

WITNESS STATEMENT: ANTHONY C. PETRILLI

JULY 16, 1994

On the 4th of July I jumped my first fire in Colorado; it was called the Oil Springs Fire. The size was 20 acres of rolling hills of PJ. We twelve jumpers from Springerville, AZ worked the fire most of the night with only a little cat nap. We demobbed on July 5 to Grand Jct. I clocked off at 2400. I watched The Weather Channel to see the forecast of a dry cold front was coming the next day with winds. My main concern at this time was jumping in the winds.

When I arrived to the airport the morning of the 6th the word came of a fire call. There was plenty of time to ready gear. The pilots were not scheduled to be on until 0900. The briefing consisted of: 1. that we were reinforcements 2. The fire was 20 minutes out 3. Blanco was the IC, he was a good guy, uses jumpers a lot and do him a good job. When we were getting suited up Eric Hipke, Roger Roth, and I were given radios. I don't know why we were given 3 radios instead of 4. I didn't consider it to be any big deal.

In the air over the fire I saw it was 30-40 acres on top of a mountain. It looked steep, rocky, brushy. The fire had many fingers. I would call it messy. The windows in the Casa jump plane are few and small. During streamer passes I couldn't get a good look at the jump spot. The spotter, Mike Tupper said that there was 100 yards of drift. Billy Thomas and I agreed it looked more like 250 yards. The exit point was correct. The wind drift was straight and steady with very little turbulence. I expected turbulence from the terrain. The spotter told us that Sonny Archuletta was at the jump spot with a wind drift streamer. Eric Hipke and Billy Thomas were the first stick. After they were out the door I could see the spot well. Dale Longanecker, who was my jump partner, discussed our jump strategy. I would take the side of the jumpspot closest to the highway. Dale and I had an intense jump, but both of us did well and made the spot. The rest of the load made it in or near the spot without any major problems. The time was approx. 0930. Picture #1 looking towards the fire with the helicopter with a bucket in the background. While at the jump spot Sonny Archuletta programmed my radio with the fire frequency. All jumpers gathered gear to get slung out by the helicopter in the morning. I remember Longanecker asked Hipke if he wanted to keep the radio. Hipke said that he didn't want it and that Longanecker could have the radio. Billy Thomas and I decided to be a saw team and readied the saw and sig pack. After everyone from my load gathered at the spot Sarah Doehring led us to the fire. On the way to the fire Billy and I stopped at H-2 to do 10 minutes of saw work.

Billy and I arrived at the fire at approx. 1010. We had a short jumper reunion. A bucket drop was made on a burning tree on the top of the saddle. It was apparently slopover. I gave Quinten Rhodes a sig of gas and oil. At this time it was my opinion that Mackey was in charge of the line building and that Blanco was the IC.

Throughout the fire I didn't see Blanco. Although I was not looking for him, I never saw him. I didn't hear him talking on the radio very much. Again, although I was near chain saws, I did hear a lot of other radio traffic. I have been an IC a few times on fires between 10 and 50 acres. I know I was constantly on the radio and walking the fires constantly from top to bottom.

Other jumpers were already headed down the hill. Billy and I bumped around the diggers to the

#3 saw position. The winds were 6-10 up canyon. The flame lengths were 6-10 inches. There was no problem next to the flames. At approx. 1025 at the 100 yard mark down from the saddle the chain came off; we were fixing it when I took picture #2. I could see an area further down the hill on a slight ridge that was smoking up. I was concerned enough to keep watching the area while Billy was fixing the saw. After fixing the saw we bumped around the diggers to the #3 saw position again. At approx. 1035 Mackey came back to us and said that we were pulling out. Longanecker called him back on the radio and said to wait and that bucket drops could help. The bucket drops cooled the area so we started back down again. We were sawing again when the #1 and #2 saws with a few diggers bumped ahead to another area that was heating up. At approx. 1300 Rhodes felled the tree on the bottom hot corner of the line. A couple of bucket drops cooled that area. The saw team from the hotshot crew joined us as we tied the in with the line that was made by the folds who bumped ahead. At this time we had four saws and many diggers. Work was at a high level output. We started working up the hill towards the lunch spot. We made it there at 1400 without any trouble.

During lunch I noticed that the jumpers from the 1st load were looking beat. Those jumpers were Rhodes, Soto, Woods, Shelton. Jumpers from the second load were Thomas, Cooper, Feleciano, Longanecker and Petrilli. After eating, drinking, resting, and talking trash they started looking better. I wasn't very hungry so I just snacked and drank. I noticed that the hot shots weren't eating much either. At approx. 1425 Mackey called for the hotshots to come back down the line to hold and improve the cup trench. Soon after that Longanecker told me that he was going further down the hill to look around.

At approx. 1510 he called us jumpers to come down to where he was. Cooper and Feleciano stayed at the lunch spot. The six other jumpers headed down the hill about 75 yards. I saw Longanecker across the gully of the same mountain, not across the main canyon. He was approx. 300 yards away. He wanted all of us to come down. I told him that I didn't think it was a good idea making more line since we are having trouble holding the line we already had. It is my opinion that you need people to hold line and we were already spread thin. He then asked for one saw and a couple of diggers. Thomas, Shelton, who had the other radio in our group, and I started down. We walked 10 yards and stopped. The fire made a run in the crowns up the hill from Longanecker. We were impressed with the 100 foot flame lengths and the radiant heat we were feeling even though the fire was 250-300 yards away. What was even more impressive was that the ground fuel was already burnt from earlier during the fire. The fire would travel 150 yards in 15 seconds. Photos #3,4,5 were taken during these three different runs. I told Longanecker to look beside him where the runs were starting. He said that he saw them, and that he was fine. We told Longanecker that we didn't want to come down and I thought that he should get out of there. The winds were starting to pick up a little maybe to 15 mph.

It is my opinion that these runs that were 150 yards from the bottom of the canyon drew our attention towards that area and not the bottom of the canyon. I don't know if the radiant heat from those runs could have started the bottom of the other side of the canyon. It is also my opinion that the fire started across the canyon 30-40 yards up the canyon from the runs on the other side. There may have already been something burning in the bottom of the canyon that we didn't see.

At approx. 1600-1605 it spotted across the main canyon. I called Mackey on the radio and told him that it had spotted across the main canyon and that we were coming back up the hill. I knew

I didn't want to be where I was. He asked me if it spotted across the MAIN canyon. I replied yes it was across the main canyon and its ROLLING. At this time its flame front was 50 yards wide and had traveled 50 yards from when we first noticed it as a spot. It was definitely pushed by high winds, approx. 35 mph. This was a very narrow spot in the canyon where the winds were also being funneled.

As we were coming up to the lunch spot Mackey met us and we all agreed that the place to go would be in the black up the ridge from the lunch spot and below H-1. The one place I knew I didn't want to go was back down the line. To the right was the gully that Longanecker was in. The area where we were didn't look safe either. This is also where we met up again with Cooper and Feleciano. At this point the winds were at approx. 45 mph. As we were going up I was at the tail to see if we had everyone. I thought Mackey was with us, but I didn't see him. I figured he was going back down the line to get everybody else. He didn't have to come to direct us, but he did. He didn't have to go back down the line to get everybody else, but he did.

As we were scurrying up the ridge, Shelton said he was putting his sig pack down. This was approx. 150 yards above the lunch spot. It was then I realized I still had my saw. I put my saw down beside the sig pack. I knew this wasn't the best place to lay the saw, but putting down jacked the pucker factor up one more notch. My pace increased at this point because of the lesser weight and the higher pucker factor. The steep slope, smoke, ash, and blowing dust were some of the difficult factors we had to deal with. Soto and Woods were dealing with muscle cramps and dehydration. The noise of the firestorm in the canyon was like a jet during take off. The wind was still at 45 mph. Soto and Woods began to fall behind. I passed them, but kept encouraging them to keep coming and ensuring them there was good black up the hill. The area we were going through was black, but the aerial fuels were still there. I didn't want to stay there because I just witnessed previously the hillside reburn with very high intensity. I still didn't know what was going on with the fire below us. There was still very heavy smoke coming from below.

Between 1614 and 1618 I heard Erickson telling Mackey on the radio that there was a spot below them and telling them to get out of there NOW. When the six of us reached our deployment sight between 1619-1621 I called Mackey and told him we were sheltering up. I do not remember any reply. I felt more comfortable when we reached the deployment sight so I took my time when getting into my shelter. I checked to see that everyone in our group was sheltered up. I laid down inside my shelter and checked my watch and the time was 1624. On 7/14/94 Quinten and I made a test run from the lunch spot to the deployment sight. It took 8 minutes to go 450-500 yards. The actual run on 7/6 started 75 yards below the lunch spot.

When we were in our shelter I talked to Longanecker he said he was on the ridge below us and that he was fine. I told him that we were OK. To keep spirits up we talked and joked. Ken Wabaunsee called us from the helibase. Wabaunsee was in charge of a group of jumpers that had been bussed to the fire. They just arrived to see our fire shelters on the ridge. He had no idea what had happened. I told him that there were nine of us on the ridge and we were OK, but we didn't know what the fire was doing below us. Wabaunsee then told me that Erickson and Hipke made it to the highway and needed an ambulance to take them to the hospital. He then told us that Archuletta and Doehring made it to the freeway. We started getting a head count of all the jumpers. We were missing Mackey, Thrash, and Roth. I called them on the radio. No reply. I called them again. No reply. I remembered when Wabaunsee was talking to Erickson I

couldn't hear Erickson's transmissions. I had hoped that Mackey and Roth were by the freeway and couldn't get radio transmissions in or out.

When in the shelters the fire made three different runs on our right side approx. 200 yards away. Inside the shelter it heated up to 110 degrees. During the hottest run there were glowing fire brands blowing into the shelter. Between fire runs we would peek out the shelter. The wind was still blowing ash and dust. There was still heavy smoke coming from below us. Inside the shelter there was much less ash, dust, and smoke.

At approx. 1730 an air tanker dropped a load in our area. At approx. 1800 Tanker 10 dropped a load that landed directly on us. Smoke from below was not as heavy, but the retrained gave us a little more reassurance. Soto and Woods carried their shelters closer to us. At approx. 1830 we decided to get out of our shelters. Longanecker came to our area. I asked him if he had to shelter up. He said that he hadn't and that where he was it was fine. We were trying to organize a sweep of the hillside to look for the missing. He said that he was going to the helispot. As he walked away I looked at his fire shelter pouch and saw a folded rain fly. That is not to say he didn't have his fire shelter inside his pack.

As we were looking into the canyon we noticed something below the saddle on the line that didn't look like the surrounding area. Instead of sweeping I headed straight for that area. I walked straight to the lower group of bodies. I called the helicopter and said that I had found five. He asked if we needed medi-vac. I told him that it was too late for that. I walked up the hill and found six more. Called the helicopter again and informed them of the additional six. After I found the twelfth body I walked over to the helispot.

I boarded the helicopter on the last load of the nine. I viewed the line as we flew out I saw nothing. At the helibase I drew a map of the fire and the fireline. I wanted to help the search and rescue jumper crew as much as possible.

Watch Out Situations.

1. Fire not scouted out and sized up. The map that was drawn by Mackey and Blanco was incorrect. We needed somebody walking the fire, lookouts posted and an aerial observer.
3. Safety zones and escape routes not identified. Escape routes were too long. The crew had to travel approx. 600 yards to the safe area of the saddle. For us it was 500 yards to a good black area where we felt it was safe. There really weren't any safety zones.
4. Unfamiliar with weather and local factors influencing fire behavior. Some people knew of the high wind forecast. The tight canyon funneled the wind so that when it crossed the canyon the winds pushed it even more.
- 5 Uninformed on strategy, tactics and hazards. Strategy and tactics were known, but not the hazards.
7. No communication link with crew members/supervisors. The IC did not communicate.
8. Constructing line without safe anchor point. That is a very profound statement.

9. Building fireline downhill with Fire below. The trouble came from the bottom of the canyon.
11. Unburned fuel between you and the fire. That was not the case until it crossed the canyon.
12. Cannot see main fire, not in contact with anyone who can. I was the first to see it cross the canyon. I should have seen the problem earlier and made contacts then.
13. On a hillside where rolling material can ignite the fuels below. It could be that rolling material ignited the bottom of the canyon.
14. Weather is getting hotter and drier
15. Wind increases and/or changes direction. I do believe the change in wind speed happened quickly. Fire may have been in the bottom of the canyon for some time until the wind blew it up.
17. Terrain and fuels make escape to safety zones difficult. Our escape route gained 500 feet in elevation over 500 yards. The fireline gained 400 feet over 600 yards.
18. Taking a nap near the fireline. Some of the jumpers from the first load were fatigued and dehydrated.

Fire Orders

Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first. We were heavy on the aggression, but light on safety.

Initiate all action based on current and expected fire behavior. No one expected the fire to run like it did, but some had an idea the fire behavior was going to increase.

Recognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts. The only weather forecast received was from NOAA. No spot weather forecasts were done. No fire weather forecasts were given.

Ensure instructions are given and understood. This was done.

Obtain current information on fire status. This was not done until it had crossed the canyon.

Remain in communication with crew members, your supervisor and adjoining forces. Communication goes both ways; up and down.

Determine safety zones and escape routes. Not done well.

Establish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations. This was not done.

Retain control at all times. We did that well in the morning, but not at 1600.

Stay alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively. We did these except stay alert.