about to enter med school, had taped up Gary's leg, fitted me with a sling and fashioned a splint for Blake's ankle, but we still had to take it slow. The packer hadn't brought race horses, anyway, and we sure weren't jockeys, so it was just as well.

A couple of hours down the trail, we pulled up at a little glade of the sort that would make a good picnic spot, if it weren't so far off the road. The packer motioned us to stay aboard while he climbed down and made a phone call to the ranger station to let them know when to expect us. Now that was a right pretty glade, and the ground was bare in spots that showed it had gotten right much use, but I didn't see the first sign of a phone booth anywhere, and this was well before the days of the cell phone.. I thought the old guy's elevator might not have reached the top, but to humor him, we sat and waited..

I looked at Gary and he looked at me; then we looked at Cliff, who just shrugged. Meanwhile, the old packer matter-of-factly ambled over to a hollow tree, reached in and removed a phone, and proceeded to ring up the ranger station.

I kind of halfway expected him to ask for Chloe, like the guy in the famous Spike Jones skit who was searching for a girl named Chloe in a swamp, when a phone in a hollow tree starts ringing. (It was somebody else looking for Chloe.) But the packer apparently wasn't familiar with that skit, and merely asked for the ranger. After a brief conversation, he hung up and replaced the phone in the hollow tree, ambled back to his horse, and the journey continued.

There wasn't much for us to do for the next couple of days, except hang around the bunk house, play checkers, and read three-year-old magazines. And wait for the guys to come down from the fire. A doctor came and bandaged Blake's foot, looked at Gary's leg, poked at my shoulder and suggested we all should see a doctor as soon as we got back to Missoula. We seconded that notion, that idea having previously crossed our minds.

Next day the guys came down - hot, hungry and ready to say good-bye to Hell. We seconded that notion, too.

## Chapter 9 - You can only hurt in one place at a time

I'll have to agree with the old packer about one thing. Horses are reliable, and mules even more so. A horse might be a slow, bumpy ride on a long trip, and you might need to stop for grass a time or two, but you eventually get there. And no one ever died of saddle sores, even if they're sure they will. You can rely upon a horse. He might try to buck you out of the saddle, stomp you, kick you and bite you. And if he did it once, you can depend on his trying it near about every time he sees you.

But, he wouldn't be likely to ram you into the side of a mountain at three hundred miles an hour, which was more than you can say about an airplane. A vision of the old Tri-Motor trying to unsuccessfully bore an instant tunnel through the side of Mount Baldy was hard to shake, but Johnson had the most skilled and experienced pilots that could be found anywhere. No one could say that Johnson Flying Service hadn't done all they could to keep accidents such as that from happening. Nevertheless, the thought wouldn't go away entirely. It was just something we learned to live with, kind of like hemorrhoids.

There's an old saying that you can't hurt in but one place at a time, and I think there must be something to it. I remember one time a doctor gave me a shot of codeine to relieve a toothache. It turned out codeine gave me cramps of the biliary tree, that's the liver to most of us, which in turn made me forget all about the tooth. It finally quit hurting, and I still have the tooth.

All of which is by way of saying that, when they took us out to a small dirt strip the next day to meet the Doug, my shoulder was aching so badly, I didn't give a hoot if the plane ran into the side of a mountain or not. That sentiment got altered a bit, later, when chances of ramming into something had improved considerably.

The Doug was sitting on the runway when we arrived, and all I can say is I would have loved to have seen how the darn thing got there. If they hadn't built it there, it must have been like landing in a well without touching the sides. Such a feat seemed beyond the skills of even a Johnson pilot.

There were mountains all around, which gave the distinct feeling that the airstrip was in the bottom of a bowl. Actually, I guess you might say it was in the bottom of a gigantic bowl. How the pilot planned to fly the thing out of there at all was a mystery, and the extra weight of men and gear wouldn't make it any easier.

That we loaded onto the plane without anyone needing to point a gun at us can be attributed to either our confidence in plane and pilot, or mass ignorance of the situation. We figured if he got it in, he can surely get it out.

When they hitched a tractor to the plane and towed it as far to the rear of the runway as they could get, it had to be obvious to the most ignorant among us the runway was too short for the ship. This was going to be a tight take-off.

We boarded and I strapped myself into a bucket seat facing the open rear door of the aircraft. I had a good view of everything. When we crashed I wanted to be able to see everything. Cramer climbed aboard and went forward to the pilot's cabin. I guess he wanted to see which part of the mountain we were going to hit.

At the end of the short runway was a barb-wire fence to keep cattle and elk off the runway. Shortly beyond that was a north-south highway running parallel to the Clearwater River, which was just beyond the highway. The other side of the river was a sheer granite cliff towering several hundred feet above the river. There was no way we could gain enough altitude in that short distance to clear that cliff. My guess was we would probably come down in the river even before we reached the cliff. Happy thought.

To further calm our nerves, there was a long wait, while they took down the fence and stopped traffic on the highway. Little things like that are real confidence boosters.

Finally, short of grading down that mountain to river level, everything that could be done had been done. Aboard the plane, all was silence. No one was talking. Some of the guys might have been praying silent prayers. I swallowed hard. Suddenly, thoughts of Mama's biscuits and gravy, and Maggie face got all mixed up in my mind, so I quit thinking altogether, and breathed a silent prayer as the port engine began to turn, cough, burp a cloud of smoke, and erupt with a roar..

Then the starboard beast came to life. The pilot let the engines warm up an unusually long time, while he went through the cockpit checklist. If either engine coughed one time while we were on the take-off run, it would be curtains for us.

Thorsrud, the pilot and one of Johnson's best, held the brakes, revved the engines until the plane was fairly hopping up and down, applied full flaps, and turned her loose! . The plane surged and we roared down the runway, engines and hearts throbbing. . It was like the start of the Kentucky Derby, when the starter springs the gate, and fifteen thoroughbreds sprint for the inside track.

I guess you might say that the moment of truth and the moment of terror began at about the same time. We were all aware that beyond a certain point, there was no stopping. There would be neither time nor room to abort the take-off. For better or worse, we would be committed.

Thorsrud had driven a stake where he needed so much speed or it was no-go. His terrified passengers didn't know if we had reached that critical speed, or not.

It was a one-shot deal. There would be no second chance. The pilot was pouring on the coal, giving it all she had. We were rocking in our seats like oarsmen, praying, "Come on! Come on!" Nothing could be heard above the roar of the engines. Anyone could have been shouting prayers or curses, for all anyone knew; it was all the same.

If God could have heard anything above that racket, it would have been a minor miracle. Faster and faster, she was picking up speed, but eating up runway at the same time.

She bounced a couple of times but couldn't stay airborne. We were running out of runway. She bounced again and this time stayed up - which was a good thing, because we were out of runway.

The plane shot across the highway, I stared full into the face of the lady driving the first car in the line of traffic that was backed up to witness the crash.. In that brief moment, our eyes met. Her mouth was wide open, jaw slack, and her eyes looked like targets in a shooting gallery. I won't vouch for what my own resembled.

Before a gnat could wink, we were out over the river, fighting for altitude. No way to clear those cliffs. It would only be moments before we crashed, but Thorsrud had other plans. There was a clunk, clunk, as the wheels went into the well, and almost simultaneously he virtually stood the plane on its ear in a steep bank, and I was looking straight down into the churning waters of Clearwater River.

We wouldn't hit the cliffs, but we still had several hundred feet of altitude to gain before we could clear the canyon rim.. Looking out the windows, we saw nothing but rock walls flashing by on either side. For ages, it seemed, we went roaring down the canyon, twisting, turning, avoiding cliffs and fighting for altitude.

We gained enough altitude to clear the rim at last, and everyone breathed again. The collective sigh of relief that went up was not unlike that of a dirigible that had sprung a leak. For the first time since beginning the take-off roll, we put our full weight down and relaxed.

Although the interval between take-off roll and clearing the canyon rim was brief, it seemed like ages.

I had never been a passenger on a take-off like that before, and haven't

since. I will always believe the plane never broke ground. I will always believe that the pilot just picked the wheels up when we ran out of runway, and the plane just kept on flying.

I think it was Edmond Burke, or some famous British Prime Minister, who once observed that, "Nothing focuses the mind like the sight of the gallows." Maybe so, but Mr. Burke never faced a take-off on a field that short.

Somewhere on the way back to Missoula, I realized my shoulder hadn't hurt since I boarded the plane. When I settled down for a nap, the shoulder started throbbing again. I guess it's true.

You can't hurt in but one place at a time.

## Chapter 10 - Arranging Ligneous Detritus

Old Fred didn't waste any time getting us looked after at the hospital. He had a truck waiting and sent us right over. Blake's ankle was flat broke. His fire season was over, but Fred let him stay on as a clerk in charge of something.

Gary's leg would heal with a week's rest. Gary didn't mind resting for a week.

As for my shoulder, the doctor just immobilized it with tape and left my arm in a sling. In a few days it was good as new, except it kind of ached when the weather changed, and there was a big scab over the place where the static line burned through. It could get a little raw if it rubbed against my shirt.

The biggest injury of all was to Gene Tuniga, who had been hiding his sore arm from anybody in authority for fear he would be taken off jump status. He finally had to 'fess up. Although it was embarrassing for Gene to show pain to anyone, he got to where he couldn't hide it any longer. Fred sent him to the hospital with us. It turned out Gene had made a qualifying jump and two fire jumps with a severely broken ulna, the big bone below the shoulder.. That was about as bad a break of an arm as you could get. He would be out for the season.

Hearing that, I kind of felt like a sissy, complaining about a mere shoulder separation. And I hadn't tried to hide my pain from anybody. They kept Gene in the hospital for a couple of days after they set his arm, but one day he came walking into the fire depot where we were putting fire packs together. A grin divided his face into two hemispheres; his eyes showed no pain. He was wearing a cast the size of a garbage can.

The nurses over at the hospital had loved Gene, and I guess that's mainly what he was grinning about. Fred made him an observer in a scout plane that flew over old fires that had been reported "out," to check them for fresh outbreaks. Sometimes a fire will smolder for weeks before it breaks out again, and people have been known to jump the same fire twice. Nobody liked to do that. We always tried to get a fire plumb out, but no amount of mopping up will get everything.

Gene didn't mind missing the overtime, he was home every night, which gave him plenty of opportunity to improve on the contacts he'd made over at the nurses' dorm. I think Gene was making the most of that opportunity. We didn't see much of him after that. He was too busy flying and courting.

You couldn't loaf much around F.O. "Good Deal" Brauer, unless you could make loafing look like work. To Fred's credit, he didn't stay fooled for long. He wouldn't buy your bill of goods, but he wasn't above selling you his if he thought he could pull it off. He nearly always did. That's why his middle name was "Good Deal," and why I would not advise buying insurance from him.

It was kind of an unwritten rule that rookies did the brush-piling projects, unless retreads happen to volunteer, which none ever did. Brush piling is probably the most enervating and onerous chore the Forest Service has. It consists of putting your mind in neutral, as you have no use for it whatsoever, and putting limbs and other slash left over from a logging operation into a pile over a square of tarpaper. This allowed them to set it afire when it dried out after a couple of months. As a rookie, I had piled my share of it, and found it to be one of the most mind-numbing jobs I'd ever had.

Having been burned on other occasions, we were wise to Fred. He would need to get up pretty early to get ahead of us. We were ready for him when he approached us while we were repacking the same fire kit for about the tenth time. We had already packed enough fire kits to last ten years, and we didn't have any more stuff with which to pack kits, without going to the trouble of lugging more out. That's why we kept packing and unpacking the same kit.

So far, Fred hadn't caught on. There was an art to proper goofing off, and the best among us by far was "Little Joe" Roemer. He was so good at making nothing seem like something, he even fooled himself sometimes. It was Little Joe who inspired us to pack and unpack the fire kits.

"Have I got a deal for somebody, but I don't think you guys are qualified," Fred announced.

That was a switch. You didn't need any qualifications for brush piling, except a numb brain and a total lack of ambition.

"What kind of qualifications?" Gary asked warily.

I didn't take my eyes off what I was doing, which was retying the fire kit for the umpteenth time.

"Ranger up at Big Creek wants some men to, it says here," he thumped the manpower request on the clipboard he held, "'to assist the ranger in arranging ligneous forest detritus for an experiment in rapid oxidation.' Sounds like he needs somebody with an engineering background."

"Is Big Creek good fishing?" Gary asked.

"Only if you like to catch big ones," Fred said. "They don't call it Big Creek because of the size of the creek, you know."

"I took a bunch of organic chemistry," I volunteered, neglecting to mention had flunked it three times before finally passing it.

"Yeah, me too," Gary seconded.

"I guess that might qualify you," Fred said, writing our names down.

My suspicions were aroused. This was about to be too easy. Fred never gave in that slick. There had to be a catch in it, somewhere.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Does it say anything in there about brush piling?"

"Don't you think I would have told you, if there was?" Fred replied.

No. I didn't think he would have told us, but he acted just enough hurt by the question that I felt a momentary blush of shame for ever having doubted him.

"Better go pack your fishing gear," Fred said.

I knew he was grinning behind his ears as he walked away, but I never could prove it. Gary was already running to the barracks to get his gear.

\*\*\*\*\*

I cursed Fred and threw a crumpled sheet of tarpaper on the ground and prepared to arrange another pile of ligneous detritus for rapid oxidation. I'll have to tell you that, unless I had missed something somewhere, arranging ligneous detritus was about the same as piling brush, and fire is about as rapid as "oxidation" gets..

Fred had out-finessed us again. All that baloney about "engineering background," and "organic chemistry" didn't amount to a toot in a whirlwind. What we needed was a good dictionary, so we could look up words like "ligneous," "detritus" and "oxidation."

And another thing, the steady rain beating down on our heads didn't help our feelings much either. The "ligneous material," of which there is an unlimited supply all over the west, and which we were trained to keep fires out of, wasn't going to burn in this weather. We couldn't look forward to the welcome relief of a fire call, either.

Fred had sent us into exile. We were going to be piling brush the rest of our lives. He was right on one count, though, the trout in Big Creek were real bruisers. To prove it, the ranger showed us a creel of nice, fat, speckled monsters he caught while we were arranging his ligneous matter. It was nice that someone had the time to fish. Gary and I were too pooped to wet a line when we got in from tending our daily chore.

Weekends were a different matter. They belonged to us, if there wasn't a fire. As much as it had rained since we had been at Big Creek, we didn't think there was much danger of that. And even if there had been, it wouldn't have been hard to find Gary and me at Big Creek.

As a matter of fact, that's where they did find us. Late that drizzly Sunday afternoon, we were knee deep in Big Creek, and neck deep in cutthroats, when one of the assistant rangers caught up with us. He told us a call had come in and we would be heading back to Missoula at daybreak. That took care of fishing for that day.

Of the whole smokejumper crew on the Big Creek "ligneous detritus arranging" project, everybody was accounted for by midnight, except Snuffy Cromer. Snuff had gone on a solo foray over into Glacier Park, just across the North Fork of the Flathead. He wasn't all that much of a fisherman anyway, and he had heard there were girls working in the park during the summer. Snuff had borrowed an old truck from one of the hired hands and had gone over to the park

to track those rumors down. Nobody had heard from him since.

We couldn't wait; we needed to load up and get back to Missoula. It was a pretty long trip and we were traveling by truck this time. The only route in and out of Big Creek was the dirt-and-gravel logging road that ran south along North Fork of the Flathead about thirty miles to Columbia Falls. We had gone maybe eight or ten miles when we discovered Snuff's pickup truck parked in the road - but no sign of Snuffy. There was no traffic on the road until the logging trucks started rolling about seven o'clock in the morning. Therefore, we had no idea how long Snuff's truck had been parked there, or what had happened to him.

Where in the world could he be? Fearing the worst, we piled out of the truck and began the search. We hit pay dirt with the first yell. There was an answer from down a hollow to the right of the road.

"Hey! Come help me!"

That was Snuff all right, and his voice didn't seem more than a hundred yards away.

"Get me out of here before she kills me!"

Had Snuff run afoul of some floozy over in the park who was threatening to do him in? That was sure possible - discretion was not Snuffy's long suit. It was even likely. I had seen Snuff with some real tail wagers. He often said it didn't matter how ugly they were, if you waited until it was too dark to see them before you picked them up - and took them home again before sun-up.

"Hurry up!" Snuff was desperately pleading.

There was no doubt he was in real trouble.

"I can't hold on much longer!"

We rushed in the direction of his voice - and came to a screeching halt when we spotted him. At the base of the tree that was his refuge stood an outraged mama moose and her offspring.

Snuff had outdone himself this time. That was one of the ugliest mamas I had ever seen, and about the maddest. She was daring Snuff to come down, and our presence only distracted her for a moment. She was awfully unreasonable and insisted on having at least one good whack at Snuff before she left the scene - but we were finally able to chase her away. It took some persuading to get Snuff to leave his refuge. We had to convince him she was gone for good.

Old Snuff wasn't too keen on talking about the episode, and I really couldn't blame him. It was right embarrassing for him, but the guys weren't going to let him off that easily. He finally gave us his version of how he ended up in that tree.

According to Snuff, it was right foggy when he started back to the ranger station, and he was just creeping along when he felt a heavy bump on the right, front fender. And it got pitch dark then, because the crunch he heard was from the only headlight he had that was working.

When he got out to investigate the cause, that old mama moose put him up the tree, where we found him. Mooses are right fractious animals anyway, and



they sure don't take kindly to being goosed in the rear end by a headlight, in the middle of the night. Looking at it from the moose's point of view, you can easily see her point.

Leaving the pickup where it was for his buddy to retrieve, Snuff hopped aboard and off we went to Missoula.

We wanted to speak to Mr. Brauer about "arranging ligneous detritus for rapid oxidation."

## Chapter 11 - Rescue

The bad news was by the time we got to the fire, what had begun as a fisherman's campfire had already consumed five thousand acres, and was spreading fast. The good news was that this was one fire we didn't need to jump. After flying us from Missoula to Laramie, Wyoming, in a converted WWII-vintage Air Force surplus twin-engine Hudson bomber - with the word "Kokakistan" inscribed across the nose (I have no idea what that signifies and neither did the pilot.) - they drove us from Laramie to the fire in Volkswagen vans. I'll admit those dinky little vans weren't as flashy as red-and-white parachutes, but they got us there all the same.

We stepped into what looked more like a United Nations meeting than a fire camp. The House of David had set up a field kitchen under a big-top tent. Yellow-robed barefoot men with beards and ponytails, and yellow-robed barefoot women with smiles were serving hot meals to members of the Zuni Hotshots firefighting team from the Zuni tribe in Arizona.

The House of David, for those who don't know, is a religious sect dead-set on doing some good in the world, and they do. They show up at all kinds of disasters. They had fed mobs of workers many times before, and had the whole process down pat.

An atmosphere of organized chaos seemed to pervade the whole camp. Everyone was hurrying to get somewhere. They were going in all directions but everyone had a purpose and seemed to know what they were doing.

The only people standing around were off duty personnel. They would eat a bite and catch a little sleep, and get back on the fireline, either to relieve someone or to add to those already there.

No-one cut the smokejumpers much slack. We were met at the buses by a fire boss, who assigned each smokejumper to supervise an eight- or nine-man squad of Air Force rookies.

That was a tougher assignment than one might think. These rookies were mainly off the big-city streets, and had never seen a forest fire before. Heck, darn few of them had ever even seen a forest, other than Central Park. Our guys were supposed to teach them how to chop line without chopping each other, or killing themselves in the process. It wasn't an easy task. There weren't enough smokejumpers to go around, and there were a lot of rookie crews without an experienced man to lead them.

I was lucky. They had something else in mind for me. I wouldn't swear to it, but I think they might have been afraid there would be a language problem if

I tried to work with those Yankee rookies. They were probably right. I could come closer to speaking the native Zuni language than I could Brooklynese.

I know it all depends on your point of view. Like, to a sardine, a submarine is just a can of people, but I'll have to tell you, to me, those boys talked funny. I think the fire bosses made a wise choice by not having me try to instruct them. No doubt they saved a lot of confusion.

Anyhow, they made me a fire scout. My job was to walk the perimeter of the fire and extinguish, if possible, any places the fire had skipped the line. Also, I was to report on anything unusual.

As far as I was concerned, the whole darned fire was a tad unusual. I mean it was bigger than any I had ever seen or fought. But I knew what they meant. The job suited me to a tee. I didn't need to supervise any rookies, I would work alone, and mostly I would be walking. I could always do that.

As it was already dark, I hit the sack, pleased with having drawn such a plum of an assignment. I would start out at the first sign of dawn.

I think there are some things here I should explain. One, a breeze sprang up during the night and the fire had spread to about seven thousand acres. And two, that's an area of about eleven square miles of very rugged mountains to stroll around.

Come morning, I hitched a ride on an Air Force deuce-and-a-half that was carrying some rookies to the fire line at the top of the ridge, which was as good a place to start as any. Those rookies were going to be supervised by a sergeant, whose firefighting experience might have been questioned, but he did speak a language they all understood.

But as we were headed for a spot that had already burned itself out and cooled considerably, there wasn't much chance of their getting into too much trouble, unless they got into an axe fight with Pulaskis. As soon as we got to the fire line, I jumped down and left the sergeant shouting at the rookies in ancient sergeant language, as sergeants have done at least since the time of Alexander the Great.

By noon I had covered several miles along the ridge and found a couple of small spot fires smoldering outside the line. They weren't very big, and I handled them with a little Pulaski work. Chances are they would have eventually fizzled out on their own, as they were near the top of a rocky ridge with little in the way of fuel to feed on, but, since they were paying me big money to put out fires, I thought I would earn it.

Coming off the ridge, I entered what had been a large dog-hair stand of pole-sized white-bark pine. They were standing there like so many hat racks - twenty-foot-tall stiff rods of carbon that would snap off in a brisk breeze. No green remained. The green had disappeared into the red maw of the fire demon that had raced through a few hours earlier. A few yards further on, attesting to the rush and fury of the fire when it crowned out, lay the charred corpse of a mule deer. It kind of made me wonder. If a fire can outrun a mule deer, what chance would a human have? I always came up with the same two answers, : slim and none. The fate of the guys at Mann Gulch, where fire in dry grass caught thirteen jumpers, pretty well settled that.

About a mile ahead I caught up with the guys chopping line on the fire's

flank to keep it from spreading to the side. A little farther on, the head fire was burning toward the top of the mountain, where, if they could keep it contained, it would finally burn itself out on the rocky top. They sure didn't need me up there, so, to reach the other side of the burned area, I cut across the still-smoldering ashes and stumps behind the main fire to the fire line on the opposite flank.

Turning away from the main fire, I began following the perimeter of the fire back toward its point of origin. Sooner or later it would lead me back to camp. I figured it would be a walk of seven or eight miles, if I was lucky. If not, what the heck. I'd spent the night in the woods before. It wouldn't be all that comfortable, but it wouldn't be the end of the world, either.

I had worked my way along the upper edge of the burn area for a couple of miles or so when I thought I heard faint voices from the hollow below. I couldn't make out what they were saying, except they sounded kind of agitated. I gave a holler to let them know I was there, and got an immediate answer from several voices, sort of like when you stir up a flock of crows.

If they needed help, I couldn't do much, but I thought I might better get down there anyway. I hadn't gone too far when I met a bunch of guys coming toward me. From the way they greeted me, they sounded like a bunch of kids at Christmas who had cornered Santa Claus.

It was the same bunch of rookies I had ridden up the mountain with. Somehow they had gotten lost, sergeant and all.

"Here's a ranger!" they shouted. "We're saved! We're saved!"

Those boys were plumb jumping up and down. Even their sergeant was right glad to see me. I wasn't a ranger, but that's what they called all Forest Service people. I didn't think that was the time to explain the difference between a seasonal firefighter and a professional forester.

How they had strayed from their own small assigned area, I never knew, but there they were, wandering around the woods like the lost tribes of Israel, not caring much who rescued them, as long as they were rescued.

They had thrown away their lunches, Pulaskis, shovels, coats and canteens. Don't ask me why people do dumb things when they get lost. It seems that lost people get confused and their tendency is to get rid of all extra weight, very often including all their clothes in the dead of winter. It doesn't make a lick of sense, but that's what happens.

It was downright embarrassing, the way they made over me, blubbered, and carried on. You would have thought I was a rescue ship and they were on the Titanic. Only problem was, I didn't know exactly where we were, either. But I didn't have the heart to tell them right then.

The way they fell in behind me when we set off, was as if I were Moses leading the Israelites out of the wilderness, except I believe Moses had a better idea where he was and where he was going.. Even old Sarge was downright docile, which was totally out of character for any sergeant I'd ever met. I kind of got the idea he was a tad abashed for having led his sheep astray, in the first place.

Walking the perimeter back to the truck would have no doubt been the

surest and most logical way back to the truck, but would have been miles further, and those guys would never have made it. Get right down to it, they were in a pretty sad way, with blistered feet, no food or water, mosquito bitten and scared to death to boot. We had to find a short cut. I thought I had a general notion of where the truck was and headed off across the burn in that direction.

For the time being, at least, I thought if I acted as if I knew what I was doing and moved out smartly, it would give them a little confidence. I didn't know what I would do when they found out I didn't know where the heck we were, and we would probably have to spend the night in the woods. I decided to cross that bridge when we got to it.

In the meantime, we hadn't gone too far when one of the boys discovered the charred remains of a porcupine not far off the game trail we were following. He was about to pick it up when I yelped just in time. Porcupine quills are nothing to laugh at. That's all I needed right then was a rookie with a handfull of porcupine quills.

The poor guy was very abashed that I yelled at him, but what really got me was that none of them believed me when I told them it was a porcupine. They thought a porcupine was a mythical creature, like a unicorn or Puff the Magic Dragon. I thought the sight of all those quills might have convinced them, but I am not sure. At least no one else wanted to pick up anymore funny-looking dead "squirrels".

We set out again. There was still plenty of sun, but the afternoon was beginning to wear on. I really wanted to get these rookies back in camp and off my hands before nightfall. I didn't look forward to spending the night with them in the middle of a ten-square-mile burn.

Besides that, the poor guy who nearly picked up the porcupine was sick and kept throwing up, or trying to. He couldn't do much on an empty stomach, so he ending up having dry heaves. And that only made it worse. He needed a doctor in the worst way. So we kept slogging on, the rookies buoyed by the thought they had been rescued, and I, plagued by the thought that I wasn't too sure they had been.

Suddenly, I froze. We were crossing the head of a draw. A noise like a freight train was coming up that draw, straight for us. The rookies thought we were taking a break, and immediately flopped down on the ground to make themselves comfortable. The sound of trains meant nothing to ears accustomed to such noises from "els" and subways, but I knew there wasn't a railroad track within forty miles, and surely not in that draw.

Sometimes a fast-moving wind-driven fire with a lot of fuel will skip from ridge to ridge without touching the timber in between. Then, just when you think you have things under control, the fire smolders down to the unburned timber and the darn thing takes off behind you.

We were smack in the middle of just such an area and that roaring coming at us was the fire that had reached the dry crowns of the trees. Anyone who has ever fought a fire will tell you that a crown fire is the worst sort of fire you can face. When it takes off, it is completely unpredictable and there is no way to stop it. Just as quickly as it starts, it can stop. But you never know when that will be.

In this case, it happened about a hundred yards from where the guys were sprawled on the ground relaxing, and I stood frozen in my tracks. What happened to cause that, I will never know. Maybe there was a break in the timber and it ran out of fuel. Maybe the wind changed. Maybe my Guardian Angel, who mostly slept at the switch, was on the job for once. Maybe we were just plain lucky.

It was over in a matter of seconds, and those rookies never knew that for those brief moments they stood in a good way of becoming charred flesh like that porcupine. I didn't make them any wiser on that score, either, but that was the shortest five-minute break on record.

They grumbled a little when I got them on their feet, but I wanted them out of there before that fire decided to take off again. We had been walking for about three hours and the sun was beginning to get pretty low on the horizon by then. After crossing the draw and breaking back out into the burned area, I led them up a rocky ridge, hoping I could get my bearings. Then we could work our way out of there.

Reaching the top of the ridge, we had made it all the way back across the burned area, so we were at least on the same side as we started that morning. Other than that, I had no idea where we were. By that time it was getting so late I thought that in the few minutes of daylight we had left we had better find a flat place to spend the night. It was pretty plain that these guys wouldn't make it much further.

Up ahead, just the other side of a small stand of pine repro, was a spot that might be likely, and I headed for it, the guys in single file behind me. Breaking through a stand of low reproduction, I ran smack into the truck, right where we had left it that morning. "Here it is! Hooray for the ranger!"

Well, well. Waddyeknow! No one could have been more astonished than I.

## Chapter 12 - The Dawn Patrol

Bud Moore, the man in charge of odd jobs like mine, shook me awake at daylight the next morning. In spite of everyone's best efforts, there was still plenty of fire on the mountain. They had pretty good lines along the flanks, but the head fire was going strong. All the effort and manpower was concentrated there.

The fire boss was a cautious man and wanted to know what was going on behind him at the other end of the fire. It was my job to let him know. I still needed to cover the part of the perimeter I had missed when I got involved with the Air Force.

Fortunately for me, the man in charge of the fire decided those guys really needed a keeper, but, since I already had a job nobody wanted, they assigned them to another "ranger." He was a young, local-district man, fresh out of college, who knew the country and was sure he could keep these guys out of trouble. I wished him luck and got out of there before they changed their minds.

Bud and I had breakfast in the mess tent and I stuffed a couple of bag lunches in my small backpack carry-all. I wasn't planning anymore "rescues," but I didn't know what I might run up against, after what happened before. After that, we stood around and talked a few minutes while our breakfast settled.

As we were leaving, Bud cut himself a chew of tobacco and wallowed it around in his mouth a couple of time before he stained the grass with a long, brown stream. It looked good and smelled so rich, I wasn't much of a chewer, but he made it look so good, I had a sudden urge to try it. He politely offered me a small cut about the size of a wart. I hoped I hid my disappointment in his "generosity" better than I'd hidden my desire to try it.

I didn't think Bud had exactly knocked himself out with that dinky little plug. But us beggars can't afford to be too choosy, and he might have thought I was too much of an amateur to risk a big plug.

I stuck it in my mouth and headed up the ridge toward the fire. I'll have to say that in my mind I was apologizing to Bud long before I got to the top of that ridge. That little pea-sized chew of tobacco got bigger and bigger every step I took.

By the time I reached the top of the ridge that durn plug was big as a watermelon. When I reached the fire line, I cut it down to a size I could handle and wrapped the rest of it in some leaves and stowed it in my pack. That was the juiciest chew I ever saw. I think if everybody had chewed a plug of that tobacco they could have spit the fire out, and we could all go home.

In the meantime, I had a lot of country to cover. With luck, I wouldn't run into any stray Air Force personnel this trip. Actually I didn't see another human being all day, but I saw an ungodly amount of wildlife that had perished in the flames. You would think that anything as fleet as a deer or an elk would be able to get out of the way, but they get confused in the smoke and noise and sometimes run directly into the flames. Other times, the fire just outruns them.

Burrowing animals are the best survivors, but, unless they have a good store of food stashed away, they face starvation in a denuded area when they emerge. Even birds can get caught.

The most pathetic sight, by far, was a sow bear and her cub, reduced to smoldering heaps. They weren't recognizable as animals until I got right up on them. Then I wished I hadn't. I thought of the play on Smoky Bear's slogan that was bantered around the Parachute Loft: "Remember, forest fires prevent bears."

Somehow it wasn't so funny when you saw a couple of bears that had been prevented because someone was careless with a campfire. It seemed useless and wasteful. You get enough wildfires set by lightning, without adding those ignited by man. The good news is that Nature tends to repair herself, given time. But, unless I was mistaken, it would take a while to bring this forest back.

I continued on around the perimeter in the opposite direction I took the day before. Other than a couple of small spot fires that had smoldered across the line, which I plotted carefully on the map they had given me to jot information on, I didn't find anything that I considered especially remarkable. I didn't think it would be very useful to anyone, but I plotted the bear carcasses on it, too. To tell the truth, I just had an urge to commemorate them somehow. Funny how things like that stick in your mind.

Late in the afternoon, after dropping off the ridge in what I hoped would be a shortcut back to camp, I reached a little stream. I suddenly realized this was where the fire started when the guys who were camped here went fishing and

left their fire burning. It was in what had been a little glade right by the stream. The remains of their tent, now mostly ashes, was still staked out where they had left it. The soles of many feet had packed the ground hard all around, showing that, until the fire, this had been a much-used camping area.

There was other evidence of recent human visitation. In fact, it was all over the place. There was a portable Briggs & Stratton gasoline-powered pump sitting on the bank, its intake pipe out in the stream, and what must have been a half mile of hose strewn over the area. I pulled the starter rope several times without results before looking in the gas tank. It was empty. No wonder it wouldn't run. Apparently the crew hadn't thought to check the gas before they abandoned it. They just thought it was a bummed out pump, and didn't bother to retrieve it. Nobody had even noticed and the crew didn't bring it to anyone's attention, thinking a pump that wouldn't run wasn't worth the trouble.

But I figured the fire boss would want to know about it, if he didn't already, and plotted it on the map. I made a note in the margin about the gas, so he wouldn't miss it. There was also about three dozen Pulaskis scattered around where the crew abandoned them when the fire crowned out and they had to run for their lives. When they finally got reassembled and back to the fire line, the fire was two miles away. Crown fires spread fast.

It was getting dark when I finally got back to camp. I was worn out, sweaty, grimy, stinky and starved out, but I thought I'd better turn my information over to the fire boss before going by the mess tent. It was good I did. He was so delighted to find out about that pump, it took his mind off the crises he was facing in camp.

He had sent to the government warehouse in Laramie for six cases of coffee and in the kind of administrative slip up that always causes someone a crisis, they sent him six cases of cough syrup. By the time he discovered the faux pas, the warehouse was closed and the clerk who had committed the blunder was home in bed.

Faced with a possible mutiny when the camp found themselves looking at a caffeine-less wake-up call, if he couldn't come up with some coffee somewhere, he was bemoaning a less-than-perfect world. That's when I walked in with my report. He scowled at the map, grunted noncommittally at my bear memorial, smiled at the information about the Pulaskis, and jumped with joy when he saw the bit about the portable pump.

It seems the Air Force had brought in the pump, but neglected to inform the fire boss. They had also abandoned it without telling him. Communications between the Air Force and the Forest Service left something to be desired.

He had heard rumors of such a pump, but he couldn't find anyone who knew anything about it. My report was the first hard evidence he had gotten that it actually existed. A pump that worked would go a long way toward his being able to control the fire. I told him that I thought all it needed was a little gas and maybe a quart of oil. To avoid any embarrassing scenes such as being hugged by a fire boss, I got out of there as soon as I could and made it to the mess tent.

He retrieved the pump and put it to work right away, because, when I awoke the next morning, which was not early, the first thing I heard was they had gotten a line all the way around the fire during the night. They were now in the first stages of mopping up.

Since no one had bothered to assign me to a mop-up crew, I thought I had better get out of sight before someone got wise. I didn't exactly goof off that day. I just didn't make any noise about where I was, or what I was doing.

I was back in camp about the normal quitting time. A very sweet House of David lady said she didn't know how to make hushpuppies to go with the stringer of fish I handed her, which she was going to fry for me, but she would be glad to try, if I would tell her how. I'll have to say, that lady was a right apt pupil. I never made any that good. Those hushpuppies fairly melted and the mess of trout served six of us well.

That night the smokejumpers were told to pack their gear and be ready to fly out in the morning. Sure enough, right after breakfast, with coffee this time, we loaded onto the Volkswagen buses for the trip to the airport. Old Kokakistan was sitting there waiting. If they had given us time to take a shower, we would have washed off enough grime to have lightened the load and Kokakistan wouldn't have needed near as much runway.

We had a good view of the fire as we headed over the mountains back to Missoula. It appeared as a huge, smoking black scar on a green velour carpet.

I wasn't at all anxious to go back to Big Creek and arrange ligneous material for rapid oxidation, but I was tired of that fire. Perhaps Mr. Good Deal Brauer had undergone a change of heart and wouldn't send us back to Big Creek. I mean, there was always a chance. Then too, there is always a chance, in Montana, that the sound of approaching hoofbeats might be zebras. I wouldn't bet on it, but the chances that it would be zebras are better than the chances of Fred Brauer having a change of heart.

But when he sent us off, he did give us his solemn promise that it would not be for the purpose of piling brush. He further declared that the first time he had been confused by the wording of the project request.

We bought his story. That darn Brauer could make you think a cow was a zebra.

### Chapter 13 - The big Big Creek bark beetle bash

Life is full of surprises, not the least of which is the fact that, thanks to jillions of little bugs holding a family reunion in spruce trees, we didn't go back to piling brush. Fred Brauer actually had told us the truth. I suppose he needed to tell it straight a few times in order to make us believe in all those other "good deals."

Get right down to it, Fred Brauer could get more mileage out of one word of truth than George Washington ever got out of that cherry-tree yarn.

Anyway, a little critter called the spruce bark beetle was wiping out millions of board feet of Engleman spruce. It was a vicious little rascal about the size of a grain of rice, and it could kill a spruce tree before you even knew it was there. It had been around forever, but this was the first time in anyone's memory it had so many kin. They would swarm into a weak or diseased tree in the middle of a healthy stand, and the next thing you knew, they had killed the whole darn stand. And that's a lot of timber.



Naturally, folks whose livelihood depended on that timber were a heap more interested in saving their jobs than in feeding bugs. The Forest Service didn't want to be put out of business by a bug, either, so it was trying to find ways to control the little pests. One method was to cut down a live tree in a bug area. Then, when all the bugs had flocked to it, haul it away, bugs and all.

This was known as the "trap-tree" method. I don't know if it saved many spruce trees or killed many bugs, but it sure was cheaper and a lot less smelly than spraying six counties with DDT.

Starting up near the Canadian line, there must have been a half dozen or so fairly good-sized creeks flowing east into the North Fork of the Flathead. All had excellent fishing possibilities. Since the best stands of spruce grow along waterways, our job was to explore each of these creek basins for bug hits, and map them in. It called for a lot of hiking, but it sure beat arranging ligneous detretus. In a fit of generosity, the Forest Service assigned to us an old worn out decrepit 4WD Dodge Power Wagon that appeared to have been a poor loser in a Demolition Derby. It came equipped with a tent and a large chest of assorted canned goods, flour, meal, and necessaries.

We were instructed to get as far up the drainage as we could before establishing a base camp. We were to fan out from that camp in a pre-arranged pattern and explore the whole basin, which covered several thousand acres. It would take about a week to cover each drainage before we moved on to the next.

Gary Dunford, a first-year jumper name of Thompson, a district man by the name of Dick Dillingham - who was planning to become a jumper the next year, a couple of other guys, and I threw our gear into the back of the Power Wagon, and hauled ass for Coal Creek, the first drainage on our map.

For whatever reason, I ended up driving that monster, which turned out to be about as dubious an honor as being tarred and feathered. I immediately sensed a few peculiarities before we had gotten very far. For instance, turning the wheel to the right, I noticed it had a strong tendency to drift off to the left and vice-versa. This could make a finicky person nervous, especially when meeting someone, because we also had no brakes, and the horn wouldn't blow. I don't suppose that mattered all that much, since the only traffic we were apt to meet was an occasional logging truck. After all, we were sixty miles north of the nearest paved highway. Besides, with the muffler missing, nobody could have heard a horn if we'd had one.

However, I found if we could get the speed up to a measurable amount, less than 40 mph, which was not easy in that vehicle, unless we hit a downgrade, the wagon wouldn't respond to the steering wheel no matter which way it was turned. It wasn't that the vehicle seemed to have a mind of its own. It didn't seem to have a mind at all. Or, if it did, it was a death wish.

Because the road ran parallel to the river on our right, and sometimes several hundred feet above the river, we had a few anxious moments when the truck tended to veer to the starboard. We soon learned to steer by having the guys in the back shift their positions from one side to the other, kind of like on a sailboat.

The shocks, if it had any, weren't much to brag about, therefore, shifting weight gave the wagon a pretty heavy list to one side or the other, but it steered the truck while we were gaining enough headway for the steering wheel to

take over. At least we didn't end up in the river. Coaxing it onto the right-angle turn off the river road onto the Coal Creek truck trail was going to be a problem..

We solved that by gearing down and rolling to a stop as near to where the truck trail met the main road as I could get it, and winching onto the truck trail. Fortunately, the winch was the only other apparatus on the truck that worked, besides the engine. It was kind of ornery work because the trail took off kind of sidling up the mountain side on loose shale. There weren't many trees handy upon which to anchor the cable, but we finally got it headed up the trail.

We spent the entire day alternately winching the truck around sharp bends in the trail and bouncing merrily along when the ruts were deep enough to guide the truck. Several times it bounced clean off the trail, but there wasn't much harm done. After all, what could happen to that thing that hadn't already happened?

Once it glanced off a tree, knocked off a side mirror and crumpled a fender, and forced us to cut a pry-pole to pry the fender off the tire before we could winch her back on the trail and be off again. It more or less went that way for the rest of the day. About early sundown we had worked ourselves back to a good campsite about ten miles up the Coal Creek drainage.

We didn't have a whole lot of time to pitch camp, and we couldn't rely on the truck's headlights to help us. It didn't have any. Actually, it had one when we left the ranger station, but it got smashed when the truck veered into a boulder. We didn't mind too much, because the truck would have gone over a cliff if it hadn't hit the boulder. At that moment, we hadn't been too concerned with the truck's welfare, but all our food was aboard.

While Gary and I pitched the tent, Dillingham headed to the nearby creek to catch supper, and the other guys rounded up firewood. Coal Creek had almost never been fished, and by the time the fire was going well, he was back with a half dozen fat trout. Folks who have never had fresh trout rolled in cornmeal and browned over a campfire just don't know what good eating is. I cut up an onion and made some hushpuppies. The other guys had never seen anything like a hushpuppy, but they scarfed them up, anyhow..

One of the good things about having a truck, even one as beat up, neglected and worn-out as this one, was that you didn't need to worry about the bulk and weight of the stuff you took with you, as you would if you needed to pack supplies in on your back or even on a mule. You could bring a load of bricks if you wished, and that's almost what we did.

Besides a tent as big as Barnum's Circus, we had a food chest full of flour and canned goods, kapok sleeping bags, maps, charts, cameras, pots, pans, axes, hatchets, shovels, trenching tools, paint guns and extra paint (orange) for marking bug trees. We even had Army folding cots, a rare convenience for wilderness camping.

As soon as supper was over and the pots and pans washed, we put those cots to use. I don't think it took anyone long to find their flat side. The heavy labor of the day, the sound of water rushing over rocks, and a full stomach tend to mitigate against any form of insomnia. A delicious restful stillness settled over camp and we became one with the natural world around us.

Sometime during the night I was awakened by one of the denizens of the natural world who had invaded the tent and was gnawing on our food chest. I rolled out of my sleeping bag and, brain still befogged with sleep, saw, in the moonlight filtering through the open end of the tent, the biggest rat I'd ever seen. I had my leg cocked, ready to kick the intruder out, when it occurred to me that rats don't get that big. Even in Montana. I guess it's good I thought better of it because, as my vision, cleared, I discovered I was about to deliver a swift, barefooted kick to a porcupine.

I've seen dogs with porcupine quills in their noses and paws that you couldn't pull out with pliers. Even bears don't normally choose to tangle with porcupines. Maybe that's why porcupines tend to be so laid back. They aren't afraid anything is going to eat them.

They wouldn't be too hard to kill with a stick or rock, and I guess you could eat one, if you could get him skinned, but most animals aren't willing to become pin cushions just to get at a few ounces of meat. Unless they've found out lately, nobody knows how porcupines are able to mate without making shish-k-bob out of their beloved. Apparently porcupines have solved the problem, though, because there is a jillion of them. It must be a pretty delicate operation.

In addition to mysterious mating habits, a porcupine's digestive system is also a marvel. Porcupines will eat most anything. Once, while on that brush-piling detail, we came up on a tractor the loggers had left in the woods over the weekend. Between Friday afternoon and Monday morning, porcupines had chewed up the seat cover, eaten the rubber insulation off all the wiring, consumed the steering wheel, destroyed the floor mats and started on the tires. Apparently one of the tires blew out when they bit through, and the noise scared them off.

Anyway, our guest paid me no heed whatsoever, but went right on chewing his way into our larder, while I went off in search of a shovel. Finding one leaning against a nearby tree, I went back to the tent, scooped him up, pitched him into the woods, and crawled back in my cot without disturbing the other guys.

Just before I dropped off, I heard the gnawing again. Porcupines are also persistent. I guess that's how they get their breeding done. I found out if I turned my back and buried my head in my heavy shirt, I couldn't hear the gnawing. The other guys were wiser than I. They made a point not to hear it the first time.

It had been a long day.

## Chapter 14 - Slaying the dragon

Circling over the meadow by Coal Creek on his morning hunt, a hawk registered a scream of protest upon finding interlopers in his territory. His indignant cry didn't rid his world of interlopers, but it did wake us up. He continued wheeling overhead, crying his protests, while we prepared breakfast.

Before we finished our bacon and eggs, the sun was beginning to reflect pink off the snow-capped peaks of Glacier Park to the east, and light up the broad valley that would be our bailiwick for a while. Outside of our camp, there was not a man-made object within sight. It was nature as God made it; raw, beautiful and untouched. Lush meadows and dark-green forests were enveloped in a

bright-blue sky that promised a perfect day.

The porcupine had disappeared, but he had chewed a big hole in the corner of the food cache. Except for consuming the labels off the cans, he hadn't bothered trying to open them. I guess he thought the glue on the labels and the painted pine lumber of the chest was more palatable than the groceries within. That was a bad sign. He could have been right.

As it turned out, it didn't matter. We managed to catch enough fish and kill enough fool hens that we didn't need to rely too heavily on that food cache, and that was a good thing. You can't really plan meals out of unlabeled cans. But it did make for some spicy combinations, such as chili peppers and pears and things like that. It wasn't very good, but it would hold your interest. It was sort of like playing Russian Roulette with a can opener.

Coal Creek formed a very large basin and we wanted to complete our survey of the bug situation in a week. That wasn't as difficult as it might seem, because we could eliminate several thousand acres of the drier upper portions immediately. Spruce grows in the flats near the water.

We divided the area into several sectors on the map and drew straws to see who covered which sector. It really didn't make much difference, because they were all about the same. My sector covered the north side of Coal Creek, from camp all the way to the river road, and the junction of Coal Creek with the North Fork of the Flathead.

The map showed the area to be bisected by a footpath that ran south from the truck trail we'd come in on, crossed Coal Creek, and ran up the ridge to a fire tower at the top of the ridge. It was logical to follow pretty close to the creek until I struck that trail, up that path to the truck trail and back to camp.

If I could cover the rest of it the next day, I could spend the balance of the week fishing. It was only about a fifteen-mile hike, which I thought I could make in a day, if I started early enough.

As it was, I very nearly didn't even get started. One of the younger guys was using a hatchet peeling a tent pole. Hatchets can be a very dangerous tool. Heads do fly off, and people are always getting hurt when the blade glances off a struck object, I don't know why people think they need to give those things to Boy Scouts, unless they want to eradicate the Boy Scouts. Our young hatchet wielder was a little older than most scouts, but he was still dangerous with a hatchet, and the last thing we needed was a hatchet injury. Being the senior man around, I thought I had better show the greenhorn how to use it before he chopped something that wasn't kindling.

I stopped him in mid-swing and gave him a hands-on safety lesson involving the proper use of bladed tools. To demonstrate, I delivered a mighty blow to the pole he was chopping, and gave him a classic lesson in what-happens-when the hatchet glances off a knot and cut the toe out of your boot with your foot still in it..

The first thing you do is sit down, grab the offended foot, and spin around and around while uttering words like, "Shucks," and "Phooey," and, "Behold, I have struck my foot with the hatchet!" Then you limp to the privacy of your tent and remove your boot, praying all the while that you won't pour your toe out of the boot you just chopped.

Well, I had ventilated the boot, but my toe escaped with a slice wound about a half-inch long in a fleshy part. I did have a wool sock to darn, but all the toe needed was a Band-Aid. I'll have to say it was more embarrassing than harmful, but I was glad to see that, when I left camp on my mission, the kid was using the hatchet with a lot more respect. I had made my point, all right, but I had also made a sandal out of my boot.

An occasional grasshopper exploded from the untrodden meadow grass in my path, as if ignited by some sort of natural proximity fuse. They made good fish bait. The bluegills back home couldn't resist them, and I bet the trout liked them, too. I would find out as soon as I had my sector scouted out. Butterflies flirted with meadow flowers and kissed the morning dew from favored blossoms as I made my way from camp across the few hundred yards of grassy expanse to the dark forest beyond.

It was a good day to be alive, and there was spring in my step in spite of my wounded toe. As I neared the edge of the woods, I could see that a trail of cracker crumbs left by Hansel and Gretel could not have led me into a more primeval forest. I felt I must have been the first human intruder to trespass there since the beginning of time. A bio-cathedral of towering giants held a canopy of foliage, admitting only dappled tokens of sunlight that filtered to the damp floor below.

Spruce is not wind-firm, and the forest floor was littered with an eons' accumulation of giants that had come crashing to earth where there was no one to hear and where solitude reigned.

It was easier to travel through the woods by walking along the downed trunks and jumping from one to another than to try to stay on the ground and be constantly climbing over them. Once I was startled out of my wits when the log I had just landed on exploded beneath my feet.

A young bull moose had wallowed himself a bed right beneath my landing spot. It was like stepping on a freight train. He didn't attack, but I orangeed him up good with my paint gun as he went by. He was probably as startled as I was, but, if he was, that bed was no longer fit to sleep in. Some hunter might be even more astonished at the sight of an orange moose that fall, than the moose and I were at encountering each other.

I had located and mapped four widely separated bug hits by the time the afternoon was drawing to a close. They were easy to spot. Each bug hit was spotlighted by bright sunlight that came shining through the needleless bug killed trees.

The sun was getting low, and I figured I should have come across that footpath long before. After checking a log to see that it didn't conceal a stray moose, I sat down to study the map and ponder the situation.

I didn't really mind spending the night in the woods, although it wouldn't be nearly as comfortable as that Army cot. I had caught a couple of trout at lunch and still had a little food in my light pack. I knew I wouldn't starve. But everyone took it for granted that all of us would be back in camp by dark. It would be a shame to have the guys out looking for me at night when I wasn't even lost.

I could go back the way I came, but it would be awfully tough jumping from

log to log in the dark. While these thoughts ran through my mind and I was studying the map, it suddenly dawned on me that I was sitting smack in the middle of that trail! It was as if it were suddenly lit up.

The trail had probably been cut through maybe forty or fifty years before and never used, but once a virgin area is disturbed by axe and saw, the signs never entirely disappear. The evidence was very, very faint, but as I looked closely the signs of disturbance became crystal clear. An old sawed trunk here, a chopped limb there, a slight opening in the bushes. It would have been impossible to spot in an urban situation, but there in that pristine wilderness, it was very plain.

Everything a couple of feet either side was completely natural, but where humans had been was ever so slightly disordered and out of tune with its surroundings. It was like the voice of the turtle. You needed to be very quiet to hear it.

I sat there a long while pondering that which had just been revealed to me. Guys like Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett were great trackers, and I'm not comparing my experience to theirs, but it gave me better understanding of their prowess. They could track over virgin country where anything that gets disturbed is noticeable by sharp eyes and alert senses. I slowly rose and followed the new found path in the fading daylight, and hit the truck trail right at twilight. I still had a five-mile hike back to camp, but a truck trail isn't too hard to see, even by moonlight.

We finished scouting our sectors the next day and spent Thursday fishing, lying around camp and working up our reports. Altogether we had located about thirty bug hits, and I discovered that grasshoppers worked pretty well on trout, but not like they did on bluegills. We all got pretty well stuffed on trout.

Next day we broke camp and prepared to wrestle that old Power Wagon back down the mountain. It would have no doubt been a great favor to the Forest Service or somebody if we had merely abandoned it and walked back, but we didn't.

As senior man, I was once again the designated driver, but it sure wasn't a thing I was looking forward to. The other guys were looking to me. I thought they were leaning on a pretty slender reed, but I hated to let them down. I suppose that is one of the burdens of leadership.

It was all we could do to lug that food chest full of unlabeled cans back aboard the truck. Cans kept spilling out the porcupine hole. I would have left it there, if I thought the ranger could be convinced we ate it all. If anything, getting off that mountain was tougher than the trip in. We spent most of the day trying to either keep the truck from going off the side of the mountain, or running into trees.

I'd been on some long walk-outs before, but I had never gotten as worn out as I did on that "ride-out". It was brutal, but at last we reached the sharp downgrade that ran about three hundred yards across loose shale before it hit the river road at right angles.. Just a few feet beyond that was the river.

There was not a single tree to winch to. That meant I had to get up enough steering speed to make that turn onto the river road. Given the degree of slope, that wouldn't be too difficult, but if my timing was off or the steering didn't take hold, without brakes, I would shoot across the road into a deep, wild,

rock-strewn river. I calculated the floatation factor of that old truck to be less than that of a lead brick. There was also a good chance the truck would flip over if I made that turn too fast.

All in all, I don't think a bookie would give me very good odds of survival.

Abandoning ship and walking back to the Ranger Station would have been by far the practical thing to do, and the temptation was great, but, darn it, I felt responsible for that wreck of a vehicle and the whole crew.

Getting them all back was a challenge. I wish I hadn't felt that way. It would have been very simple to leave the truck where it was, walk home, and let the ranger worry about it, but it wouldn't have been very responsible.

Then, too, I had some cock-a-mamie idea that the reputation and honor of the smokejumpers was at stake, and I couldn't let them down. I was the sole passenger on this journey down the slippery slope. As the Captain of the Titanic, if not successful, I would go down with the ship. I gritted my teeth, dropped it in gear and tromped on it before I chickened out and forgot all that "honor" baloney..

I had it in low gear and four-wheel drive, as that was the nearest thing to brakes I had, and off we went.. The engine was wound as tight as I could get it and the truck was bucking and bouncing off that loose shale like a golf ball on rough pavement. It was all I could do to stay in it, but I was going much too fast to abandon ship.

The left fender crunched against a big boulder and the truck swerved to the right toward the edge of a drop-off. I spun the wheel as far to port as it would go and hoped I had enough speed for the steering to grab hold. With no time to pray, it caught!

Somewhere along the way what was left of the tailpipe fell off and the engine roared straight out of the manifold. Exhaust fumes filled the cab. Tears filled my eyes but, though I was nearly blinded, I could catch a glimpse of River Road coming up fast. I spun the wheel to the right as far as it would go and shot out onto River Road, in a cloud loose gravel and dust, pitching and snorting like a wild bull. The truck tipped up on two wheels, the food chest and gear flew out, scattering goods everywhere, and the truck skidded to a soft landing against the low bank on the river side of the road. That was the only thing that kept the truck from tipping over into the drink.

The engine died. I came close, myself. Steam hissed from under the hood and I thought I heard water dripping somewhere. The thought flashed in my mind that it might be gasoline and I had better get out of there. The door was jammed, but I bailed out the window just as Gary and the boys ran up. They were right excited and clapped me on the back and congratulated me as if I had just won the seventh game of the World Series.

I felt kind of rubber-legged and sat down while the guys gathered up all the parts and personal gear and canned food that had shaken off. They thought I was nonchalant and modest about the whole thing. Fact was, I was petrified and speechless. I wouldn't have taken that ride again at the point of a gun.

By the time they got the parts retrieved and the chest loaded up again, I was restored enough to begin the final lap. But when I gave the door a jerk to

get it unjammed, it fell off. We threw it in the back and took off. Smoke filled the cab, but with no windows and the door off, the wind carried the smoke and fumes away. I could see pretty well, but it was no easy job to get the truck to go where I was looking..

When we wheeled into the Ranger Station everybody there had turned out to watch us come in. They had heard us coming for miles and saw the smoke, too. It probably would have been a joyful homecoming if I hadn't rammed the cookhouse to get stopped. The cook took a dim view of that because it jarred his stove flue loose, which came uncoupled, filling the kitchen with soot.

The truck engine wheezed, coughed a time or two, and, with a final rattle, expired on the spot - a toothless dragon, no longer breathing fire. It was a sorry sight, with one door off, left fender crumpled, no side mirrors, windshield shattered, headlights smashed, tailgate missing, steam boiling out from under the hood and smoke rising out of the cab. I had gone to all that trouble to deliver a junk yard.

Considering what I had gone through, it hardly seemed worth it, but at least no one else would be forced to do combat with that thing. It gave me a good feeling, as if I had slain a dragon, but I didn't tell anybody that. They would think I was crazy.

The ranger walked over and patted the smoking heap and gave a little shudder. I think he might have been attached to it in some way, but no power on earth could resurrect that carcass. Whatever its glorious past might have been, it was dead, and, as far as I was concerned, good riddance.

While we were eating a supper of baloney sandwiches, which we made ourselves, along with some unlabeled surprises salvaged from the food chest, a call came to inform us that a truck would be there in the morning to take the jumpers back to Missoula. They were getting fire calls from down around Hamilton and Darby. We wouldn't see Big Creek again, but, somehow, I don't think the tear the ranger wiped from his eye, as he gave us the news, was for us.

## Chapter 15 - Little Joe

Somehow, from its very inception, the Smokejumper Project has had a reputation of attracting kind of off-beat people to its ranks. Well I am here to tell you that it's not true. That is a false misconception, for which the jumpers take a bad rap, and was probably started by a letter from the Head of the Forest Service to the Chief of the proposed Aerial Firefighting Project way back in 1938. He warned the Chief that "all parachute jumpers are crazy," and to "be on guard as to whom you hire".

That was a most unfortunate and inaccurate assessment. Earl Cooley, who made the first fire jump was definitely not a whacko. He might have leaned a bit toward the mule-headed side, but definitely not crazy. Our current leader, Mr. F.O. Good Deal Brauer, may be crafty, but he isn't crazy.

By all reports, Frank and Chet Derry sure weren't crazy. A little odd, perhaps, but no more odd than the Wright brothers, and certainly not crazy when they developed a steerable 'chute. Until then, a parachutist was at the mercy of the wind, much like a balloonist. Their steerable 'chute employed the use of two slots in the canopy, which spilled air and could be opened or closed alternately



by two steering lines. The steerable 'chute enables the smokejumper to maneuver safely into small openings in the forest canopy and make aerial firefighting possible.

College boys have always made up a goodly percentage of smokejumper personnel, and, Lord knows, you couldn't find a more sober set than those budding young scientists. Creative people are often misunderstood by the public they seek to serve, and that's the sort of people the smokejumpers tend to attract. But definitely not kooks.

Take, for instance, the guy who joined the jumpers from right there in Missoula. He came from the University of Montana right after the project was adopted as a part of the Forest Service firefighting arm. While the Derrys were developing the slotted 'chute, he was developing a safety device to help prevent the rash of sprained ankles being suffered during training jumps.

The simple safety device consisted of a couple of large paddle-like feet. The two paddles, one pair for each foot, were about the size of a snowshoe, (in fact, the prototype was two pairs of old snowshoes) joined together by a set of very special, strong and powerful, high-tempered, state-of-the-art springs resembling common bedsprings (in fact, they were common bedsprings). The idea in this young physicist's mind was that the paddles would distribute the weight evenly, and the springs would absorb the shock of landing, thus preventing ankle injuries. Simple and effective.

As you might imagine, he had trouble with the ascetic-minded aristocratic authorities who ran the project, and wished to remain aloof of any new innovations. In their close-minded attitude, they failed to see the unlimited possibilities of this simple revolutionary invention. They deemed the idea as somewhat, well, cock-a-mamie, and withheld their blessings upon this far-reaching, ankle-saving, visionary device.

Permission was finally granted at the persuasion of none other than our beloved F.O. "Good Deal" Brauer, whose historic and prophetic words, "Let the stupid jerk kill himself. It's his neck. Put him out of the Ford," turned the tide

With blessings secured, our man was ready for his date with destiny. They took him up in the Ford. Forest Service officials and the entire compliment of smokejumpers, plus a goodly contingent of passers-by, gathered to witness history in the making.

Eyes shaded from the sun, they watched the Ford circle for altitude. With three thousand feet finally attained, the plane leveled off and begin the approach run. The demonstration area was a large, flat meadow with a few large trees scattered throughout.. There was no wind to speak of, and the spotter carried him directly over the center of the meadow. There was practically no chance to miss it.

On the ground the crowd waited with bated breath as the cumbersome Ford made its approach. Finally the pilot chopped the engines, an object bearing a strong resemblance to Eveready Bunny tumbled out. After awhile a canopy blossomed, and they watched the rabbit descend slowly and gracefully toward the meadow.

It no doubt would have been an event comparable to Lindy's landing at Orly Airport, except Lindy didn't land in a hundred-and-fifty-foot ponderosa pine

tree, as did our hero. The demonstration was over. The disappointed crowd dispersed and left him suspended there, paddles flapping in the breeze. Fred locked up and went home..

Sometimes it's difficult for true genius to be recognized in a cold, indifferent world, and society fails to benefit from their acumen. Such was the case in this event, and untold thousands of ordinary smokejumpers might have needlessly suffered sprained ankles as a result.

You may think what you please, but smokejumpers do not attract weirdoes.

\*\*\*\*\*

I rode in the cab with Caseri, who was the driver of the truck that came to pick us up the next morning. He was on light duty since his accident in the swimming pool. His nose, both elbows, and one knee were skinned pretty badly. He limped and his wrist was in a cast. In spite of that he was about as bouncy as ever. He claimed to be a fast healer. He also told me he hoped to be back on jump status in about a week.

It was a very freak accident that put him out of commission, and wouldn't have happened at all, if the pool had possessed a spring board, as any self-respecting pool should. Or if the roof of the bath house had been a mere one foot closer to the pool. Several elements seemed to conspire to bring about the disaster.

First, Caseri, who was an excellent athlete, wanted to dive. Second, Patrick MacGiffin, an Irishman who would wager on anything, called him chicken and bet he couldn't make it to the pool from atop the bath house. Caseri couldn't sit still for that, especially from an Irishman. He lost the bet, but only by a very narrow margin. He gave a mighty leap and did a neat belly-flopper on the edge of the concrete. As it turned out, it was lucky he fell short. As he told it, the bath house was at the shallow end of the pool where the water was only about two feet deep, and he might have broken his neck diving into water that shallow.

At any rate, Caseri said that guys were being sent out on fires as fast as they were brought in, so we wouldn't have long to wait. He was right. When we pulled in, the Ford was sitting on the apron with the engines idling. Joe Gutkowski was already aboard with his spotters Kit. Max Allen and Little Joe Roemer, were suiting up. Gary and I were told to join them. That was fast. We usually at least had time to get something to eat.

But in less than half an hour we were airborne, hungry and over-the-Bitterroots outward bound. Lolo Peak, which stays snowcapped year round, passed beneath the left wing and slowly receded behind us. Not that it mattered much, but we were headed for Idaho.

After about a forty-five-minute ride, during which time we alternately napped and peered at the scenery, we began circling our fire, which was a small one. It looked like an old, dead snag and some light brush. It was burning on a rocky slope near the top of a round top ridge. It shouldn't have been too tough a blaze, but one could never tell. We knew one thing, it was in the heart of some pretty remote country. Even from our lofty altitude, there wasn't a road in sight, only timber-covered mountain sides.

A small river snaked through meadows before disappearing into a narrow

gorge. The floor of the valley was dotted with beaver ponds and patches of flower-covered bogs. It was going to be a long walk out, but first we needed to worry about getting down to put out the fire.

After considering all the alternatives, of which there weren't any, Gutkowski determined that one place was about as good as another. He was going to put us down in the timber as near to the fire as he could without our getting singed in the process.

Although it was our necks that would be in a sling if anything went wrong, the spotter had the last word in the matter. It was his responsibility to get us down safely. It was our problem to put the fire out, once we got there. As senior man, Max Allen, a four year jumper, was in charge of the fire.

In any case, nobody argued. We had all been there before. We knew our jobs, and we knew the rules.

Max was the first man out and we watched him land on the ridge near the fire. He waved at us to show that he was safely down. Little Joe prepared to exit on the next pass, which he did, and it was my turn. Gary would be the last man out.

Gutkowski checked all my equipment and made sure I didn't have any static lines wrapped around my arm or my neck, as had been previously known to occur. All was well and, outside the usual adrenaline rush and a dry mouth, I was ready to go.

We mushed in. I was gazing at the tree-studded meadow we passed over just before the pilot cut the engines and Joe tapped me on the shoulder. I guess I must have been looking down too much, because I sort of tumbled, or maybe the propwash flipped me over. Anyway, I know I had that good vertical body position you want when the 'chute opens. The problem was I was upside down. When the shock came, there was something like a roar as the NFL-type football helmet, with the heavy wire-mesh face guard attached, popped off my head like a cap off a beer bottle.

I saw nothing but stars. When they cleared away, I saw my helmet disappearing toward the meadow far below. My only thought was, "I've got to find that helmet. My ears are in it." Besides that, Fred Brauer was sure to make me pay for it by putting me on brush-piling detail for the rest of my life.

To heck with the fire. I steered for the meadow. I could always tell the others that I went for the only open spot because a timber landing was too dangerous without a face mask and helmet. But that argument was put to rest when a small committee of trees rose to meet me and I landed in the top of the tallest one.

Fortunately, it was a fir with soft, yielding branches, but I still got a pretty good swipe across my face when I crashed down through the boughs. My downward progress finally came to a halt, and I was left dangling like a hung ham about forty feet from the ground. My nose was bleeding, but nothing seemed to be broken.

Meanwhile, back in the plane, Gary and Gutkowski had seen my helmet fly off and saw me chasing it toward the meadow. They watched me all the way down, and saw me hang up in that big tree. When Gary went out, he steered straight for the meadow, in case I needed help. I had just crawled out of that tree when he

landed about twenty feet away. It wasn't the first time I had climbed out of a tree I had never climbed up, but it was the first time I had come down with two black eyes and a bloody nose.

The first order of business was to get the parachute out of the tree. While we were scrambling around getting that done, we made two remarkable discoveries. One was a Forest Service trail where we could stash our gear for the packer. The other was my helmet. That was two licks of good fortune we weren't expecting.

The helmet looked as if it might have gone head to head a couple of times with Mean Joe Greene. The face mask was a tad warped, but the darn thing was still fastened just as it had been when it popped off my head. It didn't seem possible for my head to come through an opening that small, but that would go a long way toward explaining the two black eyes, the bloody nose, sore chin and the big knot under each ear.

After sacking our gear and flagging it for the packer, Gary and I headed for the fire before it got away from Max and Little Joe. They also had all the food, the thought of which might have spurred us on a little. It was getting late in the afternoon by now, and Gary and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. We were hungry when we first climbed aboard the plane. By the time we climbed the ridge to the fire, we were famished. But since the fire was beginning to run, there still wasn't time to eat. We needed to get a line around it pronto. This four-man fire was about to become an eight-man fire, and Missoula just didn't have the troops available right then to help us out, even if we had possessed the means of calling for them.

Even Little Joe, who had goofing off down to a science, felt called upon to make every lick count. This was exceedingly usual, and we felt privileged to witness the rare event of Little Joe actually doing productive work.

You might think we resented his ability to deceive his supervisors into thinking he was working, when in fact he might be napping, but such was not the case. We showed him the deepest respect and held him in awe. He in turn, as befits a champion, modestly accepted as his due, our veneration of his God-given talent and world-class loafing abilities. In his field, he stood alone, the unassailable master.

It was inspiring to know that in times of crisis Little Joe would abandon his throne and assist us ordinary mortals. For the sake of his reputation among his peers, he might not have risked his crown by so valiant an effort, if real supervisory personnel had been present, but all we had was Max, and he didn't count. He was not a supervisor. He was merely senior man among senior men, and had been first-hand witness to many of Little Joe's triumphs. As far as we all were concerned, Little Joe's record was unblemished and word of his lapse would never escape us.

By the time evening shadows began to lengthen, we had closed the line, thanks in part to Little Joe's Herculean efforts. Barring something unforeseen, there was little danger of the fire getting away. At last we could rest a little and eat.

But we couldn't eat very much, as it turned out. While we were absorbed in Little Joe's heroic efforts, Most of our food drop got blown over the edge of the canyon and scattered all over the side of the mountain.. It would be at least two more days before we could leave the fire, and we would be on pretty

short rations in the meantime..

## Chapter 16 - Long days and short rations

The guy who invented C-rations must have worked long and hard before he figured out how to take the flavor out but leave the bulk. The only thing that varies is the texture. If you want flavor, you must imagine a flavor that fits the texture. But if you are starving, and C-Rations are all you have to eat, you'll eat them and want more. But you do need to be pretty hungry.

Gary and I were bad hungry that evening. We hadn't eaten anything since before daylight, and, with the cook at Big Creek still pissed off at us for messing up his kitchen, it was hard to tell the eggs from toast. Since then, we'd bounced a hundred and fifty miles in the back of a truck, flown to another state, climbed a mountain, and fought a fire.

Gary and I divided a can labeled "hamburger." It could have been anything, for all you could tell by looking at the contents. It was lumps of something like ground golf balls in a sort of semi-liquid that could have been either gravy or axle grease. We couldn't tell which, but it didn't matter. It didn't taste like much, but it gave us a lot to chew on. We ate it, then licked the can.

At first we had enough to keep us occupied and our minds off food. But, as time went on and we got hungrier, thoughts of food kept returning to plague us. Hunger eventually became more unrelenting than the blaze.

We got a line around the fire pretty quick, but there was a lot of brush - old blown-down trees, snags, stumps and ground litter - that continued to burn. Until that fuel was exhausted, we had to keep an eye on it. We each did a shift during the night, patrolling the line and making sure the fire stayed inside.

In the meantime, we tried to make the food last until we got the fire out. It was a touchy situation. The fire had more fuel than we did. It became a question of who was going to run out first - us or the fire - and it was a pretty safe bet that we would.

By the end of the second day, we were running neck and neck with the fire. By the morning of the third day, we had consumed the last crumb of food. We had even divided up the soap bar that looked like candy, or the candy bar that tasted like soap. We never could decide which. In any case, grimy as we were, we thought we were hungrier than we were dirty, so we ate it. Although it cost me a filling, we even ate the crackers.

The fire was about out, but we still had to finish mopping up. If we were lucky, it would only take the better part of a day. While three of us were mopping up, the fourth would be out scouting around for a berry patch or anything edible.

No doubt a survival expert would have found something edible even on that barren ridge, but we weren't survival experts. As desperate as we were becoming, we still couldn't find a darn thing to eat. It was as if an omnivorous nature had consumed itself in order to deprive us. There was just nothing edible on that ridge.

Not even Fred Brauer would have expected us to starve ourselves plumb out fighting that little fire. We could have left it most anytime and gone on to the Ranger Station, and nobody would have thought worse of us. But, doggone it, we had our pride. We were veterans and pros. We were sent out there to put the fire out and, by golly, that's what we were going to put! Besides, the Ranger Station was twenty-five miles distant.

Late in the afternoon we heard a single engine droning from far away - but coming closer. It was the Cessna they used to fly patrols and check on old fires to make sure they hadn't flared up again. Old gimpy-armed Tuniga would be aboard guiding the pilot to the red "X" on the map.

The drone got nearer. Gene was unerringly homing in on us. The little plane finally hove into view from the southwest, where they'd been checking other fires that had been burning in that quadrant. They had decided to give us a fly-by on their way back to Missoula. They obviously had no way of knowing we were out of rations, and we didn't have any way of getting that vital information to them.

The plane made a couple of wide circles, then came straight at us for a low pass. Little Joe was probably the most visible of us. He was standing on a huge boulder, waving, jumping up and down, and shouting.

"Drop us some food, you bastards," he yelled. "We're starving."

The plane came straight for Little Joe. I thought it was going to knock him right off the rock. Little Joe must have thought so, too, because he made a dive for the bushes and buried his head in his arms. But, as if in answer to his prayers, the plane disgorged a little 'chute of the sort spotters used to check the drift before we jumped. It was weighted with a small package, which drifted to the ground not twenty feet away.

Max retrieved it and tore open the package. Inside was a note and a baloney sandwich. Max read the note aloud.

"Steak at the Ox tonight. Enjoy the baloney. - G"

Gene didn't mean to torture us. He just didn't know we had a problem. We could laugh about it later when our bellies were full, but right then it wasn't too funny. In the meantime, we made the most of it by solemnly dividing the sandwich into four equal parts. It wasn't much, but it was a lot more than the nothing we expected.

The fire was out, but it was much too late in the afternoon to make it out to the Ranger Station before dark. We could only go as far as we could and make camp. No need to try to hike at night when you can't see the trail or where you're going. You could walk right off a cliff.. If there was one thing we didn't need to do right then, it was fall off a cliff or get lost.

However, desperate circumstances breed desperate measures, and we were flat desperate. Donning our headlights, we took off. We didn't need to worry about losing the trail, there wasn't any. We picked our way down the mountain toward the meadow where Gary and I had landed to strike the trail where we had stashed our gear. Max and Little Joe could stack their gear beside ours and we would be on our way.

According to our map, it was about twenty-five miles to the Ranger Station

where we were to be picked up. That's an awfully long walk-out under good conditions. On an empty stomach, it's murder. .

The sun had just about set by the time we reached the meadow. Max and Joe shed their burdens of heavy gear, and we swung off single-file onto the trail, heading west toward the sun's rapidly receding rays.

We made about four or five miles before giving in to advancing fatigue. My stomach rumbled all night, and well before dawn's early light we were back on the trail. Our shadows grew shorter as the day became brighter and hotter, but upon entering the deep woods, all shadows became one, dappled with shafts of filtered sunlight. Everything there smelled of lush foliage, ancient moss covered wind-thrown trees, lichen-coated rocks and dripping spring water. In places the path was kept well-worn, not by human traffic, but by creatures of the forest. They chose to follow a path of least resistance, instead of breaking through brush to make paths of their own, except where they might deviate to a salt lick or den.

We followed the trail for what seemed like an eternity, occasionally breaking into open park-like stands of ponderosa or crossing sunny meadows, only to plunge into dark forests beyond. We had plenty of water in our canteens, but it was the thought of food that drove us. One-fourth of a baloney sandwich isn't much to live on for a twenty-five-mile hike, and we had eaten that hours before.

All I could think about was a big, juicy steak at the Ox. I could visualize Gene taking a big bite of rib-eye and swallowing it with a big swig of beer. The thought made my stomach growl, and I tried thinking of something else. Nothing seemed to work. It was hard to get a vision of that steak out of my mind. I could almost smell it. I seemed to be obsessed with thoughts of T-bones.

I tried turning my thoughts to Maggie. I could see her face plainly. Then she would pucker up to start telling me how foolish we were to let a bear steal our food. But before she could say anything, she turned into a lamb chop with peas, mashed potatoes and gravy. The next thing I knew, my stomach would growl again, and I would be thinking of prime rib.

I think the other guys were having similar thoughts, because none of us talked much. Every once in a while someone would groan, but talk wasted too much energy. About every hour we stopped for a break to study the map for a shortcut. There weren't any. As near as we could figure, we were making about four miles an hour, which meant that on that winding trail we were actually doing a little over three miles, as the crow flew. That was pretty slow going. At that rate, we were going to be on the trail most of the day. Supper seemed a far distant goal, but it never left our minds. The pot at the end of our rainbow was full of beans.

The trail, which had been on a long gradual upslope, began to trend downward, which helped considerably. According to the map, there was a fair-sized stream not quite halfway to the Ranger Station. Maybe if we were lucky, we could catch a few fish to stave off starvation. There never was a smokejumper who didn't carry a few yards of leader and a couple of flies in his personal kit.

When we finally reached the stream the darned thing was bigger than we thought. That might have been a problem if the Forest Service hadn't seen fit to construct a sort of a cable trolley over the stream. It consisted of a wire basket slung on two pulleys that ran along a single cable stretched over the stream. There was a small, rusty cable attached to each end of the basket, so it

could be retrieved from either side of the river. Someone on the far bank could help in pulling it over. But if there was nobody on the far side, the man in the basket had to pull himself across.

It was tad primitive, but it worked. However, it hadn't worked in a pretty good while, and we didn't know how strong the rusty cable was. After a short conference, we decided to risk the lightest man. Though he was obviously the lightest man, Little Joe had no desire to blaze any trails, especially by crossing a raging river in a Rube Goldberg contraption. He objected vigorously, but to no avail.

Majority ruled by three votes and more than a quarter ton of starving beef. It was opposed by a minority of one vote and a hundred and twenty pounds of quivering flesh. Little Joe was about to become a hero, whether he wanted to or not. To make it even more imperative, the quieter pools where the fish lay were out of our reach over near the far bank.

Little Joe, resigned to his fate, climbed into the hamper under his own steam and managed to pull himself all the way to mid-stream before the small, rusty cable parted, leaving him stranded midway of the river, about ten feet above the turbulent waters. In this situation, needless to say, Little Joe could not be described as a happy camper. But, driven by hunger, he carried on like a trooper.

We could have pulled him back to safety, but he would have none of that. Instead, he reached overhead and, grabbing the main cable with his gloved hands, began handwalking himself forward. We cheered him on and he was doing pretty well until he suddenly gave a piercing scream, clutched his hand to his chest, and bailed out of the basket into the frigid waters. Fortunately, he landed in one of the calmer pools near the far shore and quickly scrambled up the far bank to safety, still clutching his left hand.

We stared at each other in utter astonishment. That move didn't make much sense, even for Little Joe. We concluded Little Joe was in trouble, but what kind of trouble? . Something had happened to cause that bizarre behavior, but what? Did something sting him? It just wasn't like the boy to just let loose and dive into a river when he was nearly across.

We watched as Little Joe lay writhing on the bank, still clutching his hand. He answered our shouts of inquiry with "Ahhhh! Ahhhh! Ahhhhh! Ohhhhh!" That didn't tell us a great deal, except we knew he was in pain. Our best guess was that maybe there had been an undetected wasp nest in the basket.

"Ahhhhh! Oooooo! Ahhhhhh!" Little Joe cried.

We quickly retrieved the trolley. Someone had to get to him, quick!

Without wasting time, I got in the basket and over the river as fast as I could go. When I got to Little Joe, he was rocking back and forth, bloody hand cradled on his chest, blood all over his shirt. I couldn't get much out of him at first, except moans and several purple words, but there was no doubt he was hurting.

"Kee-rist-O-Mighty!" he kept moaning. Sometimes it was, "Holy Moses!"

In any case, the wasp theory was dashed. A fountain of blood spouted from his hand. You don't bleed that much from a wasp sting.



"HeeeeeYeweeeeOhOwOhhOhOh!" Joe moaned as he rocked and bled.

Gary and Max were over the river by then and had gathered around.

"Damn trolley ran over my finger and cut it off."

He shook his hand slightly and groaned again. One of the pulleys from which the trolley basket was suspended had run over his finger as he was pulling himself across. The flanges of the pulley were sharp and, under Joe's weight, easily cut off a finger.

"Is your finger still in your glove?" Max asked.

"I think so," Little Joe answered.

Max carefully helped him ease the glove off, and shaking it, out fell the tip end of Little Joe's index finger. Max examined it, and announced he thought he could catch some fish with it.

"Yep, lopped 'er right off, all right," he said. "Clean as a whistle."

Since Little Joe continued to bleed like a blood-spouting fire hydrant, we thought it was important, while Max fished, we would get the bleeding stopped, and get his hand bound up as quickly as possible. At the rate he was losing blood, he would soon be out.

We did finally get it stopped, but not before using all the gauze in the first-aid kit and Little Joe's shirttail to boot. He protested when we tore up his shirt, but it kind of trailed off to a whimper after we gave him a shot of Demerol from the Demerol kit they always gave us on a jump, in case a jumper was badly injured. It happened more often than we liked to think.

I'm not too sure we should have done that because, not long after, Little Joe, still babbling incoherently, passed completely out. I didn't know if it was from the loss of blood, shock or the Demerol, but he became blissfully peaceful. If he stayed like that for long, and it appeared he would, we were going to need to carry him the rest of the twelve long miles to the Ranger Station.

While Gary and I prepared a litter for Little Joe out of mine and Joe's jump jackets and two poles, Max was catching fish.

"Bull trout must like fingers," he held up three nice bull trout..

There was something about fishing with Joe's finger that disturbed Gary's sense of decorum. "You can't go around fishing with a man's finger," he protested.

"Why not?" Max asked reasonably. "They're not biting anything else I've tried."

"Well, because it just isn't done," Gary said, not quite convinced of his own reason.

"Show me where it says you can't fish with human body parts," Max said, and I'll throw these fish back. They sure aren't hitting the flies we have. Besides that, the Bible says, 'Waste no, want not,' doesn't it? There ain't no

need wasting it and furthermore, according to my Bible, a fish ate Jonah, whiskers and all, and all I want to do is use a little bitty piece of finger what Joe won't even hardly miss."

Gary couldn't marshal any strong arguments against Max's liberal use of Biblical authority and plain logic. He tried, but in the short battle that raged between his stomach and heart, the stomach won hands down.

"I'll build a fire," he said and went to look for dry wood.

By the time we got a good, hot, little, cooking fire going, Max came back with a half-dozen good-size trout.

"Last one got away with the finger," he announced. "Wasn't much left."

Glancing at our peacefully snoozing patient, he added, "Joe won't need it anymore anyway."

It doesn't take long to clean and cook a trout. Given our famished condition, it took us even less time to eat them. We saved one for Little Joe, in case he woke up. After all, he did donate the bait.

Joe didn't wake up. He might have stirred a little when we picked him up and started on down the trail, but he didn't even wake up when one of the litter poles broke and we spilled him on the ground. He wasn't faking it just to get a free ride. That boy was in deep slumber.

By spelling each other every hour, with two men carrying the litter while the other rested, we made slow but steady progress. A couple of miles from our destination, we were pretty fairly bushed and gave serious consideration to flagging Little Joe and leaving him by the trail for the packer to pick up in the morning. That idea got vetoed pretty quickly. Brauer probably wouldn't have liked it, and it wouldn't have spoken very well for smokejumper loyalty. Besides that, Little Joe would never let us hear the last of it. So we made the best of it and struggled on.

We got to the Ranger Station about dark and turned our load over to the assistant ranger and the dispatcher. Little Joe slept on, which was fine with us. We would divide his steak, which the cook was preparing.

The ranger told us about the spotter plane. After leaving us, they had one more fire to check before heading back to Missoula. A downdraft caught them on a low pass over the fire and they went into the mountain. Gene and the pilot were killed. Gene never got to the Ox.

Next day the Ford landed on the little dirt strip and carried us back to Missoula.

## Chapter 17 - A farewell to flames

Seasons change rapidly in northern climes. Days were getting shorter. Summer was drawing to a close and with it, the fire season. Probably my last.

Several of the guys had already pulled out. Fall was coming on. You could feel it in the air and see it in the turning of the leaves. Nature's symphony

was subtly changing keys. Songs of autumn began filling the air.

Ducks felt the coming change and even a duck has more sense than to spend a winter in Montana. They chatted and giggled like a bunch of schoolgirls in new prom dresses. Flocks of them were leaving the marshes at Nine Pipes with all the fanfare of snowbirds departing Grand Central Station for Miami.

A "V" of geese silhouetted against a later-summer moon passed high overhead, honking their way south. The sight reminded me I would also soon be headed south. Traveling at night, they would surely arrive before I would. It was a couple of weeks before school started and I wasn't in a big hurry. But time was running out.

I didn't want to make a big thing out of it even to myself, but somehow I didn't feel like the same person who had stepped off the train in Missoula four years before. I couldn't exactly put my finger on it, but something sure wasn't the same. Two years of the 82nd Airborne sandwiched between two years of smokejumping are apt to change anybody's outlook. A person can't learn to cope with death without gaining an appreciation of life. I don't mean that it changes you completely, but life does take on a new dimension.

It was in this frame of mind that my thoughts naturally drifted back to why I had come to Missoula in the first place. The answer, of course, was to impress Miss Howland - at that time, the girl of my dreams. I shuddered and blushed to myself. It just wasn't a vision I had meant to conjure up right then. I hadn't given her a thought in years. Why was she intruding now?

In a wink, her vision disappeared to be replaced by a stronger vision of Maggie. Good, old, practical, down-to-earth Maggie. I didn't think of her all that often, either, but when I did, it didn't cause me to shudder. There was a big difference between the two. The vision of Maggie wouldn't go away, and I was grateful. Suddenly, for some unknown reason, I had a great urge to see Maggie. Before I could suppress it, a laugh bubbled up. Some of the guys stared at me kind of strangely and, shocked me back to reality.

Miss Howland had intruded into my thoughts like a gate crasher with tattoos and bad breath. I was mortified at myself for having had those thoughts. She had proven to be a real chuckle-head, and I had been greatly relieved when she shifted her attention from me to a bald-headed professor with a beard. They finally eloped, and I think he became a haberdasher in order to keep her in cashmere sweaters. I really pitied the poor guy. Except in passing, until the past few moments, I didn't think I had thought of her since.

But I thought again of Maggie and this time, instead of laughing, I simply smiled and felt warm inside.

When the fire call came, several of us short-timers were trying to look busy out in the warehouse. With nothing in particular to be done, and a dozen or so people to do it, looking busy was not an easy chore. No doubt Little Joe could have pulled it off, but we didn't possess his skills and dedication. Few people did.

Little Joe had gone to St. Francis Hospital when we got off the plane in Missoula. In spite of a Demerol hangover, it was no challenge for a man of his talents to convince the doctors to prescribe a high-protein diet and complete bed rest for at least a week. When we went by to see him, he had just polished off a rare sirloin, which had been cut up and fed to him by a good-looking

nurse.

"Got to rest my finger," Joe said without apology.

The nurse smiled prettily.

Masters of an art need not apologize for their talent. According to Little Joe, they may accept any largesse as merely their due. After all, would a Michelangelo apologize for creating the Pieta merely because it would fit in the living room? Neither did Little Joe feel in the least contrite, or harbor any reservations about applying his gifts full bore.

The fire call was for three jumpers on a fire down near Darby. Because it was a very small fire and late in the season, Fred asked for volunteers.

I was standing with Ced Blackwell and Peavey Pearson, and he was looking squarely at us when he said it. We squirmed, but Fred had a way of getting people to do things they didn't really want to do - especially if it suited his purposes. The best we could do was explain that we had to get back to school by a certain day. If it was as small a fire as he said it was, we could get it pretty quickly. We couldn't do anything about volunteering, because we were already volunteered, but we did get him to solemnly swear to get us off that fire in three days, no matter what.

About forty-five minutes later, the spotter let us out of the Travelaire, one at a time in three passes. Peavey jumped first, me second and Ced last. The only thing special about this jump was that somewhere between the door and opening shock it occurred to me that this was probably the last fire jump I would ever make. I fervently prayed it wouldn't turn into a swan song.

Opening shock eased my mind on that score, but the usual exhilaration and relief that welcomes the sharp tug announcing an inflated 'chute was damped somewhat by a feeling of finality, that I would never experience it again. I don't want to overinflate it, but it was kind of like the end of an era. It was the same feeling you get at New Year's, when the old year ends and the New Year begins - without the champagne, the horns and the confetti. And there wasn't anyone to kiss.

At any rate, I was pretty sure I would never jump again. Whatever it was I thought I had to prove was either already proven or never would be. It couldn't have been solely to impress Miss Howland. I couldn't possibly have been that dumb. On the other hand, perhaps I was. I didn't want to think about it. In my innermost heart, I didn't think that was the whole reason. At any rate, that was thirty-odd jumps and a millennium of time ago. There must have been a reason I wasn't aware of, but whatever it was no longer mattered.

For the moment I forced my thoughts back to the situation at hand. It's a funny thing, though. The mind can never really grasp that the greatest danger is on landing, not because of the possibility of the 'chute not opening. Apparently no amount of bruises, contusions, broken bones and sprained ankles can ever convince anyone of this. The thing is, when there is nothing but rocks to land on or trees to land in, bad things can happen - and often do.

Because this was my last jump, I guess I was more aware of the odds. I sure didn't want to explain to the folks at home how I happened to break a leg on my last fire jump.

I found a small opening about a hundred yards to the left of the fire and managed to squeeze in. Peavey was already down, but Ced managed to hang up.

It took Ced a little while to get down, but as soon as he made it we didn't waste any time getting on the fire. It was an old snag shattered by lightning. The fire had spread to some brush, which was blazing away and threatening to spread.

We got the snag down and a line around the fire by evening, but we needed to keep an eye on it all night while the brush and duff burned off. The fire was still burning when a ground crew came in to relieve us the next morning. We turned the fire over to them and were getting ready to hike out when the faint flopping of a chopper rotor echoed off canyon walls miles away, getting closer.

Most of the fires we manned were at altitudes well above the normal operating ceiling of helicopters of the day, and it was very seldom we were on a fire where they were used. This dinky fire surely didn't rate one, but a few minutes later there it was, hovering overhead. The only reason we could think for its being there was bigwigs from Washington out on an inspection junket - and this was the only fire in the region still burning.

While the chopper settled itself on a point of rocks a few hundred yards from the smoldering fire, we grabbed our things and headed down the trail toward the ranger station. We didn't want to get caught up in an inspection tour and take a chance of maybe missing a ride back to Missoula. Fred had promised us relief within three days. We had been relieved. Fred had said we could leave after that so, adios, adieu and sayonara. We were out of there.

Passing near the chopper on the way out, we noticed the pilot, wearing a sickly expression, still seated at the controls like he was frozen there. He was a lantern-jawed individual with a cold cigar clamped between his teeth. He had a kind of funny walleed stare. We didn't recognize him. He was a stranger to us, but we nodded in greeting.

Barely turning his head, he looked clean through us and seemed to focus on a spot about ten yards behind us.

"You guys jumpers?" he asked.

"Not anymore," Peavey answered.

"Wound up today," Ced informed him.

"Going home," I put in.

He pondered this information for a moment and sort of ruminated on it, as if trying to memorize it. I think he might have been better satisfied with a simple yes or no from us, because he seemed a bit perplexed. Without moving his eyes from the spot behind us, he announced, "I'm supposed to take three jumpers off this fire and down to the ranger station, if I can find them."

That bit of news kind of caught us by surprise. Now it was our turn to mull things over, which didn't take too long. Although we might have felt the misgivings of kids being offered candy by a stranger, we didn't waste any time in opting for the chopper.

Before condemning us for hesitating, consider that (1) none of us had ever

flown in a 'copter before, (2) a fifteen-mile hike was slower, but safer, and (3) nobody had ever heard of a chopper being sent to take jumpers off a fire unless they were hurt.

This might set a precedent that no smokejumper would ever be subject to more than a five-mile walkout. Dream on. As far as I know, jumpers are still forced to hike out many miles.

Truth of the matter was we didn't give it much thought at all. We just threw our gear in and hopped aboard. It wasn't until we were lifting off that it occurred to me that we might have violated the cardinal rule that says you should never board an aircraft with a scared pilot or a homesick Cuban. I didn't see any Cubans, but we sure had a worried pilot, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what he was concerned about.

"Lord, I wisht we could get more altitude," he said, as a snag rushed by the window, not fifty feet away.

"Holy cow!!" was about all I could manage.

Noises ranging from the woofs of a startled moose to the wails of a lonesome coyote came from the back seat Ced and Peavey shared. As I turned to shield my head from the crash I felt was imminent, I got a distinct impression of eyes the size of mag wheels and hair standing stiff as a regiment of Prussian soldiers.

Clearly, the pilot was no longer alone in his concerns. We sincerely shared all of them, with a few of our own thrown in.

"Geez!" a tall fir rushed by, "... zus!!" he finished, and turned a light shade of green as the juicy end of his cigar went down his throat.

It went on this way for quite a while as we raced down the slope of the mountain, fighting to keep it aloft in air too thin to feel the bite of the rotors, schlossing from side to side like skiers avoiding trees, rocks, snags and whatever else might plunge us into disaster. The theory of flight for rotor-wing aircraft underwent a severe test before we managed to attain a safe altitude and work our way down to the ranger station..

We had done nothing to uphold the myth of smokejumpers as a death-defying fearless crew. By the time we landed, if not completely dashed, it had taken an awful pounding. Our swash had long since buckled.

Grinning from ear to ear, Fred was on hand to greet us when we stepped down onto the tarmac apron in front of the parachute loft.

"I told you I would get you off that fire within three days," he said. "How'd you like that chopper ride?"

He no doubt expected a show of appreciation from us.

The reply was a little less than enthusiastic.

"Great," we mumbled, our eyes fixed on a point a good ten yards beyond him.

Chapter 18 - Open Road

Imagine that you are in a huge stadium. Suddenly the cheering stops. The crowd leaves; the lights go out. You are left sitting alone, drained and empty, no cheering, no action, no crowd and lights. The comforting matrix of which you were so much a part has dissolved into recent memory.

It takes some getting used to. That pretty much describes my feelings after letting Peavey out in Auburn. Ced had left us at Shreveport earlier in the day. Now I had it alone. I hadn't realized how much noise silence could make.

It had been dark when we pulled into Peavey's driveway. His folks had just eaten supper and weren't expecting us until the following day, but we had driven straight through nonstop. The only time the engine was cut off was when we made pit stops. One of us slept on the back seat while the other one sat in front and kept the driver awake while he drove out a tank of gas.

Mountains gave way to prairie, prairies to desert and desert to swamp, bayou, Coastal Plain and piney woods. After the dry, cool mountain air of the Bitterroots, late summer in the Deep South was humid, close and oppressive. We weren't used to it.

While I was protesting that I really couldn't stay for supper, Peavey's mother had it on the table and there was nothing to do but partake. It would have been unmannerly not to. But no amount of persuasion could induce me to stay the night. I was too wound up to think about sleep and not able to hide my anxiety to get on the road.

Good-byes were warm, short and sincere.

"See you later. Good luck in med school."

"We'll be looking for that Great American Novel soon," was Peavey's parting shot.

We meant it, but more than four decades have passed with no contact and no Great American Novel, either.

Heat lightning blanketed the sky with strobe flashes as I strode across the lawn and crawled into my car. The air was still and thick with heat and the haze of the storm that was brewing. Thunder rumbled from the direction of Birmingham. I was approaching the center of town when the first heavy gust of the storm hit and made tree branches dance fantastic pirouettes. Rain spattered travel dust on the windshield. Then it came down hard, borne sideways by the wind. The wipers couldn't keep up and I was almost blinded. Waterborne trash was cascading down gutters into storm drains as I inched through town.

The traffic light at Courthouse Square was making giant swings on its cable. I turned east onto the highway and, in a few miles, outran the storm. But the air remained close and heavy. Lightning flashed behind me and there was a cell to the south that lit up the sky in flickers like a gigantic fluorescent tube about to expire. There wasn't much traffic. Except for a few semis, I was alone on the highway.

The wipers kept a steady beat out of sync with the radio. The DJ kept up a steady patter and obviously considered himself a wit. In my opinion, he was

about half right.

"Storms, tornadoes, wind, rain, sleet and hail," was his version of a weather report.

But he neglected to inform his audience of where these tornadoes might be located. Meantime, the cell to the south was drawing closer, shedding lightning bolts in all directions.

"Here's a platter brewed just for the occasion, which we'll spin for all you tornado watchers out there," he prattled.

I came to a long straight-away approaching the small town where the station was located and could see the blinking light, red on the radio tower, at least five miles in the distance.

"Heeers Miss Lee-nah Horne with some sto-ra-my wea-thah of her own," he intoned in throaty exaggeration, no doubt spellbound by his own boundless charm.

"Doan know why ..." came the clear dulcet tones of the great blues singer through the constantly crackling airways.

"... there's no sun up in the sky ..."

"Yeah," the DJ broke in, intending to make a few witty background remarks, but whatever they were, his audience was to be forever deprived.

In spectacular blue brilliance, the floodlights of heaven awoke to the clash of gigantic celestial cymbals. It was as if some Mighty Being, annoyed at the buzzing of a fly, had gathered up all the forces of nature and smote the creature into silence.

ZZZZZTTTT! BOOOOOM! FFZZZZT!

The tower light disappeared and, except for the steady crackle of static, the airwaves were mute. They remained so for several minutes. The highway ran past the now-darkened radio station, still steeped in silence as I drove by. Not until I had passed through the town and was again in open country was the silence broken.

A quavering, much-chastened voice came on the air. No longer suave, charming, debonair or witty, and minus the insouciant aura of the pseudo boulevardier.

"We have a weather bulletin ..." it announced.

I reached for the knob and turned the radio off. The steady flip-flopping of the wipers told me all I wanted to know about the weather.

Driving at night might be a little more dangerous, according to experts, but it has its compensations, too. For one thing, there isn't as much traffic, especially after normal folks go to bed. I've always been a night person, anyway. That's when you have time to think, not that I had many Great Thoughts to think about. It's just that miles of uninterrupted reflection gives you opportunity to get your mind in order and your priorities straight. I like to keep my priorities straight, even though right then I didn't have many. Finishing school was about the only one I had, unless maybe Maggie had become



one.

After pondering that awhile, I decided Maggie had become one, and the most important one at that. If I was going to build a life, it would need to be around Maggie. Funny thing; I'd never thought quite that far in the future at all. That's what women will do for you. It never occurred to me before that moment that Maggie might have something to say about those plans. I'd need to

ask her first off. I didn't consider what would happen if she said no.

I was way out in front of the storm clouds now. The night was clear and the moon was out. An occasional far-away gleam of an airport beacon embellished an already starry sky, to be repeated time and again at regular intervals until it was out of sight.

There was a nagging little problem that had never entirely left my mind from the time I first set out to Missoula. I had never told my folks that what I was doing, either for the Forest Service, or even while I was in the Army, involved jumping out of airplanes. In my mind, it wasn't an act of deceit. I just didn't see any point in their worrying needlessly, when I was doing enough worrying for the whole family. I knew they would need to know sometime, but I always thought it could wait until it was all over before telling them.

It was over and I was trying to think of a gentle way of telling them. There didn't seem to be any.

A mind such as mine, unable to grasp the intricacies of chess, can't be expected to ponder the unknown future indefinitely, or ponder problems that seem insolvable. It tires one, and the thoughts slip away as a burden too heavy to bear. The mind begins to reflect more upon other things or goes blank entirely. In the interim, any thought might enter. .

My mind was in this state when a stanza from a poem by Longfellow, taught to us in sophomore English by a whacko prof hung up on poetry, came to me. I don't think I had thought of it since my sophomore year.

It began in that unguarded moment as a distant whisper and, unchallenged, crept closer, repeating itself with increasing volume until it was firmly established in my brain.

"Wouldst thou," so the helmsman answered,

"Know the secrets of the sea?

Only those who brave its dangers

Comprehend its mystery."

It occurred to me that this was the problem and is the problem for anyone who tries to share an experience. You can tell tales and you can share fragments, but you just can't convey the essence of the whole ball of wax. If we could, maybe wars wouldn't recur and humans wouldn't be prone to repeat mistakes of the past.

That was much too weighty a thought to hold for long. I would be home in a couple of hours and tell Mom and Maggie all about it. They would drink in as much as they could, but I knew they could never fully grasp that which was reserved solely for the few who were there. I couldn't do the impossible.

Now, if anyone ever asks, and they seldom do, I just tell them it was one hell of a time.

## Chapter 19 - A gathering

When Maggie and I stepped off the plane at Hale-Johnson Field in Missoula, a lot of things had changed. Houses had spread to the foot of Sentinel Mountain and halfway up its slope. There was no more Johnson Flying Service, and the barracks, fire depot, and parachute loft, which were new when I last saw them, had a settled well-groomed look - something like a college campus. Some new buildings, a museum and a memorial to jumpers who had died in the line of duty had been added.

Faces at the parachute loft were bright, young and eager, and there was something familiar about them. Then I realized these were the same visages we wore forty years before.

Lolo Peak, hoary-topped and unchanging, stood guard over Missoula as it had for three forevers. A mere 15,000 years ago it had looked down upon what geologists call Lake Missoula before the ice dam broke, draining the lake and scouring the giant coulees of eastern Washington. A lifetime had passed since I had last seen Lolo. It was like greeting an old friend.

Coming to Missoula was a sentimental journey for me. Even Maggie was affected. The occasion was the first reunion of old smokejumpers that I had attended. They hadn't had many. Maggie and I came alone. None of the children or grandchildren were with us. Somehow they weren't much interested in watching a bunch of old geezers getting together to tell lies and talk about what good men they once were.

I looked forward to shaking hands I hadn't shaken in more than forty years. I searched for faces I might recognize. I didn't find many. It's amazing how shedding a little hair and gaining a few pounds will alter a person's appearance. Name tags in big, bold letters helped solve that problem.

Downtown had been altered quite a bit. They even had one-way streets. The Silver Dollar Saloon was still in business, probably serving the sons and grandsons of former patrons. The Ox, where they served steaks, keno, women and beer in equal measure was business as usual as it had been for the past century and a quarter. We had a steak there with Don and Doris Sweet. While the women played keno, Don and I talked about Gene and the steak he never got.

The town had rolled out the red carpet and there were signs and banners everywhere. We gathered that afternoon in a big pavilion at the fairgrounds on the site of old Hale Field - the Missoula County Airport. There once was a restaurant next to a large, vacant lot at an intersection across from the airport. It was no longer there; neither was the vacant lot.

Dick Johnson, flying the Tri-Motor, once touched down in the vacant lot, crow-hopped over the restaurant, landed on the runway, did a neat ground loop and walked away as the startled patrons of the restaurant looked on. He got grounded a while for that. He later died in a crash down in Yellowstone while flying an elk census. Dick was the best of an awfully good bunch.

At the far-away drone of an aircraft engine, something like an electric

spark coursed through the crowd. The murmurs stopped instantly, much like the crickets and tree frogs at night cease their chirping at a strange noise. This noise wasn't strange, though most of us hadn't heard it in forty years; a lifetime; nearly two generations.

A cry went up and was echoed by many voices.

"It's the Ford!"

And there was a rush for a better view. The old Tri-Motor, freed from a museum for the moment, circled overhead wagging wings in the joy of greeting old friends and receiving their salutes.

For most of us, life had come fill circle. Maggie said I had a tear in my eye, but I know I didn't. It was just smoke from the barbecue fire. At least, that's what I told her.

Smokejumpers don't cry.