

Bruce Nelson

5555, 55555, 5555555555

June 13, 1999 Ft. Greely Alaska

Brief Report on the Fire Whirl on B222,
6-11-99.

by Bruce L. Nelson

Times and sequence of events are approximate
and to the best of my recollection.

I jumped with the second plane load of smokejumpers
at about 1115. The winds were pretty calm and the
fire about 10 acres. My load was assigned by ICB to
to work on the left flank. The eight of us began

stringing hose from a Mt III Pump located in the
nearby brook (which ~~was~~ is towards Jarvis Cr.) to the left flank
of the fire. With the exception of a 100 yd

burnout where the left flank ~~met~~ met the road, it was

all direct attack. Although the fire was making
more ground than we were, our progress was good.
Fire activity was moderate. Most of us predicted

that if the wind stayed low, we would catch the fire,
but if the wind came up (which was probable given
the history of Delta fires and due to high lenticular clouds)
we were quite likely to "lose it"

I had a chance to fly the fire with Bent Mitman and the Delta Crew leaders. The plan (of flanking the fire and burning out the head) looked good, but it looked sensible to tie our left flank line directly into the creek brook.

I was placed in charge of the left flank by I.C. Bob, and given the Delta Crew, with basic instructions to hold and improve the wetline.

Yeager, who was running the lead nozzle, and I agreed to run the hose lay directly to the brook and burn out from it. This decision was also prompted by Yeager reporting ordinance going off. (We have heard thousands of pounds of blanks? going off but also some larger stuff)

Soon after the burn started, the wind changed and started blowing pretty hard from the south. Yeager soon realized me saying that it was going to get too hot and they were leaving. I left the jump spot and started heading up the hose line. I told the Delta crew to pull any uncharged hose to the road and then to gather whatever else they could without getting far from the nearby road and jump spot/safety zone. It was observed

We were going to lose most of our line, and some hose, but with the jumpers nearly out and the Delta Crew near the road, I wasn't overly concerned about safety. About 400' from the road I started to break down some hose. I was the furthest from the road. The fire started building so I left it and started heading out. When I got to the opening I could see only one other person still "on-the-line". Warning had already been given by the jumpers on the road to pull out because the fire was building rapidly. About then I heard a rapidly building roar and saw the fire whirl, perhaps 100' high. I ran towards the road near the brook, and saw Taylor uncomfortably near the whirl, leaning against the wind and holding onto his hardhat. When I hit the road I called to verify that ~~Delta~~ was in the safety zone. Jumper Mcintosh verified they were. Murry hurried towards us. The whirl, now mostly dust and sticks, headed for the safety zone, where it apparently dissipated? I called Delta and told them to stay in the safety zone. I told the jumpers with me to head for the big gravel bars on Tarrs Creek if it made a run towards us.

After the 1st big rush, all of us from the left flank and tail headed for the safety zone. We secured unburned gear during lulls and waited out other runs for the next hour or so.

This event was somewhat unnerving for us because we had two good safety zones (Jars and the jump spot) and those of us closest to danger had "one foot in the black." I have never seen a fire whirl this large and we were very surprised it built so quickly and came out of the mostly burned block.

Later we encountered Wattenbarger, Cramer and the others. I believe we all agreed that it was the wildest fire behavior we had ever seen.

On a very positive note, we ~~had~~ recognized these unusually dangerous burning conditions, and I believe we have applied those lessons in the 3 days since. Some of these lessons are:

"The block" may not protect you from a whirl.

In very bad conditions safety zones have to be huge and close.

If you are sparked, there's probably a good reason for it.

