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Lightning: The Forest Fire Fighter's Enemy

Training the Fighter

By JIM FRAKE
Mail Tribune Staff Writer

Summertime and forest fires are usually synonymous to the men and women of the U.S. forest service who protect our national forests.

During the past few years, there has been a significant trend toward a greater number of fires annually, however, just as significant is the smaller amount of timber destroyed. The increase in fires is attributed to greater public use of the forests and natural phenomena. Better protection of the forests is due to top-notch training in fire fighting, as well as adequate equipment and manpower. Quicker detection of fires and immediate suppression combine to help keep Oregon green.

In an effort to have better-trained personnel on the job, the Rogue River National forest sponsors a forest fire training program each year for first and second-year employees. The trainees learn about small fire suppression, map reading, detection techniques, smoke chasing, fire behavior, general guard duties and safety precautions during retardant drops.

This year the school was held about 12 miles east of Butte Falls. There were 46 trainees and an instructing and supervisory staff of 24.

The school was under the direction of Robert H. Torheim, fire control officer and Doug Finch, assistant fire control officer.

Also participating were Carroll Brown, forestry supervisor, and William Cummins, Portland, who is in charge of law enforcement in connection with fire control. As a staff member of the forest service regional office, he serves as an advisor to the various forestry officers under him.

Rogue River National forest has held training programs annually since 1925, when trainees attended a one-day session in individual districts.

Starting in 1928 the fire training camps were combined and held at Union Creek. The site was moved to the Applegate in 1939, and since 1941 the school has been held near Butte Falls.

Generally Summer Employees

Trainees must be at least 18 years old and are generally short-term, or summer employees who man lookouts and serve as firemen.

Because of limited facilities, only first and second-year employees attend the school. It isn't uncommon for a person to attend the sessions two years in order to cover different phases of fire training that he may have missed the first year. Finch said the minimum three-day training is required before they go on duty.

The trainees are hired by the individual district rangers and chosen for particular jobs. Rangers then select those who should attend the school. Trainees are generally men, but this year's school included Miss Ann Webb, a senior in forestry at Washington State university. She has been assigned to a lookout.

Finch, who is also a forest fire dispatcher, said the importance of the individual fire fighter can not be underestimated. Despite modern equipment and air power, the "man with a shovel" is still vital to fire suppression. It is for this reason that the training program is held.

Opens With Orientation

This year's school opened with an orientation assembly, with Supervisor Carroll Brown speaking briefly. Also speaking were Don Johnson, assistant fire engineer, "History and Organization of the Forest Service," Ralph Wiese, supervisor of recreation and range, "Rogue River National Forest activities," Torheim, "The Place of Fire Control and the Fire Training Program," Hector Langdon, fire engineer, "Accident Prevention and the Ten Standard Fire Fighting Orders," Finch, "The Guard Training Camp Program," Bob Krell, acting district ranger from Prospect, "Sports and Competitive Program," and Luke Cernick, fire control officer in the Butte Falls district, "Camp Management."

Trainees were divided into two groups of lookouts and four sections of firemen. Personnel received both classroom and field training in the seven categories. Concluding the training was an hour-long written examination developed by the regional forest service office covering all classwork.

Purpose of the test is (1) to introduce the trainees to their job; and (2) to determine instructor ability. The results are used only to better the training program and to help district rangers with follow-up training, according to Finch.

Suppression personnel are particularly required to attend the class on fire behavior, which gives them an idea of what to expect when an alarm is received. The trainees are instructed how to recognize various fire fighting situations such as "blow-up" conditions.

Requirements of Fire Discussed

The three requirements for fire—heat, fuel and oxygen—also were discussed. The trainees were reminded that one of the three requirements must be removed for fire suppression. Water or dirt can be used to decrease the temperature, a fire trail will help isolate fuel, and smothering the fire will cut off the oxygen supply.

Instructors demonstrated different types of fires and fire behavior on a specially-built table lined with metal.

Once a fire is discovered, it must be pinpointed by using a fire finder (actually a fire locator; the lookout is the finder) and then described in "map language." Separate class sessions are devoted to the use of the fire finder and reading maps.

In map reading classes, trainees learn how to associate the actual maps with the actual ground. They are taught the use and meaning of map symbols, as well as the subdivision of land into townships and sections.

Fire Finder Instruction

For the fire finding instruction, personnel was taken to Buck Pt. lookout, an emergency lookout used following lightning storms or during periods of poor visibility. Here they were told how to set up, operate and read the fire finders. Speed and accuracy in fire detection leads to less damage to timber, the foresters emphasized.

Instruction in small fire suppression was conducted with small brush fires started to give trainees practice in putting them out under supervision.

Fire control officers explained that small fire suppression involves Class A (up to 1/4 acre in size) and Class B (1/4 acre to 3 acres) fires. Although water is preferred, dirt can be used effectively to put out small fires. Both are used if accessible.

"Dry mopping" is simply the process of putting out a fire or coals without water. The fuel is broken into small pieces and then smothered in dirt. The sticks are separated and laid side-by-side in a dirt area called a "bone yard."

Stay At Site Six Hours

Supervisors pointed out that forestry firemen stay at the site of small fires six hours after the "bone yard" is completed and the last smoke is seen. If no evidence of fire is detected then, the fire is considered out. A small fire is under control only when it is entirely out, firemen noted.

In other training, the fire fighters and lookouts tried

their luck at "smoke chasing." The trainees employed various methods of fighting fires from directions given presumably by a dispatcher. The instruction included use of compass readings and how to judge distances.

Two loads of retardant were dropped by forestry planes to acquaint the personnel with aerial bombing. Two factors were emphasized: (1) safety precautions during a retardant drop; and (2) function of the retardant plane in relation to the actual bomber. The droppings were directed by radio.

Altitude of Borate Drops

It was explained that borate material is usually dropped at an altitude between 75 and 150 feet in open country. Dropping speed is about 160 miles per hour. Each drop is generally 1,000 gallons, and each gallon of the material weighs 10 pounds. Because of the weight of the material, and the speed at which it is dropped, strict safety precautions must be taken, Finch noted.

On Friday, a general guard duty class was held to outline the overall fire fighting program. Each district ranger discussed the material with the crew members who work under him.

Assisting the fire control officers and forestry officials at the training camp were Luke Cernick, camp boss; Dude Henshaw, assistant camp boss and safety and transportation officer; and Bob Krell, recreation coordinator.



Part of the training that forestry personnel receive before being assigned to lookouts or fire fighting crews is centered on small fire suppression. Harry Sanford, a member of the engineering crew in the Prospect district, begins suppressing a small fire by separating the fuel. Once parts of the fire are separated, "dry mopping" can begin.



After a small fire is broken into smaller pieces, firemen can proceed with "dry mopping" operations. Lyle Pope, an extra protection fireman in the Prospect district, demonstrates mopping up a small fire by smothering the sticks of fuel in dirt. The pieces are separated and laid away from the fire area in a dirt patch known as a "bone yard."



Speed and accuracy in detection of forest fires leads to less damage to timber. Truman Puchbauer (right, rear), an assistant ranger for Rogue River National forest, one of several instructors at the training school, shows Miss Ann Webb, a forestry student at Washington State university, and James Canady, lookout at Whiskey Peak in the Applegate district, how to use the "fire finder."



Trainees at the Rogue River National forest's annual forest fire training program learned about fire behavior from John Hoffman of Butte Falls (right), and Luke Cernick, fire control officer in the Butte Falls district.