

## **Aggressive Wildland Fire Control and the Biscuit Fire**

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The group of men who gathered at the old abandoned Smokejumper Base near Cave Junction, Oregon on June 21, 2002 could not have imagined the disaster that would befall the forests near the base in three short weeks. These men had laid their lives on the line to protect the forests from fire. Many, now in their 60's and 70's, would risk it all again for the thrill of leaping into the unknown and attacking the greatest enemy of the forest - wildfire. The siren would sound and all hands would fall to in order to prepare the men and equipment, fill out the paperwork, taxi the plane to the end of the runway and take off.. This activity had to be done within 5 minutes in order to get the men to a fire before hope of getting it under control faded. Studies of old records had shown that in many areas of the Siskiyou, Rogue, Klamath and Six Rivers National Forests, fire fighters had to be on the fire within 30 minutes of sighting the first smoke or the fire would reach project size.

Who were these men? For the most part they were college kids that needed summer employment. In their early 20's they had no real fear of parachuting into a forest and attacking a fire. They seemed to think that they were invincible. Who would they later become? They entered all walks of life. Their ranks include scientists, doctors, dentists, lawyers, foresters, and even farmers, mechanics and brick layers. When the group of 130 men gathered on the 21st they were brothers. Only about 350 men had ever manned the base at Cave Junction. In times of need, jumpers would be brought in from other bases. The bonds of brotherhood extended to these outsiders but they remained outsiders until they demonstrated that you could entrust your life to them.

The major dangers of wildland fire fighting are well known. The sudden shifts of wind that cause a fire to explode, falling snags and rolling rocks are common to almost all wildland fires. The dangers of parachuting into a forest generally added only the risk of the type of injuries found in contact sports. However, the forests in South West Oregon do have their own dangers. These are steep mountains that can receive over 100 inches of rain each winter. In the summer the mountains bake under a cloudless sky. Then mid and high level moisture create thunderstorms. Dry lightning, where the rain from a thunderstorm evaporates before it reaches the ground, is the worst fire threat. A lightning strike into a mountainside covered with dry brush that is 10 to 15 feet deep and so thick that a person can barely penetrate it, is probably the greatest danger.

Five men who attended the Smokejumper reunion spent the next week in an area of the Kalmiopsis Wilderness called Gold Basin. The wilderness area is named for a rare plant, *Kalmiopsis leachiana*, that only grows in this area. Gold Basin is in the heart of the area now burned by the Biscuit fire. They were rebuilding an old trail that was nearly destroyed by the Silver Complex fire in 1987. The Silver Complex fire started in the same general area as the Biscuit fire. One Smokejumper, who is now an aid to a U.S. Senator, said that he was in the group of Smokejumpers that made the initial attack on the

Silver fire. It took 18 hours for a plane load of Smokejumpers from Missoula, Montana to arrive at the fire. The Silver Complex fire burned around 100,000 acres of forest.

In June of 2002, the brush in the old fire area was up to 6 feet deep. It rained in Gold Basin two weeks before the Biscuit fire. The brush and the mixed conifer reproduction on the edges of the old fire area took advantage of the moisture to make one last spurt of growth before the summer drought. In June 2002, the areas burned by the Silver fire had finally recovered. In the week we spent in Gold Basin we missed the blooming of the Kalmiopsis (a Rhododendron like plant) but the Rhododendron, Azalea, Iris and Darlingtonia (a rare fly catcher) were in full bloom. The climax forest of Douglas Fir and Sugar Pine was doing well. Many of the oldest trees that had stood for generations of man were now succumbing to disease and insects but they were being replaced by new growth.

The lesser dangers of the Siskiyou mountains were more of a vexation to the Smokejumpers. We all knew of Poison Oak. A few suffered serious reactions and after the swelling and blisters had healed they went to other bases without this plant. As long as you didn't try to eat the forest, you would not be bothered by the Amanita (Death Head) mushrooms or the Oregon 7 and 2 minute mushrooms. The latter mushrooms look exactly like a mushroom that is one of the tastiest mushrooms in the world but you only live for seven and two minutes after eating the Oregon varieties. The Death Cap (Miners Bane) shouldn't be used to grace your can of stew. Small but poisonous critters abound. Scorpions do live in rotten logs and in the debris on the forest floor. (Its best to shake out your boots in the morning.) Most of the people stung by scorpions get it when they sit down. No matter how close the bonds of brotherhood you didn't get much sympathy from the crew if you sat on a scorpion. After all "Why were you sitting down on the job?" The Yellow Jackets and Bald Hornets were another matter. Yellow Jackets build nests in the ground and become very upset when fire, or a wayward boot, invades their space. Bald hornets build their nests in tall trees. It took a special kind of control to rappel to the ground after you kicked a Bald Hornets nest. Rattlesnakes are common in piles of rock. There are larger critters living in the Siskiyou forest that can also trouble firefighters. The skunks are not too friendly and the Bears and Cougars are always hungry. The rookies and flatlanders are cautioned about creatures that go about on two legs.

As one of the men who attended the reunion said, "It's too bad the Biscuit fire didn't happen two weeks earlier - we would have stomped it cold." While many at the reunion are becoming a bit long of tooth and starting to slow down there is no question about it - they probably would have stopped this fire in its tracks had they been first on the scene. Are aggressive fire control efforts needed? The loss of timber, wildlife and watershed and the cost of fighting the fire would argue in favor of aggressive efforts during times of high fire danger. Did the closure of the Smokejumper base at Cave Junction contribute to the losses of the Biscuit fire? No one will ever know for certain but those of us who fought fire in the area years ago can only stand in silence and shake our heads.