

GUIDED TOUR NARRATIVE – DODGE’S ESCAPE FIRE

Taking no more than 10-15 seconds to throw down their equipment, the crew continued their frantic scramble up the slope away from the advancing flames. But the oppressive heat, the steep slope, and the difficulty of trying to cross the rocky ground between them and possible safety began to take its toll. Their legs and lungs began to play out and the men’s escape paths began to run along the contour of the hillside. The shelter and safety of the ridgetop began to appear further and further away. Jim Harrison, still carrying his heavy fire pack, collapsed from exhaustion and had to be urged on by those coming up behind him.

The crew moved across the slope for about two minutes after dropping their equipment. They passed through another stringer of pine trees and came out into an open, grass covered part of the slope. The fire had closed to within 50 yards of the men and was coming up fast.

Again, without a word to the crew, Foreman Dodge reached into his pocket, brought out a book of paper matches and began lighting them and throwing them down into the deep grass at his feet. A fire quickly sprang up and burned off a small 10’ X 10’ area. Dodge stepped into the still-burning grass at 5:55 PM, turned to those closest to him and waving his arm began yelling, “Up this way! Up this way!”

Dodge’s fire continued to burn almost directly up the slope. Jumpers Bob Sallee and Walt Rumsey who were near Dodge when he lit his fire, thought Dodge intended his fire to be a buffer between themselves and the rapidly approaching wall of flames. They bolted around the right side of his fire and clambered for the ridgetop that was only 100 yards up-slope from them. Eldon Diettert followed their path.

Bill Hellman, who had been at the rear of the line of men, was suddenly up near the front of the line. He, too, failed to grasp Dodge’s plan and began his run up the left flank of the escape fire. Wag Dodge remained within the island of his burn out and continued to wave and call out to the remaining smokejumpers as they streamed by below him. But with the approaching virtual wall of flame, estimated to tower 10 to 40 feet high, Dodge wetted a handkerchief, pressed it to his face and lay down on his side in the middle of his burnt area on the steep hillside. Though he was practically lifted off the ground three times by the strong, turbulent winds of the fire, the flames passed by him and he was uninjured. Fifteen minutes later he was able to regain his feet and began searching for his crew.