

Fire B-222

ACCOUNT OF FIRE BY M. MEIEROTTO

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On Friday, June 11th at approximately 10:00 a.m. I was dispatched to fire B-222. I knew we were the 2nd load going to the fire and figured it would be rolling when we arrived. Directly after the first load jumped, we jumped. The jumpspot was at the tail of the fire in a big cleared area several acres in size, cleared to mineral soil. The fire was about 5 or 10 acres in size and seemed to be quite active. There were several engines on the scene at the jumpspot and were starting up the right flank with a hose lay. On the plane I was instructed to set up a pump show in a near by creek and begin securing the left flank. As soon as I got on the ground I proceeded to do so, following an old road from the jumpspot to the small stream. Roughly 250 yards. I immediately began to here ordinance going off in the fire. Being in the Delta area I was surprised that there was no wind and was thinking if it started blowing we would really have our hands full. In short order the pump show was set up and the rest of my load headed up the left flank with a hose lay while I manned the pump. I had a good view of the fire from the little creek. Retardant didn't seemed to slow the fire much and after several hours the head of the fire was really beginning to build. About this time I believed the fire was over the hill. The fire was moving to the north at that time. I remember looking at the high clouds about this time and saw they had become lenticular, suggesting high winds aloft. At that time the winds on the ground were still light and to the north. By mid-afternoon or so a crew arrived from Delta. I felt I would be of more use on the line and so lined a member of that crew out on the running of the pumps. I went to the jumpspot and gathered as much hose as I could carry and was about to head up the left flank. At this time I heard a general announcement over the radio to pull back off the line as there was an increasing amount of ordinance going off on the line. I also remember hearing Jim Veitch over the radio stating that he was hearing a sound he had never heard before coming from the head of the fire, which was by now creating a fairly large column. This puzzled me as I knew he had substantial fire experience and assumed he was referring to the ordinance that was continually going off. I believe he was on the right flank at that time. When I reached the start of the left flank on the road leading to the pump, Bruce Nelson called me and asked me to begin a hose lay on past the pump on the road to Jarvis creek. I tied in with the Delta crew, Which were grouping up on the road roughly 100 yards from the jumpspot. As I was lining them out on the hose lay that Bruce wanted I noticed the tail of the fire was beginning to blow out. I thought this strange as I knew it had been saturated with water and just moments before appeared to be cold black. I also remember the rest of the jumpers on my load going back on the left flank to retrieve some of the hose left on the line. I e. Taylor, Yeager, Carroll, Liston, Hocklander, Nelson, and Adell. I had my back to the fire at this time and was talking to the Delta Crewboss. I heard a whooshing sound behind me and immediately turned to look at the fire. The first thing

I saw what appeared to be a dust devil in the black, but within a matter of several seconds I realized it was something more. I would guess the distance from me to the developing whirl would have been 50 or 60 yards. Instead of dissipating as is usual, it was growing rapidly. I turned back to the crewboss of the Delta crew and asked him to gather his people and begin moving to the jumpspot as it was also an excellent safety zone. This took but a second, and then I turned back to the fire. I was shocked to see that it was now roughly 40 or 50 feet across and was beginning to twist from side to side. Instantly I became aware of a blasting wind. At this point I yelled at the crewboss to move immediately and to make sure everyone in his crew was accounted for. He didn't seem to grasp the urgency of the situation and I again told him to move immediately. I was quite agitated at this point and began moving myself as I turned back to the fire. It was amazing to see what can only be described as a fire tornado. It was writhing back and forth and spinning as if in fast motion. It was generating enough force to begin drawing forest debris up into it. The exterior looked to be black smoke and dust while the interior appeared to be glowing orange flame. At this point the wind was terrific and I realized it was caused by the tornado drawing everything into it. I began running toward the safety zone in the hope that the crew would follow my example. Turning one last time I saw the tornado moving toward the south on a path that would take it across the road and into the green. It was massive at this point and I distinctly remember seeing several entire trees, maybe 20 feet tall with roots and all, caught up in the whirl and were perhaps 50 feet in the air. I remember associating the sight before me with the tornado portrayed on the Wizard of Oz. I don't mean to sound corny but that's what entered my mind. By this time I had reached the edge of the safety zone and turned to check on the crew. At this point the wind was roaring, along with the tornado, and visibility was near zero as the dirt on the safety zone began to get sucked into the whirl. At one point I saw a shindiawa pump, still attached to the IA chute, get sucked up and disappeared into the dust and smoke. With the crew all hunkered in the safety zone I became quite worried about the other smokejumpers and called on the radio. I was relieved to here they were all O.K.. From the time I saw the whirl begin until this point was a matter of only two minutes or so.

In summary, I have to say this is the most extreme fire behavior I have ever seen in 11 years of fire fighting. I was also asked about the use of fire shelters on this event. I honestly believe they would not only have been useless, but a hazard for this reason, The wind was far to violent for deployment or use as a shield. Also, had anyone managed to get into one before being overran, they would be cremated without a doubt. I believe a good safety zone is the only option. Also, With ordinance continually going off on the fireline, wouldn't that be considered a safety concern? And if so, who should make the call to remove personnel from the line? It seems to be developing into a "roll your own" policy. Is this the message we want to send to type 2 crews? Crews that stand gawking at a fire tornado forming and don't seem to understand they are in danger?