

MURPHY

This is something I wrote back in 1974, when I was fighting forest fires for the Forest Service. Is there anyone out there who can share a “fire story” with us?

The men stood around muttering to one another, glancing frequently at Murphy, the sector boss, who stood a little apart from his men. They shivered in the cold night air as they stood on this mountain top he had brought them to. They had been on the fire line since dawn. They were tired and hungry; their clothes damp with perspiration and fire retardant from the afternoon airdrops. They should have been back in fire camp by then, with their bellies full and their tired muscles beginning to relax in the warm sleeping bags. It was Murphy’s fault they weren’t there. They knew it and Murphy knew it.

He had held them on the fire line too long. The sun had set by the time they had reached the open mountain top where the helicopters were to pick them up. The helicopters did not operate after dark in these rugged mountains. Murphy picked up the mic of his portable two-way radio, licked his lips, and put it down without calling anyone. The men stood there in the starlight, watching him. He fumbled a cigarette from his shirt pocket and lit it. Then he took a deep breath and called the dispatcher. The men who were standing closest to him heard him give his position and request transportation for “about 40 men.” The voice of the dispatcher came back clearly. He would send the only vehicle available, a flatbed truck, as soon as possible. Because of the fire, the truck would have to detour some thirty miles over rough woods-roads. That’s why they were using helicopters. Murphy could expect the truck to arrive about 1:00 a.m.

The muttering and grumbling grew louder. One truck at 1:00 a.m.! There were at least one hundred men with Murphy.

Several men began to talk more loudly. Fire camp, they said, was only about eight miles in a straight line to the northeast. They could walk there by 10 o’clock. About a dozen of them, not looking at Murphy, started walking - in the wrong direction. Murphy watched them go.