

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A SMOKEJUMPER

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Remarks at the dedication of the memorial to the 13 smokejumpers who died fighting the Mann Gulch fire, Helena National Forest, Montana, (made on May 8, 1991 at the Smokejumper Center, Missoula, Montana, by Robert Wayne Sallee, the only living survivor of that August 5, 1949 tragedy).

It is a great privilege to participate in this dedication. I would like to be able to tell you a lot more about the men we are honoring today, but in 1949 we trained in 4-man squads. Although you were a speaking acquaintance to most of the fellows, you only really got to know people outside your squad if you were sent out on project work together.

Although first-year jumpers made 7 practice jumps, those with previous experience only made two, and they were kept in separate barracks from us. So we had very little opportunity to get to know them.

After training we were sent out around the region on project work. Some together, in fairly large groups, piling brush and building trails. Sometimes two or three to augment a ranger district crew, and sometimes one alone.

In my case, in 1949, I was sent to the Canyon Ranger Station on the Clearwater to replace a man who had not reported for the trail maintenance crew. We spent most of the summer as regular Forest employees until Mother Nature sent a big lightning storm through the region. We were then called to Missoula as needed and dispatched to fires more or less in the order we arrived. In my case, except for Walt Rumsey who was in my training squad, when we were sent to Mann Gulch all the others were just speaking acquaintances.

Thus I can't tell you much about them personally but will try to tell you what kind of young men became smokejumpers. This was just after World War II and a lot of returning veterans were still in college. The competition for jumper jobs was pretty intense. Earl Cooley and his staff were looking for young men in perfect health, athletic in a physical way, although

the upper weight limit of 180 pounds left out the big time football and basketball players.

Earl and his men wanted experience in the outdoors and if possible some previous firefighting experience. So many of the guys had either worked on blister rust contracts or in brush camps. I had one summer in a blister rust camp and one summer on the Kaniksu white pine disease and stocking survey and had been on several fires in the Kaniksu.

But most important, when these young men filled out the application and accepted the job offer, they demonstrated that they were men who had decided to test their personal courage---face fear---fulfill a need to step up from the rest of the crowd.

When you are a boy growing up, you go through a series of steps to overcome fear. In the beginning you are afraid of everything. One by one you overcome these anxieties until you decide to put the question of courage aside forever. And there is no better way than jumping out of an airplane to convince yourself and show the world that you are not afraid.

But it isn't easy. The application for the job isn't too tough because you can always back out and nobody else will know. But when the job offer arrives, you know this is for real. "If I keep on with this, I'm going to have to jump." You lie awake at night

thinking about falling, and eventually those who go on decide, "Yes, I can do it."

And after you report and stand up on the shock-tower and look down at at least a broken leg [if things go wrong], you grit your teeth and jump just like all your buddies are doing.

And when you're kneeling in the doorway of the plane, looking down at little buildings and cattle and trees far below, you think, "My God, am I really going to do this?" Then another fear comes forth and it dominates your being. And that is the fear of facing your buddies again if you don't jump.

So when the spotter hits your leg, you jump---and it takes forever to fall that twenty feet or so to the end of your static line.

I can't describe to you the glorious feeling that goes with seeing that beautiful white canopy overhead and the exhilaration of knowing you have done it. When you reach the ground the comradery with those who also jumped (in other words, conquered fear today) is overwhelming.

At that moment you become one of an elite group consisting of all those who have jumped before. I won't tell you that there is no concern before the next or future jumps, but they are never like the first one.

I hope I have given you a little insight into what

it's like to become a smokejumper. There isn't any other experience like it.

In 1949 the parachute program was still feeling its way. But it was a great success and the proof of that is that it still exists and is needed over 50 years after the first fire jump. There aren't many programs that can match that.

The smokejumping experience has been beneficial in my life and I think the lives of all alumni of the program. Jerry and Rob Linton and I have talked about this at some length, and I think Rob put it best when he told me that after smokejumping everything else was easy. He said even his stint in Korea wasn't as tough.

Smokejumping solidifies a courage that takes you through life. Nothing can ever be as difficult as stepping out that door the first time.

We hear a lot about teamwork in modern life, but there is no better lesson in teamwork than the one you get in checking your buddy's static line and breaker-cords and depending on him to check yours.

Jumpers have a highly developed determination and will to succeed. If you had ever seen a 140 pound man carry 100 pounds of firepack and jump gear up a mountain to the trail because the terrain was too tough for a 1400 pound mule, you would have an understanding of the word determination.

And participating with a crew of jumpers to build a fireline across the head of a fire before it blows up is a study in the will to succeed.

Jerry Linton reminded me that we also came out of the program with a great respect for good health and physical stamina.

I could probably continue this until I had given the program credit for every desirable character trait known to man and maybe the program deserves it. But for myself I feel the greatest benefit was learning how to do a day's work for a day's pay. This program teaches men that if you are given a job, you do it and don't complain. If you don't want it, there are hundreds of others who do. There is no union to protect you. You stand on your own merits and he who works hard succeeds in all things.

Again I want to say I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more about the 13 men we honor today. But I will say this: They were outstanding young men, selected from among the best, with proven courage, determined to succeed and dedicated to doing the job assigned.

They gave their lives trying, and this tribute is long overdue.

[Bob Sallee is now Engineering Manager, Inland Empire Paper Company, Spokane, Washington. Used by permission.]