

THE DAILY

FIRE FLIES

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After skydiving to the scene of a blaze, the real work begins for smokejumpers.
The Daily



Video by: Vivek Kemp, Jonathan Tortora, Shalini Sharma

McCALL, Idaho — In a ranking of the world’s most dangerous jobs, being paid to skydive onto burning mountains must surely stand somewhere near the top.

The brave souls known as “smokejumpers” make up just 3 percent of the nation’s wildfire fighters, but they’re often called up first when remote forests start to burn. These 450 highly-trained men and women are now gearing up for what already promises to be an intense, fiery summer.

After one of the warmest, driest winters on record, forests across the American West are packed with sun-parched fuel. Forecasters at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise have predicted heightened risk for “significant fires” from the Western Rockies to Southern California.

That means smokejumpers at nine bases across the United States are packing their para-

chutes.

“They’re going to be the lead element that goes out,” said Tim DeHass, manager of the national smokejumper program in Boise, Idaho. “They’re the first line of defense.”

So far this season, wildfires have torched parts of Arizona, Colorado and California. A lightning-sparked blaze in New Mexico’s Gila National Forest last week became the biggest wildfire in state history. Elsewhere in New Mexico, smokejumpers already have taken to the skies to prevent smaller, isolated blazes from getting out of hand.

The skydiving firefighters’ principal asset is their ability to deliver a heavy firefighting payload at a moment’s notice.

“They can respond to a fire within 30 minutes,” DeHass said.

In preparing for fire season, jumpers train to operate in rugged country without supervision.



Only veterans of ground-based fire crews get the job, and experience matters as much as physical fitness.

Hundreds apply for the handful of positions that come open at America's nine smokejumper bases each year. Among the lucky few who receive offers, as many as a third wash out during training.

If fighting wildfires is a war, DeHass said, smokejumpers are "definitely special ops."

In his classic book on smokejumpers, "Young Men and Fire," Norman Maclean described "the sense of belonging for life to a highly select outfit, somewhat like the Marines, who know what they're talking about when they speak of themselves as the proud and the few."

Ask active smokejumpers about this, however, and a reflexive modesty kicks in.

"Smokejumpers are just another tool," one veteran jumper said.

"On the ground we do the same thing as other ground crews," insisted another.

Wildfires are mainly fought with sweat. Wielding hand tools and chain saws — dropped separately from the plane — the firefighters clear trees and brush to scrape a broad line of bare earth across the path of the fire, creating a barrier flames can't cross.

Once the fire's contained, burning logs and brush are put out by scooping cold dirt over hot coals. It's grueling work, and it can go on for days at a stretch. Afterward, jumpers can be extracted by helicopter or, if there are roads nearby, by truck.

But sometimes smokejumpers must cram their gear into huge frameless packs and exit the backcountry on foot. The normal load for such journeys weighs about 110 pounds.

After a particularly brutal trek down a trackless Idaho mountain, smokejumper Keith Suemnick, 28, said that out of curiosity he threw his bag on a scale upon returning to

MINIMUM PHYSICAL REQUIREMENTS



Backpack

110 lbs.

3 MILES IN LESS THAN AN HOUR AND A HALF



Running

1.5 Miles

IN LESS THAN 11 MINUTES



Sit-ups

45



Push-ups

25



Pull-ups

7

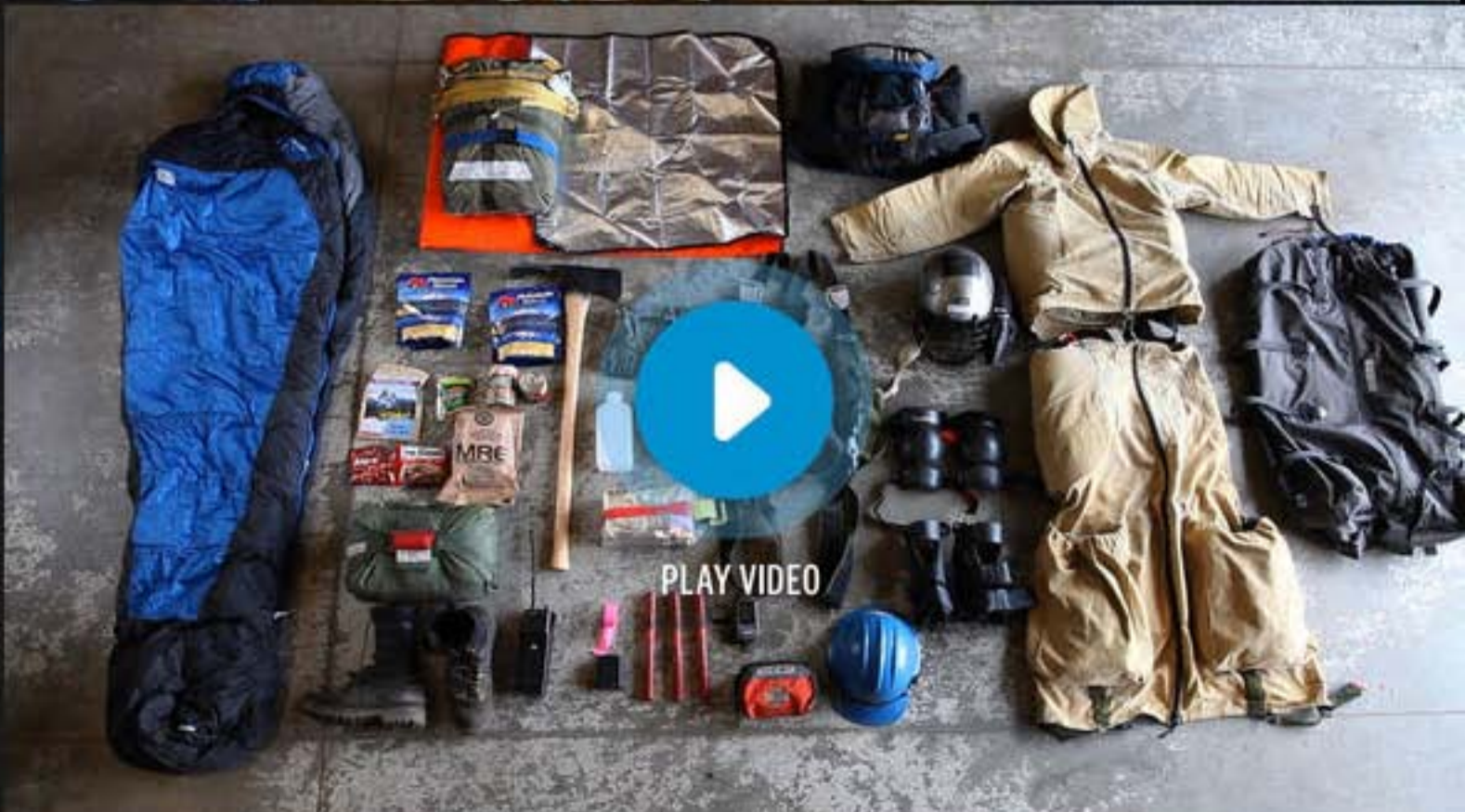
"THOSE ARE DEFINITELY THE BARE MINIMUMS - YOU MUST BE ABLE TO DO MUCH MORE THAN THAT. IF YOU CAN'T, THAT'S IT."

-RAMONA HULL



LIST of ITEMS

- 1 Sleeping Bag
- 2 Main chute
- 3 Food
- 4 Reserve chute
- 5 Fire bootes
- 6 Radio
- 7 Pulaski tool
- 8 Blanket
- 9 Gloves
- 10 Water bottles
- 11 Fire shelter
- 12 Flagging tape
- 13 Spare radio battery
- 14 Flares
- 15 First aid kit
- 16 GPS
- 17 Jump harness
- 18 Personal gear bag
- 19 Work hel
- 20 Jump hel
- 21 Knee pad
- 22 Ankle bra
- 23 Kevlar/Ne
- 24 Pack-off l



met
met
s
aces
omex-padded jump suit
bag



base. It weighed 132 pounds.

“That wasn’t even the heaviest,” Suemnick said, laughing. “Another guy had one that was 141 pounds.”

As tough as job can be, getting hired might be tougher. On arrival to their base, rookie smokejumpers are officially required to do seven pull-ups, 25 push-ups, 45 sit-ups and run a mile and a half in less than seven minutes. Then they have to haul a 110-pound pack for 3 miles in less than 90 minutes.

“Those are definitely minimums — you must be able to do much more than that,” said Ramona Hull, 29, a smokejumper since 2006. “There’s no second chance.”

Hull was part of the smokejumper program’s first all-female rookie class. Only two out her five fellow candidates made it through training. Women have been smokejumping since 1981, but they still only account for a tiny percentage of the total outfit.

“There’s no special treatment given and we’d like to keep it that way,” she said. “It can be intense, though.”

Rookies wash out by failing fitness tests, for lacking the skill or nerve to jump and even for being too heavy or light. Smokejumper candidates must weigh no less than 120 pounds and no more than 200. One particularly brawny jumper, Jared Hendee, 33, recalled that, before his weigh-in, “I didn’t eat for two days.”

The rigor of smokejumper training does help mitigate the risks they face in the field — but for people who work regularly with parachutes and wildfire, risk can’t ever be eliminated.

Steve Bierman, 50, had his closest call on a jump a few years back in the Nez Perce National forest. Bierman’s parachute tangled in the top of a dead tree and, as soon as his body weight pulled the shrouds taut, the tree trunk snapped. Smokejumper, parachute and tree all crashed

See just what it takes to become a smokejumper



Video by: Vivek Kemp, Joni Milne, Olivia Lin

down a hillside.

“Five days later, I limped out of the fire with my pride just as well damaged as my body,” Bierman said.

One of the greatest dangers comes from dead trees that catch fire and fall onto firefighters below, said Chris Niccoli, the operations foreman for the McCall, Idaho, smokejumper base. He still remembers one that toppled without warning onto a fellow smokejumper a few years back.

“He damn near died,” Niccoli recalled. “Broke his back — broke a number of vertebrae — cracked his skull, broke a number of his teeth.”

But cheating death isn’t what smokejumpers tend to mention among the reasons they keep them coming back to a job whose starting wage is just \$16.73 an hour.

Excitement and adventure are certainly part of the story. Yet Hull said so too are the moments of beauty that can only be experienced while hanging from the sky.

“Just, poof, parachute opens and — perfectly quiet,” Hull said. “It’s just this amazing peace.”

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