"THE FIRE WAS ON ALL SIDES OF US"

A RANGER'S REMINISCENCE

by Robert Perry Stewart

In the summer of 1910, Robert Percy Stewart was employed by the U.S. Forest Service near Wallace, Idaho. He found more adventure than he could possibly have bargained for: he was working with Edward Pulaski. A career Forest Service officer, Pulaski was a hero of that summer's huge forest fires because of his efforts to save his crew when they were caught by the fire. The photograph above (ISHS 70-98.2) shows the entrance to the tunnel in which Pulaski insisted his men remain as the fire swept past.

Stewart wrote down his recollections of the fire in rough form almost immediately, on stationery from a Wallace hotel, then later transcribed and edited his original narrative. After his death, his reminiscence came into the hands of his grandson, Charles Kostow, who kindly offered it for publication in this journal.

WHEN THE FIRE broke out that summer in 1910, on the Big Creek of the Coeur d'Alene River, I was sent out as assistant to Forest Ranger, Edward Pulaski to help fight the fire. Mr. Pulaski had charge of several other fires and I was usually in charge in his absence. We had two Shift Bosses, each in charge of about fifty men.

On August 18th, I was ordered to go out with another fire guard by the name of Robinson to locate the Trout Creek fire, to see how much territory it covered, and to see if there were any men working on it at that time. Robinson had come to our camp on the evening of August 17th and on the morning of the 18th, we started out on the scouting trip. We took nothing with us that
was not absolutely necessary; a compass and enough food for a couple of meals was about all. We took neither coats nor bedding.

By the time we left camp, the smoke was so thick that we could see only a few hundred feet in any direction. Neither of us knew the country into which we were going. All we knew was that the fire was in a certain direction and that if we came very near it, we could hear the burning trees fall.

On the first day, we missed the fire entirely but that evening, we saw the fire as it burned out the top of a tree. The next morning, after laying by a camp fire all night, we turned in the direction that we had seen the fire. At about noon, still hearing the continual crack of falling trees, we came to the place where the Hollingshead crew was fighting the fire. Robinson and I were both hungry and tired by the time we arrived there. We ate a good dinner and then decided to stay until morning in order to get some rest.

On the morning of the 20th, we left this fated crew. Eighteen of them were burned that night when the big blaze struck them. We followed on down the creek until we reached Mrs. Davis’ cabin on the Wallace trail. Here, we met three of our crew who informed us that Ranger Pulaski had left camp shortly after we did and that, during the night of the 19th, our crew had become frightened of the fire and had split up; each shift boss taking his part of the crew. Mr. Bedelle, one of the shift bosses, started down the trail toward Wallace while the other moved down the trail a mile or so and camped near a creek. Robinson and I found this camp and told the boss to keep his men together while we found Pulaski to see what he wanted done. We then started on the trail of the crew that had gone toward Wallace and found them camped about nine miles from Wallace. The wind, by this time, was blowing something awful and shortly after we reached this camp, Pulaski decided to take the crew into Wallace—if we could get there.

A “blow-down” of timber caused by winds that were generated by the firestorm of August, 1910. This photograph was published in the Lewiston Tribune to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the fires. ISHS 60-103.1.
We called the crew together, and when all were ready, we started down the trail to Wallace with Pulaski leading and me bringing up the rear.

After we left the camp, the fire formed a semi-circle in our rear and was coming toward us pretty fast. The smoke hid the sun entirely making it as dark as night and making it very difficult to follow the trail. Some of the men carried candles fixed in cans so that the wind would not blow them out.

It would be almost impossible to describe the run we made for Wallace. The fire was on all sides of us, and we were constantly being halted while Pulaski made little trips ahead to see if it were possible to go through the fire. We always went ahead, however, until we finally reached a tunnel where we halted. Pulaski ordered all the men into the tunnel, told them to keep still, and to stay inside. Then he called me to one side and told me that his family lived right in the path of the fire, and asked me if I would try to reach Wallace with him in order to warn and save them. We started down the trail at a pretty fast rate and after traveling a mile or so, we decided that there was still a chance to get the men out. While Pulaski scouted ahead, I went back for the crew. I will never forget that last run. There was fire all around us. Big trees would break off high in the air and scatter fire all over us. The steady screech and roar of fire was frightening, and the only thing that held the men under control was the fact that they did not know the trail. They knew that once off the trail, it would be the end.

We found Pulaski a mile or so down the trail waiting for us. He said that the fire had cut us off and that our only chance was to go into a nearby abandoned mine tunnel for protection while the fire went on by. The tunnel was about 75 to 80 feet straight back into the side of the mountain, and we had not been in the tunnel more than a few seconds when the fire struck us. Within a few moments, the tunnel was full of choking smoke and the tunnel’s mouth a raging furnace. It was only minutes later that the heat from the fire outside had drawn the smoke and air along with it back outside of the tunnel leaving almost a complete vacuum. We tried for a time to fight the fire from the mouth of the tunnel by throwing water on it but found that impossible as there was very little water in the tunnel and the fire was too hot. We backed off as far into the tunnel as possible and laid down as close to the ground as we could, prepared to take our chances, but when the air left us, very few of us thought we had any chance.

A place with conditions such as these will quickly bring out the true character of men who believe they are doomed to die. Some of them were praying, others were cursing, and a few were trying to encourage the others. When Pulaski entered the tunnel, he took his revolver out and placed it up in the top of the tunnel, remarking to me, “I might use this if I keep it with me.” One man, I remember, could think of nothing but, “Oh Lord,” which he yelled as loud as he could and kept it up as long as he had any breath left. Another man kept telling the men that we were all going to die and that there was no chance for us to escape. We tried to shut him up fearing the other men would get panic and run out but you cannot console a man in such a state. One man jumped up and said he was going out Pulaski told him he would shoot him if he started. The man sat down and kept quiet. Another man jumped up and ran out of the tunnel. We found part of his body after the fire was over.

It seemed like hours before I lost consciousness. The noise had subsided and everything was quiet. The last thing I remember was holding one of the horses and being the nearest man to the mouth of the tunnel. The next thing I knew was that someone ran over me going out of the tunnel. I jumped up and followed the man, or rather, I crawled, staggered and did almost everything until I reached the open air which was still so smoky that we could hardly breath. The fire had passed and the wind that followed it was cold as ice. We were all wet from lying in the tunnel and the wind chilled us immediately.

We crawled to where an old cabin had stood previous to the fire. By laying close to it, we were able to keep one side warm. We were joined every little while by another man from the tunnel until all the men were out but six. We did not count them at the time but five men were found dead in the tunnel and what was left of one man outside the tunnel.

We remained outside the tunnel until almost morning and then started our grueling trip for Wallace. Actually, we were only four miles from town, but that last hike seemed like a hundred miles. When we were almost to town, we were met by some men coming to our aid, but we told them to go on to get the men we left at the tunnel.

As quick as daylight came, we found that those of us who had tried to fight the fire at the tunnel’s mouth were suffering burned eyes. We went directly to the hospital when we reached Wallace, and the nurses had a real time getting the black off us. After we had been cleaned up, we were put to bed. Those of us with burned eyes were bandaged tightly for several days. One man, who had
only one eye burned, sat and read the newspapers for us. According to those papers, we were in pretty sad shape.

The hands and faces of some of the men were very badly blistered and some of the men had their fingers completely burned off. I had my hands quite badly burned and my face looked like it was covered with large freckles.

As soon as the sisters from the nearby Catholic School found out that we were in the hospital, they came over and spent a lot of time with us, writing letters, and anything else we wanted done.

The part of our crew that camped on the creek after leaving the original camping place, lost eleven men. Eight men crawled into a hole in the side of the hill where a rancher had intended to put his goods. The other men said they would have given anything if there had been room for the rest of them. When the fire hit, the trees fell around the hole and made a regular oven of it and after the fire, all the men in it were burned in one grave. A tree fell on three more men and pinned them down until they were burned. The others were saved only by getting under logs and laying in the water, although most of them were quite badly burned.

About the time our burns were healed, several of the fellows who lived through the ordeal in the tunnel, developed pneumonia from the effects of the smoke and exposure after the fire. I was hospitalized for six weeks along with Mr. Pulaski and our rooms were side by side. His wife and little girl used to come to visit us and I had quite a time playing with the little girl.


Dear Friend Percy,

I received your letter some time ago so will endeavor to answer. All the fire fighters are now out of the hospitals although some of them are in bad shape. I think most of them will come out all right. I will try and get you some of the fire pictures and send to you. We have the trails about cleared out and the new telephone line under construction to the StJoe, started the old line by Taft was nearly all destroyed in the fire so the new one. Well Percy how are you getting along in your school this fall do you have bad dreams of forest fires? or have you forgotten the experience by this time. My eyes are about all right but had to wear glasses to relieve the strain think in time will be able to dispense with them. I have made two trips over to Big Creek packed provisions to the crew clearing the trail it’s an awful looking place since the fire and hard to find a live tree left desolation everywhere. Your friends’ death was quite sudden I did not know even that he was sick well that is the way things go. Well I can’t think of any more this time so good bye.

Your friend,

E.C. Pulaski
The Forest Ranger.