

Fire on the Mountain: The crash of the slurry bomber near Estes Park

By Ryan Hale

Special Contributor
ESTES PARK, Colo. — When I came onto my 24-hour ambulance shift, I expected a humdrum day and night of running 911 calls on dehydrated tourists and folks who had fallen down hiking in Rocky Mountain National Park. Since starting a different job a year ago, I was only working as an EMT that day to fill in for someone who was out of town. I walked up to the hospital from the employee parking lot, straightening my uniform as I went in to report for duty, but by the end of my time working I would be covered in fire retardant and soot three days later.

The radio crackled to life and words of a fire down the Highway 36 canyon could be made out between the sounds of static. Everyone in the ambulance base perked up to listen as the report went on to tell of a 20-acre fire eight miles from Estes Park. "No real significance," I thought, "Except for the fact that we've been in the worst drought in Colorado history, the only reason to worry at that point was that our crew would be called out to do medical coverage for the firefighters and we might miss doing some paper work."

The rest of the day was spent on stand-by for the fire, which means: don't get too involved in what you're doing because you'll likely be called out. A few 911's came in for folks having respiratory problems from the smoke but still no call to the fire. By the end of the day, however, the fire would be almost 1,000 acres and growing. The next morning, I expected to go off shift as usual...this would be no usual day. At the ambulance office, requests were coming in from fire command for medical coverage at the staging area where the firefighters and equipment were being organized. "Sure, I'll do it...just hang around and be there 'just in case,' easy money," I thought.

The morning and afternoon were filled watching the slurry bombers, the airplanes that drop fire retardant on the fire, fly their missions over the flames.

Slurry is a watery fluid that is like the stuff that comes out of a fire extinguisher. It's dyed red so it can be seen from the air and pilots would know where they've already dropped retardant. Their planes are modified WWII bombers that can carry 2,500 gallons of the stuff and can be dropped bits at a time over a large area or all at once for a greater effect in one spot.

Three planes were flying that day along with two helicopters that were equipped with buckets that can be dipped in mountain lakes and dropped on the flames. We took pictures, watched with binoculars and dodged reporters looking for "insiders" to get information. We talked about the amazing maneuvers and flying abilities of the slurry pilots and then it happened. . .over the fire channel, as clearly as if the speaker were standing next to us: "Bomber has gone down. . . again we have a downed plane in Hermit Park."

A brief moment of disbelief fell over the fire and ambulance crews. Everyone scrambled for their gear and vehicles. One EMT spiked a pair of blood lines in the back of the rig preparing for a couple of major trauma cases, my partner jumped in the driver's seat and I took the passenger side, running the radios and lights. The crash site was just two miles up the road but it seemed like it took forever to get there. A giant plume of smoke led us to the spot. We pulled to the side of the road and grabbed all the gear we could each carry. We were the first crew to arrive, getting there even before the fire fighters. The crash site was about a quarter mile from the road, four miles from Estes Park.

It was a surreal feeling running through the forest with bits of airplane parts littering the forest floor and touching off fires all around. Finally, we reached the majority of the debris. The plane was in a draw. To the left the draw went downward, to the right the terrain went up and ahead of us the terrain also rose. My partner went right, up the hill while I went left with another

EMT down the draw, across the dry riverbed and up the hill on the other side. Hoping to meet my other partner someplace in the middle while we encircled the wreck, searching for the pilots. As I ascended the hill, the fire began to grow and burn up the steep terrain. Before I could encircle the wreckage, I took a look around and realized the fire would soon cover the path behind me. I was afraid that if I stayed a moment longer on my route around the strewn wreckage, my escape route would be covered by fire, so I was forced to turn around and back track.

Meanwhile, the trees were beginning to blow up like Roman candles, as flames would shoot up the length of the tree. The flames made an evil hissing sound as they climbed the tree and the fire was rapidly growing. Searching every piece of wreckage as well as the ground for the pilots, I realized I was covered in the slurry the plane was carrying. I was wading in it and my uniform was covered. I reached the point where we came into the wreckage and met my partner who was forced to double back as well for the same reasons I had to. The firefighters had reached the site and began cutting fire lines around the wreckage. We realized it was their show now, as the fire was larger than we were prepared to deal with as EMTs.

We reluctantly retreated back the way we entered the forest, tying markers with roll gauze at the various air plane parts we came across along the way...we knew the investigators would be interested in finding all the pieces.

Once back on the road, the rural fire crews had already set up water reservoirs on the highway. These canvas pools hold 2,000 gallons of water that the firefighters can purge from with their hoses.

This time however, it wouldn't be for the ground crews, the helicopters would be using them. The helis hovered above us, dropping their buckets into the pools, raising in the air and then flying over the fire before dumping

their payload. Over the radio, we were told the highway had been closed for 12 miles and the new fire from the plane crash had become the priority. Fire crews began showing up from six different agencies in the area and we were relegated to simply watch and wait. I was 48 hours into a 24-hour shift which would not be over until a day later.

I remembered the World Trade Center rescue crews saying that they wanted to at least find victims so they could be buried properly. I suppose at some point I realized there was no rescue to be made, and I began wishing we could have found them right away for the same reasons. The pilot's bodies were eventually found by the firefighters later that night. One was a new father and the other had flown these missions for years and planned on retiring at the end of the fire season.

The cause of the plane crash remained undetermined at this writing and the FAA ordered all slurry bombers grounded until an investigation could be made.

These slurry bombers had spent the past two days preventing 120 houses from being destroyed, but without the crucial air support, the fire grew to 3,000 acres and swept closer to Estes Park the next day.

The helicopters were allowed to remain flying and their efforts still thwarted the fire's attempts to destroy the subdivision. Evacuations were being ordered on the east side of the town and a new fire defense was set at the edge of Estes where water could be purged from the lake and city fire hydrants.

Starting my EMT shift the day before I really had no idea I would be running through a forest fire and picking through burning wreckage looking for survivors. In EMS you come to expect the unexpected but I could not have expected this.

Ryan Hale is formerly of Colby and is the son of Roger Hale and Linda Hale.



Photo courtesy Ryan Hale

A helicopter heads to fire scene with bucket of water in tow in mountains near Estes Park, Colo.

Popular exhibits at Sternberg are extended into the fall

HAYS — If you missed either of the summer's two big exhibitions at Fort Hays State University's Sternberg Museum of Natural History, you've

got a second chance. The museum announced plans to extend them into the fall.

"The responses of visitors who've

seen these two shows have been overwhelming," said museum Director Jerry Choate. "We wanted to make sure that others had an opportunity to expe-

rience them."

The exhibits are "In the Dark: Worlds Without Light" and "Blind Ambition."

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