

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE  
FOREST SERVICE

Region 6

P.O. Box 3623, Portland, Oregon 97208



*all*

- DIRECTOR
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SEP 2 1977

REPLY TO: 6730 Safety Management Information System

SUBJECT: Fire Fatality - Ron Neely, Okanogan NF



TO: Deputy Regional Foresters, Forest Supervisors, Directors

Enclosed is a copy of the accident sequence portion of the Accident Report together with a copy of an aerial photo and maps to illustrate the sequence. Also the enclosed August 29 memorandum presents the recommendations to me by the Accident Review Team.

After a review of this accident, I have requested Fire and Aviation Management to broaden the activity review to include fire training and fire qualifications, including required experience and physical fitness. This review should also look at the inter-agency agreement on fire qualification and the effect it has had on the quality of our fire overhead. The review is to be completed by December 31, 1977.

From this review we should determine if our overhead has adequate opportunity for actual experience or if we need to provide a means to acquire experience through use of a "Redding" type I.R. Crew.

In addition to this review, you should reemphasize the need for our people to follow the 10 standard firefighting orders and know the 13 fire situations that shout, "Watch Out."

To accomplish this reemphasis, you may want to share this material with your people involved in fire-suppression activities.

*R. E. Worthington*  
R. E. WORTHINGTON  
Regional Forester

Enclosures

cc: Regions 1 - 10  
BIFC  
Chief (2)  
Washington DNR

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REPLY TO: 6730 Safety Management Information System

August 29, 1977

SUBJECT: Fire Fatality - Ron Neely



TO: Regional Forester

The Accident Review Team met on August 15 and reviewed the investigation report.

The team reviewed the fire sequence and John Dell (Fire Behavior Specialist) presented Fire projection for temperatures and rate of spread for the fire.

From the material presented, the team drew the following conclusions:

1. The Fire Behavior experience on this fire was predictable by personnel with adequate Fire Behavior training and experience. It is questionable whether Ron's experience may have been adequate.

2. Ron Neely, acting on his own, separated himself from his crew. In so doing he violated several of the "10 Standard Firefighting Orders."

(2). "Know what the fire is doing at all times, observing personally and using scouts."

(3). "Base all actions on current and expected behavior of fire."

(4). "Have escape routes for everyone and make them known."

(5). "Be alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively."

(6). "Maintain prompt communication with men, boss, and adjoining forces."

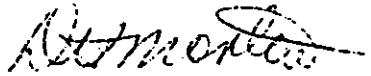
3. When Ron was first alerted that the fire had crossed the draw there is some question whether he realized he was in a dangerous situation.

4. When Ron realized he was in trouble the fire situation was such that a rescue was not possible.

To lessen the possibility of this reoccurring the team recommends:

1. An Activity Review of the Fire Training and Qualification for overhead in the Region.

2. The Region develop two "Redding" type crews to provide experience opportunity for our upcoming Fire professionals that are now or will be filling key fire positions. A detail to one of these crews would be used to round out their classroom or formal training.

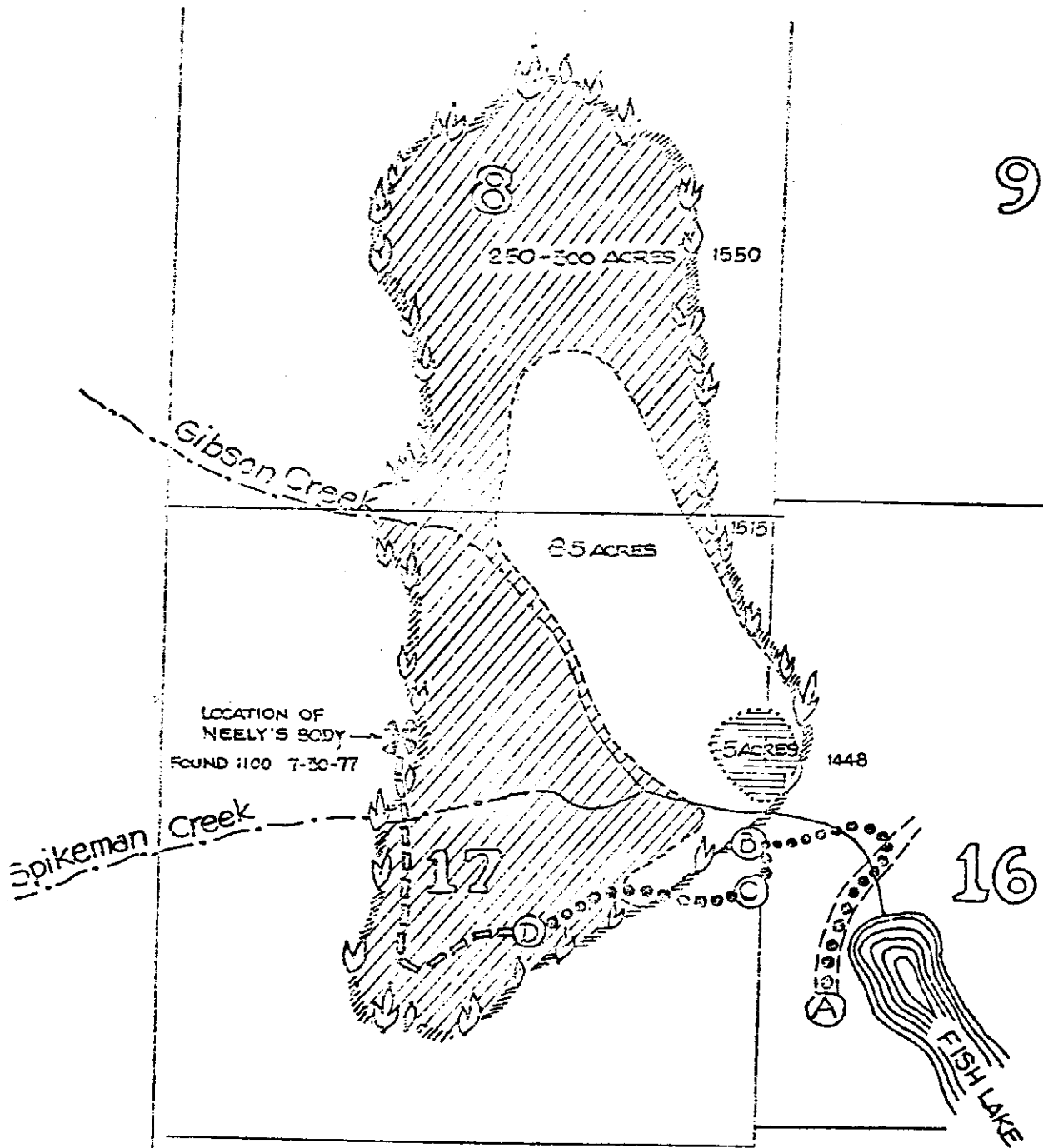


DONALD H. MORTON  
Deputy Regional Forester  
Administration

# GIBSON CREEK FIRE

CONCONULLY RANGER DISTRICT  
OKANOGAN NATIONAL FOREST

9



LOCATION OF  
NEELY'S BODY  
FOUND 1100 7-30-77

16

JULY 27, 1977

○○○○○○○○ : CREWS ROUTE OF TRAVEL

(A) 1437 : ASSEMBLY POINT

(B) 1445 : CREW BRIEFING - FIRE REPORTED AT 1 ACRE

(C) 1448 : HELISPOT VIEW POINT - NEELY REPORTED FIRE AT 5 ACRES

(D) 1515 : NEELY'S LAST OBSERVED LOCATION

===== : NEELY'S PROBABLE ROUTE OF TRAVEL

III. ACCIDENT SEQUENCE

	<u>Time</u>	<u>Reference</u>
On July 27, 1977, Wednesday, Bruce Cluff, local manager, while flying over the area spotted the fire and reported it to the Forest Service S/O Dispatcher's Office. Named Fish Lake Fire. T. 36 N, R 25 E Sec. 21 NE/NE. Okanogan National Forest, Conconully District.	13:20 p.m.	Dispatcher's Log (D.L.)
Fire by the lake. Crossed road and now 3-4 acres says Cluff (fire is at base of Schallow Mt.) burning in a southerly direction up the mountain.	13:21	D.L.
S/O dispatchers ordered air tankers, smokjumpers, Okanogan crews, DNR crews, off forest crews, rappellers.	13:23 & continuing to 14:18	D.L.
Ray Casey, Tonasket District FMO dispatched to fire as Fire Boss.	13:40 (approx.)	Casey's 7/28/77 letter to Forest Supervisor. Appendix V A. Casey's Statement
Keith Fitzjarrald and Ron Neely left Toats Coulee for fire.	13:46	D.L.
Fire at top of Schallow Mt. Winds from east. Spreading laterally. Stopped at top. Estimated at 20-40 acres.	13:57	D.L.
Leslie Julian, Air Attack Boss arrived over the site.	14:10 (approx.)	Appendix V E. Julian's Statement
Ray Casey, Fire Boss at site.	14:15 (approx.)	Appendix V A. Casey's Statement.
Ray Casey, John Calhoun, and Clay Brown, Washington DNR met on the Fish Lake Road at a point in the flat on the S. side of Fish Lake -- Marked "A" on the aerial photo and sketch. NOTE: The Fish Lake Road is the road leading from Conconully to Fish Lake; the Pine Creek Road, later mentioned, is the road leading from State Highway 97 to Fish Lake.	14:30 (approx.)	Appendix IV B. & C
Fire at top and stopped in the southerly direction. Burning to the West. About 75-100 men and equipment there. 120 men committed. Spotting on Schallow Mt. to West, ashes dropping in flat northwest of the Schallow Mountain.	14:31	D.L. and various witness statements.
Keith Fitzjarrald and Ron Neely arrived at fire site drove up road on N. side of Fish Lake, noticed the truck at location "A" where Casey and 2 DNR men were parked and proceeded to this location arriving at about listed time.	14:34 (approx.)	D.L.

The Conconully crew (7) of Tom Steichen, Foreman, Dennis Neely (Ron Neely's brother), Tom Barker, Joa Rubaluff, Cindy Smith, Alan Moomaw, Mike Tatum arrived at the same site just after Fitzjarrald and Neely. The crew had been on the West side of the Fish Lake Fish Lake Fire, within the fire area. As it spotted they were told to pull out by Jerry Lynch. They took their truck and other trucks and drove them to the flat. Meeting at the point "A" where Casey and others were located.

Appendix V A, A, Casey, Fitzjarrald Steichen and other statements.

Spot fire observed by one of Conconully crew member. 14:37  
Located on west end of Fish Lake across the Fish Lake Road, T 36 N, R 25 E, Sec. 17, NE 1/4. This is State of Washington land covered by a reciprocal protection agreement by DNR/FS. This is what's called the Gibson Creek Fire. Fish Lake Fire reported 250-300 acres. When spot first observed it appeared 10-12' in size.

D.L.

Ron Neely stated he'd take the Conconully Crew and work on the spot. The crew got their tools and followed Neely up road to a point adjacent to the south side of slope of Gibson Creek (marked "B" on photo and sketch) and proceeded to a spot on the hill side to observe the fire (marked "C" on photo and sketch). Fire was on North side of Gibson Creek about 200' above road.

Appendix IV, B & C  
Appendix V, A & B  
Casey's 7/28/77 letter; Steichen's statement.

Neely arrived at the observation site first about 3-5 minutes before other crew members. Ron called on radio to Casey that the spot is about 1 acre.

14:45  
(Approx. as it was 4-5 minutes before 14:48 when his transmission stated it's five acres.

Neely discussed at the site with Dennis Neely and Mike Tatum the strategy to handle fire. After some changes, he sent the crew to the creek bottom to build fire line on the lower side, east flank and build north and northwesterly around fire route "C" to "F" on photo. Neely told Tom Steichen if fire crosses the drainage, let him know. Tom had a Forest Service radio. This is the last time the crew saw Neely.

Appendix V, M through S, Various statements.

Appendix IV, B

Neely sent Cindy Smith back to his truck to get his vest. Neely had a fire shirt, hardhat, and Forest Service radio. Vest contained compass, streamer tape, gloves, and miscellaneous items. Neely probably did not have a tool. Most crewmembers could not recall; Dennis Neely stated he didn't have one.

Appendix V, M,P,  
Steichen, Smj  
Dennis Neely  
statements. et  
in vest inventor  
by Accident Revis  
in Portland, 8/4)

Cindy Smith got vest and returned approximately to site "C" unable to find Neely. Neely previously told Tom Steichen he was going ahead without it.

Appendix IV, B

SEQUENCE With Casey, Fitzjarrald and Calhoun

While at sit "A" John Calhoun suggested DNR take over the second (Gibson Creek) fire with Clay Brown, DNR, as Fire Boss and Calhoun as liaison with Forest Service. Ray Casey agreed.

14:45

D.L.

Clay Brown left group and went to a spot north of Fish Lake on the Pine Creek Road to observe the Gibson Creek Fire. He had a DNR radio and a scanner in his vehicle but no Forest Service radio. He could monitor the Forest Service frequency but could not talk to Forest Service crews. Communication would have been between Brown to Calhoun who also had a State radio.

Appendix V, B  
Fitzjarrald  
statement.

John Calhoun was the State liaison and Keith Fitzjarrald was the Forest Service liaison.

Casey, Calhoun, and Fitzjarrald traveled up to Clay Brown's location and Calhoun talked with Clay for a short while. The three of them went around the lake leaving fuses off with a crew at Fish Lake (Forest Service) Fire. At that time the communication with Clay Brown was through Calhoun. Then Casey took his vehicle and Calhoun and Fitzjarrald took Fitzjarrald's vehicle around to the east side of the Fish Lake Fire.

Appendix V, B  
Fitzjarrald  
statement

Fire (Gibson Creek) now at 5 acres.

14:48

D.L.

16 smokejumpers and equipment dropping on Fish Lake Fire.

15:02

D.L.

End of Drop

SEQUENCE With Ron Neely and Crew

<p>Neely proceeded to flat, marked as "D" on photo above the observation site, "C". Ron reported it as a good helispot. Also fire about 5 acres. From there he proceeded in a general western direction through grass and timber stringers.</p>	15:00	Appendix <u>IV</u> , B Fitzjarrald's statement.
<p>Tom Steichen called that the fire had crossed over Gibson Creek going in a SW direction. Casey acknowledged and said he would (or had) let Neely know.</p>	15:15 (Approx.)	Appendix <u>V</u> , M Steichen's statement. (Pg. 1)
<p>About this time Ray Casey contacted Neely two times and told him the fire had spotted to his side (the south side). Neely told Casey that he was moving out. (Assumed to mean his escape route in a E or S direction.)</p>		Appendix <u>V</u> . A Casey's statement
<p>Approximately the same time Leslie Julian was flying overhead as the air attack boss. He contacted Casey that the fire had jumped the creek to the south and building up ahead and looked like it was about to make an up-hill run. Casey acknowledged he was aware. Someone (assumed to be Neely) came on air and said "I know, I am here" in a voice not sounding excited or in any trouble. Julian responded "If anyone is down there, they better get the hell out of there". No acknowledgement of transmission or asking for help or escape routes.</p>		Appendix <u>V</u> , E Julian's statement (Pg. 2)
<p>About this time Clyde Lovejoy who was positioned high up on the west flank of the Fish Lake Fire and Gene Doner, Deputy Sheriff, Okanogan County, who was located on the Pine Creek Road just above Fish Lake observed a person in yellow fire shirt walking through the open areas and into the trees on the flats south side of Spikeman Creek not necessarily moving fast. Location "E" on the photo and "D" on the sketch. This is the last observed location of Ron Neely.</p>		Appendix <u>V</u> , I & J Lovejoy and Doner's statement (Pg. 2)
<p>During this time the winds were swirly going various directions from time to time.</p>		Appendix <u>V</u> , O Tatum's statement and others (Pg. 9)
<p>Clay Brown, DNR, located on Pine Creek Road at NE side of Fish Lake noted the critical nature of the situation; didn't have Forest Service radio but DNR radio and was planning project fire needs.</p>		Appendix <u>V</u> , C Brown (Pg. 10-14)
<p>Neely asked for a retardant drop. None immediately available. Neely was moving fast at that time.</p>	15:20 (Approx.)	Appendix <u>V</u> , B Fitzjarrald's statement. (Pg. 1)

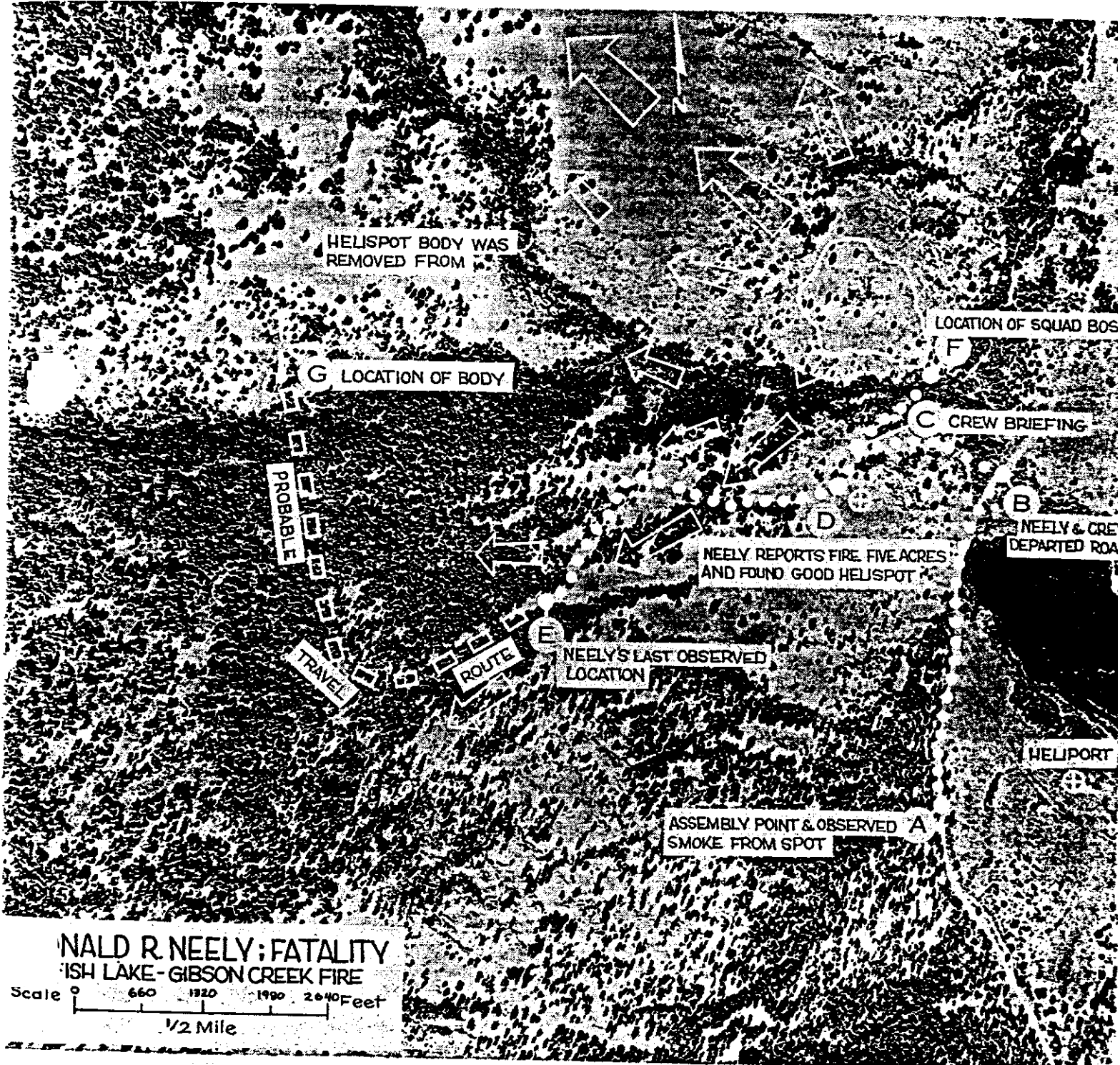


Okanogan S/O dispatchers noted critical nature of Neely's transmission and started to record the conversations. Casey calling Neely. He appeared to be trapped and Casey and Air Attack (Julian) have been calling him.	15:45	Appendix <u>V</u> , F Stratton's statement. D.L.
Air attack says fire 200 acres.		Appendix <u>V</u> , E Julian's statement
Reported fire was 250 acres. State taking over say S/O dispatcher - monitor of State radio log.	15:50	D.L.
Ron Neely's watch stopped at this time. Found with body.	15:57	From witnesses at scene, 7/30/77
Casey calling Neely, no reply	15:58	D.L.
Casey calling Neely, no reply	16:00	D.L.
Casey called S/O requesting someone to come out and see him.	16:04	D.L.
Casey calling Neely, no reply	16:05	D.L.
Mike Ramos, Okanogan Administration Officer dispatched to meet with Casey. Bob Wintersteen went with him. Wintersteen to be investigating Neely.	16:12	D.L.
Gibson Creek fire moving rapidly and is 1200 acres.	18:57	D.L.

SEQUENCE - SEARCH

Clyde Paul, Res. Tech., Winthrop Ranger District entered fire area, Spikeman Creek to see if safe for crews to enter. Recommended they wait 2 hours before entering.	19:00 (Approx.)	Investigating team discussions with Forest personnel.
Search made using 8 people. Dangerous, hot, dark.	21:00 -- 00:30 a.m.	Appendix <u>V</u> , Klienfelder's statement.
July 28 - 29 - 30; See Richard Klienfelder's statement of sequences of search.		Appendix <u>V</u> , V
<u>July 30; Upon hearing that body was found the following sequence occurred.</u>		

Call to helispot and Jim Opdycke "notified" a body was found. Used code message.	11:02 a.m.	Radio monitoring and/or on-the-scene observation by Investigation Team Members, Ben Hull and Neil Opsal.
Opsal and Hull landed at helispot between Spikeman and Gibson Creek.	11:40	
Ben Hull notified Cecil Dewing at base helispot "It's a 10-4", the code stating it was Ron Neely's body. Cecil then proceeded to inform family. People at site were Jim Updycke, Ben Hull, Neil Opsal, Dick Kleinfelder, Clint Eckstein and 2 members from Siuslaw search crew.	11:50	
Kleinfelder shortly thereafter identified the spot on an aerial photo. Verified that the area had been roped off previously and that no one had come within its confines.		
Found hardhat and eyeglasses above body.	12:35 p.m.	
Sheriff informed per Dewing's call.	1:35	
Call via Cecil about status of body for family information per Bill McLaughlin's request.	1:45	
Released crews and informed sheriff would bring in party to handle body.	1:50	
Sheriff Jerry Beck, Okanogan County, and three deputies arrived. Shortly thereafter, keys and coins found near body. Neely's watch noted as stopping at 3:57.	2:50	
Body left helispot at Spikeman/Gibson Creek for base helispot.	4:20	
Search team overhead had critique of search efforts, fire camp.	8:00	
On August 1, Monday, Ben Hull, Bill McLaughlin, and Casey returned to the site where body found. Located Neely's wallet that had fallen between the rocks under where body located.		



HELISPOT BODY WAS REMOVED FROM

LOCATION OF SQUAD BOS

G LOCATION OF BODY

F

C CREW BRIEFING

PROBABLE TRAVEL ROUTE

B NEELY & CREW DEPARTED ROAD

NEELY REPORTS FIRE FIVE ACRES AND FOUND GOOD HELISPOT

D

E NEELY'S LAST OBSERVED LOCATION

A ASSEMBLY POINT & OBSERVED SMOKE FROM SPOT

HELIPORT

ROUTE

**WALD R. NEELY; FATALITY**  
**FISH LAKE - GIBSON CREEK FIRE**

Scale 0 660 1320 1980 2640 Feet  
 1/2 Mile