

Flame & Fortune

BY STEPHEN J. PYNE

As Smokey reminds us, forest fires kill more than trees. Revealingly, the archived records for fire control in the U.S. Forest Service begin with the deaths of seventy-eight firefighters during the 1910 fires. Since that lethal inauguration, an average of two firefighters have died by fire annually and eight fires have killed crews of ten or more. The fourteen firefighters who perished on Colorado's Storm King Mountain in 1994 join a long, portentous roll of those who have died under fire. Fire protection does not demand that firefighters die, but they do. The house odds are that a small fraction will continue to do so.

The firefight as battlefield, the crew as paramilitary unit—these are the common prisms, the journalistic and philosophic set pieces, through which the country has viewed the recurring tragedies. Fire control by the federal government began when the U.S. Cavalry rode into Yellowstone National Park in 1886. They were greeted with fires, which they fought; their example inspired eager successors. In 1897 the National Academy of Science recommended that the Army take over the new forest reserves and that West Point teach forestry, since the principal problems were fire control and trespass. The same month that the 1910 fires devastated the northern Rockies—the August that Ranger Edward Pulaski, a direct descendant of Count Pulaski of Revolutionary War fame, saved his panicky crew by holding them at gunpoint in an abandoned mineshaft while the firestorm raged around them—William James published his celebrated essay, “On the Moral Equivalent of War,” in which he urged a national conscription of youths to sublimate the martial spirit into a war against the forces of nature. If war, as the pacifist James argued, was “the romance of history,” then firefighting would become the romance of forestry. Ranger Elers Koch explained that a “forester in the Northwest dated the events of his life by fire years,” that he remembers “individual fire campaigns...as the soldier remembers the separate engagements of the war.” After World War I, the American Forestry Association campaigned for “suitable headstones with bronze tablets” for dead firefighters as “heroes of peace,” who “died as truly in the service of their country as did those of Flander's poppy-covered fields.” Chief foresters routinely petitioned for the seasonal cantonment of army units on the national forests as a method of fire control. That plea only ended in 1933, with the creation of Franklin Roosevelt's



Mendocino, California, 1956. FHS photo.

“Tree Army,” the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC promised better results than pick-up crews of the unemployed, like the ill-disciplined mob that loosed a backfire during the 1933 Griffith Park fire in Los Angeles in which 25 firefighters died and 125 more were hospitalized. Even so, 29 CCC enrollees died by fire. After the 1937 Blackwater fire in Wyoming burned over two crews, killing 15, the American Forestry Association helped create a forest fire medal for heroism; the first awards were posthumous. The need for better trained elites led in 1939 to the creation of smokejumpers, parachute smokechasers to grapple with small fires in remote locales, and the 40-man crew, self-styled “shock troops” who could travel to large campaign fires. By then forest defense, as the patriotic posters read, was national defense. When the U.S. Army wanted to establish a paratrooper base, they studied Forest Service smokejumper operations; when fire broke out in 1943 at Hauser Creek on the Cleveland National Forest, the marines who fought it left behind eleven dead and seventy-two injured; amidst fears of incendiary attacks, the Wartime Advertising Council created Smokey Bear to promote fire prevention. The Mann Gulch fire of August 1949 that killed thirteen firefighters burned the same month in which the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb, effectively announcing a cold war on fire. The 1952 movie it inspired, *Red Skies of Montana*, climaxed with



Military personnel assigned to fire suppression. FHS photo.

smokejumpers improbably digging foxholes in their fire-fight—a clear parable of the Korean War then raging. The next summer the Rattlesnake fire killed a crew of fifteen. The wholesale conversion of surplus military hardware to fire control reinforced the sense that firefighting was indeed the moral equivalent of war as B-17s and PB4Y2s filled the sky, and retrofitted jeeps and even halftracks prowled firelines, an iconography better suited to Guadalcanal than the national forests. Chief Forester McArdle memorialized the eleven firefighters who died in the 1956 Inaja fire as heroes “in the defense of the free world.” Thereafter the U.S. hurled aerial fire control into Alaska, now a Cold War frontier with the “red menace,” at precisely the same time, with the same technologies, and for the same reasons as the Soviet Union did in Siberia. In 1961 the Forest Service organized its best crews into a rapid deployment force. Before the 1966 Loop fire exploded through their ranks, killing twelve, the El Carriso hotshots habitually wore berets in imitation of the Special Forces then in Vietnam. After that, large-fatality fires receded, the rhetoric cooled, and fire management fixated on the question of fire in wilderness, for which classic firefighting was anathema. Even so the firefight-as-battlefield motif persisted, rekindled dramatically during the so-called Siege of ‘87 and the Yellowstone conflagrations of 1988, when the military again mobilized for fireline duty, bringing the saga full circle.

The tragedy in Colorado has stirred the ashes of analogy once again, though warily, because both the context of fire protection and that of America’s post-Cold War military have changed. To pursue the old analogy would place the firefighters who died on Storm King Mountain in the position of army rangers killed chasing General Mohammed Aided in Mogadishu—brave warriors in a compromised cause. There are better alternatives.

The fire-as-war metaphor fails, as all metaphors must. It fails first because, without a human antagonist, the moral drama centers within people, not between them. Firefighters get killed but don’t kill. The metaphor fails more tellingly because warfare is not a good model for fire practices.

Our relationship to fire is profoundly symbiotic. We are the one species that can start and, within limits, stop fires. Historically the first ability has enabled the second; the best way to control fire is with controlled fire; humans prevented wildfires by igniting their own. Not until the industrial revolution put fire into machines and reordered our relationship to the natural world did people assume that free-burning fire could be suppressed and, if necessary, eradicated.

Not surprisingly, it was the millennial 1910 fires that prompted a national debate on fire policy. Aggressive fire suppression had the sanction of European forestry; controlled “light” burning was, as poet Joaquin Miller ingenu-



Robie Creek Fire, Boise National Forest, 1955. Forest Service photo.

ously put it, “the Indian way.” Folk philosophers could not face down academic science, and as the body count mounted and federal troops poured into the Northern Rockies to restore order, the suggestion that hostile fire was somehow friendly fire, that the philosophy of firefighting was wrong, seemed not only ignorant but traitorous. Fatalities hardened ideology; to question public policy was to question the private sacrifices of the dead. The problem was fire, and the solution was less of it, not more. The cost in lives seemed, in retrospect, a downpayment on the Great War. The cost in money came through the Forest Fires Emergency Act of 1908, which authorized the Forest Service to spend whatever was necessary, subject to supplemental appropriations, to combat the emergency. The prospect of a blank check frightened many early fire officers. But of course the money was irresistible. The American fire establishment grew around it like crystals on a string. Not only had firefighting its own logic but its own treasury. Whatever else the fire establishment did or wanted to do, actual firefighting paid the freight.

Fire protection thus became an institution of American affluence. But there are some things money can't buy. It can't keep fires from starting or big fires from breaking loose. For several decades approximately 2-3 percent of fires have accounted for over 95 percent of the total burned area, a quantum that reflects irreducible environmental conditions. The Yellowstone firestorm of 1988 sucked in \$130 million with no appreciable effect on fire size or behavior. Meanwhile, the cost of suppressing fires has risen, with more and more of

that expense absorbed by supplemental appropriations. Even as the fire community recognized that fire control alone was inadequate, even as the federal agencies in the 1970s reformed their policies to accommodate controlled burning, even as ecological analysis has demonstrated that the plunging curve of burned area traced equally the curve of an environmental deficit, a fire famine, state and federal agencies have continued to dispatch crews to the front lines.

The environmental tragedy was not that wildfires were suppressed but that controlled ones were no longer kindled, because withholding fire is as powerful an ecological act as applying it. The exclusion of fire has, in many landscapes, catalyzed a crisis in biotic health, the environmental equivalent of the S&L scandal. One manifestation is a catastrophic buildup of fuels. More fires burn more intensely than in the past, and any attempt to restore a different regimen of fire must operate within ever-shrinking margins, the equivalent to running with vials of nitroglycerin. The costs to reintroduce fire into millions of acres of public wildlands would require a combustion Superfund and a new CCC, a commitment devoid of any significant political constituency. The fire rehabilitation of Oregon's Blue Mountains alone calls for a down payment of 100 thousand acres burned a year.

Social circumstances too are worsening. Pressures on the public lands have intensified. The vanishing rural landscape has removed a once-useful buffer and stuffed it with houses—still more fuel and more critics of any policy other than all-out firefighting. Legal liabilities for escaped fires, air quality standards, endangered species considerations, and impassioned interest groups have extended the national gridlock to such backcountry locales as the Three Sisters, Little Tujunga Canyon, and the Mogollon Rim. The agencies that oversaw the debacle implausibly ask a skeptical public for money and trust to set things right. Wildfires will continue as long as there are wildlands; the issue is not whether fires burn but how. In the past few years fire officers have struggled to kindle a thousand points of light with fuses and helitorches, but the amount of controlled burning is minuscule; the ecological darkness grows. That leaves the burden on firefighting, now more than ever more essential, isolated, and desperate. But by itself it can only temporize. It cannot eradicate the volatile legacy of the past or dissolve the clogged confusion of the present. Increasingly it must struggle to justify its sometimes fatal obsessions.

Perhaps a better trope is the motto adopted by the North Rim Longshots, “flame and fortune.” Money and action, fire season as a rite of passage—these are the motivations behind seasonal firefighting, a life as compelling as any ever imagined. Flame and fortune also spot weld public rhetoric to private purpose. Fire agencies will follow the money. Firefighters will follow the action, the best crews eager to go to the worst fires, even if, tragically, that pursuit from time to time acquires a more existential meaning and leads them to a final rite of passage, through the trying fire and to the fate that awaits us all.

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