

Why Were They There?

The training preached safety so much that Devin Weaver wondered if he'd ever get near a fire. Now his father wants to know how all those rules were broken and ignored.

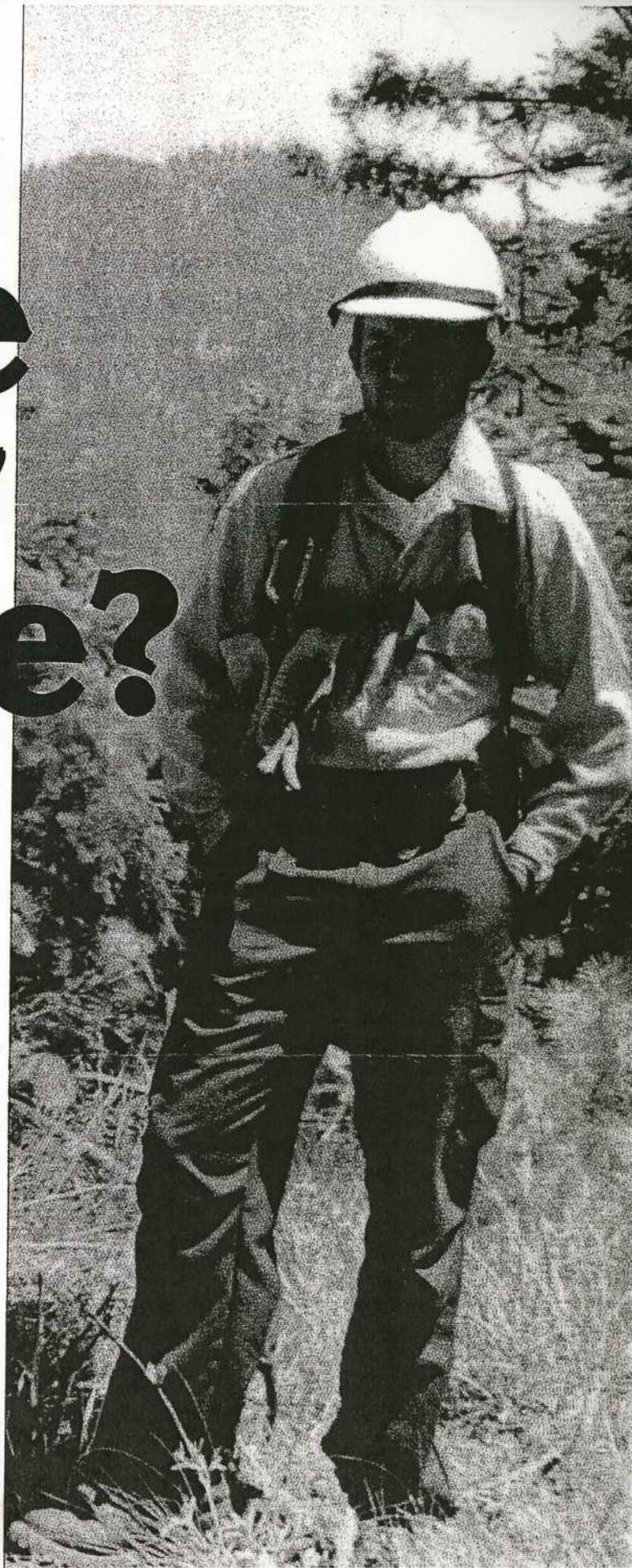
by Ken Weaver

I was awakened at 1:07 A.M. by my wife screaming, "Ken, there's a man on the phone. He says Devin is dead." Barbara was shaking and bent over as though she had been hit in the stomach. I instantly knew those words were true. The pain in her voice was too large, too intense. "He says Devin died in a fire."

I forced myself to take the phone and braced for the words that were to come next. "Hello, Mr. Weaver. My name is Randy. I am with the Forest Service. Devin's crew was overrun by a fire at about 5:30 yesterday afternoon and Devin didn't make it."

Devin Weaver had been a U.S. Forest Service firefighter for twenty-one days when he was sent to fight a fire on a dead-end road on the margins of Washington state's wildest country.

Photos courtesy of Ken and Barbara Weaver



"What do you mean he didn't make it?" I said. "My son could outrun any fire. It's not possible for a fire to overtake Devin; he is in too good of shape."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Weaver, but the ID is positive. We know for sure that Devin was one of the casualties."

"One of the casualties? Are there more?"

"Yes, there were three more. We are trying to reach their families now."

"Was Jason Emhoff one of the other casualties?"

"No, Jason was burned. He was taken to Harborview hospital with burns over 30 percent of his body. Let me give you some numbers that you can call for ..."

"Why do I need numbers? You killed my son, that's plain enough. Don't think I need to have that repeated." I pressed the disconnect button. He was talking. I have no idea what he was saying.

Barbara held me from my back, her arms around my shoulders, the way I used to hug Devin. She was sobbing. "He's not dead. Devin's not dead. The man was wrong," she said. "Call somebody else. Devin's not dead."

"Yes he is, sweetheart," I said. "Devin is dead." I had said it for the very first time. The words came crashing out of my mouth like boulders

Thirtymile Aftermath

When a group of U.S. Forest Service firefighters pulled up in vans to put out a wildfire started by an abandoned campfire along the Chewuch River in the Okanogan National Forest in north central Washington July 10, the situation was already more dangerous than it appeared.

Near record high temperatures, drought and steep terrain would only help the fire. The firefighters were on a dead-end road that led to a trailhead to the Pasayten Wilderness, leaving them only one direction to safety. When the fire blew up, the crew tried to outrun the flames in the vans, but the fire was too quick and fourteen were cut off.

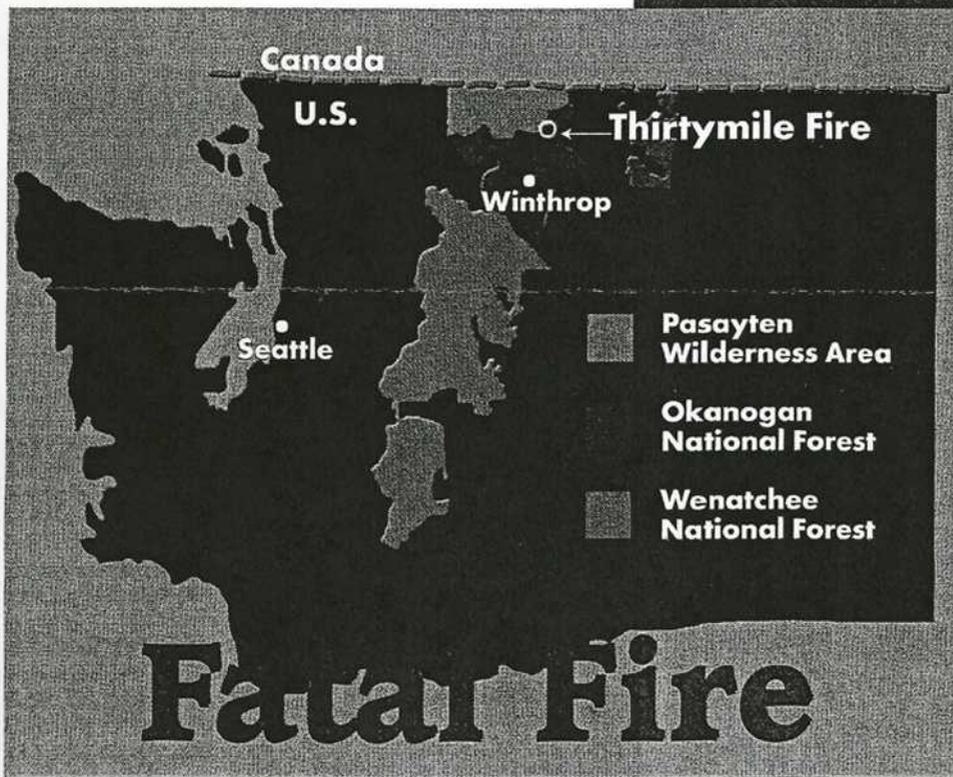
As flames advanced on their position near the end of the road, the firefighters deployed their aluminum-and-fiberglass shelters to try to ward off the intense heat when the fire front passed. Eight members of crew remained on the road while six deployed their shelters on a rocky slope a short distance above.

Devin Weaver, Jessica Johnson and Karen FitzPatrick, each of Yakima, Washington, and Tom Craven of Ellensburg, Washington, were killed when fire burned over them while they took refuge on the rocky slope.

The two others who had taken shelter with them escaped with their lives, but one of them, Jason Emhoff of Yakima, suffered severe burns.

The Forest Service investigation of the incident found that the group of fourteen firefighters assigned to the Thirtymile Fire violated all ten standard safety orders and ignored ten of eighteen warning signs described in Forest Service firefighting guidelines.

The parallels to the fire on Storm King Mountain in Colorado that killed fourteen firefighters in 1994 were striking and left many wondering how those mistakes could have been repeated. Senator Maria Cantwell of Washington called for hearings into the Thirtymile Fire in November.



crashing in a rockslide. They took physical form and hurt as they violated the air. Devin is dead. My golf, bow hunting, bowling, camping partner, soul mate and best boy friend was dead.

For the next eight hours, Barbara and I sat together on the couch. Barbara had her feet pulled under her with arms around shins in the fetal position. I just held her as tight as I could. We grieved a deep, visceral grief and cried. Words were infrequent and choked with pain. Time was suspended. Yesterday's bright promise looked today like a threat. Our family would never be together again; our circle was broken. Unlike any other problem I had faced in my life, I couldn't solve this one. I knew that this was not like any book or movie where the tragic hero always gains closure in the end.

As the first wave of pain began to pass, one thought burned in my mind. How could they do this? How could they possibly get Devin with twenty-one days of experience into that level of harm's way? This kid was twenty-one. He was a fitness buff at six feet and 170 pounds. He ran seven miles a night with a thirty-pound pack on his back to prepare for this job. He was an experienced woodsman. How could they possibly get him into a situation he could not escape from? The next afternoon, three members of the Forest Service came to our home with the first details of the tragedy. They described an out-of-control wildfire that blew up quickly, trapping and burning my son to death. They said it was no one's fault, an act of God.

Over the next days and weeks, more details became available, and the picture that emerged was something quite different from an act of any God I know. The fire was indeed out of control, but had been for more than four hours. This crew was led down a dead-end road in a steep box canyon with a plan of attack that was later determined to have had no chance of success. In all, the people who were supposed to be protecting Devin's life violated every single rule of safety on the books. They ignored every single warning sign present, abandoned all common sense and could not exercise even minimal command authority after they were entrapped. All the training Devin had just received stressed safety first. Everything he was told stressed safety as the top priority. Nothing was more important than the health of the firefighters. We talked about his training after it was completed and he said these



Devin and Ken a few years ago

people really know what they are doing. They were so safety-minded he wasn't sure they would ever let him close to a real fire. He, like the others in

his crew, went down that dead-end road in that steep box canyon in front of that out-of-control wildfire, knowing that safety was the top priority in the minds of his supervisors.

As it turned out, it was all a fraud. No one considered Devin's safety. No one considered the rules to actually be rules. As the investigative report would later quote a firefighter, "Everyone knows those [ten standing safety rules] are just guidelines and can't always be followed." Devin's squad was completely betrayed when they were led down that road. His squad did not give their lives; they had their lives taken. They did not die because of what they were doing, rather whom they were doing it for. We now know that the United States Forest Service does not have to follow any safety rules. The information Devin and others received in training was little more than a cruel hoax. It served only to make them let their guard down. They never had any more than a random chance. No one ever told the new kids what any veteran could tell you about safety, "They aren't really rules. They're just guidelines, so we don't have to follow them. It doesn't matter if your boss gets you killed. This is the Forest Service. We don't answer to anyone."

And so it is that an incident commander can abandon his responsibility to his crew, break every rule, ignore every watch-out point, suspend his common sense, exercise no leadership, cause the death of his crew members and simply be reassigned. No fines, no loss of wages or rank, just reassignment. Yesterday I got an overtime parking ticket and I had to pay a \$10 fine. It occurred to me that parking thirty minutes overtime was a more heinous crime with a larger penalty than what happened at Thirtymile. How is this possible? How can a department in our government operate by a different set of rules than the rest of the population? Why do we make brave young men and women fighting wildland forest fires each summer suffer greater workplace risk than we allow in the private sector? Aside from the legal question, how is this morally possible?

The single issue here is accountability. Abraham Lincoln said it best, "Government of the people, for the people, by the people." Our government was divided into three branches to ensure accountability. Without accountability, the Forest Service is neither for the people nor by the people. So why do we allow the Forest Service to investigate itself and impose its own sanctions? Or in this case, no sanctions at all.

On November 15, the Senate subcommittee overseeing the Forest Service met in Washington, D.C. The meeting was requested by Senator Maria Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington state. Reading the report from the Thirtymile tragedy, she was struck by the similarities to past lethal fires at Storm King Mountain and Dude Canyon. In all three fires, the same root cause, ignoring safety rules, cost the lives of firefighters. In all three fires, safety was not first, safety was not even considered. Most or all of the rules were broken, and as a result, brave young men and women paid with their lives. Senator Cantwell asked the question on many people's minds: Why does the same problem keep taking lives? The hearing began with brief statements from the senators in attendance and Representative Doc Hastings of the Fourth District of Washington state. Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth was the first to testify. It became clear listening to his testimony that no substantive changes were being considered. The "action plan" proposed by the Forest Service completely failed to address the root problem. Senator Ron Wyden of Oregon made this point very clear in his questioning. He insisted that Chief Bosworth put down his prepared statement and tell him in his own words what exactly he was doing to keep this from happening again. The chief's answer didn't seem to fit with the question and Senator Wyden required him to report back every sixty days on his progress. I came away with the feeling that Chief Bosworth is a very sincere and dedicated man. He has inherited a problem that is as large as the Forest Service itself, and making real changes will be a prodigious undertaking.

The remainder of the testimony hammered at the same theme, accountability. It was generally agreed that the rules in place are adequate, but there is epidemic lack of compliance. Everyone agreed, including Chief Bosworth, that some form of enforcement will be required. No one,

however, agreed on exactly what form that enforcement should take. There was also general agreement on the need for better training and evaluation at all levels of supervision. One point that got little attention was how to retain qualified higher level personnel. Being a seasonal job, fire suppression makes a poor career. I feel that this point needs to be addressed in any long-term solution of the safety problem. Creating year-round jobs for professional wildland firefighters would be one possible solution, and while costly, I believe it would save forests and lives.

All in all, I thought the hearing did a good job of addressing the problem and certainly was an important first step. But as the 1998 TriData study of wildland firefighting shows, understanding of the problem and the solution is not new to the Forest Service. Why nothing has been done is hard to understand. I pray now that Senator Cantwell has taken up the cause that real change is possible. I look forward to seeing the sixty-day reports that Chief Bosworth will give the committee. It will be interesting to see what form of accountability he will propose. In the meantime, I think that everyone on the fire line would do well to consider the risk of buying into the culture of machismo that rules the behavior of these crews. As adults, we have all experienced thinking with the group mind and we all know that it doesn't work, but fire crews are constantly being ruled by the group mind. We saw this on Storm King Mountain. Firefighters have to be strong enough to use their own minds all the time and brave enough to be afraid. If you find yourself working with a crew that is not afraid of fire, find one that is. First-year crew members need to be told that rules get broken, that safety is not always first. They need to be told that their incident commander can get them killed without losing his or her job. It is an absolute fraud to tell them less.

I was given the privilege of telling my story at the hearing. I had a tough time not crying as I spoke. Devin's memory is a source of great pain to me at this point. I am told that time will make it less so; that's hard to imagine. I just simply don't understand how this could happen. It seems like a bad dream, but it's not. It's a nightmare from which I will never awake. I will spend the rest of my life marking time until I see my best friend again. A lifetime before I can hug him. A lifetime before I laugh at his humor, before I see his broad smile. A lifetime before the circle will be unbroken. 