

DRAFT

Report on incident on Fire B-222, 11 June 1999

Statement of James Veitch

14 June 1999

Refer to the accompanying drawing. (Note: The compass directions on the sketch are all guesses but the lay of the trail is to my best recollection. Corrections to the compass still do not change my opinion that the wind swung 270 degrees during the course of the event.)

After jumping fire B-222 Mike Hardy and I worked as a saw team moving up the right flank of the fire. We were clearing a 6-8 foot swath for the hose lay next to the fire line. We began work near the fold-a-tank at the tail of the fire. As soon as we began working we bumped about 100 yards in front of a State saw team that was cutting line. We began to cut and continued for a couple hours. About 1400 hour (wild estimate) a D-8 Cat came past us and proceeded towards the head of the fire. About half an hour later we tied into the cat line. We then stopped cutting line. I estimate we were about 0.25 of a mile up the line from the fold-a-tank. We then improved our cut back for about 50 yards and Charlie Brown burned out a finger of green. At that time there were 2-3 State fire fighters, Charlie Brown, Jim Dibert, Justus Ortega, Mike Hardy and myself in a group. Along where we had been cutting line the fire was either out or acting very cool. The fuel was black spruce up to about 10-15 high. It was thick but not dog hair. We moved at a good pace with the saw. At times we could see the column of smoke at the head and commented that we weren't getting any closer to it. The winds were very light out of the south. When Brown did his burn-out we had hose and water in position. The burn-out fire burned readily but gave no concern. I felt that the control of the fire was going well due to the progress we made on our flank, because we had water and we were tied into a good Cat line. It was apparent to me that the head was causing trouble but I thought it was a matter of time before the Cat rounded the head.

About 1500 I sent Dibert back to the tail to get drinking water and food. Hardy, Brown and I got on the Cat line and started moving to the head of the fire. We radioed Cramer that we were going up to meet him. We walked about 300 yards to a "T" in the Cat line. The line had been headed south. At the "T" one line went east one west. The line looked very good. There was some green on the fire side and the Cat driver seemed to be careful about not making heaps of slash on the outside of the line. The "T" seemed to be a point where they had tried to turn the head but then had to come back and head west when the fire moved west. The right side of the "T" headed pretty much straight west. About 100 yards down the west line I saw the Cat and a State fire fighter. There was Cat line cut further ahead but the Cat obviously came back to improve the line, or I saw a second Cat. We walked about 50 yards on down the Cat line (to the west) and met Cramer. This was just east of the "3" on the sketch. Cramer told us Justus Ortega had found spot fires in the area of "B" on the sketch. Cramer also told me there was a "large meadow" to the west of us. I took it to mean about 200 yards to our west up the Cat line. At this

time I think Brown went back down the line to where our hand line met the Cat line. Hardy and I cut spruce bows and began hunting in the area of "B" for spots. I left the saw at point "3" on the Cat line. I found one small spot. I met Jay Wattenburger and he said he had found 6 spots and that Ortega had found a big one. As I was gridding the area I saw a Cat go up the line to the west past me. About then (1545 hours) Dibert called from the Cat line that he had water (point "1"). Hardy, Dibert, Ortega and I filled our canteens at point "1". Ortega had come down the line from the west to point "1". At this point we had green to the north of us, north of the Cat line, and green to the south of us with fire behind it. The trees in this area were taller than near the jump spot. They were up to 40 feet high in thick stands. The head of the fire was approximately in the location of "A" on the sketch. It was putting up brown smoke and was rising vertically. The wind was coming out of the ESE and was gentle. I'm confident of the wind direction because it was causing the spotting over the line to area "B". The spots at "B" were produced when the area just south of "2" torched up just before Hardy and I met Cramer the first time.

When we were at the cubitainer Cramer was at location "4" on the line. Hardy walked to him and came back to the cubitainer at "1" with news that Cramer wanted all of us but one man to go to him (Cramer). Cramer was going to do some work on the line to the east of "4". One person was to stay behind to patrol for spots in area "B". No dramatic fire activity was yet apparent and we were not alarmed by the fire situation. At this time I noticed the wind had switched and was coming from the north instead of the ESE. I commented to Hardy that the wind was now in our favor to burn out the green on the south side of the Cat line at point "1". Hardy laughed at me and I dropped the idea. Dibert and Ortega went east on the line to Cramer. Hardy and I were still filling canteens at the cubitainer. (We left the cubitainer on the north side of the Cat line. It should still be there, burned up.) At this time Hardy asked me what time it was and I told him it was "exactly 1600 hours." I remember that the fire was starting to burn in the area of "5" just up the Cat line from us. Small arms ammo was also popping sporadically. Cramer and the others had moved east along the Cat line and went out of sight. Because of the fire at "5" I moved to point "2", Hardy remained at the point "1", the cubitainer. At this time I began to be concerned about the safety of our position. I then retrieved the saw from point "4" and moved it to "2" (points "4" and "2" were about 50 yards apart.). The fire was now burning hot at "5" and fire was starting at "3" on the south side of the Cat line. I set the saw down at "2" because it was apparent to me that the fire was cooking up and I wanted to size up the situation. The time must have been about 1605. Within a couple minutes the fires at "5" and "3" were engulfing the stands of trees in those areas. I took a photo looking west and another looking east on the Cat line because of the spectacular fire display in both directions. The smoke began laying down and coming out of the west but did not seem to be blowing too strongly. So from 1600 till about 1610 the wind had swung from ESE, to from the North, to from the West. I could hear lots of small arms ammo popping in the area of "A", it was about as rapid as pop corn popping in a pan. I was becoming more and more concerned with the fire situation. It was obviously heating up fast. The fire at points "5" and "3" were consuming large patches of timber and the smoke was settling down on us. I say "settling" because it seemed to descend and lay on the ground. At "2" the Cat line was extra wide and I thought it might be a possible safe area. I waved for Hardy to come to me at "2" and he did so. Points "1" and "2" were about 50 yards apart. At this time Hardy and I were both concerned about the situation and discussed where a safe area was. I suggested walking past the fire at "5" and heading to the meadow to the west that Cramer had

told me about. Hardy didn't like the idea of going past the fire at "5". We would have had to go into the green in the area of "B" to avoid the heat from the fire at "5". Going into any green didn't seem smart at that time. Going east was blocked due to the wall of fire in the area of "3" and there was more green fuel on both sides of the Cat line to the east. Point "2" on the Cat line was next to a burned area on the south. That looked like our best bet if the situation got too hot at "2". About that time (about 1610-1615 hours) I heard a strange noise in the direction of "A". It sounded like a thumping noise of some sort. It alarmed me to the point I got on the radio and called Cramer. I think I said, "I'm hearing a noise I've never heard a fire make before." Either Cramer or Hardy said there was a lot of ammo burning and that was probably making the noise. I could hear sporadic small arms ammo popping and it was defiantly not small arms exploding. I tried to frame the sound to something I knew. The best I could imagine was it might be plastic explosive burning, giving off a "whoffing," fluttering noise as it burned with high volatility. As Hardy and I stood at "2" the sound seemed to move from west to east paralleling the Cat line just to the south of us. The noise was loud and deep. The smoke was too dense for us to see what was making the noise but it sounded very close. After the sound passed us we saw the fire had crossed the Cat line to the north side at "3". We heard a radio call from Wattenburger with something to the effect that he had "crossed the road." Hardy and I commented to each other that that was not a good thing to do. We assumed Wattenburger had crossed the Cat line to the north. In reality he had already been burned over and was referring to a winter road he had crossed in the burn. The wind was now coming from the south. So in just a few minutes it had swung more than 270 degrees from ESE to North to West to from the South. I was concerned the fire would blow up the north-south section of the Cat line from "3" and endanger Charlie Brown and those with him. I tried radioing Brown with no success. I did contact Bert Mitman and told him the fire had crossed the line and could sweep north towards Brown.

About this time (1615-20) Hardy and I went about 100 feet south of "2" into the burn because there was too much fire along the south side of the line and it was eating in towards point "2". The burn in this area had happened about an hour earlier. It was a clean burn but the area was still hot on the ground. After going in about 100 feet we stopped and waited a few minutes. We then decided to go back and get the saw, which we did. I had left the saw on the road because I thought if we had to run for it I didn't want to carry the saw and it might not burn on the Cat line. All our moves were casual and we were constantly talking over the situation and what was the right thing to do. After retrieving the saw we moved about 200 feet south into the burn. I then suggested we head east and link up with Cramer and his group. Visibility was about 100-200 feet as we walked through the burn. The area had recently burned and was still hot but not uncomfortable or any apparent threat. After walking about 150-200 yards we hooted and received a return hoot. I then came onto a north-south winter trail. I looked north and saw Cramer's group about 100 yards to the north. Hardy and I moved to them and grouped up. We then went north a few yards and found another winter trail going east. Ortega was sent east to scout the trail. He found a large, marshy meadow about 150 yards east. We walked over to the meadow, decided it was a secure area and sat down to wait. I checked my watch and it was exactly 1648 hours.

