DEATH IN BLACKWATER CANYON

One Human Life With Every Thousand Acres of Timber is Toll of Greatest National Forest Fire Tragedy Since 1910

Northern Idaho and Montana also climaxed on August 21. When the wind had died down on that fateful day, survivors found the bodies of seventy-four forest fire fighters lying in their own ashes.

Those who were fated to survive the Blackwater tragedy are undoubtedly still wondering just what happened. With the suddenness of fate, a well-behaved fire of several hundred acres, in the process of being expertly brought under control by veteran forest officers and CCC fire fighters, became a scaring, consuming killer, a torturer of appalling viciousness. Ground fire, gradually being pinched out by fire control lines thrown around it, suddenly roared into the tree tops, driven by violent and erratic wind, until cyclonic drafts of hot air caused great walls of flame to rush toward each other. Fire fighters, but a few minutes from safe ground, were struck down before they could cover a hundred feet; another crew, trapped on a narrow rock ledge, was bathed with flame as gale-driven winds changed with unbelievable suddenness.

And what did happen? What is the whole story of this drama of destruction high in the remote mountains of the Shoshone National Forest, in Wyoming? All, of course, can never be told. Of one crew there was not a single survivor. The last movements of this heroic though luckless band of fire fighters can only be surmised.

But everything else is known and recorded. Investigations by the Forest Service, by the United States Army, and by the Civilian Conservation Corps have been searching and revealing. The cause of the fire is known; so are the elements of time and of man power and of attack. Circumstances leading up to the tragedy, of the tragedy itself, are likewise known, gleaned in part from the burned and swollen lips of those who were trapped by the flames but who lived to tell about it.

Here, briefly, is presented the case of the tragic Blackwater fire — a peculiar combination of circumstances rare in forest fire history, which took one human life with every thousand acres of timber destroyed. Consider, first, the scene of the disaster. A rough, almost waterless country, ranging from 7,500 to 10,500 feet above the sea, with heavily timbered basins, divided by bare and rocky ridges at the lower elevations, and with

By ERLE KAUFFMAN

AMERICAN FORESTS
WHERE FLAMES TOOK TO THE TREE TOPS

The Blackwater Canyon section of the Shoshone National Forest of Wyoming, ranging from 7,500 to 10,500 feet in elevation, is a land of heavily timbered basins, divided by bare and rocky ridges. It was when ground fire, gradually being pinched out by fire control lines, suddenly roared into the tops of such trees as shown above, driven by violent and erratic wind, that men died
As the fire appeared at 10 a. m. on August 21 — an ordinary 200-acre conflagration.

The beginning of the blow-up at 3:45 p. m. A sudden gale sent fire raging into the tree tops.

Ten minutes later the wind suddenly changed — one change bathed fifty men with flame.

The wind changed again with extreme suddenness, wiping out an entire crew of fire-fighters.

One of the numerous fire camps which spread through the Blackwater country when the fire was reported on August 20.
THE STRATEGY THAT WON — AND LOST

The attack on the Blackwater fire was aimed primarily at saving the heavily timbered basin shown above at upper right. Fire lines, extending from Coxcomb Peak, in center of picture, and encircling Blackwater Canyon, indicated by broken line, held firm when the fire "blew-up" under the action of erratic winds. The line that failed, indicated by dotted line, and doomed fifteen men is shown in center of picture. Center arrow shows location in gulch where Ranger Clayton and his crew were trapped and burned. Arrow to left shows rocky ridge where Ranger Post and his men were bathed with flames after a harrowing and dramatic escape from fire-swept Trail Ridge.
A closer view of the scene of tragedy. An unseen "spot" fire set by wind-driven flaming embers joining with one he was attempting to bring under control, trapped Ranger Clayton and his men in the gulch indicated by the center arrow. The arrow at the left shows the high, rocky ledge where Ranger Post sought safety.

Ranger Post and his men were barely able to reach this rocky ledge before fire surrounded them. Twice, as the wind shifted suddenly, they were bathed by flame. Five men attempted to escape — but one succeeded. Of the forty remaining with the ranger and following his instructions, but three died of burns. Note tools abandoned by fire fighters.
NO ONE LIVED TO TELL THE STORY

"We are going to attack the spot-fire in the hole. Send additional men as there are only eight of us here" — this was the message Ranger Alfred Clayton dispatched to a fellow ranger just before he and his ill-fated crew were trapped in a gulch or "hole". Before help could reach them the sudden cyclonic action of the fire struck them down — their charred bodies being found huddled together at the bend in the gulch shown above.
rim rock higher up, above timberline. Engelmann spruce grew in the basins, with Douglas fir dominating the ridges.

Blackwater Creek, which traverses the area, was not very active in August. In fact, the whole country was hot and dry. So, when on August 18 a lightning storm swept over Double and Coxcomb Mountains and down into the basins, smokechasers and fire lookouts were unusually nervous and alert. But, when the storm had passed, horizons were clear. Smoke spirals, signals that fire had struck, failed to appear.

But fire had struck! A shattered alpine fir tree on the side of a hill not more than forty yards above Blackwater Creek, later told the story. Investigators are fully satisfied that lightning, striking this tree on August 18, started the fire which, three days later, was to rise up in sudden fury and wipe out fifteen lives. That it smouldered without throwing up sufficient smoke for detection, to be fanned into flame on the dry, hot afternoon of August 20, was but the first of the peculiar combination of circumstances which marked this history-making tragedy.

Almost with the first wind on this afternoon, the Blackwater smoke was reported from Pahaska Tepee, Buffalo Bill's old hunting lodge. At about the same time Assistant Supervisor Carl G. Krueger, of the Shoshone National Forest, was in the air with Pilot Bill Monday, of Cody, scouting a smoke in distant Sunlight Basin. The flying forester was attracted by the Blackwater blaze, then about two acres in extent and burning casually, with little wind. He reported directly to Supervisor John Sieker, at Cody.

Within fifteen minutes after receiving the first report of the fire, Ranger Charles Fifield, of the Wapiti District, was on his way to Blackwater Creek, pausing long enough to send in a call for fifty men from CCC. (Continuing on page 558)

The smoke clears over a land of death—Blackwater Canyon after the ashes cooled. In the lower left corner is the gulch where Ranger Clayton's crew died.
DEATH IN BLACKWATER CANYON

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Camp F-24, at Wapiti. He arrived at the scene of the fire at 5:10 p.m. requiring exactly one hour and eighteen minutes to cover the thirteen miles of highway, old logging road and unused trail — exceptionally good time.

The ranger found the fire, with some wind behind it, spreading rapidly and started the first CCC crew to reach the scene on a fire line around the lower side of the blazed and out on each flank. This crew of seven men, in charge of Foreman Bryan Sullivan, was soon reinforced. By 8 p.m. Ranger Field had fifty-eight CCC enrollees strung out on his lines, with seven men supervising and forming his overhead. The fire at this juncture headed toward Cusco Peak in an almost pure stand of Douglas fir, and it was especially desired to prevent it from branching off into a heavily timbered basin, one of the forks of Blackwater. So it was planned to strike hard and swiftly. It was the judgment of Ranger Field and Supervisor Sieker, who had arrived on the scene from Cody, that the fire, now covering about 200 acres and burning fairly quickly, would not spread appreciably during the night. Before the wind came up the following day, they reckoned, enough fire line would be constructed to hold the fire to its present boundaries. Two things were needed — men and equipment.

So the word went out! Fifty men from CCC Camp F-24, at Tensleep—fifty from CCC Camp NP-3, in Yellowstone National Park—fifty from CCC Camp BR-7, at Deaver—and so on. Before the fire was finally brought under control more than 400 enrollees, with foremen and other officers from nearly a dozen CCC camp fires were drawn from nearby and other distant parts of the Blackwater to capture the CCC companies. Meanwhile, of course, other forest officers, veterans of long fire-fighting experience, had been ordered to the Blackwater to capture the CCC companies.

At midnight unexpected wind whipped the fire into the tree tops for short duration and caused Ranger Field, who returned refusing charge, to concentrate his forces on the north side of the fire, extending his line—well trenched to mineral soil—up what was known as Trail under observation. Despite weather conditions unfavorable to fire suppression, the line was holding.

Shortly before noon on Saturday, August 21, Assistant Supervisor Krueger sent an airplane to observe the fire, and reported that it had been held down in a "hole, or basin, there were two small "spot" fires—fires started by windburning embers.

Around 1:30 p.m. the Trail Ridge sector was still the "hot spot," with the attack focusing on extending control lines further upward toward timberline, and holding that already constructed lower down. For this advance work, two veterans of the fire line, Ranger Alfred G. Clayton, from the neighboring Washakie National Forest, and Ranger Urban J. Post, from the Big Horn Forest, were selected.

They went into action immediately. Ranger Post, assisted by Junior Forester Paul Tyrrell, leading a crew of fifty-one enrollees from the Tensleep CCC Camp, worked the upstream part of the Trail Ridge and one on the other side. Clayton, assisted by Ranger James T. Saban, with a crew of six, followed some distance behind.

Shortly after 3:00 p.m. Ranger Post strung out his men with orders to push the fire line toward the rim rock above. Then, further exploring the situation, he found nothing to cause him real concern. About where the fire had already been burned, there was a large amount of inflammable material still on the trees. Below were several smoking spot fires, known as "hot spots." There were no winds. In fact, upon rejoining his crew, the ranger expressed an opinion that the fire would be well in hand within three or four hours.

About this time Ranger Clayton was in a rather open part of the wood along the constructed fire line discussing the situation with Ranger Saban and Assistant Technical Rex A. Hale. With them were five CCC enrollees. Clayton was interested in a smoke which had begun to show below the line and he evidently felt that this spot fire might spread if the wind should arise and go over or around Post's crew, ahead of him. Consequently he hurriedly wrote a note to Ranger Post and dispatched it by Assistant Leader David Thompson, of the Tensleep crew. He informed Post that he and his men were going into the basin to attack this spot fire, and requested that additional men be sent to help him since "there are only 6 of us here."

Thompson reached Ranger Post about twenty minutes later and delivered Clayton's message—but not before Post him-
self had discovered the fire that was concerning his fellow ranger, Post, at that very moment, in fact, was himself making plans to attack it.

But he never had the chance. Hardly had he slipped the message into his pocket when the gale struck. With a suddenness that would have paralyzed a less experienced fire fighter, the wind came up, reaching hurricane proportions almost immediately. And then Post heard it, felt it, the thunder of an avalanche upon a forest! The fire was crowning and the wind was under it, changing directions with alarming frequency! He could see the spot in the basin blowing up. Clayton, village, and the men! Had they been caught? They had gone down in the basin to launch their attack. Had there been sufficient warning? Somebody—Ranger Post. This fire his backyard knew that they—Clayton, Saban, Hale and the others—had been trapped in that deadly blast. For there had been no indication in Clayton's message that he and others were in the basin; the spot had to be cleared of men were to be held up their line, and Clayton and his party had simply gone down there to wipe it out. And there was nothing. Ranger Post could do to help them. No living thing, at that moment, could enter the basin and live. Besides, the wind was endangering his own party. Even as he watched, the fire was moving up the ridge toward them at a frightful pace. The whole sector seemed to be blowing up!

It was time for quick, cool action. Going up the ridge where he could watch developments, he dispatched Tyrrell to call in all of the members of his crew. About this time volunteer fire fighters from a Bureau of Public Roads camp came up, with Bert Sullivan, a veteran fire fighter, in charge. They were sent on ahead.

In a short time Tyrrell returned with all of the men he could locate and the retreat to timberline was on in earnest. The men were ordered to drop heavy tools and to proceed as fast as possible with only lanterns and light shovels. In the meantime, the main fire, now crowning, was making startling progress—and toward timberline. It was beginning to look like a grim race, with tornado-driven winds favoring the fire. The fire was on—worse for the moment, at least. Within a few hundred yards of the ridge, the flames shot across the fort of the retreating men and forced them out on a large open rock slide. Near exhaustion, they dared not gallop! The fire was roaring toward them. Thinking of their feet, Ranger Post and his aids rushed the CCC crew down the steep slope of the ridge—across the side opposite from the fire line. Throwing the earth, they waited hopefully.

All survived that first blast with minimal burns, and after the smoke cleared, it was decided to move the men on the other side of the ridge. The reason being that with the wind holding its present course the section that had just burned over could be cool enough to retreat into when and if the other side of the ridge blew up.

And then, with the perplexing suddenness of action, some shots were fired and the whole fire, the wind whirled around, drove the fire into the tree tops and bathed the whole rock point with flame. The wind was blowing away from us,' said John Tockstone, CCC fire fighter, later explained. 'But all at once it changed and whipped the flames right back over us.'

Panicked panic struck the hot refuge. Men dashed here and there, screaming, praying, looking for an avenue of escape. Four of the CCC boys broke away and dashed down the ridge into the fire, a mad attempt to reach the area already burned over. One, critically burned, succeeded. The others died—horribly.

Back on the ridge the trapped men were enduring nausea for a second time—as the wind changed. Then the smoke became so dense that for a while it appeared no one could survive it. But they did, by keeping their noses to the ground.

Sundays found the rocks cooling, the smoke thinning, and the exhausted group of men took stock of their fate. Of the forty men remaining on the rocky point, but three were so badly burned that they were later to die. Considering all they endured, their survival can be attributed only to the experience, judgment and heroism of the three leaders, Ranger Post, Forest Ranger Tyrrell and Foreman Sullivan, all of whom suffered severe burns—Forest Ranger Tyrrell to die shortly afterwards.

But what about Ranger Clayton and his little band in the fiery "hole"? One can only surmise. In a gully just below a small spring, their bodies were found, charred almost beyond recognition.

What matter the rest? Enough to say that they went into the "hole" because they foresaw possible disaster if the spot fire were allowed to run unchecked— and their job was to check it. What they did not foresee was the sudden cyclonic action of the wind which sent two walls of flame rushing toward them with such awesome speed that they were cut down before they could reach safe ground.

And even as they were dying, even as Post's courageous crew was being bused from the fire in timeliness, the other CCC fire fighters moved forward, tight-lipped and grim, against the enemy, fire. The racing flames must be stopped! Timber must be saved! For it was not for this that they—Clayton, Saban, Tyrrell, Hale, Bevans, Garza and the others—gave their lives.

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