

Fire #912 222

Initial Attack.

June 11th 09:56

B-222

Engine D-51 responded from DAF at about 10:00 AM with Mike Bobo + Norm Hilliker on board. The smoke was reported in Donnelly Flats, we could see the column as we drove past Jarvis Creek bridge. I requested DAF to call pump station #9 and ask if they were doing a controlled burn, as I passed Ft. Greely main gate a fireman named Tom Lucas called me on Delta V.F.D. radio channel and said the fire was in the flats off of twelve mile crossing road. At that time I called D.A.F. and requested 1 air tanker + helitac. About 15 seconds later I requested the 2nd air tanker. Once on scene with D-51, D-21 (reb) + Ft. Greely Fire Dept. we dropped the portatank off their engine and filled it with their tanker. We ordered 2 dozers (D-8's), 4 water tenders, more portatanks and about 10,000 ft. of hose, pumps etc. We ordered the local Delta Type II crew + 2 Type I crews out of Fairbanks. Two loads of smoke jumpers were ordered by dispatch plus helitac on helicopter S23 (AFS ship) Helicopter 974 (FBK5 I.A.) was ordered for Delta I.A.. Helitac from 398 began cutting a saw line on the rt. flank (west side). We anchored off twelve mile crossing rd. this was a wide dirt + gravel spot, excellent safety zone, this was the North end of the fire. When we first arrived the column was straight up with a slight influence out of the N/NE. When the 2nd helitac came on S23 they assisted with the right flank. At this time the hose lay from the full portatanks was going down the line, water was being pumped, helicopters were doing bucket work, air tankers

were dropping Retardent with Air Attack coordinating the Air Show. I informed the incoming crew + jumpers on the tail (which was the North end at that time) that 8 mph SW wind was predicted sometime in the afternoon, I told Bruce Nelson (smj) I was concerned with the Left flank if the wind shift came, I told Bruce to watch the smoke column. When the Delta 1 crew arrived I put them on the left flank with Nelson. When the first dozer arrived I put (Forest Tech. I) Abe Horschel with him so we had commo, they started working the right flank. When the SMS's arrived I had Reb put Nelson +7 + the Delt crew on the left flank and MTMAN +7 on the right flank. When the FMO flew over the fire he talked with Air Attack, the A/A told him retardent was not effective. The FMO told him to stop using the tankers. I told the FMO we were thinking about burning from the Anchor Area east along twelve mile crossing road to Jarvis Creek to try and secure the North end because I was concerned the SW winds would blow as predicted an the left flank would blow out letting the fire go towards Ft. Greely an the town.

The FMO said that would make to much of a mess. The FMO stated we would go to plan B which meant going to the South end of the fire an burn along roads. The Midnight Suns crew with Reb Ferguson began developing their plan to burn off the South end. I was going to send Bruce Nelson +7 SMS's to help with the burn but decided against it, I again told Bruce Nelson he was to stay on the left flank an watch the direction of

the smoke column. I said I think the left flank will blow out when the wind shift comes. I ask for Retardent again for the left flank and it was never sent. Somewhere during this I think the FMO told Air Attack no more retardant because it was ineffective. I even requested to Air Attack Airtankers loaded with water, an he said that they didn't believe it would be effective. Sometime after the retardent was shut down the large firewhirl developed in the black moving in a counter clockwise direction. The firewhirl was about a 100ft. wide in diameter at the base it extended straight up for several hundred feet. I watched it develop in what only took seconds for it to come up above the black spruce never leaving the ground and start moving to the left flank, I called Nelson on the radio to move off the line back to the road which was our safe zone. The SMJ's + Delta crew had already retreated an was just out as the Vortex hit the line. The firewhirl came down the left flank, crossed the road dropping firebrands as it went starting a new area on fire over the safe zone road. It picked up para cargo chutes with cargo boxes attached and dropped them right in the new fire area. Hard hats were sucked off firefighters heads along with crewboss fire shelter which was still in the yellow case. This shelter was sucked out of the hand of the crewboss as he pulled it from his pack (day pack). The winds in the fire whirl were like a tornado, counter clockwise at an estimated 60-70 mph. (The crew remained in the safety

Zone for about 2 hrs). The firewhirl went back into the fire moving up the Right flank. The SMJ's on that side that weren't with the dozer went into the black for a safe zone but the firewhirl hit them in there, 1 SMJ had some 1st + minor 2nd degree burns. They crossed over to the Jarvis Creek side of the fire and remained there about 2 hrs. We couldn't do a medivac because of increased fire behavior but the SMJ's made their way to the twelve mile crossing road & the safe zone. In the mean time I walked down the road passed where the fires had blown over and called for a pickup truck so I could get the SMJ to the clinic for treatment. During the time we spent in the safe zone and after the firewhirl hit, we had 2 more hits from the fire. The fire blew out the left flank first with the vortice then fire blew out of the center between flanks, then the right flank blew out. We lost the helitac + personal gear from the second blowout. This gear was in a safe area at the time, dirt + gravel about 100' to 150' from the already burned fire line, aerial fire brands got on the gear during heavy smoke. As the firewhirl hit I called air attack and told him what happened and said "Send 2 air tankers, no, make it 3 air tankers". After the firewhirl hit the fire went North and never looked back. We were in a large gravel/dirt safe zone on the road, fire shelters did not need to be and were not deployed. Also if fire shelters had been deployed I think

it would have been impossible to hold down against
the tremendous suction of this large firewhirl.

Mike Bobo I.A.I.C. Type III Fire #912222

Mike Bobo 6-24-99