

My Portal Passage

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My portal passage occurred early in my career. It happened my "Rookie" season of smokejumping at McCall, Idaho. That event taught me so many valuable lessons that guide me through my career as a firefighter and fire manager. I will share this event so others might benefit.

The year was 1983 when I became a "Ned New Guy" at the McCall Smokejumper Base in Region 4. What an exciting year. I had four weeks of intense, physically demanding training ahead of me, a wealth of information to learn, and skills to master to meet the demands of the program. The training at McCall was excellent! They needed all thirteen rookies that started with me and all of us successfully completed the program.

With training completed we were all anxious to try our new skills on a real fire jump. The season was starting slow and the wait was maddening. The list was turning very slowly but I eventually worked my way to the top and had a place on the first load. My call was a five AM fire/rescue mission on the Boise NF. A member of a local ground crew had broken his femur when a heavy limb dropped out of a Ponderosa Pine. The fire was still manageable but the injured firefighter had to be lifted out for medical treatment. My jump partner was the legendary Wild Bill Yensen who had trained the year I was born in 1953. Bill looked over his shoulder before we exited and yelled, "Just follow me Ned." I was now officially a smokejumper.

The season continued at a slow pace and most fires were fairly tame. Most of the rookies had two or three fire jumps under their belts and we all felt like "Salty" veteran smokejumpers. I finally made it to the first load again and a request for the west side of the Payette came in. We loaded up in the DC-3 and headed for the Snake River.

This fire was all but out and the district had put it in patrol status. Three local crewmembers came to check on the fire and found enough smoke to call for a little help. There was so much open ground below that we would do a three-person stick on each of two passes. When I got to the door I was asked if I saw the jump spot. "No," I said; I was too far back in the plane.

The spotter pointed to a rockslide that corralled the fire on the left flank. "There is a flat depression left of the slide at the bottom of the slope, do you see it?" With the rockslide as a reference I quickly spotted the drop zone. That piece of information would come in handy later in the day. The rest of the jumpers on the plane thought we had drawn one of the sweetest deals ever and told us they would see us back in McCall that night.

After packing our jump gear we walked up a long draw at the base of the slope that was packed with sagebrush averaging six foot tall. We climbed out of the draw underneath the smoldering fire, climbed the short slope, and started digging line in the light fuel. It seemed like the more we dug line, the more fire we were seeing. It was obvious that we could not keep up.

The line of fire then took off burning down the hill toward the Snake River. The jumper foreman sent four folks back to gather up the jump gear. I thought I should volunteer to help so I took off a minute behind the others. At this point, there was an impressive line of fire running down the hill and starting to swing to the right, lining up with the unburned slope to the left of the rockslide. Seeing that, I decided to not drop into the draw but to stay high where I could keep an eye on the fire. About the time I reached the rockslide the fire had lined up fully underneath the unburned side of the hill and the wind switched. I looked down at my buddies that were in the draw with the jump gear and saw them staring up at 60 foot flames heading straight for them. I chose to stay in the rockslide knowing I would be all right there. I was worried about the others thinking that they were in grave danger. I lay down in the scree as the fire front raced by me. There was little or no heat increase in the rocks but lots of smoke. After about five minutes I sat up and looked down the hill where the jump gear had been. I saw the smoldering ash piles that had been our packs and nothing else. After a small rock cut loose from above and knocked my hard hat off, I whistled and asked if it was clear to come out of the slide. Boy, were they relieved to see me. As I walked down the hill toward the others I now noticed for the first time the cause of that erratic fire behavior. Just on the other side of the river was a fully developed thunderhead moving toward us. *Why had we not seen that before?*

I can answer that question myself. We were too busy looking at the ground and digging line to Look Up, Look Down, and Look All Around. We had not

assessed the fire environment before we engaged the fire. When the fire started moving *down hill*, we did not stop to figure out why. We broke all the rules that day and had the fortunate opportunity learn from the experience.

As a result of that day on the Snake River, I am committed to doing a thorough evaluation of the fire environment before I put my head down to dig. I also discovered the importance of monitoring weather, situational awareness, and changes in the burning conditions. When fire activity increases I am determined to find out why, if my monitoring has not already predicted the change.

That commitment has kept me safe and ahead of the game ever since.