

Courtesy of the Allen family

Firefighters didn't know they were in danger

Officials ponder why others keep dying in similar situations



Courtesy of the Allen family

Helitack partners Shane Heath and Jeff Allen were killed fighting a fire in the Salmon River Canyon, where the terrain is recognized nationally as extremely dangerous.

By [Rocky Barker](#), The Idaho Statesman

Firefighter Jeff Allen wasn't calling for help when he radioed for a helicopter to pick Shane Heath and him up from a ridge line above the Salmon River. Even though he reported smoky conditions, he didn't consider the situation to be an emergency, said Jacob Smith, a colleague who monitored radio communication July 22. The job of clearing a spot for a helicopter to land was done, and they were ready to leave. Allen and Heath did not know that the Cramer Fire would soon overtake them, racing uphill through the dry grasses of the steep slope. "They were asked throughout the day whether they needed to be picked up," said Smith, a mechanic who monitored radio broadcasts from the Indianola Helibase where Allen and Heath were stationed. "They said they didn't." Why they weren't aware of the danger when other firefighters had already been pulled off the fire is among the questions a team of 10 investigators is attempting to answer. Team members are interviewing witnesses and reviewing data to see whether the agency's safety rules were followed, whether weather, land conditions and vegetation were factors, and whether equipment contributed to their deaths. "The focus of this team is what happened and what can we learn from the deaths of these two firefighters," said Cheryl Chatham, a spokeswoman for the investigators. They are expected to complete their review in three to five weeks. Most of the investigation is centered on decisions made the day the men died. But federal officials also are looking at the larger question of why firefighters keep dying in surprisingly similar circumstances. Others suggest the culture of Western forest fire management needs to be examined. Forest experts agree that a century of fire suppression has made forests more dangerous. Yet federal agencies are forced by politics and outdated plans to continue to fight fires to protect isolated homes and the scenic greenery people love. "Certain elements of the public are going to scream bloody murder unless the federal government protects their property," said Steve Arno, a retired U.S. Forest Service fire scientist and co-author of the book, "Flames in Our Forest," with Stephen Allison-Bunnell. "They can only be defended for a large expenditure of federal dollars and at great risk."

**A dangerous place** Allen, 24, of Salmon, and Heath, 22, of Melba, were killed fighting a fire in the Salmon River Canyon, an area recognized by the nation's firefighters as difficult, dangerous

terrain. "We know that fires make big runs up the chutes in the Salmon River breaks," said David Alexander, retired supervisor of the Payette National Forest and a nationally recognized fire management expert. "You've got to be on your game when you're in that zone." Long Tom Mountain, between two wilderness areas near the end of the isolated Salmon River Road, is 35 miles northwest of Salmon, the nearest town. Historically, the ponderosa pine forest there burned often, as frequently as every seven years. But for the last century, federal officials have altered that natural rhythm, battling every blaze reported by the Long Tom Lookout two miles north. Like millions of acres across the West, the slopes below Long Tom were thick with small trees and brush that would turn a routine ground fire into a crown fire when conditions were right. The first sign that conditions had become more dangerous came in 1985, at nearly the same place as the Cramer Fire. The 32,000-acre Butte Creek Fire, which burned on the western boundary of the Cramer Fire, was the largest fire to hit the Salmon National Forest in 66 years. On Aug. 29, 1985, winds whipped the blaze into a blowup and sent 73 firefighters running to bulldozer-cleared safety areas the size of football fields. As the severe crown fire burned around them, they took refuge in individual fire shelters — metallic tents that shielded them from the heat and smoke. The firefighters stayed in their shelters for about two hours, and through close coordination with their bosses they moved to cooler places. Only five were hospitalized for heat exhaustion, smoke inhalation and dehydration. Without the fire shelters, at least 60, if not all, of the firefighters would have been killed, investigators later said. "That's an evil drainage," said Camille Hayes, a 14-year firefighting veteran and member of the Indianola helitack crew that included Allen and Heath. "It's not the first time people have been hurt there." The Clear Creek Fire, which burned 217,000 acres of the Salmon National Forest in 2000, started on the other side of the river, a few miles south of the Cramer Fire. Allen was one of the first firefighters to rappel from a helicopter to fight it. When it blew up and made a run down the canyon, he and other firefighters had to escape to safety zones.

**Beginning of a disaster** Dry conditions similar to those in 1985 and 2000 returned to the Salmon River Canyon this summer. At 4:48 a.m. on July 20, observers on the Long Tom Lookout reported smoke in the Cramer Creek drainage and suspected a lightning-caused fire. A Bureau of Land Management team was sent to attack the fire, which had grown to three acres in thick ponderosa pine, sagebrush and grass. By the next evening, 26 firefighters were on the fire, which had grown to 220 acres after a small run through slash piles of two- to three-foot flames, driven by the afternoon winds that rose from the river canyon. In his daily report, incident commander Alan Hackett warned of the potential for "large fire growth to the east, rolling debris and steep terrain." Hackett declined to comment for this story. He requested two helicopters for the next day with highly trained helitack teams of two firefighters who can rappel down to a fire to cut "helispots," where helicopters can land to drop off and pick up crews and equipment. At 9:30 a.m. the next morning, Allen and Heath rappelled from a helicopter to a steep, narrow ridge line west of Cramer Creek and above the fire to cut a helispot. The place chosen for the landing zone was on a bench below the ridge's summit. Heath and Allen would have to use chainsaws to cut trees on the steep slopes to make room for the blades. When the two firefighters landed, they saw the trees were larger than estimated from the air, some more than 24 inches across. They reported by radio they had identified several safe areas, places they could go in the event the fire burned close, Smith said. One was a rocky area just off the west slope below the bench. They began cutting the trees to clear what would be called Helispot 2. Meanwhile, about 60 firefighters were flown into Helispot 1, at the bottom of a small ridge just east of Allen and Heath's location. These less-experienced firefighters began digging a shallow trench around the fire to keep it from spreading. Normally, clearing a helispot would take about an hour and half, said Zeke Smith, 25, of Salmon, who was Allen's helitack partner two years earlier. But cutting the larger trees took five hours, keeping Heath and Allen on the hill until midafternoon. Throughout the day, said Jacob Smith, the mechanic, the two were in radio contact with Indianola. Meanwhile, a plane carried the Air Attack Group supervisor, who coordinated two air tankers and a helicopter that were dropping water on

the fire. The supervisor determined the targets and led the tankers in for their retardant drops. He also was the backup lookout for Allen and Heath, Smith said, when their helicopter was away from the scene.

**Cache Bar boaters** Guides for Rocky Mountain River Tours rowed into the Cache Bar boat landing around noon after a five-day river trip on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. At the landing, they quickly unloaded and deflated the rubber rafts and loaded the gear into a waiting bus. Guests watched as a helicopter grabbed water from the Salmon River below the landing and carried it over the ridge. “The fire wasn’t doing anything then,” said Dave Mills, co-owner of Rocky Mountain. At about 12:30 p.m., Al Bukowski of Solitude River Trips arrived and his guides also went to work. Packing up takes about two hours, Bukowski said. As the two outfitters were finishing up, a warm wind began blowing east up the canyon. The fire began to grow. Now, two helicopters were dropping water on the fire. “We were watching as the fire raced over the ridge,” Bukowski said. “That’s when the cloud of smoke got dark and big.” One helicopter was circling, apparently watching the fire, Bukowski said. All the outfitters left Cache Bar by 3 p.m.

**Crews pulled off** The approximately 60 firefighters who had been digging a fire line near Helispot 1 were pulled off the fire at midafternoon, according to the official report released by the investigation team 72 hours after the incident. They were removed, the report said, “due to increased fire intensity at the lower helispot.” Outfitters estimated the wind came up at about 2:20 p.m. The firefighters walked to the Cache Bar boat ramp. The investigation report, which officials said was preliminary and subject to change, was sketchy on one of the key details — the time between when the other firefighters were pulled off and when Allen called in. It said shortly after the hand crews walked to the Cache Bar landing, Allen called for a helicopter to pick him up. However, the outfitters reported they did not see the firefighters at the landing before they left at about 3 p.m. after Allen had called in. Smith, the mechanic, put the time he called at about 2:30 p.m. One helicopter was in the Indianola shop 20 miles upriver for its 30-hour maintenance check. The other was being fueled, Smith said. When full, it was sent to pick them up. “We had both helicopters available,” he said. When the helicopter arrived above Allen and Heath, the pilot couldn’t see them because of the smoke. The helicopter repeatedly tried to land but could not because of poor visibility, the official report said. Now, apparently threatened by the approaching fire, Allen and Heath broke off radio contact. “They said they’re bugging out,” Jacob Smith said.

**Lost cause** After radio contact was lost, the two helicopters searched for Allen and Heath for nearly three hours. At about 5:30 p.m. or 6 p.m., two other members of the helitack crew rappelled to the rocky ridge line where Helispot 2 had been cleared. A firefighter in the other helicopter spotted the bodies 450 feet up the slope from Helispot 1. No one knows why the two had not gone to their safety zone. Because of the fire conditions, the two rappellers were forced to remain on the ridge with their fallen comrades overnight, Smith said. A partially opened fire shelter was found near the men. The fire had caught them and they were killed when they inhaled its superheated gases. “This thing hit them quick and hit them fast,” said Hayes, who was on their helitack crew. The next day, Forest Service officials and Lemhi County sheriff’s deputies retrieved the bodies, triggering public grieving and a quest for answers that continues today. Bill Allen, Jeff’s father, was on a helitack crew that was stationed on Long Tom Mountain in the 1960s. He knows first-hand the dangers the place and the conditions presented. He is waiting for the outcome of the investigation. “We want to find out what they come up with,” he said.

**An all too familiar story** Allen and Heath were both top athletes in high school and in peak physical shape. “They were like thoroughbreds,” said Zeke Smith, Allen’s former rappelling partner. “To run with these guys was impossible.” But they found themselves in a race with nature that sadly, firefighters have repeatedly lost. As a slope gets steeper, humans lose speed. For fire, the opposite happens. Heat rises. When forest fires burn, the steep river canyons act like chimneys. When pushed by wind, the speed of the fire increases as the slope becomes steeper, said Laird Robinson, a U.S. Forest Service information officer in Missoula. As a smokejumper in the 1960s and 1970s, Robinson often jumped into the Salmon River Canyon to fight fires. He also helped the late author Norman Maclean investigate one of the most famous forest fire disasters, the Mann Gulch Fire. At Mann Gulch along the Missouri River, 13 firefighters were killed in 1949. Maclean turned his investigation into the bestselling 1993 book, “Young Men and Fire.” Robinson’s son Calvin, also a smokejumper, was fighting the South Canyon Fire near Glenwood Springs, Colo. in 1994, when 14 firefighters were killed. In both instances and at the Cramer Fire, the firefighters were trapped uphill of the fire and were overrun. “Both Mann Gulch and South Canyon were chimney situations,” Robinson said. He stressed he doesn’t know the specific circumstances of the Cramer Fire. But he said he knows what has happened in the past. “Anytime you are above a fire and you don’t have visual contact, you are courting disaster,” Robinson said. After the South Canyon deaths, the federal agencies made safety a higher priority. The week Allen and Heath died, three other firefighters died in accidents on fires across the West. So far this year, 14 have died in incidents ranging from car accidents to illness to helicopter crashes. One other firefighter was killed in Arizona in May. Neither Robinson nor Alexander want to speculate what happened at Cramer Creek. But they both agree the way to stop the recurring deaths of firefighters is for every individual, from managers at the top to the people on the lines, to adhere to strict safety rules. These rules are called the 10 standard orders and the 18 “watch outs,” which are shortened to simply “lookouts, communications, escape routes and safety zones.” They require firefighters to be constantly aware of fire conditions and to prepare ahead of time safe places that are easily accessible if conditions get bad. In nearly every fire fatality, Robinson said, several of these rules were ignored or broken. “At times we’re looking for a handy new policy when in fact we have the basic rules to save lives,” Alexander said. John N. Maclean, , Norman’s son and author of “Fire and Ashes: On the Front Lines of American Wildfire,” said past investigations too often have focused the blame on the firefighters and not the system. “I’d like to see us get to the point where we can learn from these deaths without blaming the people that put their lives on the line,” John Maclean said.

**Set in stone** A new national fire plan was put in place in 2001. But many national forests continue to operate under rules laid out in land management plans written in the 1980s that have yet to be revised. The Salmon National Forest land management plan, which dictates how the 4.3 million-acre forest will be managed, was completed in 1986. Considered progressive for its day, the plan allowed forest managers wide flexibility to use fire to meet management goals in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, where natural processes are supposed to be unimpeded by human activity. But for the forest outside the wilderness, including the Long Tom Mountain area, the plan called for putting out all fires. George Matejko, who stepped down as forest supervisor after the deaths of the two firefighters, said he and forest staff had already planned to increase the area where fire could be allowed to burn when the plan is revised in 2005. “There will be a definite change in using fire outside the wilderness,” Matejko said. But even if such a policy had been in place this year, Matejko said he would have ordered the fire suppressed because of the drought conditions. Fresh in his mind was the Clear Creek Fire and its explosive growth. Those who would allow fires like the Cramer Fire to burn even in drought years need to be patient, Matejko said. It took 80 years for the undergrowth in the West’s forests to grow to dangerous levels. “You can’t solve that overnight,” he said. “This is a marathon, not a sprint.”

**Threatened resources** Increasingly, land and fire managers have to justify their approach and reasons for fighting fires. Firefighters recognize that the sooner they get to a fire, the easier it is to put it out. But even if their plan requires full suppression, they have many strategies available. The decision depends partly on what is in the fire's path. The official daily fire report for July 22 identified five residences and one out-building threatened by the Cramer Fire. Hackett also had listed wilderness values, mining claims, recreation areas, threatened and endangered species and anadromous fish as resources threatened by the fire. On July 24, after the fire had spread to the edge of the Colson Creek drainage, 35 residences were listed as threatened. Eventually, fire officials said 44 structures were threatened by the 5,614-acre fire. Records obtained from the Lemhi County assessor's office show that the homes and buildings in the Colson Creek area and along the Salmon River near the area are valued at nearly \$1.2 million. The cost of fighting the fire was estimated at \$2.8 million. R.J. Smith, Lemhi County assessor, said simply adding up the value of homes saved by firefighting is misleading. The Clear Creek Fire got away from firefighters and grew to 217,000 acres, threatening the city of Salmon. Landslides continue to cause hundreds of thousands of dollars of damage to roads, private property and fish and wildlife habitat. "How many years are we going to feel these effects?" Smith asked. "I think we ought to control these fires a little better." Robinson takes another view. "There is nothing in any of those places worth one life or a major injury," he said.

**Responsibility** Ultimately, said Steve Arno, the fire scientist, the nation has to share the responsibility for sending young men and women into dangerous situations to fight fires known to be beneficial. Voters and Congress must change the incentives for land managers, shifting responsibility to landowners to protect their own homes and making it easier to use fire for beneficial uses, such as regenerating the forest, improving wildlife habitat and enhancing the ecosystem. "I think they really do have the choice," Arno said. "It's just too hard politically. "We have over-promised people that we can protect their property from forest fires," he said. "That's such an incredible entitlement. Many of these homes are really undefendable from any practical standpoint." Eventually, the investigators will determine who or what was responsible for Allen and Heath's deaths. It will likely be a combination of factors, said Hugh Carson, a retired federal fire manager and consultant from Boise. Matejko was among those who gathered the bodies and relayed the bad news to the families. He asked to be transferred despite the lack of any suggestion that he had done anything wrong. "I take it very personally," he said. Jack Ward Thomas, former chief of the U.S. Forest Service, can relate. He was in charge when the 14 firefighters were lost at South Canyon in 1994. "I'm sure the people in charge would have traded places with them if they could," he said. "They feel that responsible."

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