

Smokejumper: A memoir by one of America's most select airborne firefighters by Jason A. Ramos

- WHY READ SMOKEJUMPER? -

"Sadly, none of the lessons from the past have stopped wildland fire tragedies from happening again in the future. ... You cannot change the basic nature of fire, which is fiercely unpredictable in the extreme. But you can try to keep alive the lessons of the past to give those of us who live with fire better odds, and this Ramos has helped to do." John N. Maclean, in the foreword to Smokejumper

"This self-reliance is a double-edged sword; half the time we fly in, finish the job, and leave before anyone even knows we're there. We're not heroes. We just provide a unique public service that we have become too reluctant to promote.

We need to overcome that insularity and let people know what we do. Because if we don't tell our story, someone else will."

While reading the subtitle would lead one to believe that this was going to be a jumper-sized ego trip through wildland fire for the masses of American readers, the reality couldn't be farther from the truth. This is a book that seems part memoir, part history lesson, part smokejumper propaganda, and wholly worth reading. The author takes readers alongside his personal journey as a wildland firefighter, from his early years in California to his time spent as a smokejumper in the Washington Cascades. His story is not unlike that of many others in fire, a story of hard work, determination, grit, sorrow, and triumph.

Smokejumper is a great book for firefighters of all experience levels, but is especially valuable for those who might be newer to the wildland fire service. It serves as an excellent overview of many of our tragedy fires, of our fire history, and wildland fire culture as a whole.

As you read through the book, compare the author's experiences to yours. While the book is mainly about being a smokejumper, keep in mind that while the various crew types use different methods of getting to fires, at one level or another we're all firefighters doing the same job. We all have different "tribes" that we are part of, engine crews, smokejumpers, hotshots, handcrews, helitack/rappel crews, but we are all members of the larger firefighting "tribe." As with many books, the true value isn't so much what's written on the page, but what takes place "between the ears" as you read it – the thoughts and ideas that are provoked by reading. While it would be easy to discount the author's ideas because of our "tribal" affiliations, this is a great book that takes a serious look at many of the issues we face today as wildland firefighters, and wraps them in some fun storytelling to keep our attention.

- SMOKEJUMPER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS -

Chapter 1

How did you get your start in wildland fire? What experiences in your first year or two stand out to you know? Would you do anything differently? What's your strongest memory from your first season? How about your second season?

Chapter 2

Have you experienced traumatic events as a firefighter? If so, have they changed how you look at things, at work or in your personal life? Have they changed your own behavior, for better or worse?

Chapter 3

Have you set any long term career goals? What are you doing to achieve them? Are there ways you can get help from those around you to reach those goals?

Chapters 4 & 5

Why is it important to know the history of your organization? What are some things that have changed in wildland fire since 1910? Since 1945? Is there still a place for envelope-pushing "barnstormers" in developing new tactics, methods, and technology in the fire world? What might the modern equivalent of the early-day inventors (the folks like Ed Pulaski and the early smokejumpers in these chapters) of the fire world be?

Chapters 6 & 7

Some goals take more effort and dedication to achieve than others. What are some goals in your life that you're working hard for? What have you achieved that you're proud of? Have you experienced failure that has helped you grow? What parts of your job require intense training? Are there any parts that could use more intense training than you already do?

Chapter 8

What skills have you acquired in your career that might seem odd to someone outside of fire? Are there any skills you brought to the job that have proven useful that you might not have thought would be good to have in a fire environment? Do you have any stories of spending time on standby in random, remote places? What kind of things did you do to pass the time and stay motivated?

Chapters 9 & 10

What kind of fire-related close calls have you experienced? What did you learn from them that you might not have learned just by reading or hearing about them? Have you ever spoken up about safety on a fire? Turned down an assignment? Why or why not? What was the outcome? Have you ever had a situation where you didn't speak up but later wished you had?

Chapter 11 & 12

How do you rate the danger or risk of your job? Is your danger/risk scale different than your coworkers? Your family and friends? What are some hazards of the job that you pay special attention to? Why?

Chapter 13

The Thirtymile fire undoubtedly had an influence on many firefighters, and even changed how we do business in some ways. Have you done the staff ride or read the book by John Maclean? Does reading

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the author's experience add to or change your understanding of what happened? Why is it important to review incidents like this, even 15 years after it happened?

Chapters 14 & 15

What do you think about the author's take on fuels in the urban interface, and the Yarnell fire? Have you ever felt pressured to take certain actions because of the values at risk? What lessons have you taken from the Yarnell fire?

Chapter 16

How has technology changed since you started fighting fire? Do you carry any equipment now that was unheard of ten or twenty years ago? What tools do you think you'll be using ten years from now? Is all technology good, or can it cause a distraction from the "basics" of the job? Can technology by itself make the job of fighting fire safer? Why or why not?

Chapter 17

While this chapter is mainly talking about smokejumpers, many of the things the author mentions apply to all firefighters. We work long hours in difficult conditions, spend a lot of time traveling, have strong work ethics and sometimes have oversized personalities, and usually earn little recognition from the general public. What made you choose fire as a job or career? Is that reason any different than why you've stayed in the field? What challenges have you faced – physical, mental, relationships, etc. – during your career? How have you overcome the challenges that come with the job?