

Demonstrated leadership

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Smokejumpers often are considered solely an initial attack force, but they can be a great source of first-response authority as well.

The morning of June 19, 2002, dawned bright, clear and dry on the Rio Grande National Forest in southern Colorado. Randy Burgess, district ranger on the Divide Ranger District, was concerned. Heavy fire activity in the Rocky Mountain geographic area had drawn down resources. Burgess had initial attack resources in place, but any new starts would be difficult to control. The Hayman Fire, on the Pike/Santa Isabel National Forest to the north, and the Missionary Ridge fire, on the San Juan National Forest to the west, were threatening communities and demanding heavy commitments of firefighting personnel.

During the day several forest employees were attending a Level II law enforcement training session at the South Fork Guard Station when a report came in at 13:30 of a new fire on the forest a few miles south of South Fork, Colo. There was an immediate response of forest service and local fire department resources, but with existing fuel and weather conditions the fire was soon beyond the control of local fire forces.

Sid Hall, the Saguache Ranger District fire management officer who was assigned as the incident commander quickly recognized that this would be a Type III incident and help was needed. As part of the initial response, a request

was made for a planeload of the smokejumpers who were stationed at a spike base in Canon City, Colo. Tim Schaeffer, a Type III incident commander and a Bureau of Land Management smokejumper from Boise, Idaho, was on board.

PLAN OF ATTACK

At 16:00 hours Schaeffer was orbiting the fire with seven jumpers in a Twin Otter aircraft. The situation didn't look good.

"The fire was several hundred acres and burning with 200- to 300-foot flame lengths. It was plume dominated and was consuming ponderosa pine, bug-killed spruce and even tearing through groves of aspen," he says.

Together with spotters Alli Cushman from the Bureau of Land Management and Ron Rucker from the Forest Service, Schaeffer selected as a jump site a large, long field near the point of origin. However, there was a concern — this was a mixed load and with 600 yards of drift on their streamers, the winds were close to the threshold for the Forest Service round parachutes. There were two Bureau of Land Management jumpers and five Forest Service jumpers on board. Schaeffer and Hans Germann, the two blm jumpers, went out in the first stick. Once on the ground, they determined conditions were safe for the rounds and the remaining five jumpers safely made their jumps.

Schaeffer met up with Burgess to discuss the best use of his jumpers. Burgess was surprised to find that they had met a few years earlier when they worked together on an emergency project dealing with some severe blown-down timber on the National Forests of Texas. They also had worked together on the Moose Fire in the Northern Rockies in 2001.

Burgess was concerned; he had already ordered a Type I incident management team, but he was in a bind until the team arrived because most of the Forest Service personnel with advanced fire qualifications were on off-forest fire assignments. Sid Hall was a Type IV IC and the incident needed a Type III

organization.

Schaeffer explained to Burgess that he was a Type III IC and that many of the jumpers on his crew could fill the intermediate positions of a Type III organization. Burgess seized the opportunity and immediately transitioned Schaeffer into the IC role. While there were some local folks to fill some of the ICS positions, Schaeffer needed additional help. Another seven jumpers were available at Canon City, Colo., and the order was placed. At 20:50 the Twin Otter was back over the long flat field, and another seven jumpers were safely deployed.

SOUND LEADERSHIP

Schaeffer took on the leadership role without hesitation. He organized his crew and the local forest and fire department personnel. They built a strategy, developed objectives, established relationships and immediately began suppression and human population protection actions. That evening they began preparing a written incident action plan for June 20 and participated with the Forest Service in the development of the wildland fire situation analysis.

Schaeffer's jumpers filled out his Type III organization: Mark Koontz became the operations section chief; Mike Hayden, Chris Stevens and Eric Ellis became division supervisors; and the remaining personnel filled in as dozer bosses, strike team leaders, task force leaders and crew bosses. Local agency personnel filled the logistics, planning and information functions. Al Martinez, a Rocky Mountain Region Forest Service employee and qualified safety officer, was passing by on U.S. Highway 160 and was selected as the safety officer. Additional orders were placed and plans were made and implemented.

During the evening of June 19, the fire was making strong runs and threatening the Willow Creek and Beaver Mountain subdivisions. Due to the imminent threat to human life, Forest Service Supervisor Pete Clark approved Schaeffer's request for extended shifts for his jumpers and other resources assigned to the incident. While Schaeffer did work his personnel beyond 16 hours, he applied mitigation

measures to manage fatigue.

PRAISE FOR THE JUMPERS

In a recent letter to Rex Mann's area command team, Burgess praised the jumpers and Schaeffer. "Tim quickly assigned members of his crew to key positions. The jumpers' professionalism and experience helped the available local crews protect homes and other structures until the Type I team arrived."

We often think of smokejumpers as an initial attack force, but they can be a powerful source of leadership. In many cases, a planeload or two can contain the elements of a Type III organization with strong leadership skills like Schaeffer's. Schaeffer explained that for the BLM, this use of jumpers is not far beyond the ordinary. It's standard operating procedure for each planeload of jumpers to have a Type III IC as part of the crew.

On June 21 Aaron Gelobter's Type I Team arrived from California. Burgess and Schaeffer briefed them at a transition meeting at 13:00 hours. They took command of the fire at 19:00 hours and Schaeffer and his crew were released. The fire was added to the existing Pueblo Area command and additional resources were reassigned from the Hayman Incident to the Million Incident.

In the end, the Million Fire burned more than 9,000 acres and made very little news. Much of this was due to the demonstrated leadership of a forest supervisor, a ranger and a smokejumper and his crew.

LESSONS LEARNED

Smokejumpers can be a valuable resource, not just for jumping a small fire with a single stick, but also for providing an extended-attack Type III organization.

Schaeffer demonstrated true leadership. He quickly organized his forces, integrated the local fire agencies and developed a safe and effective plan of action. Gelobter gave him a well-deserved compliment when he said, "Our

transition was extremely smooth, it was like taking over a fire from a Type II incident management team. They had accomplished so much in the three operational periods before we arrived.”

Schaeffer included both local forest, fire department and law enforcement personnel into his organization. There was one plan, one strategy and one set of objectives for this incident.

The local leadership of Burgess and Clark should be applauded. They truly had situational awareness, recognized the need for a higher level of management and used the resources available to them in an efficient manner. They allowed for the protection of human life while managing fatigue of the forces assigned to them.

Gelobter also commended the two for recognizing the value of area command. On June 21 they made the decision to move the Million Fire under the already established Pueblo Area Command with Mann assigned as the area commander. With the Hayman Fire winding down, area command could, and would, divert resources to the Million Fire, allowing Gelobter’s team to meet their control objectives and contain the fire.

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