

## GUIDED TOUR NARRATIVE – THE CARGO RETRIEVAL AND LUNCH SPOT

As soon as the last supply pack settled to the ground and its parachute collapsed, Foreman Wag Dodge shouted to the men to gather up their parachutes, their jump suits, the supply packs and the pack parachutes, and drag and carry everything to a central location. The spot he had chosen was down the gulch from the jump zone, just above the drainage bottom, on the north side. On a routine jump this task might take ten to fifteen minutes, but because the supply parachutes were so widely scattered across the upper end of the gulch, it took the crew forty-five to fifty minutes or so to complete.

While the crew was finishing up hauling to the spot he had picked out, Dodge heard someone shouting and whistling up on the ridge near the fire. He turned to his second-in-command, veteran smokejumper Bill Hellman, and told him that he was going to hike up to the fire to see who was yelling and to make an initial assessment of the blaze. He instructed Hellman to sit the men down and have them grab something to eat. After they were finished with their meal, Hellman was to have the crew fill their canteens from the two 5-gallon cans of water that had been dropped with the rest of their supplies, gather their tools, and come up to the fire.

At about 5:00 PM Wag Dodge crossed over to the south side of the gulch and quickly covered the nearly half-mile between the lunch spot and the fire. When he was close to the fire's edge he was surprised to find only one man there: Jim Harrison, the recreation/fire guard from the Forest Service's Meriwether Campground, located at the mouth of adjacent Meriwether Canyon. Harrison had been digging fire control lines by himself for three hours in a vain attempt to keep the fire from spreading down into Meriwether Canyon and burning the campground he was hired to look after for the summer.

Dodge made a quick assessment of the situation. Though it was getting late in the day, the fire was still burning aggressively in the thick fuels that surrounded it. As the heat of the fire pushed him back, Dodge suggested to Harrison that he join the smokejumper crew. Harrison accepted the offer and together he and Dodge began to retrace Dodge's steps back down to the area where the crew had assembled the gear and sat down to enjoy what for most of them would become their last meal.

Roughly half way back to the lunch spot, Dodge and Harrison ran into Hellman coming up to the fire with the smokejumping crew. Wag Dodge told Hellman he didn't like the situation up on the ridge; the fire was burning too hot and there was too much unconsumed fuel for his liking. He told Hellman to take the men directly to the gulch bottom, cross over to the north side of the gulch and a distance up the other side. They were to stay high enough on the north hillside to keep the fire well in sight. Dodge said his plan was to start from the safety of the riverbank and start attacking the fire from the rear and flanks. Dodge and Harrison were going to return to the lunch spot to get some food and water.

What Foreman Dodge and the rest of the crew failed to recognize, and what with the benefit of time and analysis we can now clearly see, is that the fire was then in the initial stages of what wildland firefighters call a “blowup”. A blowup is a phenomenon where a fire changes from a slow-moving ground fire to a rapidly burning fire that jumps from tree to tree with dramatic speed and incredible heat and intensity.