

Introduction

In a situation where the consequences of wrong decision are so awesome, where a single bit of irrationality can set a whole train of traumatic events in motion, I do not think that we can be satisfied with the assurance that “most people behave rationally most of the time.”

– Charles. E. Osgood

First of all, without question and to this day, I still consider smokejumping to be *the* best job in the world. All those fortunate to have done it, currently doing it, or doing it in the future are, indeed, some of the luckiest humans. The problem with having such an immensely satisfying, worthwhile, stimulating and adventurist job, however, is the inevitable balance that must, according to the Law of Administrative and Managerial Bullshit (LAMB), be paid by those on the fireline, at the warm and toasty end, to compensate for all those rousing complimentary adjectives. It is a law much like gravity, designed to bring even the hardest of souls crashing to earth with frequent regularity, just like a jumper seeing his canopy torn to shreds above his head.

But what is smokejumping? In German it roughly translates to Feuerspringer; fire jumper, which is basically what smokejumping is. That does not, however, make it a circus act, as some German friends once assumed it to mean while visiting them in Cologne. “Robert doesn’t look like a circus performer,” they said, being a relief to me since I’ve never much liked circuses. They thought we jumped through rings of fire, on bikes perhaps, in tight pants or leotards, next to elephants under a big tent maybe, who knows? The thought alone is quite uncomfortable. In reality, though, smokejumping is a national wildland firefighting resource. Its primary purpose being to deliver personnel and equipment to remote wildfires quickly and effectively using a fleet of fixed-wing aircraft and parachutes. We jump fires. Not circus hoops.¹

However, due to the LAMB, jumpers *are* routinely forced to jump through a myriad of hoops, administrative hoops, designed by experts just to remind us of which in the latest of a long line of swivel-chaired slugs is in charge. The last time jumpers governed their own destiny was in the early ‘90s, though older vets will say independence was lost long before even then. Since that coup, for it was a coup, seizure of power is a coup, hordes of self-righteous administrators and managers have cocooned the once independent organization and precipitated virtual insanity onto one of the most valuable, respected, professional, skilled and yet underutilized resources in all of America. It is no coincidence, and probably no surprise, that just about every single one of these administrators have been desk-jockeys with no association or understanding of the sharp-end whatsoever: where metal meets meat, where pulaskis meet rock and dirt, and where heat, fuel and oxygen burn. Female administrators are excellent at organizing, brilliant at it, even just for the sake of it they do it. But therein lies the problem, because smokejumpers never needed more organizing, never needed more paperwork, never needed anyone to teach ‘cohesion,’ never

¹ Smokejumper History (abridged), p.335

needed anyone to lecture on the latest fashionable oxymoronic buzzwords: ‘diversity,’ ‘ethics,’ and ‘equal opportunity.’ We jump from planes to fight wildfires. Not too difficult in itself, apart from the physical effort, but neither is it like baking a bloody cake, so leave us alone.

To some, ‘insanity’ might seem like a harsh word to describe this encroachment of bureaucracy, but bear me out: during the last few years of the twentieth century the smokejumper organization, Missoula in particular, underwent some very disturbing changes at the hands of unskilled managers either unwilling or incapable of reining in entrenched, egocentric, power-hungry, administrators. Instead of experienced fire people – base managers, trainers, squad leaders, etc. – determining who could become a smokejumper, based upon prior experience and credibility borne from word of mouth, desk-bound, non-jumping administrators became directly involved in the hiring process, actively going out to recruit people (women and minorities mainly) from all across the country. In effect, forcing people into the organization who had no purpose being there while eliminating others who did – and who were very literally lining up and waiting in the wings. For example: in one instance a woman who should never ever have been hired, routinely warned as being unsatisfactory by senior trainers, was very nearly killed and several of us watched in horror as our fears became reality before our very eyes. Other more woolly instances of heavy-handed administrative incompetence emerged when jumpers were forced to sit in circles and tell others their bloody secrets like some inane hippy candlelit vigil shite of the ‘60s. A handful of veteran jumpers left the room in disgust. Others, under the perceived threat of sanction, no doubt, stayed to endure the abuse and embarrassment. Such is the power that one entrenched administrator can wield when allowed to do so. Further examples could fill a large book, cover to cover, with insane sordid tales of the LAMB.

The best years, though, are always the busy years. Years that real money can be made, the big earner years. But more to the point, when years are busy, when you’re out in the wilds of nature, miles away from roads and the hustle-bustle of civilization, baking hot, worn out from working a 36-hour shift, covered in soot from head to toe, bleeding, blistered and desperate for a cold beer, those are the best of times. Those are the years jumpers live for; up to their elbows in dirt, swinging an axe, tugging on a crosscut, eons away from the three ring circus of bullshit.

That’s what it used to be like anyway. Maybe now, doing the best job in the world, they secretly wear tight pants and leotards, hold hands round the fire, and chant. Bleeding shoot me if that is so! I think not, however. From what I see the organization in many ways has finally undergone a change for the better, and about time. Morale has revived. Recent years have been busy and jumpers are more frequently used outside of their more traditional role. But it has to be asked, like the elephant in the room, why *that* airplane, that wonderful “collection of parts flying in loose formation,” the Turbine DC-3,² has not been seen in the red skies of Montana this year (2012)? Someone quietly told me it was politics. It’s a damn fire organization! What has politics got to do with anything?

As I write I am exactly 55 years and 9 months old. “Strange,” you might say, to be so specific. But wait, because exactly 18 years and 3 months ago it was determined, without question and without remorse or opportunity for recourse, that I was no longer qualified to be a

² Missoula’s DC-3 is rumored to have evolved as a result of drug money. The DEA already had the plane on its radar but waited for the cartel to upgrade it to turbines before confiscating it on its next drug run. Someone was thinking ahead.

primary firefighter, despite having been a smokejumper for the preceding three years. An administrator somewhere decided that should a person reach that mysterious age of 35 they were all of a sudden underserving and unqualified to get a full-time job in primary firefighting. That unnamed administrator, hiding under a rock somewhere amidst the bureaucracy, not only forced me, and countless others, out of an occupation that we loved, but cost us untold thousands of dollars in lost earnings compared to everyone else who were not yet, simply, 35 years old, for doing exactly the same job. Exactly two years later the government, in its infinite wisdom, out of the goodness of its little heart, arbitrarily raised that limit to 37, to save on its dwindling retirement funds, no doubt. By which time, of course, everyone caught in this trap was still too old. Nevertheless, I remained a smokejumper for as long as I could afford to, forced to subsidize my firefighting career by writing inane computer code, and finally leaving the organization (strange term isn't it, for what is dysfunction) in 2002 to get that elusive real job that I hated. Not surprisingly, I now unreservedly despise any person who would agree to this egregious, quite abhorrent, willful process of discrimination. If you are that person or, indeed, even if you agree with that person, you are a fucking idiot – so put this book back on the shelf and scurry back under the rock from where you came. Leave the real work to people you know nothing of: those who don't mind getting dirty, don't mind getting broken, don't mind getting old, don't mind doing tough physical work at any age, don't mind prostituting their bodies on an annual basis to put out fires in a job they love, despite incessant bullshit. That, in a nutshell, is smokejumping.

Finally, a good friend, with far loftier ambitions than I, now a preeminent professor at the University of Montana, once said of smokejumping, “the best job to have ever had.” Me? I just wanted to work hard, get sweaty and dirty in beautiful places, jump from airplanes and enjoy my job, all the while trying to maintain the old ethos and spirit of smokejumping. If in this book I come across as harsh, it is deserved, for I want no more than the organization to prosper and be the best it can possibly be, with the best people trained to the best of human ability, given the best tools for the job and, moreover, be run by the best of the best. When such simple things are hindered by bureaucrats or inept managers I don't much like it. I loved the job. I loved it while I was doing it and I never once lost that perspective, which is why I would so readily tear the verbal heart out of anyone who was ignorant enough to damage the credibility of the organization or disregard the unrelenting efforts of those at the toasty end.

Throughout the text I have not used anyone's last name. It's completely unnecessary to do so; those who know, already know, and those who don't, never need to; and because it simply doesn't matter. But also because there are individuals among the jumper organization who frequently get involved in the more clandestine aspects of parachuting. Winter occupations that see them in far-flung fields doing things that would make most people cringe. For them anonymity is compulsory and, as such, is being respected in these pages, hence the use of an occasional alias. Such occupations made necessary due to the seasonal nature of wildland firefighting; being laid-off each September until April. Or, as in my case, *Catch 22*; being too old. Though not old enough not to be hired by other sections of the government for equally risky work. Also known as Joey Rule #2: ‘They can do anything for you or anything to you.’

Footnotes have been used solely for added explanation or to further include facts to the associated text which may, or may not, be of interest to the reader. They are not intended as citations.

It was never my intention to write an accurate account. I shall leave true history to those far smarter and far more patient than I. In fact, it was never my intention to write this book at all, but for some reason it was suggested that I should, almost expected that I would. So with that, I started to scribble, unconcerned for specific dates, times and places, which these days tend to merge into one anyway, coming and going as they please like spooks in a smoke-filled mist. Though now and again, a spark, a vivid memory, would emerge to the fore, completely out of the blue, for no reason, only to vanish as quickly as it arrived if I did not write it down. So there are stories mislaid due to procrastination, lethargy even, in not wanting to rise from slumber and reach for my keyboard. Those I shall leave to others. Those scribed here come alone from memory, without research, just as I remember, warts and all. Continuity may be inexact, but that is simply due to merged thoughts, forcing two or three fires into one maybe, years perhaps, into months. I suspect for those who also never kept a journal it is the same.

Smokejumpers fight many things during their lives: fire being the obvious and, for the most part, probably the most sensational, the most exiting and rewarding. But those sky-scraping 100-foot flames are not the greatest of foes. Financial worries, family issues and job prospects all play a part just like for anyone else. But with the addition, year after year, of reaching that perfect level of physical fitness to avoid the burden of an injury that can mean the end of a season or even the end of a career. That fitness made all the harder by those niggly injuries, always acquired in physical activity, that make fitness that much harder to achieve, young or old. But the greatest, most consistent, and most insidious foe comes from outside the confines of the smokejumper enclave, but inexorably and inextricably seeps into it. That is why this book is not just about fires, but about what else firefighters endure to keep the job they love – and do so not just for their benefit, but for the benefit of the nation. Because these great sweeping forests are one of this nation's greatest resources, and greatest of all treasures. Not just for their timber, but for the public pleasure, for recreation; hiking, hunting, fishing, camping, climbing, even just to sit back and look at it in awe, for nature's sake, admire it, wonder in it. For the main subject and star of this book is not the smokejumper or the fire, but the land on which both live. A land smokejumpers are fortunate to call 'jump country.'

Chapter One

— First Fire Jump

The American way of life consists of something that goes greatly beyond the mere obtaining of the necessities of existence. If it means anything, it means that America presents to its citizens an opportunity to grow mentally and spiritually, as well as physically. The National Park System and the work of the National Park Service constitute one of the Federal Government's important contributions to that opportunity. – Newton B. Drury, NPS Director (1940-51)

THE SECOND I ENTERED OBLIVION I knew my mistake. But it was too late. No vigor. I had stepped when I should have leapt and the blast from the powerful turboprop just feet from my head sent me into an immediate uncontrollable spin. When I focused my eyes at a little over 1,300 feet I first saw mountains, then water, and then mountains again, with a brief glimpse of the disappearing aircraft on each blurry rotation. The spotter's white helmet still visible in the open door as he looked back in what must have been utter bewilderment. So it went as I corkscrewed towards earth a little faster than is healthy.

The parachute cords were twisted so tight that my neck felt as if it was in a vise, and I couldn't lift my head to see if the canopy was fully inflated, or, more importantly, if it was even there. Then, finally managing to wiggle my head forward, I peeked up through the cage of my helmet and saw the reassuring sight of red and blue ripstop nylon above me. The parachute was inflated at least, but it was spinning rapidly anticlockwise and making me quite dizzy.

This faster than usual approach to earth, and hasty overtaking of my jump partner – who I managed to glimpse on each rotation – was becoming increasingly alarming. The problem was obviously humorous to someone, though, because at 800 feet I heard a laugh.

Despite the incessant spinning my canopy was, in fact, quite stable, even if not fully inflated due to the cords being completely twisted from the base of the parachute right down to my neck. The problem in the whole process was the rag doll dangling beneath it.

Somewhere below me was the jump spot. A meadow in which I was supposed to land and where everyone else was, I assumed, watching my descent in comedic amazement, and no doubt taking bets if I would ever make it in.

Certainly, if I didn't control the spinning soon I would never reach it. Instead, I'd crash into another part of the planet; either the water on the other side of the mountains or the mountains on the other side of the water. Or that big bloody tree in the middle of the meadow, motioning me ever closer. Its ugly outstretched branches beckoning like a giant flytrap.

As I neared the end of the twists the spinning slowed, and for one glorious but excruciatingly brief suspenseful second it stopped, before starting up again in the opposite direction. With the ground rushing closer by the second it was no longer funny. It was both foolhardy and dangerous and threatened to smash me to pieces.

Finally, at 300 feet, I managed to pry my risers apart to stop the spinning and quickly surveyed the dizzying scene below. I was lucky. The wind had been strong but, remarkably, I had remained within the wind cone. So with no help whatsoever from me I was exactly where I was supposed to be; directly above the meadow with the small stream meandering just off to the right. All nicely surrounded by 70-foot pines and Douglas-firs.

At this point the ground was just a little bit closer than I'd anticipated. But finally able to do what had been drummed into me during weeks of training, I turned into the wind to reduce my bone-shattering forward speed. But now going backwards, I could only see where I had been and not where I was going. Remembering that the stream was off to my left, and knowing that I didn't want to end up on the wrong side of it, I pulled on my right toggle to quarter the canopy and steer away. Happy to be in control for the first time during the entire descent, I gloated over my regained confidence and prepared myself for a perfect backwards parachute landing fall. Just before slamming into the dirt like a sack of shit.

There was nothing pretty, safe, or remotely enjoyable about my landing and I impacted like a Napoleonic cannonball. A fitting end to a dismal performance. But being resilient I was relieved not to have heard anything crack. My feet had hit first, thankfully, then my backside, followed by the back of my head. My feet would have hit again, completing the somersault, had the canopy not re-inflated and unceremoniously hauled me across the meadow on my back. Enabling me to pick up a delightful assortment of wilderness fauna, mud, and buffalo crap along the way. Most of it, of course, embedding deep down my neck. I reached for the parachute cords above my head, grabbed a couple, and reeled them in until the canopy spilled air and collapsed, which, after what seemed like 100 yards, left me supine, motionless and exhausted. Yet I was unhurt – except for a severe case of damaged pride.

I jumped up as though everything had gone exactly according to plan, and to my great relief everyone seemed to feign ignorance to the drama, the others busy gathering their gear in various parts of the field, or pretending to. Then I heard a yell and looked up to see another body fly over my head at an alarming rate and thump into the ground a few feet away. My jump partner (JP) had arrived. In better circumstances he should have landed already, being a good thirty pounds heavier and having left the aircraft a couple of seconds before me. But my twists had given gravity the advantage and I had overtaken him as Newton predicted.

Nevertheless, my JP was here, and he landed with an almighty thump that only weight and added wind velocity can provide. To better see where he was going he hadn't fully turned into the wind, as is generally considered advisable, so on impact I heard air being involuntarily expelled from his lungs and even thought I felt sod shudder. He had four points of contact: his feet, ever so briefly; his head, uncomfortably; his knees, painfully; and finally his head again as it embedded itself into the grass in an inglorious face-plant. Then, just as he started to get up, probably thinking it was all over, the wind re-inflated his canopy, yanked him off his knees and hauled him face first across the grass, only stopping when hitting a log in an elk wallow. But it gave him time to release his canopy by unclipping one of his mud encrusted Capewells.³

³ A manual mechanism initially developed for the military during WWII which allows jumpers to quickly detach the canopy from the parachute harness.

This newly arrived form rose from the mire like some strange mythical creature and, like me, made an attempt to look as though nothing untoward had happened. (Such actions are a common trait among resilient young rookies looking to emulate youthful, though often foolhardy, invincibility, even in the face of extreme trauma and injury.) Once sure nothing was broken he looked towards me and started to laugh, waving his arms in delight. He told me later he'd been laughing the whole way down because my unorthodox descent and abundant use of English profanity had amused him considerably. It was fine with me, because watching him extricate himself from the muddy mire was equally amusing. Our laughter was a natural response to the grateful realization that after landing like two sacks of shit in a shallow pond neither of us was broken.

The recent arrival's helmet cage was plastered in a colorful selection of summer foliage, but it was still easy to tell who he was. At a lean six-foot something it could only have been Steve. Being my rookie bro and frequent jump partner I was thankful that he wasn't hurt after hurtling into the planet so fast. Many wouldn't have escaped injury so easily. I was, however, selfishly reassured that someone else had endured equally as bad a landing as me. Not that it at all detracted from my dismal performance, for which I was certain to receive a good bollocking in due course.

We both later discovered that everyone had experienced an uncomfortable landing. Partly because the jump spot was perfectly flat, and unusually long in the prevailing wind direction, allowing us plenty of leeway to jump with the wind vastly exceeding normal operational conditions. We all agreed to jump, however, because the spotter had thought it worth a try, and for some reason we had trusted him. Being new to the game my JP and I were more than willing to prove ourselves in front of the more experienced veteran smokejumpers who we generally looked up to, trusted, and didn't want to disappoint. In other words, we knew squat and stepped out of the door of a fast moving aircraft at 1,500 feet, like sheep to the slaughter because we didn't know any different.

The spotter and squad leaders in charge of us that day were apparently equally willing to see the results of brand new rookies in high wind behaving little better than crepe paper streamers. That quickly infused the notion that trust had to be earned, not granted unconditionally because of seniority, position or overt confidence.

There were exceptions to this rule however. There were some in the organization that gained everyone's confidence and respect by instinct alone. But that stemmed from credibility, not position; from experience, not seniority; and from quiet stabilizing earned authority, not overt brashness. For one person in particular it was because he was built like the proverbial brick shit-house and could crush a rookie's skull with his bare hands. And given my recent performance that's no doubt exactly what he was going to do at his earliest convenience.

Despite the excitement over the windy jump we knew it had been the easy part. All it had entailed was falling out of a perfectly good airplane under a few yards of silk and being fortunate enough to stay in one piece – even though little I did that day advantaged me in that regard. Now, however, we had to fight the wildfire that was raging in the woods a few hundred feet from the field we had just cultivated with our bodies.

As we gathered our gear from various parts of the meadow the jump ship came roaring over the treetops and began delivering cargo. At 200 feet the spotter was easily visible in the door as

he threw out the first of many cardboard bundles – I think he was also giving us the middle finger salute. Containers of food, water, tools and chainsaws floated down on flimsy eight feet ‘splat chutes’ and thumped in all around us. A few boxes didn’t fare too well beneath some of West Yellowstone’s test parachutes, causing their contents to be strewn across the meadow like a lazy mid-west garage sale.

After ten minutes the plane did one last low pass. The spotter waving from the doorway as he left the meadow littered with little orange parachutes, brown boxes, crushed cans of fruit cocktail and splattered remains of Beany Weenies, looking like pavement pizza after Friday night in Missoula. After circling overhead to relay fire information and radio frequencies the ship turned to head back to base, its engines getting steadily fainter as it disappeared into a dwindling dot between the white-capped mountains in the distance.

Silence. The drone that had engulfed us for the past two hours was gone and we became accustomed to a new sound, reminding us of a more immediate role. Loud crackling in the woods signaled increasing fire activity and we could see flame lengths growing rapidly as they reached the tree canopy on the edge of the meadow. An odd Doug-fir was igniting and torching brilliantly, first one and then another. Then two and three, as several became one massive 100-foot flame licking at the sky, preheating more in its path in readiness for the same treatment. The fire was bright, hungry and growing. As trees torched, hot burning embers rushed high into the atmosphere on the updrafts. If they fell back to earth too soon they would ignite more fires hundreds of yards ahead of the fire-line.

We were thankful that we had jumped into a natural firebreak. The long, wide and lush meadow would stop the fire from burning anything further in that direction. However, there was plenty of forest yet to burn in the other three directions, and it was a forest ready to burn, just like the Yellowstone fires of 1988. Only this year extraordinary efforts were being made not to have a repeat of that devastation. The political backlash from those fires had halted temporarily the park’s normal let burn policy for natural fires and managers were still a little edgy.

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ONE OF THE BEST THINGS ABOUT jumping into the wonderful Yellowstone National Park that day was that few people, smokejumpers or not, ever get to parachute into America’s, and indeed the world’s, first great National Park. Yellowstone is a majestic place and everyone wants to visit, urged by a deluge of documentaries that examine its unique geology, and by an impressive array of nature shows that follow the lives of its many inhabitants. And in visiting, being enthralled by everything about it: the splendor of the landscape with its boiling pools of mud, spouting geysers, deep canyons, pristine rivers and high alpine lakes nestled among vast mountain ranges; the remarkable and fortunate history from its inception in 1872 to become the peoples’ park;⁴ and the enduring survival of its many lowly critters and imposing beasts.

⁴ In 1871, geologist and explorer Ferdinand V. Hayden, along with other equally concerned, forthright individuals, were the first to propose to the U.S. Congress that the *Great Geysers Basin* be forever preserved “for the public good.” On March 1st, 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed The Act of Dedication into law, whereby protecting these great lands from “the

Yellowstone may no longer be the extreme hidden wilderness it once was when small pockets of Shoshone made it their home, or when the first white fur trappers arrived. Nevertheless, it remains a significant place amid an expanse of splendor. One where ordinary people are fortunate to have the opportunity to get up close and personal to the magnificently beautiful wilds of nature.

To be lucky enough to be there on my first fire jump was indeed a privilege. It was befitting compensation for starting at the bottom of the list and made the effort of the preceding year and pain of the previous weeks worth it. And, as Drury's chapter quote so aptly said, that effort, and these wonderful and wonderfully wild places, had enabled us to "grow mentally and spiritually, as well as physically." At thirty-four I knew I had truly found a job I would love. This really was the best job in the world.

vandals who are now waiting to enter into this wonder-land," and who, "will in a single season despoil, beyond recovery, these remarkable curiosities, which have required all the cunning skill of nature thousands of years to prepare." – Hayden.

Chapter Two

— North Fork of the Clearwater

I'm in love with Montana. For other states I have admiration, respect, recognition, even some affection. But with Montana it is love. And it's difficult to analyze love when you're in it.

– John Steinbeck

IT WAS THREE MONTHS SINCE our dairy barn burned to the ground. And with characteristic corporate lethargy on behalf of the insurance company in effecting their end of the bargain, Anne, my wife, and I now had no farm. With the onset of winter we were forced to sell our herd of cows in November. Then, on the last day possible, the insurance company compensated us at a fraction of value. But by then it was November and too late to do anything. We no longer had a choice because it was impossible to keep dairy cows outside during a long cold Minnesota winter, not if we expected to make a living. In Minnesota the snows continue for months and temperatures frequently drop to minus 30 degrees Fahrenheit – sometimes even considered a warm day to the Finnish inhabitants during January or February – making running a modest dairy herd difficult at best and constructing a new barn virtually impossible. And without cows the farm was nothing.

The whole episode was thoroughly depressing. Watching the best of our herd being sold was a heartbreaker. Since the fire Anne and I had long run dry of tears and we stifled emotions in the cold November morning as the last of our herd boarded the truck. Even they seemed to sense the misery that had befallen them. It was one of the worst days of our lives, and probably the worst of their short lives too.

Yet they boarded the truck in their own inimitable way. A few fought the experience because that's what cows are supposed to do. Others were clearly nervous about the commotion but could see their herd mates onboard and left anyway. A few were totally nonchalant to the whole experience and strolled about oblivious to anything; a testament to their contentment in some, a testament to dumb stupidity in others. Petra, the youngest of the herd, had all the flighty characteristics of a high maintenance blonde and kept glancing over to where her calves had been housed. A mothering instinct concerned about the whereabouts of her latest twin heifers.

She had routinely escaped the confines of the barn to peer over the calf pen door, just to make sure they were being looked after properly. But all that remained was a charred, pitted piece of concrete. No door. No pens. No warm straw-filled comfort against the fresh northerly wind that signaled the arrival of another winter. She wandered around in confusion, as any youngster would when not understanding what had happened or what was going on. Her skittish eyes seemed to plead for explanation.

All the animals had been our extended pets. Each had a name and a distinct character, some good, some bad. After six years of relentless back-breaking work, through hard-fought misery brought on by drought, blizzard, torrential rains, stray voltage and, at times, abject poverty as a result of frequent milk price reductions, these cows had finally started to earn their keep and make us money.

But now, as the truck drove away down the drive, with a row of warm wet muzzles breathing steam through the slats, all we had to show for those years were three old vehicles, an assortment of farmyard pets and a heap of oily old railroad ties. Time had come to rethink a life that had never been easy. Such things are but a chapter of life and this reevaluation was but the consequence of risk. We had lived a little of Aeschylus' "reward for suffering is experience." It may not have been particularly easy, life rarely is, but it was, had been, at least, a very real way to live, a life at the productive end. A necessary one for people to survive. It provided a true perspective and a valuable lesson on the quirkiness and often unforeseen uncontrollable fortunes and fates of life.

After the insurance company finally settled the claim they had the unmitigated gall to continue billing us for the preceding three months for a barn that they clearly knew no longer existed. At first I thought it was a simple mistake, a clerical error, but then another bill arrived, and another. I was finally forced to go to the office and yell at a desk-ridden Fryer Tuck who tried to say that we "hadn't cancelled the policy" – for a barn he knew no longer existed.

But that didn't work either, because the company continued to send us ever-increasing bills over a period of months, even finding us in Montana six months later. I eventually stopped them coming by attaching one to an eight-inch rough chunk of two by eight and giving it back to the postman Elvis-style; *Return to Sender*.

The barn fire, however, was not the catalyst to my later choice to fight fires. Indeed, Anne and I had absolutely no idea what we would do after leaving the farm, although the choice to move west, into wildfire territory, was in part initiated by a previous journey:

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THAT JOURNEY UNDERTAKEN in the early summer of 1988, when we had driven through the vast unchanging dry plains of North Dakota to the mountains of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. Being from the 'burbs of London I had never seen anything like it, finding myself saturated in the Wild West I had only seen on television. The country was magnificent, awe-inspiring and endless and I imagined legendary cowboys standing tall behind every rock and burned up twelve rolls of 35mm film in six days on scenery that I never envisaged existed except for on revolving celluloid. The mountain ranges fascinated me. One after another they appeared like distant ghosts on the horizon; subtle, grey, obscured by haze, steadily growing more massive mile after mile. Until finally, after countless more miles, they would tower above us to block the sun as their baldly white tops pricked holes in a crystal blue sky. The panorama was spectacular, monumental and ruggedly beautiful. To a lad from London it was a delight for the eyes and a thrill to the senses.

Flanked by mountains the valleys were green and lush. Made so by sparkling pristine rivers providing drenching irrigation. Ranchers herded cattle on horseback between immense open-

range pastures, just as they had for generations. Nearby, monster machines cut endless fields of hay and filled the valleys with the sweet dusty aroma that lifts a farmer's heart. Deer were plentiful and roamed in unconfined freedom. Solitary moose sauntered undisturbed along riverbanks. Lone black bears roamed the hills in search of early summer huckleberries, and contented Angus and Herefords grazed, fat, in the hundreds, head-down and oblivious to the magnificence of their backyard.

They have a term for this vast open Montana landscape: 'Big Sky.' Although the term doesn't fully compliment the vastness of this land. One has to see it, feel it, smell it. Seize it into the senses to fully experience what is one of the most awe-inspiring, freedom-inducing, romantic and exciting places on earth.

We stayed in a cabin owned by the Pillsbury family just outside of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Anne's aunt was the cook and to test the amenities before the dignitaries, celebrities and general wannabes arrived she was allowed to invite a few friends and family. We stayed in an immaculate old log cabin – as one would expect with many famous names in the guest book. The ranch was located right on the banks of the Snake River, in the shadow of the Grand Teton. The place names were all recognizable from my childhood and seeing them for the first time held an almost surreal fascination. To discover that these places really existed thrilled me. Yet I felt I had been there before. Everything seemed strangely familiar, and comfortable.

On our second day I decided to go for a run. I was told that guests often tried but because of the altitude rarely got very far. Of course, I was determined to prove them wrong and headed out along the long drive to the main highway, then on toward the Jackson Hole ski area. It was over 6,000 feet and 85 degrees. The air was thin and warm, and full of floating cotton from the river-bottom trees. On my left was the Grand Teton, to the right the ranch, and just beyond, the impressively wide meandering Snake River. I started to get a feeling of déjà vu and as I ran I vaguely remembered a dream from childhood where I was running along a road bordered by mountains and a ranch where Olivia Newton John lived – being the if only star I always lusted after during those awkward teen years.

Continuing on towards the airport I briefly stopped to watch a few obviously very rich people arrive in their lavish private jets. Soon heading back along the road and yet all the while trying to make sense of that strange feeling of having being there before.

Anne was ready waiting for me and once I'd showered we all went to the cookhouse for dinner. Just inside the door was a guest book that we were all expected to sign. We hadn't noticed it earlier and sifted through the pages to see if we recognized anyone. I just about fell flat when Anne pointed out that Olivia Newton John had stayed there the same week the previous year!

We left the cabin the next day to begin our long journey home to Minnesota and it felt as if I was leaving something behind. I had never felt such a connection before. Being in the mountains with countless new scenes unfolding at every turn was incredible. The car's windows were open the whole time, the air so fresh, sweet and invigorating. I couldn't inhale enough of it.

But of course we had to return to the cows and the life we had chosen in the winter-frigid, summer-sweltering, mosquito-bitten flatlands of Minnesota.

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AFTER LOSING THE FARM later and reconsidering our options it wasn't hard deciding in which direction to go. While still in Minnesota Anne found a position on a Forest Service (FS) wildlife crew in remote central Idaho, based on a veterinary qualification she had gained at college. She drove west in April and I stayed behind in Minnesota while a replacement was found for my milk testing job, and eagerly waited to hear if Anne's FS district would hire me on their fire crew – digging ditches being about the only thing I thought myself qualified to do after slinging cow shit most of my life.

I had recently heard of these summer fire crews while milk testing for a neighbor's dairy herd. John, one of the more energetic young farmers in Becker County, had earlier told me about a local teacher, Chuck, who headed west each summer to fight forest fires during the school holidays. Apparently a few weeks before Chuck left he could be seen running the roads to get in shape. He would then disappear in June after school finished and return exhausted, battered and bruised – but happy and much richer – in September. Rumor had it that the children in Frazee, Minnesota, didn't learn much English at the start of a new term, but did hear a lot of jump stories about firefighting in mountains most of them had never seen. John's was a casual conversation initiated by his desire to hunt in Idaho and I never really thought much about it at the time. But it must have embedded in my subconscious because it was to return to the surface later, and change my life completely. Yogi Berra once said: "If there's a fork in the road take it." I was about to run headlong up that fork with all the naivety, exuberance, hope and vigor of a determined adolescent.

Anne eventually called to let me know that the North Fork District of the Clearwater National Forest would, indeed, hire me and keep me working until September. I was thrilled, packed in a day and immediately headed west. After the misery of the fire, and living in limbo with the in-laws for a few months, life had begun to improve. It took 18 hours on a mostly deserted highway to reach Missoula, Montana, and four more to reach Canyon Work Center, right in the middle of the massive Clearwater National Forest.

Anne was in the middle of nowhere. The nearest town was an hour away and barely surviving on a beleaguered logging industry. The majority of vehicles I'd seen for the last three hours from Missoula were logging trucks, all careening down narrow roads as if possessed. They weren't of course. At least I don't think so. I assumed it was more because they knew the roads like the back of their hands and, since their wages were determined by how many trips they could make in day, they drove fast. My Minnesota license plates were a dead giveaway and they let me know it. They didn't know the half of it.

On the first morning I awoke early, full of anticipation and introduced myself to Chuck, the district Fire Management Officer (FMO). Gleaming with excitement I was crushed when he told me that he couldn't hire me after all. This was such a disappointment after the anticipation, the weeks of waiting and the long trip. He explained that only United States citizens could be employed with the Forest Service, even if it was only a temporary seasonal job. No one had thought to tell us and we had never thought to consider it. Anne had mentioned that I was English but there seemed to be no way around the bureaucracy. It was a problem, and a big one. But without anything else to do I stuck around to watch, listen and bide my time while figuring out what to do next.

After talking with a couple of Anne's new friends on the wildlife crew we learned that I could volunteer my time. For this I would get an allowance of \$7 a day for four 10-hour days, plus, graciously, the use of a bed. Seeing as I was already there, Anne was there, and since I really had nowhere else to go, I decided to push for it. I asked around to see who needed people for certain types of work and ended up approaching the silviculture manager, explaining that he could save some money on his budget by taking me on. For \$28 a week it seemed like a bargain on his behalf, because I hadn't been paid that little since working an agricultural 60-hour week in England when I was 16. He was a little skeptical at first, he didn't know this Limey from Adam, but he eventually agreed to try me out. I was greatly relieved, even though I would remain greatly broke.

Over the next few weeks I planted trees, marked cutting boundaries, surveyed old boundaries, mapped roads and inspected cut banks. Then I inspected other contractor's work while they cut poles, killed moles and planted trees. It seemed as though the FS was all about checking up on how other people were working FS land, and then building the roads that allowed the companies to do it and cleaning up the crap they left behind. The time, money and effort expended so that companies could tear up the mountains was anomalous to me. It was ultimately anomalous to others as well because it gained the attention of a host of environmental groups who were forcing the whole logging industry, rightly or wrongly, ignorantly or arrogantly, toward a major upheaval. The silviculture crew had a lot to do with making that upheaval less dramatic in the '90s, although few in the logging industry were impressed by their efforts. It was a damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of job, stuck between the longstanding timber industry paying local wages on one side, and city environmentalists with easy access to politicians on the other. But hell, to me it paid \$28 a week – and I got to use a bed!

On my days off – those when I got paid seven dollars less – I went out with Anne on her wildlife tasks. Her job was to document all the plant species in pre-designated, satellite-selected areas of the forest. We would drive out in a putrid green FS truck to some remote logging road, walk a few miles up mountains and across meadows before finding the specific quarter-acre spot. Then, once on a horrendously steep slope Anne would write down all the plant names in Latin, literally hundreds of them. I have no idea how she managed to learn them all in the time she was there. She picked it up amazingly quickly. Latin to me was, well... Latin.

If anyone asked, we always said that I drove my own vehicle because as I wasn't being paid for those days I wasn't supposed to be riding in a FS rig. This was just in case some grizzled old office fart wanted to blame someone for anything – the FS is like honey to such people. It was a cover your ass (CYA) policy that I soon learned proliferated, like the holes in Swiss cheese, and just about as useful, all aspects of this once noble institution.

Those days with Anne were wonderful. Once finished with work we would have lunch on top of a remote undisturbed peak: two flatlanders mesmerized by the endless, unspoilt, velvety green vistas in one direction and appalled by the nuclear-like devastation of clear-cut logging in the other. Once back at camp our newfound friends would harass us with whistles, catcalls and innuendo. But they were only jealous.

The snowline on the mountains surrounding the camp rose as summer approached and the fire crew soon needed extra help for their prescribed burns. To get that help they asked for volunteers – the FS simply loves volunteers, even more so than the army. I had been waiting for

this opportunity and jumped two paces forward like a Gurkha volunteering to parachute for the first time, uncaring of the consequences. Chuck initially gave me an ‘are you still here’ look but reluctantly, or in fascination of persistence, nodded his head anyway. He had probably thought the hard work and lack of wages in silviculture would have made me quit. But during years on the farm we’d often earned far less for doing far more and I hadn’t thought much about it. Now, however, although still poor, I was having more fun than I’d had in years.

So, at the start of the fourth week I was provided a pulaski⁵ – a long handled axe with an adze (a hoe-like tool used to hollow out logs) opposite the axe, like a mattock – and found myself digging dozens of firelines in 90-degree heat on excruciatingly steep south aspect slopes in the middle of Idaho. It was bloody wonderful! I was having the time of my life!

Chuck stared at me rather quizzically when I showed up the next morning looking for more. I had a handful of blisters from no gloves; torn feet from useless boots; but unequalled ambition from having... the best time of my life!

“Glutton for punishment?” I think was the question Chuck posed before sending me back into the hills for more of the same.

The work was physically demanding but was little more than we’d done for years on the farm, except for being on slopes that I, and especially my legs, had never seen before. Minnesota doesn’t have anything worth calling a mountain and my legs screamed every time they met another 30-degree incline. But it was all new and exiting and in some strange masochistic way I even welcomed the daily exhaustion and cuts and bruises. I clearly wasn’t doing it for the money, though, because the food bill alone was more than I was earning.

Many of the crew were in their second or third year and had developed a comfortable routine; pacing themselves throughout the day. Some routinely fought for the privilege of driving the engine. Whereas a small group of us would thrive on just doing the down and dirty hard graft. I was becoming an anomaly. Not for wanting to work, or even volunteering to do the hard work, but for doing it for 7 bucks a day.

“It’s not even beer money!” They said.

It didn’t take long to realize that a few of us were routinely putting in a lot more than our fair share of work. It’s easy to tell when you’re digging miles of fireline day in, day out, up, down and across almost every mountain in the forest. Even with the back aching, hands ripping, feet tearing and legs burning there is still plenty of time to think. So although I was thoroughly grateful for having the work, I was, nevertheless, growing frustrated at doing more than a fair share for a gross less reward. With encouragement from Pete, one of the brilliant squad leaders, I explained this rather succinctly to Chuck one morning. But word had preceded me.

My basic approach, never accused of being diplomatic, was: “Com’on, gimme a job. I can do this!”

Slowly but surely I was wearing Chuck down and unknown to me others were also helping my cause. I’m sure Chuck had more important things on his mind but after a few more days he

⁵ Originally introduced to the U.S. by Collins Tool Company in 1876, but reportedly ‘re-invented’ in 1911, at Ed Pulaski’s request by Joseph B. Halm, Pulaski’s assistant, both U.S. Forest Service rangers based in Wallace, Idaho. Largely as a response to what Pulaski saw as a need for better firefighting tools after being credited with forcibly saving (under gunpoint) 45 lives during the *Great Idaho Fire* of 1910, which burned 3 million acres over 2 days and killed 87 people, at least 72 of them firefighters.

decided to hire me as a contractor. Apparently the government had released some fire emergency funds under a severity clause to make this possible. After that, I started getting real wages. It wasn't a lot, but at least I could now live on it. I don't know which of us was more relieved, Chuck for not having to deal with my daily harassment or me for finally getting paid for work I was already doing.

The whole crew was earning a lot of overtime now that we were doing more burns: slash burning; setting fire to the trash left over after logging operations, smaller diameter trees and branches, often several feet deep on the hillside. And whether out-of-touch, desk jockey, middle managers choose to accept it or not, for every seasonal firefighter, it's the overtime that makes it a livable wage.

We were now starting at six in the morning, going until dark, and getting 14 to 16-hour days on a regular basis. Overtime (OT or Oats) was a wonderful thing, even if mine wasn't time-and-a-half like the others. But with the nearest town so far away there was nowhere to spend it anyway, so it grew rather nicely as there was no longer any feed, fuel or veterinary bills to pay.

These burns were incredible. There's no other way to describe the wanton destruction of setting huge tracts of land alight littered with so much brittle-dry fuel. This summer Chuck had more than the usual acreage to burn and he needed to use up his funds for the year or he would lose them. So we would set one 50-acre clear-cut alight and move to the next to set 80 acres alight, then move again to set 100 acres alight. These massive ugly clear-cuts were where logging companies had removed all the valuable timber and left the rubbish (slash) behind for us to clean up by burning before replanting could occur. During the season we dug miles of fireline around the clear-cuts and pre-positioned hose-lays to prep them. Then, once the weather obliged and fuel conditions were right, we would ignite the slash in strips during the early evening in an attempt to draw the heat to the center. If it was done right the air would be sucked in from all sides and, hopefully, stop the fire from escaping the perimeter and burning the surrounding healthy forest. The technique was very effective and remarkably successful most of the time. Chuck seemed to have a knack for it. It was grueling hard work but immensely exciting.

North Fork clear-cuts are nearly always steep and brimming with brittle slash, loose stumps, downed snags and rocks, making traversing through a slash unit extremely difficult, especially when carrying a drip torch and a five-gallon jerrycan full of fuel mix. We would strip off the top of the unit in few tight rows to provide a good burned buffer and then work down, widening the rows as we went. All the while watching for rollers – logs or rocks dislodged by the fire that could bounce down on us – with only our wits and flimsy plastic hardhats for protection.

Stumbling through three feet deep brittle slash with fire above and behind us while carrying a flaming drip torch often provides a good test of Darwinism. Dropping an unintentional glob of burning fuel while climbing over piles of slash can be an enlightening experience to say the least, and it frequently initiates that intrinsic surge of adrenaline needed to get the hell out of Dodge. Lighting behind you without a suitable exit can also be awkward when carrying an extra five gallons of incendiary fuel. Either way, such mistakes can be the makings of a kebab, much like an immolated monk, and are usually followed by a loud "OH SHIT!" and a rapid departure from the vicinity.

Everyone wore green Nomex⁶ pants and yellow Nomex shirts, designed to protect against occasional direct flame but not heat. During burns we'd invariably have flames lapping at our ankles that would scorch our trouser legs. While we didn't care too much about burning our trousers, which were issued, we did care about our boots, which weren't. And although issued we also cared about our hard to find, old-fashioned, cotton Nomex shirts.

Having a traditional cotton Nomex shirt was like owning gold dust and we hung onto them no matter what state they were in. It was quite normal to see people wearing more patchwork than shirt, especially the sawyers, who would rest the blade of their long Stihl chainsaws on their shoulders. The type and condition of a yellow shirt was used to signify experience. And in many cases provided a better gauge of fire experience than the later mandated pieces of paper claiming a myriad of superior classroom fire qualifications.

By ten o'clock in the evening we would have three or four 80-plus acre fires raging on various aspects of the forest, turning darkness into a bright orange glow. The crew would then split up between each unit to monitor the fires and extinguish anything that escaped the boundaries to threaten the forest. With the night sky ablaze smoke columns could soar up to 20,000 feet, allowing the smoke to diffuse over a larger area instead of sinking to the closer valleys where it would annoy the local residents and attract even more animosity towards the Forest Service.

Forest smoke management is a contentious issue among the large burgeoning communities of Montana and Idaho. Most of the understory prescribed burns close to these communities are done solely to provide firebreaks for their protection, and yet complaints abound, especially after being subjected to several days of settling smoke. Such complaints often originate from newer inhabitants, however, rather than the longstanding residents who have already experienced the disastrous effects of wildfire and are, therefore, more inclined to accept a few days of smoke in order to safeguard their livelihoods.⁷

As the dirty dark smoke from our infernos billowed upwards, burning hot firebrands rose into the night sky to be whisked away on the prevailing evening winds. It was still early in the season and atmospheric humidity would extinguish them long before they ever fell back to earth. Later in the season it would be different. During the long hot summer months embers of wildfires cause constant problems as they are carried on the wind to ignite countless more fires in the tinder-dry timber far ahead of constructed firelines – spotting is a serious hazard to firefighters and firefighting.

Occasionally the massive heat and flames in the burns would escape the boundaries and surge over the fireline in search of fresh fuel, causing everyone to jump into action by digging more fireline around the spill – or slop-over. Pre-positioned hoses were efficient in laying down the flames so that we could dig line more directly. But the steam caused by this was always horrendous, almost worse than the smoke itself. Our eyes and nostrils took an absurd level of

⁶ A synthetic flame-resistant material, somewhat resembling cotton, developed by DuPont in the 1960s that does not melt, ignite or drip.

⁷ As I write, we have only now, after almost two months, seen clean fresh air. With 49 consecutive days of no rain, the large summer fires have been smoldering away and filling the valleys with smoke. But that's life in the northwest. On a recent drive from Missoula to Seattle we didn't get relief from the smoke until Snoqualmie Pass; that's 427 miles of constant smoke.

punishment from steaming hot ash and other airborne debris. Eyes would sting, streaming with tears, while lungs rebelled by hacking up dust and mucous. If it got too bad we'd step out of the smoke to inhale fresh air in a moment of respite before submitting ourselves back to the task. We never had breathing masks and relied, instead, on simple cotton bandanas, which weren't very efficient but they at least kept the larger particles from being inhaled.

After a session in these conditions our mouths were bone dry, caked with so much dirt and dust that we could feel grit between our teeth and taste dry wads of desiccated ash on the tongue. Tears from irritated eyes created rivulets that left pale vertical streaks on otherwise sooty faces. The nose and sinuses would get so clogged that it felt like flu. Headaches were commonplace. All we could do was maintain fluid intake to combat the symptoms of dehydration from working so close to the heat of the fire. The slightest moment of fresh air was a godsend and when available we inhaled it by the gallon.

Due to the varying conditions on these burns there was always discussion about who would ignite and who would hold it. Those holding the perimeter were destined to eat smoke and spend hours in misery. It was a dirty thankless task, but unquestionably vital. The glory, though, was all in the ignition. As was all the fresh air.

Once Chuck knew the fires were secure, usually midnight, we'd drive back to Canyon to shower, grab some late dinner, a few beers and fall sleep. At five o'clock the next morning we'd be up again, putting on our stinking clothes and heading back to the burn to check the perimeters, cooling any hot edges so the fire didn't creep over, or under, the fireline. Without rain the burns would smolder away all summer, always threatening the line. So until it rained it was a daily chore to check the miles upon miles of line we had dug. It went on for weeks. By the end we were so incredibly fit. The once excruciatingly steep slopes no longer fazed us. We were each now volunteering to go down into the depths of these units and would even, on occasion, jog back up because it seemed easier. Some of the firelines were so steep and rocky that we would hold onto the hoses and almost abseil down. When it came time to remove the thousands of yards of hose we would hook one end to the back of the engine and haul it up to a road – not an officially sanctioned method but an efficient one nevertheless. To stop the connections from snagging on rocks and stumps we would hang onto the hose and have the uphill ride of our lives. It was like being on a rope tow, except that we had to run alongside it, jumping over logs and rocks along the way. As long as we kept our feet moving and knees high we were okay. Otherwise we'd catch a limb or a stump, trip up, and cultivate the mountain with our backsides.

It wasn't all work, however. We would take regular breaks throughout the day to keep hydrated and fed, and we used the free time to get to know each other. After work on shorter days I would run halfway up the Black Mountain trail before dinner, just for the hell of it. When feeling especially ambitious I'd occasionally do it with a ruck full of rocks. On the way I'd see deer, a few mountain goats, if I was lucky to get high enough, and even a solitary black bear rummaging for bugs under a rotten log, its large paws tossing it aside as if it were kindling. The views were amazing, looking over the slopes and meadows of the Mallard Larkins, instilling a sense of complete freedom and solitude that I had only felt atop the craggy tors on the barren moors of England. The air was fresh, raw and invigorating, and crystalized snow still lingered under shaded overhangs and inside crevices among rocks well into the summer.

The running, the volunteering for everything, and the sheer enjoyment I got from the job was gaining me a reputation and with that came a level of credibility to match that of the rest of the crew, Limey or not. So when burning season ended and the real wildfires started I automatically became an integral part of the crew on the fireline. Like the others, I was now gaining real fire experience. Fires became like a drug; addictive, we couldn't get enough of them. We would each vie for position and argue over who would go out on the next one. Then we would argue who'd go on the next one while we were still on one. We spent days and nights camped out on the fireline in the mountains and meadows of Idaho eating countless 'Meals Refused by Ethiopians' (MREs),⁸ sleeping in the dirt, in the ash, filthy, unwashed and working every daylight hour and many nighttime hours. When we finally relaxed around the fire at night, totally exhausted, sometimes in pain, we drank copious amounts of coffee and hot chocolate to keep us awake, never in a hurry to go to bed. Caffeine and youthful adrenaline kept us up and we had a never ending supply of both. Firefighting campfire stories abounded, revolving around fires, heroes, successes, failures, bears, old firefighters, snags, injuries and, of course, *Big Ernie*. In the morning everything would start over with renewed vigor, that which only emanates from youth. Being older I guess mine came more from the coffee, the little green Ibuprofens, and the pressure to succeed in front of more youthful peers who, without exception, I greatly respected.

I was fifteen years older than most of the others and obviously a little slower. Years of kneeling to milk cows and running roads with a ruck had worn my knees and my back had seen better days. I was envious of others' youthful joints, lack of any serious pain and their seemingly limitless adolescent playfulness. When the old niggardly pains became too much of a hindrance, while working or when trying to sleep on a rock, I'd break out the Ibuprofen again. And after a couple of green pills with my morning coffee I could forget my age for a little while longer and wonder who the hell *Big Ernie* was.

⁸ Meals Ready to Eat were developed by the Department of Defense in 1981, becoming standard issue in 1986 with 12 available, and quite delicious, entrees. The successor to the Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) Rations developed for Special Forces in Vietnam (Lurps).