



High Mobility The Interregional Fire Suppression Crew

Martin E. Alexander

The wildfire problem is of major concern to all western forest resource management agencies and organizations. During the average year, some 12,000 wildfires blacken 200 thousand acres of the 210 million protected acres of the National Forest System. One of the long-time objectives of the U.S. Forest Service has been to provide highly trained, well conditioned, versatile fire suppression crews to critical fire situations. A fire suppression crew with high mobility that can reach a large project fire on short notice and do an effective job during the first burning period, has always been the dream of fire control managers. The interregional Fire Suppression Crews developed by the U.S. Forest Service serve this purpose.

Background and History

For many years, forest protection agencies relied on pick-up firefighters that were hired on an "as needed" basis. Men for these crews came from every walk of life—from skid row bums to short order cooks. In most cases these men had very little fire suppression training or experience. It was not until the advent of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930's and early 40's that any semblance of organized fire suppression crews was achieved (1). The CCC crews were used primarily for conservation projects such as trail and campground construction, but doubled as a firefighting force.

The first organized U.S. Forest

Service fire suppression crew was the "40-man" crew established in 1939 on an experimental basis (2). The 40-Man crew was located on the Siskiyou National Forest in southwestern Oregon. The crew was very effective in fire suppression in the Region 6 National Forests. The Oregon "Red Hats," co-sponsored by the School of Forestry at Oregon State College and various State agencies in 1940, was organized along the same lines as the 40-Man crew (4). During the war years programs like these were largely discontinued. However, some of the principles of training, organization, and use were to be later adopted by other U.S. Forest Service fire suppression crews.

In 1947, Region 5 of the U.S. Forest Service began to organize "Hot Shot" crews for use in California (5). They were well-trained, fast and hard hitting hand-line crews. Such crews as the El Cariso (Cleveland National Forest) and Del Rosa (San Bernardino National Forest) Hot Shots proved themselves more than once under difficult conditions in the brush-fields of southern California.

During the 1950's most of the western U.S. Forest Service regions maintained large brush crews to do slash disposal and other timber sale work. There were also several hundred blister rust control crewmen organized into 25-man fire suppression crews in regions with blister rust infested stands. These crews provided trained manpower for use on large project fires. "The Redmond Raiders," a TSI crew stationed on the Deschutes National Forest, was a good example. Because of transportation problems in dispatching these crews to other areas of the West, their most common use was local. With the termination of the blister rust program and the transition to bulldozer slash piling, such project crews were no longer available.

In the late 50's, fire control personnel in Washington, D.C. felt fire suppression crews could be used more efficiently if men were stationed near an airport. It was felt that a large airplane immediately available to transport men was necessary to carry out the concept of quick mobilization and dispatching. Such a plan became a reality when 5 IRFS crews were organized for the 1961 fire season (3). The first IRFS crews were located in the far West and Northwest. By 1963, the number of IRFS crews increased to 9. Through the years their value in fire suppression became quite apparent and allowed for an expansion of the IRFS crew program. In 1970, 15 IRFS crews were available for summer fire season. At present there are 19 IRFS crews stationed in

the western U.S. during the summer fire season (table 1).

Recruitment and Organization

Men for IRFS crews are recruited predominantly from the western U.S. Most often they are college students majoring in some phase of forestry. The Forest assigned an IRFS crew is responsible for screening, recruiting, and hiring crewmen and overhead. Crew members must be at least 18 and preferably not over 45, with the average age being 21. They must pass a yearly physical examination, be willing to fly, and be away from home base for extended periods of time. Employment is from about mid-June to early September. Some IRFS crews, specifically the Region 5 crews, terminate in November. Most IRFS crews have experienced fire fighters—65 to 95 percent are former crew members.

The crew headquarters have been strategically placed. Ideally they are located near large airports, which permits rapid transport by aircraft to going wildfires and high fire-danger areas. Crew members are housed in some sort of barracks, varying from reconditioned garages to elaborate college-type dormitories.

An IRFS crew is normally composed of 25 men, consisting of a foreman, assistant crew foreman (who may or may not be one of the squad bosses), 3 squad bosses, and 20 to 21 crew members. Overhead positions on IRFS crews are usually based on past fire experience, training, and crew seniority. The IRFS crew foreman is responsible for supervision of the crew, both on fire assignments and at home base. Crew size and structure vary among the regions, depending upon the ob-

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jectives and the needs of the home region.

Movement and use of these crews within their own regions is coordinated by the regional fire dispatchers. Requests for IRFS crews from other regions are coordinated through the Boise Interagency Fire Center (BIFC) at Boise, Idaho. BIFC arranges for air transportation and maintains a national listing of available IRFS crews (6). BIFC provides logistic support rather than serving as a command center. This permits a central office, which has fire suppression crew requests coming from all over the West, to analyze and estimate potential situations and assign priorities when the demand for IRFS crews is greater than the supply.

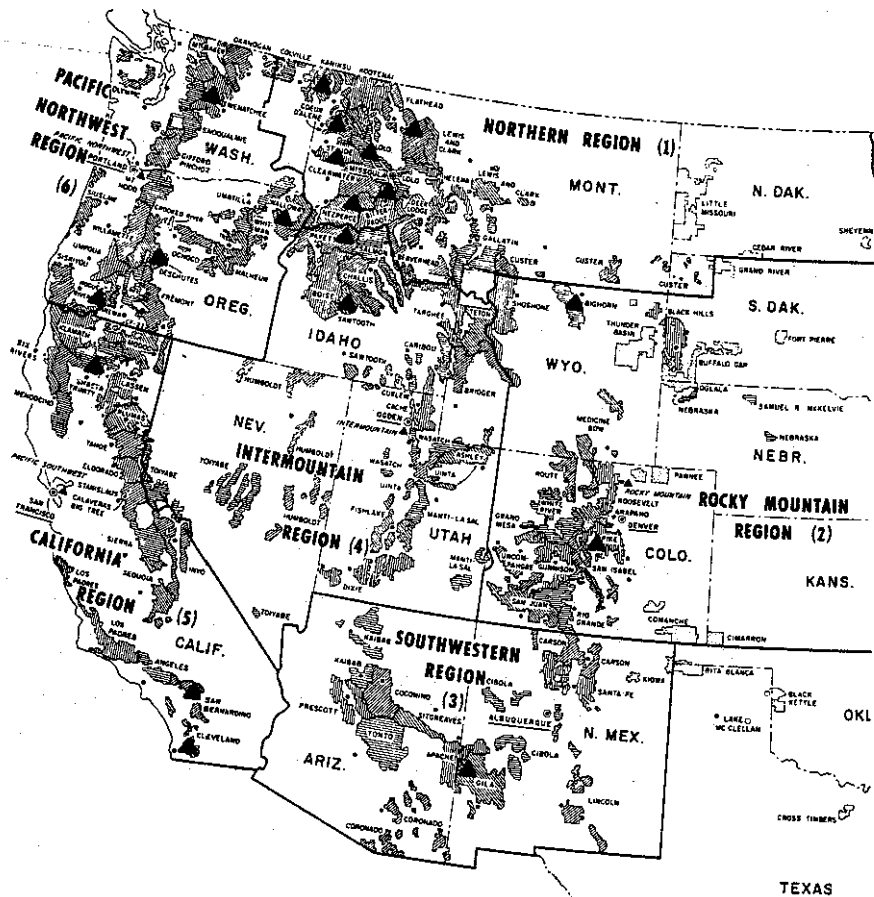
Training

Crew members usually receive 2 weeks of both formal classroom instruction and field training. Training is given in various facets of the fire suppression job. Training is intensive because without it crewmen would be no better than pick-up firefighters.

Classroom training consists of films, lectures, and programmed instruction texts in Forest Service organization. This includes fire and crew organization, fire behavior and weather, the 10 Standard Firefighting Orders, safety, first aid, retardant and aircraft management, radio communications, fire suppression principles for both small and large fires, fire control attack methods, woodsmanship, and thinking and reasoning during emergency stress conditions. Field demonstrations are given in various fireline construction methods (progressive, one-lick, etc.), care and use of hand tools, and specialized equipment such as chain saws, portable and slip-on pumps, and drip torches.

Physical conditioning is stressed during the 2-week training period. It consists of calisthenics, hikes, obstacle courses, and outdoor sports.

Figure 1. National Forests in Western United States.



▲ Location of U. S. Forest Service Interregional Fire Suppression Crews

Refresher training and conditioning are continued as needed.

IRFS crews are often faced with long working hours, little food, high air temperatures, and low humidities, all of which take their toll on crew members. Another fatigue factor is the required traveling from one fire to another. It's not uncommon to find IRFS crews that have been away from home base for 2 or 3 weeks during a busy fire season. But despite the hazards and hardships, the safety record among IRFS crews is extremely good.

When not actively engaged in training or suppression, the crew performs district project work such as hazard reduction, maintenance and construction jobs, fire proofing heavy use areas, slash disposal, timber stand improvement, trail building, and reconditioning firefighting tools and equipment. These activities keep crew members in shape and provide a ready work force for priority district work. The IRFS crews are on a 24-hour alert, 7 days a week. A sign-out roster system is utilized by most crews to determine where individual crew members may be reached at any particular time during off-duty hours.

Philosophy and Crew Morale

The effectiveness of any fire management organization is no greater than the morale of its personnel. Recognition of this has fostered a high degree of *esprit de corps* among IRFS crews which consider themselves the "best." It is customary to assign the IRFS crews control of the most difficult sectors of project fires. Crew morale appears to soar the hotter the fireline gets.

IRFS crew members develop nicknames as the result of incidents, individual characteristics, or backgrounds. Good natured kidding among fellow crew members prevails constantly. Several IRFS

crews have developed shoulder patches exemplifying their crew name or locality.

Crew morale is a necessary component of an IRFS crew. Only through a sense of personal satisfaction and pride can the individuals obtain the desire required for successful action in difficult fire situations.

Mobilization

The primary purpose of IRFS crews is to provide highly trained and well equipped reinforcement crews for large fire suppression. All 19 IRFS crews are air mobile and can be moved to any location in the western U.S. in 6 to 8 hours after being dispatched. Thus, approxi-

mately 420 highly trained men can be mobilized very quickly for any large project fire or lightning bust.

In one instance, 12 of the 15 IRFS crews were used in the 4,000 acre Pumpkin Creek fire on the Bighorn National Forest in 1970. IRFS crews are used in different types of wildland fuels, burning conditions and terrain—from mopup in heavy West Coast fuels to punching line in southern California's Class 14 brush type.

IRFS crews are used for both day and night duty. They are sometimes used as an initial attack force on their home forest and by nearby cooperating agencies and organizations. In such cases they will travel to a fire utilizing their own crew ve-

Table 1.—National Forests assigned IRFS crews by U.S. Forest Service regions with year of crew organization and crew name.

| U.S.F.S. Region | National Forest Assigned IRFS Crew(s) | Year of Crew Organization | Crew Name |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| Region 1 | Bitterroot | 1963 | Bitterroot I.R. |
| | Flathead | 1966 | Flathead I.R. |
| | Idaho Panhandle ¹ | | |
| | at Wallace | 1967 | Coeur D'Alene Hotshots |
| | at Priest Lake | 1967 | Kaniksu Hotshots |
| | at St. Maries | 1967 | St. Joe Hotshots |
| | Lolo | 1961 | Lolo I.R. |
| Nezperce | 1962 | Slate Creek Hotshots | |
| Region 2 | Bighorn | 1967 | Gibhorn I.R. |
| | Pike ² | 1962 | Pike I.R. |
| Region 3 | Gila | 1970 | Gila I.R. |
| Region 4 | Payette | 1961 | Payette I.R. |
| | Sawtooth | 1967 | Sawtooth I.R. |
| Region 5 | Cleveland | 1961 | El Cariso Hotshots |
| | San Bernardino | 1961 | Del Rosa Hotshots |
| | Shasta-Trinity | 1961 | Redding Hotshots |
| Region 6 | Deschutes | 1962 | Deschutes I.R. |
| | Rouge River | 1963 | Rouge River Roughriders |
| | Wallow-Whitman | 1967 | Wallow-Whitman I.R. |
| | Wenatchee | 1966 | Wenatchee Bushmen |

¹In 1974, the IRFS crews stationed on the Coeur D'Alene, Kaniksu, and St. Joe National Forests were reorganized into the Idaho Panhandle National Forest (personal written communication from William R. Moore, R-1, Div. of Fire Mgmt.).

²Originally the crew was assigned to the Roosevelt National Forest but was reassigned in 1969 to the Pike National Forest (personal communication with Glen C. Scott, former Pike IRFS Crew Foreman).

hicles. At certain times and because of individual experience, the crew may be split up and used as smokechasers during a large lightning bust. Individual crew members can also be utilized as "straw" bosses for pick-up and district crews. Besides serving as handline crew, they also fill in on fire control specialty jobs such as helitack crewmen and managers, retardant mixmasters, and tank truck operators.

Although IRFS crews are used primarily by the U.S. Forest Service in all of the western regions, 2 unusual fire assignments for IRFS crews were the Russian River fire and the Chaldron fire. The first oc-

curred in 1969 when 4 IRFS crews from Region 1 were used on the Russian River fire on the Chugach National Forest in Alaska upon personal written communication from Philip W. Gum, R-10, Div. of Fire Mgmt. and Air Operations. The second occurred during the 1973 fire season when three Region 1 crews and one Region 2 crew were used on the Chadron fire on the Nebraska National Forest.

The eastern and southern U.S. Forest Service regions have never used IRFS crews, nor do they anticipate using them because of readily available manpower, generally small and short duration fires, and because their fire season does not

coincide with IRFS crew employment periods (personal written communications from Wayne E. Ruziska, R-8, Div. of Fire Mgmt. and Monroe E. Kimsey, R-9, Div. of Fire and Air Mgmt.). Therefore, although IRFS crews are available to the eastern and southern states, it would require extreme fire danger over a large area for an extended period of time to warrant dispatch.

The IRFS crews are also used by other federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They are also called upon for fire suppression by western state forest resource management agencies, private forest industry, and timber protection associations.

When the regular fire season is finished in the crew's headquarters area, a crew may be moved to some other part of the West if needed. This type of arrangement usually consists of a 30- or 45-day detail. The Bighorn IRFS crew was used in this manner during the 1972 fire season in California (1). The Lolo and Pike IRFS crews were also assigned to the Lassen and Los Padres National Forests, respectively. Such an arrangement not only provides the Forest with an extra fire suppression force, but allows crew members to gain more varied experience and see different parts of the country. Similar arrangements include stand-by duty at fire coordination centers during periods of extreme fire danger.

An extremely valuable asset of IRFS crews is that they arrive at a fire as a complete "package" outfit—they have their own overhead, chain saws, crew radio communication system, and hand tools (if ordered with crew). Crew members carry their own fire pack which includes a sleeping bag, personal gear, and fire suppression clothing and equipment. The requesting fire control agency has only to provide food and water.


IRFS Experience Important

Experience and training on IRFS crews is sometimes used as criteria for selection of smokejumpers. Because of the wide variety of fire management experience gained on these crews, crew members should be well qualified to pursue careers as fire control technicians or professional wildland fire managers, depending upon their education. Many fire control personnel have worked their way up through the ranks from seasonal fire control jobs such as lookouts, fire guards, fire prevention patrolmen or as IRFS crewmen. The experience gained on an IRFS crew not only

allows young men to gain district fire control fundamentals but also allows them to experience all phases of large fire suppression. This experience is necessary to all persons pursuing a career in wildland fire management.

The development of the Interregional Fire Suppression Crews by the U.S. Forest Service marks a major milestone in wildland fire suppression. Philip V. Cloward, fire staff officer on the Sawtooth National Forest, once said that "what the smokejumper is to small fires, the IRFS crew is to large fires." Performance to date indicates that the IRFS crews are meeting their objectives and giving fire management agencies a new dimension in wildland fire suppression not previously available.

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ERRATA

Page 16, Author Caption: should read "... Moose Creek Ranger District..."

Page 17, Table 1: "Region 2 Bighorn 1967 Bighorn I.R."

Page 17, 2nd Column, Line 4: should read "...in Alaska (per-"

Page 17, 2nd Column, Line 7: should read "Mgmt. and Air Operations. The"

Page 17, 3rd Column, Line 30: omit "(1)"

Page 19, Literature Cited: (2) "...activities of the experimental 40-man fire..."