

07/16/99 05:21 AM

To: Chip Houde/AFS/AK/BLM/DOI@BLM
cc:

Subject: Re: Rookie OPS Chief

Chip, I think that this letter you sent me is so good that it would make a good article for Wildfire magazine, as it stands. If you agree, send it off to Jason Greenlee. Sounds like your fire season is still rocking and i see you ICed a 4 manner and a big Noatak fire. I'm jealous, Boats
Chip Houde

Chip Houde

06/18/99 05:10 PM

To: Tom Boatner/MTSO/MT/BLM/DOI@BLM
cc:

Subject: Rookie OPS Chief

Hey Boats, how's it goin'? Just got back from my first assignment with the Type 2 team. Thought I'd tell you how it went. Come to think about it, you may already know the gory details. I hear that we made the news Outside. CRAP!!

The fire started on Friday morning, about 0930. Donnelly Flats. Yup...that would be just south of good old Ft. Greeley. It was hot and dry, and we rolled 2 loads right away. Delta Area Forestry had people on it by the time the bros got there, so the Iceman (first in the door) was off the hook fireboss-wise. I talked to the spotters when they came back, and heard that the fire was 10-15 acres with hardly any wind when they got there. Thick Black Spruce as far as the eye can see. Still, Kubi told me that he and Billy were high-fivin' in the plane... like, "We got this one.". Weip, that turned out to be a little optimistic.

For the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon, the fire moved south, maybe a mile and a half...then guess what happened? Thassright, the Delta Wind started kickin' in. The team got the call around 1430 and started doin' all the Type 2 Goin'-To-A -Fire stuff. Got the briefing from John Gould, then I flew down with him while the rest of the team bussed it. By the time I got over the fire, it was 12-1500 acres, hauling ass to the north. "Beyond initial attack", you might say. We landed at Ft. Greeley, and I met with the IAIC, Mike Bobo from DAF. I've known Mike for a while and he's not a guy who gives up easily, so I knew this had been a pretty difficult deal so far. Apparently, just as the wind was switching that afternoon, a full fricking tornado-like thing developed and blew the fire up big time. It was an extremely gnarly situation, definitely life-threatening. The tornado (and that's what EVERYBODY I talked to called it...NOT a dust devil) chased the boys around and caught Jay Watt, burning him on the face, ears, and elbow (he's OK and working in paracargo right now). Murry wrote up a pretty dramatic account of it. I'll send it to you if I can figure out this e-mail attachment thing.

Anyway, after I talked to Bobo, I got in a helicopter and lined out the bros for the evening, pointing out a wet two-track to Bert that he could burn out to secure what was now the tail, and getting the omnipresent Delta Dozers heading up the left flank. Except for a spotfire that Buck Nelson and some boys were working on, Jarvis Creek was holding the right flank pretty well. By now, there were three loads of SMJs and four crews (including the Midnight Suns and Denali) on the fire and four more on the way. I ordered seven more crews and landed back at ICP to start planning for Saturday.

When I found out this Spring that I was the OPS Chief on one of the teams several people told me that my first assignment would be NOTHING like the Carla Lake fire. I think you told me the same thing last year. Well dude, my first assignment turned out to be just about EXACTLY like Carla Lake, down to the most minute frickin' detail! Howlin' winds, structures in harm's way, bullets and bombs blowin' up ("They're only blanks."), etc. etc. But the weirdest thing of all was that Friday night I found myself setting up shop in same corner, of the same building, on the same Army base we were in last year. You woulda

laughed your ass off! The only good thing about being there was tying in again with Chief Tommy Oldham of the Ft. Greeley F.D. That dude is a great guy and a great fireman. We decided right away that having a plan for evacuating the Post and identifying a trigger point for that evacuation was necessary, even though the fire was still six or seven miles away and had two humongous man-made firebreaks to cross. Turns out that we were right.

By the next morning, the dozers had made it all the way around the head of the fire (the wind had died down) and the jumpers and crews had done a good job of trying to secure the tail and the entire left (west) flank, but it was a long way from the tail to the head, and everyone was ragged out and stretched thin. Of course, south winds at 15-20 were forecast for that afternoon. There were four residences along the Richardson Highway, about three miles west of the fire, and Alyeska's Pump Station 9 sat about four miles to the northwest. I ordered four structure protection engines to sit at those residences, and had gotten together with the Alyeska people to scope out what would be needed to deal with a fire running at the Pump Station. Of course, Alyeska was totally squared away on measures to be taken inside their compound, and it seemed to me that things would turn out fine there no matter what happened, if we could help them out a little outside the fence.

By that afternoon (Saturday) everybody was hangin' in there, tired, but doin' good. Then came the wind. Only instead of a south wind as forecast, it kicked in straight out of the east. The fire sloped over our line in five places, the jumpers scampered up and down the line and picked up three of them, Dave Matier and Pat O'Brien with the Suns and Denali got around a big one but the worst of the slops ran, long and thin, for a good mile until Mike Theisen and the Chenas, with the help of retardant and the wind dying some, stopped it on a dirt road, still about a mile and a half from the Richardson Highway. The other crews I had ordered were starting to arrive slowly (as usual, the Chenas got there just in time), but the engines that I needed for the homes on the Rich hadn't showed (and never would). Luckily, Delta Area Forestry had assorted engines and tenders running around that evening and they set up some hoses at those homes which would come in very handy Sunday night. Unfortunately, on Saturday night they were not actually assigned to the fire, so I was not having an easy time staying in contact with them. Obviously, that was a situation that made me more than a little nervous.

So, now we had a 3000 acre fire, and it wasn't long and thin any more. The run it made to the west Saturday evening provided a nice, long north facing flank and Sunday's weather report called for winds out of the south again. And I'm not talkin' about those wimpy 15-20 winds, I'm talkin' the Real Deal Delta 30-35 MPH Mofo Wind. Great. I still thought our best shot was going direct with everything we had, but maybe that's the smokejumper in me. I wondered later whether things might have turned out differently if I had gone indirect earlier, but with the fuel conditions we had on that fire, Boats, no way could I see putting people anywhere but one foot in the black. At one point, I did send two dozers with a couple of the bros to tie the head of the fire to the southernmost Ft. Greeley firebreak, building safety zones as they went, but that was as far as I was willing to go.

Saturday night I got everybody down for some rest. Only the Chenas, who were relatively fresh, and two dozers with relief operators, stayed on the line. Overnight, they put in dozer line and started a hose lay around the big slopover. Sunday morning, that was Rod Dow's division. On that division, I had seven crews (including the Chena Hot Shots), two dozers, twelve smokejumpers, and the most experienced Alaskan firefighter in history for a Div Sup. I had ordered four Nodwells for Rod to use (though they weren't there yet), and arranged for DAF to loan us some of their IA engines and tenders led by Reb Ferguson and Bruce Swaim to protect the homes on the Rich, should it become necessary. Mike Bradley was in place at Pump Station 9 ready to coordinate things there when the crap hit the fan. The evac plan had long been in place for Ft. Greeley and the folks there had their cars packed and ready. Tommy Oldham's boys were locked and loaded to protect structures on Post. The retardant site at Allen Field (about 100 yards from ICP) was up and running and we had two air tankers and air attack pre-positioned there. I thought we were as ready as we could be.

That morning (Sunday) everybody was working hard to cool down that slopover, but though the main part of it was long and thin, there were other fingers to it, making for a lot of line to cover. It didn't take very long for things to start heating up that morning, and by noon the wind was starting to pick up again. From the east! Despite a kick-ass effort by all involved, the fire jumped our lines and rolled west toward the Richardson Highway. And I mean it ROLLED. Though a casual observer might have described the scene as pandemonium, the strike team leaders and crew bosses (and Dow) did a great job of getting

their people to safe places. The crews assembled at Pump Station 9 and once I knew everybody was accounted for, I drove to the home which was directly in the path of the fire. There was a huge lawn in front of the house, so there was a fighting chance to save it. The guy who lived there was very concerned. Actually, he was pissed. There were engines and tenders showing up at the same time, and then Reb Ferguson pulled in and told the guy, "Ain't no way your'e gonna lose this house.". That was about all I needed to hear, so I headed for the Pump Station. The crews were all there. The fire hadn't hit the Rich yet (the homes were on the opposite side of the Highway, the Pump Station was on the fire side), but it was gonna. No troopers available, and the MPs could only stop traffic on the north side of the blow up (on Post). NOW ya tell me! I sent Fred Kutzgar down to get traffic stopped on the south side so that we wouldn't have flaming Winnebagos cruisin' on up to Delta Junction. Meanwhile, I'm at the Pump Station carryin' three frickin' radios so I could talk to everybody at the same time. The fire rolled over the Rich just south of us, but the flank was definitely gonna hit the compound. All this time, Ken Perry was up in the air attack ship, and then Dave Whitmer got up in a helicopter. Those guys were crucial, giving us eyes in the sky the whole time. Mike Bradley got with Mike Theisen and the Chenas and worked out how they were gonna burn out around the station. The Alyeska people had cut a bunch of holes in the chainlink fence around the place so the crew wouldn't get trapped outside. Pretty soon, it was time to light the drip torches.

Pretty typical deal Boats, a GS-6 smokejumper and 20 hard-drivin' kids, all makin' about ten lousy bucks an hour (none of 'em with health benefits) protecting a multi-million dollar installation. And it all went like clockwork. I was hanging there to give Bradley some backup (I had sent the rest of the crews back to ICP). Dave Jandt (the IC) called and asked me to head back to camp...for the pre-planning meeting. He was right, of course. That's where I should have been. But though I had complete confidence in Bradley and Theisen, I felt like I should be there for backup. Then Dave sent Dalis down there to get me. I still wasn't leaving. Then he sent Dow down to take over at the Pump Station. I guess I hadn't thought of that. Anyway, I was cool with that, so I went with Dalis back to camp to face the music.

I had been blowin' it, getting too involved on the ground, when I should have been taking care of a bigger picture. But Jandt was cool. He told me not to apologize, and to just focus on coming up with a plan for the next day. I'll be honest, Boats. Standing in front of that frickin' ICS 215 chart, I had no idea what we were gonna do the next day. I came up with a plan that I absolutely knew would be obsolete within an hour and presented it at the planning meeting. I guess everyone else knew it too, because they didn't hassle me about it. Right after that, we had a team meeting, and every Section Chief talked about the situation. We were all short handed. All of the sections had ordered people to help, but it wasn't coming. Lots of people were doing the job of two and three. Everyone was tired. I thought that Jandt was doing a great job as IC. He had been totally supportive of all of us, and was as frustrated as we were by the delays in getting the people we needed in place. No one was bitching about the situation, and we were all ready to keep plugging. But Dave looked at us and recommended to John Gould that the Type 1 team be brought in. John was cool, too. He agreed with Dave and gave us a little pep talk. I was really bummed, and you know why. Youv'e been there. I don't need to say anything else.

Anyway, we still had a gnarly situation goin' on. And like I said, nobody was ready to quit. The Pump Station was cool and the people there were totally stoked with the job Bradley and Theisen had done. Reb and his people had saved all of the homes that were threatened, which had to have been very touch and go, to say the least. Dave Dash had shown up at ICP, and told me that he would come up with a real plan for the next day, later... depending on what happened that night. Freeing me up to concentrate on what we were going to do in the next few hours. And that was very important, because believe it or not, the worst was still to come.

Now it's about 1930 Sunday night. The east wind had quit, but now we had a giant fire sitting two and a half miles south of Ft. Greeley, and the forecast for strong south winds hadn't been cancelled. I had ordered the aerial firing module, and they were at the helibase, ready to crank. I had Dave Whitmer grab all of the bros who were at camp and get ready to tie in with Chief Oldham and four of his engines where the big firebreak south of camp met the Richardson Highway. We all met at ICP, and I briefed them on the plan to burn the firebreak. Whitmer and the bros would hand fire the corner at the highway and then hold for the aerial firing with Tommy and his boys. Ken Perry would be in an observation helicopter and Mike Landau and Shawna Legarza would be in the firing ship. If the wind held off, it might work.

We had asked the Weather Service to let us know if the winds in Gulkana on the other side of the pass

started to blow, figuring that would serve as some warning that we were gonna get it. Just after we started lighting, they called us. Okay. We kept going and about a half hour later Matier called on the radio from the south end of the fire and reported that the wind had just gone from calm to 20 mph out of the south. Crap. A couple of minutes later, the entire north end of the fire jumped up and headed right at us. We got the helicopters on the ground, and Whitmer and Chief Oldham pulled everyone back out of the firebreak. That firebreak was a mile and a half from the southernmost residences on Ft. Greeley and the fire crossing that break was the trigger we had identified to begin the evacuation of the Post. The fire never even slowed down. Tommy made the call and within about 20 minutes everyone on Post had assembled at the airfield. By that time, Tommy called and said he had fire at the residences. His firefighters were in for a long night. I sent the three volunteer engines that had just pulled into camp down to him, and grabbed a rig with John McColgan and Ken Perry. We headed south on the Rich to see what was going on. We couldn't see shit. When we got back to camp, the Ft. Greeley people were streaming out to Delta and beyond. Good move. Bradley called from Pump Station 9 and reported that their anemometer was reading 55 to 60 mph. Steady. And the smoke was laid right down on us. It was like nighttime, Boats. Pitch dark. On a summer evening in Alaska.

Anyway Boats, like I said, it was another very long night. Al Edgren gave the order to evacuate the southern areas of Delta Junction (though I'm not sure that he got the same cooperation from the residents there, compared to Ft. Greeley). Except for some spots across Jarvis Creek which got picked up by the North Stars and some DAF folks, the fire didn't go any further north than the airfield. The next morning we got crews redirected to the north end of the fire and managed to keep things in check all day. The transition to the Type 1 team went pretty smooth (Wilcock and Coe were the new OPS folks), and by the end of the shift Monday they had the fire. They're calling it 18,000 acres now, with not much acreage gain since I left.

Dash told me later that an OPS Chief isn't really an OPS Chief until he gets his ass kicked. Well, I guess I'm qualified now because I got my ass kicked royally. Looking back, maybe I would have done a few things differently but all in all I think everybody did the best they could given the conditions. Several pretty salty old dogs told me that they had never seen anything like what went on those first three days.

So there it is, Boats. I just wanted you to know that while it was all coming down, I was drawing heavily on the experience and knowledge that I gained working with you. Not just at Carla Lake, but over the entire eleven years that you and I worked together.

But don't worry man, when the lawyers start grilling me, I won't mention your name.

Later, bro.

-Chip.