

# ARMY FIRE FIGHTERS

by Marvin Fletcher

*During the summer of 1910, northern Idaho was hit by a series of destructive forest fires. Many lives were lost and millions of dollars worth of timber was destroyed. Among the thousands of people who helped fight the fires was a company of the Twenty-fifth Infantry Regiment, a company made up of Black soldiers. Their experiences in the area around Avery are an interesting episode in the history of Idaho.*

*The spring of 1910 had been quite dry, and as a result by summer the possibility of a disastrous series of forest fires in northern Idaho was very great. In June there were frequent thunderstorms, and lightning ignited countless small fires. By early July more than 3,000 fires were burning in the national forests of the state. The small band of United States forest rangers were unable to cope with the many fires, and they hired several thousand civilians, including hoboos and men from railroad and lumber camps. With their aid, the fires were brought under control.<sup>1</sup> The situation changed radically on August 20, 1910. A huge windstorm swept across the state, whipping the fires out of control.<sup>2</sup> The district ranger requested more civilian fire fighters, but the fires still raged unchecked. Then he asked the War Department in Washington, D.C., to dispatch several companies of soldiers to lend assistance. The request was granted. By the end of the month 10,000 men were on the fire lines throughout the state. With the aid of rain, they got the fires under control.<sup>3</sup>*

*The fires had caused tremendous damage to both life and property. In the Coeur d'Alene National Forest alone one-third of the timber was burned. That particular group of*

*fires cost 70 lives. Throughout the West the toll was equally high. Almost 2½ million acres were burned and timber worth thirteen billion dollars was destroyed. It cost the government almost \$800,000 just to fight the fires.<sup>4</sup> One result of this destruction was federal aid in the form of the Weeks Act, passed in 1911, which assisted states in setting up forest preserves and protecting them from the danger of fires. Many congressmen acknowledged that the 1910 forest fires helped awaken them to the need for such legislation. Another consequence was the recognition that fire protection was the most important duty of the Forest Service.<sup>5</sup> However, it would take many years to replace the trees that had been destroyed because of prior neglect.*

*The document which follows illustrates the magnitude and danger caused by one of the many fires. The author was commander of one company of the Twenty-fifth Infantry. This all-Black regiment had been created as part of the Regular Army shortly after the Civil War. The regiment, and probably some of the men in Company G who helped fight the fire at Avery, had participated in the Indian Wars, on strike duty in 1892 in the Coeur d'Alene mines, in the capture of the Spanish position at El Caney, and in the conquest of the Philippine Islands. This hazardous fire duty was new to them, but they responded well to the challenge.<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Betty G. Spencer, *The Big Blowup* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1956), 30, 34, 39; F. A. Silcox, "How the Fires Were Fought," *American Forestry* (November, 1910), 16:634.

<sup>2</sup>Spencer, 79-80; Silcox, 636.

<sup>3</sup>Spencer, 39.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 160, 237.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 266-67.

<sup>6</sup>For more background on the Twenty-fifth Infantry in this period see Marvin E. Fletcher, "The Negro Soldier and the United States Army, 1891-1917" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1968).



*During a black studies research project, Professor Fletcher of Ohio University in Athens came across this interesting military report of the curious adventures of military fire fighters in North Idaho during the 1910 holocaust. The results of the fire can be visualized in the picture of the cleanup train shown above.*

Fort George Wright, Washington  
September 7, 1910

The Adjutant,  
Fort George Wright,  
Washington

Sir:

In compliance with telegraphic instructions from the Adjutant General, Department of the Columbia, Vancouver Barracks, Washington . . . , I have the honor to submit the following report: . . .<sup>7</sup>

[The company including one officer, 53 enlisted men and one hospital corps man. They

arrived in Avery<sup>8</sup> on the morning of August 17, 1910.] At that time there were only two fires near Avery of any consequence. The first four days from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. were spent on the fire about four miles east of the town, which was threatening the railway right-of-way. The trench system was used, a trench about four inches deep and two yards wide being dug several yards in front of the fire and then a patrol left to put out any sparks, brands or flames that might leap the trench.

One man had three ribs fractured by a falling tree and it was necessary to send 12 miles for

the railroad physician. He left the next day for Wallace, Idaho, and the entire surrounding country was without medical attendance except the hospital corps man.

The various fires in the St. Joe canyon soon became unmanageable and fire fighters, settlers, miners, etc., were rapidly driven into Avery. The towns to the east were evacuated one by one and the populations of these towns took refuge in Avery. Therefore, on the fifth day, at the request of Mr. Debit<sup>9</sup>, the troops were drawn in off the fire line to preserve order in the town. . . .

On Sunday morning, August 21, 1910, a very strong wind arose from the west and lasted all day. It seemed to unite all the fires in the St. Joe Canyon and it was estimated that 20 miles of solid fire line was approaching Avery. Mr. Debit and the Deputy Sheriff, H. D. McMullan, who had arrived on the scene, went west on a special engine to inspect the fire zone. They telephoned me to get all the women and children out and to notify all the rest of the people to be ready to get out at a minute's notice.

Two special trains were made up, one for the women and children and one for the men who desired to go. Soldiers were stationed at the doors of each car, the windows were fastened down and the cars were filled with water cans. The engineers had orders to make a dash through the fires and the soldiers were instructed, if absolutely cut off on all sides, to take the women and children into the river, keeping them together as well as possible, avoiding a stampede. Both trains reached safety, but from the reports of the train men and the soldiers they had a terrible time.

The fires appeared to be coming in two waves, the smoke, roar and heat preceding the fire for miles, and I am sure no person left ever expected to get out alive. All hope of saving anything was given up. A meeting of those remaining was held in the station to decide upon a plan regarding the best means of saving life. I took no active part in this meeting beyond stating that the troops would go with the greatest number of people, because I did not know the country and was not familiar with forest fires.

Upon the advice of Mr. Debit and the Deputy Sheriff it was decided to make a march up

the St. Joe River and try to reach the head, although persons desiring to try other means of escape were to be permitted to do so.

An old mining tunnel on the edge of town was stocked with provisions and covered with wet blankets and a few old men and lame men were allowed to stay there. This was deemed safe for a few, but it could not have held any large body of men.<sup>10</sup>

The procession was started, but we had hardly gone half a mile when it was very apparent that we could not get through that way. This was towards evening and we turned back into Avery. One train load of men then started east. The fork of the St. Joe runs along the track to the east, and although it was known that all the bridges east of Avery were burned out and many tunnels caved in, they thought if they could reach an old burn about five miles east they might be safe. Avery is a division point of the Chicago, Milwaukee & Puget Sound Railway, so there were plenty of cars and engines.

Mr. Debit and a few men took blankets and prepared to take to the river at the fork. The Deputy Sheriff and I were agreed that the river would not do. Subsequent events proved that it would not have been safe. It was only about a foot and a half deep alongside of the town, but as it grew much deeper farther up we thought we would have as many drowned as burned. Falling trees almost dammed it in some places and many would have been killed that way. Further, many dead fish were afterwards found in the river and the creeks, evidently due to the intense heat.

Deputy Sheriff H. D. McMullan and his deputy, C. J. Sullivan, Company G, 25th Infantry, and the remaining citizens boarded a special train for the west, consisting of an engine, a flat car and a box car. All the rest of the engines and cars had been sent east as far as the track remained, and abandoned.

We succeeded in breaking through the first fire wave, but we could not get through the second and we were caught between the two fires. The scenes of the fires, the dense, stifling smoke, the intense, blinding heat and the roaring and crackling of the flames were indescribable. The flames seemed to be over a mile and

a half high. We traveled back and forth attempting to get through at one end or another, but it was impossible. Progress was constantly impeded by land slides or rocks, burned logs, etc. One fireman was killed while picking rocks off the track. His body was sent to St. Joe as soon as traffic was opened. One fire seemed to be on one side of the river and the other on the other, and the distance of clear track between them was about 20 miles.

During the night the wind died down, it grew cold and the fires abated somewhat. The first fire had not actually reached Avery and it was then apparent that it would not reach town until next day, as these fires travel very slowly at night. Mr. DeBitt and a few who had gone to the river, assisted by some who had broken through the fires from the hills, then started a back fire about midnight. This back fire burned one house, a \$10,000 summer residence in the canyon across the river. We remained about two miles west of Avery, and about 5:30 a.m. were able to get through.

As it was seen that there was no escape through both the fires, preparations were made for a last stand at Avery. As day came on, the wind came up and the fires again started full blast. Mr. DeBitt and a party had gone to Kyle<sup>11</sup> on an inspection trip and were cut off there all day, although we were in communication all the time by telephone. Pools were dug and filled with water and barrels were filled and placed near buildings. All water carts were filled and men were placed all over the buildings to guard against sparks. Bucket brigades were organized. Early in the morning all empty cars in the vicinity of the back fires were brought in so that the yards were also full of rolling stock which it was necessary to guard.

The second fire appeared to make tremendous progress and about 3:00 p.m. both fires seemed to unite as they struck the back fire. About the same time the wind suddenly died out, and if it had not died out about that time, and if there had been no back fire, nothing could have saved the town or people. The flames sank rapidly and in about an hour it was evident that the danger was over and all that re-

mained to do was to watch the fires which were burning out. The universal rejoicing can be imagined, although everybody was practically exhausted.

The dispatch wires had gone down and had been repaired at various times during the last three days and about 5:30 p.m. they were up again. We then received word that the first relief train was on the way with provisions and supplies. Captain George J. Holden, 25th Infantry, arrived on this train about 6:30 p.m. and assumed command of the U.S. troops. Major E. A. Dean, M. C., and four hospital corps men arrived next morning. Forty-five dead men were found and buried in the vicinity. . . .

In regard to the extent of loss, it is impossible to estimate same. Millions of dollars worth of timber must have been destroyed. District Forester W. B. Greeley told me that the market value of the timber on the Coeur d'Alene Forest Reservation alone was one billion dollars, and I believe this nearly all burned. The railroad bridges and tunnels destroyed were certainly of great value and nearly all the towns between St. Joe and Grand Forks were burned except Avery.

Regarding the cause of the fires within my observation, the fires were well started before I arrived. These fires spread so rapidly that the least little blaze is liable to cause a serious fire. All who have experience and observation seem agreed that adequate trails and road for patrolling and means of communication by telephone, wireless or otherwise, backed up by a sufficient number of forest guards and rangers ought to prevent any serious fires. A fire if reached at the start, is easily controlled and extinguished. . . .

Very respectfully,  
E. E. Lewis  
[Edson E. Lewis]  
2nd Lieutenant, 25th Infantry,  
Commanding Company G

<sup>7</sup>This document may be found in AGO #1705710, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, General Correspondence, 1890-1917, Record Group 94, National Archives.

<sup>8</sup>A small town of about 150 people, located in the rugged canyon of the St. Joe River. It was also on the mainline of the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad.

<sup>9</sup>Assistant Forest Ranger R. M. DeBitt was in charge of the Avery area.

<sup>10</sup>This technique was tried in a number of other parts of the fire area but was often unsuccessful. See Spencer, 107-08.

<sup>11</sup>A town to the northeast of Avery on the rail line.