

Written Transcript On The Line Episode 1.8 “Forty Something Years of Fire: an Interview with Wayne Williams” Copyright: On The Line. All Rights Reserved. This transcript cannot be transferred, quoted, or shared without written authorization.

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Charlie Palmer: We're back On The Line a podcast for today's wildland firefighter, brought to you in part by The Black. We are joined today by Dr. Brent Ruby, a usual suspect on the show and we are honored to have Wayne Williams on the podcast today. We tried to count the years and we got lost so we're simply going to say 40 plus years on the fire line. So we're just going to kind of free form today with some commentary and see where it gets us. So Wayne, welcome to the show.

Wayne Williams: Thank you very much.

Charlie Palmer: So as I mentioned, 40 plus years and fire, you started fighting fire in 1974 as a 17 year old kid. Somehow you finagled your way in at 17. Probably a story there.

Wayne Williams: Well was a little bit of a story. So back then it was California Department of Forestry that I went to work for and if you started at age 17 but turned 18 before the fire season started then you could do it and that's exactly what I did. So I started like in April and my birthday was in May and so I was actually 18, the fire season, the 74.

Charlie Palmer: And then in 1977 you rookie as a smoke jumper in Missoula and stayed then jumping in Missoula through 2010. And then days later went to work for the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation for several years, retire. And then in 2016, what was that experience like?

Wayne Williams: It was a good experience. Um, it was like going back in time and a good way. It was like firefighting was when I first started where they had a very simple mission, their geographic area that they thought firing was the state of Montana, but they still traveled to places like Canada and they had agreements with other states. So I got to experience some of that stuff too, which I didn't do when I worked for the forest service or cal fire.

Charlie Palmer: And then clearly and in between the rooking and first starting in California and then ending with DNRC, you had a very, very long distinguished jump career as well. What sticks out for you with that?

Wayne Williams: Wow, that's a really good question. It was something that I always wanted to do as a kid and I'd seen a Disney movie called Fire Called Jeremiah and it was filmed in Missoula about the Missoula smoke jumpers

Charlie Palmer: and that was enough to make you want to be a smoke jumper for 30 years.

Wayne Williams: It was, in fact, the funny thing about it is, is that when I was in high school and I went to talk to my counselor because I was going to graduate a half a year early, I told him I wanted to become a smoke jumper and in 1974 he told me they didn't use them anymore. So obviously bad advice because they're still using them today. And uh, it's 2017. The other thing I would never think that I would ever return to my high school again as a smoke jumper, but I did. I flew over it when I was on a fire assignment in Redding, California. We actually flew one of their jumps, ships down to the, uh, Los padres. And on the way back I was in the spotter role, so I was not jumping the fire, I was the assistant spotter and on the way back we flew over the San Francisco Bay area and over my high school and I chucked a set of streamers out,

Charlie Palmer: landed in the playground, maybe...

Wayne Williams: I think it was the freeway.

Charlie Palmer: So as I mentioned in this very, very long career, which gives you a really, really unique perspective of having 40 plus years in the fire business. What sorts of changes stand out to you? What does that look like? Being in fire for 40 plus years?

Wayne Williams: Well, I think the two major things that stick out for me is fitness has really changed, meaning there's less of it now than there was when I started in 74 and the depth of experience that people had. And so I'll start with fitness. When I first started, everybody was in really great shape and they were really good hikers and they were very adapted to wild land firefighting. They were used to hiking up steep hills. They were used to walking on uneven terrain. And it as far as getting tired, no one ever complained about being tired because most of us were at a fitness level that that was part of the job was the hike into the fire, was part of the job that after you hiked in then you would fight the fire and there was never anything like the fires too inaccessible. It was more like it's going to be steep, so be careful.

Wayne Williams: And then as far as experience goes, the experience was vast. So let's take aviation as an example. So most of the people who were flying helicopters and airplanes were veterans from Vietnam. Even in one rare case, Korea and then also a lot of Air America pilots. So we had a solid aviation program. But you also had experienced in the wild land firefighters to. Because it was, it was very thick you might say. And what I mean by that is the guy who was starting who had no experience at all, had a very long honeymoon of gaining experience. What I sort of call the middle class of the experience level where he would go into that middle class, maybe a second or a third year and have multiple mentors through that and that may last like 10, maybe even 15 years, and then he'd pop out on the other end and he would be in a leadership role and one of the reasons why he was in a leadership role as he was picked because he had good natural leadership skills, not because of qualifications that were on paper.

Wayne Williams: They actually used to pick people for leadership positions who had the natural skills. So basically by the time that guy popped out and became a, a, a foreman or a squad leader as an example, they gained a lot of experience. They'd had a lot of mentors and most of all they've aged and I think all that put together where now what you see in wild land firefighting is that mentorship is much more condensed. So if you were to look at it, we have a huge population of new people coming in. A really narrow middle class of where people can gain that experience. Which means it's short, you're not in there very long and it also means that you're probably not going to get the experience fires in different geographic areas either and then you pop out in leadership and maybe you've been around for five years.

Wayne Williams: That's something that definitely is different than when I started. The other thing that's very different as I started working for the forest service in 1975, so I worked for the state of California for basically a year and two months and then went to the forest service on the Eldorado national forest. And what I remember was the amount of crews that were on the forest back then compared to what you might see now. And most of them were under a classification that was called BD crew, which meant brush disposal crew. But what those crews did is that they would do timber stand improvement. Uh, they would plant trees, they would build trails, they would work on recreation projects, a lot of stuff that would give you great experience to be a firefighter. And then of course the fire crews did the same project work as well.

Wayne Williams: And the reason why we had that opportunity was because a lot of people would find this almost unbelievable, but the forest service was one of the few government agencies back then that was in the black. They actually were a agency that was not in debt and that was because of timber dollars. Now, as far as the debate about timber and logging, that's another show. But nonetheless that money. But nonetheless that money was simply there and so a lot of the crews back then that were considered type two crews, for example, they were people who worked in the woods all the time building fuel breaks, doing trail work, and a lot of things I mentioned earlier. So they were very experienced and the type two crews and a lot of ways were crews that people looked at as a very valuable tool where now when we think about type two crews, we're not quite sure what we're going to get, you know, if it's going to be an experienced crew or non-experienced crew.

Wayne Williams: It's not as defined as it was back then. So that's a big difference. Like I said, the aviation experience in the wild land, firefighting and the the experience from all different types of project work that we're involved in.

Chuck Dumke: I think the neat thing about hearing that story is the project work and the ancillary or the auxiliary experiences that crew members had the opportunity to capture it speaks to an overwhelming amount, a wealth of jobs specific physical training that they capture just as a as sort of a an accident. It's just part of the nature of their preparation and so they capture that specificity. We always talk about specificity of training and it's like, what's the best way to train a wildland

firefighter? We'll put them in the woods with a pack on uneven ground and up and down, and that's exactly the kind of stuff that they're getting, so having that in the early phases of a crew member's development, if we don't have that now, we have to look for other avenues to capture that sort of level of physical training. That's so key for maintaining safety on the line.

Charlie Palmer: The literature that work hardening, right?

Chuck Dumke: That's the fancy term, fancy term for just described.

Wayne Williams: You bring up a good point because the fitness level back then was incredible. It's like you never questioned someone's fitness. They always came ready to work and that kind of conditions that we always think about fighting fire and not only that, but I remember quite a few of the people used to smoke and although down the road I'm sure they paid the price at the time even though they smoked, they were still in pretty good a fitness because they walked around and all the time and like I said earlier, you know everybody was thin.

Charlie Palmer: So from your career, and I think oftentimes this happens with folks is if their fire careers long enough, they have a seminal moment and unfortunately in our business those seminal moments, oftentimes our fatality fires with a really large death toll in. I know for yourself that South Canyon would probably fall into that category for myself as well. What stands out to you? I mean you were there, you were at South Canyon. You were one of the earliest people on scene in terms of dealing with that incident. What can you tell us about what happened there in July of 1994?

Wayne Williams: That's a loaded question. So what a lot of people don't realize about Colorado is that it used to be known as the Asbestos State and where I'm going with this is that a lot of people did not have experience fighting fires in Colorado. In fact, 94 was one of the first real champion years for Colorado and it was rare for us to fight fire there. So Gambles Oak was sort of an unfamiliar fuel type for us. So I think that if you were to put it all in perspective, if you took that same crew, this is something I've thought about it quite a bit and you would have stuck him in southern California. I think they would have had a different strategy as far as their line construction just because that fuel type and southern California is more pronounced and it's more famous, you might say, and they probably had some experience in southern California. So that's the first thing that kinda comes to mind is that I think there are kind of duped because they weren't familiar with that fuel type. And then also the fire had burned under the gambles oak and never really burned the gamble. So little did they know that pre heated that fuel and also Gambles Oak has kind of a deceiving look to it. It's, it looks very plush, almost like a place you could just lay down and go to sleep, you know, it's very shiny. And so although that fuel may have been just at the right condition for the fire to rekindle visually, it didn't look that way. Where if you look at southern California that brush literally screams, I want to kill you. So I think that was one thing that was interesting at that fire. And the other thing I think that was really good too is the preserving the fatality site so that they

could really gain some knowledge from that. Because talking with Ted Putnam, he said most sites that he had investigated up to that point where either heavily disturbed or it was pretty much gone that they'd removed the fatalities and remove equipment and everything else and he had to sort of piece things together. When he got to that site, that site was pristine. It was the way it was when we came across a fatality site originally and a lot of times people have asked us because it was myself and another jumper who was sort of debating about whether to move the fatalities because we sort of felt these are like our friends and we shouldn't leave them on the hillside.

Wayne Williams: And after discussing a little bit longer, we kind of thought, well maybe we should because whatever happened here definitely needs to be passed along. So we decided that night to hike up the hill and not disturb the site. And of course there were no cell phones back then or at least we didn't have them. And they're probably too big to carry at that point. Anyhow. So we were able to borrow a landline that was in one of the houses in the housing development near the fire and we were able to get ahold of Missoula Technology and Development, Ted Putnam specifically, and he told us when he was going to get down there and they actually showed up on that fire first light and they start going through their investigation and his observations from that and, and the people who helped them with the investigation I'm talking about in the field, not necessarily the what was going on in Grand Junction, but the actual field site. We learned a great deal from that.

Charlie Palmer: You make it sound pretty easy and straightforward, the decision, but it wasn't necessarily that easy or straightforward when other people found out and there was some pressure to get those folks off the hill. Correct?

Wayne Williams: Yeah. Well I, I should also make the point that the reason why we decided to leave the fatality site intact was almost an accident. And in a sense it wasn't like we had a lot of forethought into. It just seemed like at the end of the day, that was the best thing to do. And so when we got back down to the housing development and like I said, we made a few phone calls. Uh, I had to go and report to the incident commander and I basically, he was in a garage and I grabbed him because I didn't know how much information they knew and I brought him outside and I said, now you're aware there's fatalities out there, right?

Wayne Williams: And he goes, no. So I explained to him that there were. And I told him, you know, how many we had found and there were still two missing. And so, so then we entered back into the garage and it gets kind of hazy at this point. I don't remember exactly what, what happened except there was a lot of discussion going on, quiet discussion. And um, and then eventually this one gentleman comes up to me and he was a younger guy. He was younger than I was and I guess I was in my thirties. And um, he was pretty demanding that we needed to get the bodies off the hillside and uh, I wasn't sure who this guy was, but he was starting to piss me off. And so, um, he eventually said that he was an aide for Governor Romer, that the governor wanted the bodies off the hillside and that's

when I just said, you can tell the governor to go fuck himself and I'm not taking them off the hillside. And all of a sudden this guy who I had, I thought he was a safety officer. He had a nice clean fire shirt on. You're sitting in the garage. He very calmly walks over to me and he goes up, what do you feel that way? And I said, who the hell are you? And he goes I'm Governor Romer.

Wayne Williams: And, and he was super nice and my attitude melted right then because I could tell that he was truly concerned and if my memory is not wrong, I think he had just read the book, young men and fire. And so he had a little something to go on. And so I explained to him what our logic was and I explained to him what we knew about the investigative field team that was coming and he said, make sense, let's do it. And that's where we ended up doing. And um, I would see the governor, uh, in the Washington DC when they had a memorial for South Canyon and we had a great discussion and, and he, he never ever thought that my, my comment was, was ever like towards him. He totally understood it was from his sort of a overly aggressive aid, you know.

Charlie Palmer: So he's in politics, he's got thick skin probably.

Wayne Williams: Well, I actually think it was pretty good governor, um, because, you know, he would come to the memorial at Glenwood springs a year later and he spent the whole day there, you know. So I think it's pretty solid, as you say, politician,

Chuck Dumke: That's just, it's just a neat story because it's such a, it takes a really difficult situation. And in that pivotal moment, policy almost shifted. And the things that were learned in that in your decision and sort of the cascade effect or is enormous. So that's, it's incredible.

Charlie Palmer: But it could have gone a different direction...

Wayne Williams: that could have gone completely the opposite direction.

Charlie Palmer: Cost us a tremendous amount of knowledge and understanding of, of what happened up there.

Wayne Williams: Well, and like I mentioned earlier, Ted had said at that point, it was the best site he'd ever investigated is as far as being pristine and let's face it, a lot of really good things came out of that. And I think one of the things a lot of people forget about is Ted said, you know, if you drop all your equipment and run, you gain between five and 15 percent performance. That's huge. I mean an olympic athlete would love to get like two or three percent, but gaining that much. That was super valuable. And I also just think it was sort of the beginning of, well let's take like a Mann Gulch as an example. So that fire launched a lot of study into fire behavior and then transferring that knowledge back to the firefighter on basically how to look at something and figure out what that fire might do. Knowing what the incoming weather was going to be, knowing what your fuel types of where I think what South Canyon was was a lesson, not in fire behavior

but in human behavior and I think Ted did a really good job bringing that to the forefront because it had never been talked about before.

Wayne Williams: That what happens when you get a bunch of people who really have the knowledge, have the skills, but they, for some reason they've got themselves in a bad situation. And I thought he did a great job of explaining that. And um, and also inviting other people is an example to look at that fire. So yes, it's, it's more than just simply everybody being able to carry radios. I, I remember some of the comments of people saying, yeah, after South Canyon, everybody got a radio. There was much more comprehensive lessons than just being able to see everybody carrying a radio.

Charlie Palmer: And Brent, you did a study and this is a great segway for that, I guess to to put even some more clarity to those numbers as far as transit time depending on whether you're carrying a pack or not.

Chuck Dumke: Yeah, we were. I don't even remember how we decided to do that project. I think Brian Sharkey had mentioned some of Ted's thoughts on the impact of load carriage versus abandoning the load and what your transit times would be and so I think we got a little bit of money from MTDC and we partnered up with a colleague of mine at Mesa State, what was then called Mesa state college in Grand Junction, who he was a hot shot and a jumper in Alaska before going back to graduate school in New Mexico and that's how he and I met and then he went his way and I went my way up here to Montana, but we had never been able to really collaborate on a project and I called him and said, hey, you're relatively close to that site and you have access to university students. I can drive some down. Let's put together a little study on that mountain and so we did. We went to South Canyon and we went to that site. We used an auxiliary trail that's part of a very well maintained trail that people can go to that site. At that time, the West flank line was quite maintained along the entire west flank all the way up to the ridge and so I think the terrain that we mapped out for that study was a little over a half a mile and it was a very aggressive incline and we basically. We took some really incredible equipment down there that allowed us to measure expired gas samples and then it was basically just a fingerstick blood samples and things like that and we had an escape as fast as they could with the metabolic system and a gear, a loaded pack 35, 40 pounds or something like that. We had men and women in the study and it was enormous. The difference between the Transit Times enough to make you really think that wow, if you're in a bad situation, the fastest ways to get that pack off of you. The gas data was really compelling. Then after that, just as a simple side note, we used old cell phones at the time to work through a scenario using some of Putnam's work and some of the work by John Maclean for his book fire on the mountain and we semi reproduced in escape through the West flank line with just me, so I had a cell phone. I couldn't talk because I had a metabolic system in my mouth and all they expired gases were being collected and I had a loaded pack and a tool Polanski and I listened to the instructions to pace myself up that west flank line to the Ridge as fast as what we thought their transit times would have been and we measured that gas data and the values that we

got were in upwards of 50 mls per kg. Most people don't know what that means, but when you think about aerobic power or V02 Max, anything above 50 is pretty respectable. Pretty high and my average was right around 50 to get over that Ridge with that pack on in that timeframe. And so that speaks to the metabolic demands that these individuals were faced with in that situation. So to be able to reach high enough in terms of a level of fitness, very, very difficult with a pack on because the transit times are impaired and that that speaks to the concept that Wayne brought up earlier. It's this like fitness as one of the greatest safety countermeasures that an individual can bring to the job. And maybe Wayne can speak to how that has changed from like you described back in the seventies. I mean we're just a few years away from woodstock and the Vietnam War, but here you've got well conditioned individuals and now here we are in 2017. The job is still the job. The terrain is still the terrain. The missing link though is that inherent background fitness that seems to be integral to maintaining safety. And maybe you could talk a little bit about how that's shifted.

Wayne Williams: Well, I think the first thing that I, I'm often ponder is the fact, okay, so now I'm 62 years old and I was telling Charlie on the drive up here that, you know, I, I feel fortunate that I'm still physically fit and I could still do the things I like like mountain biking and hiking and I contribute that to when I started in 1974, I was a pretty fit kid and I stayed fit throughout my career. Granted, as I got older I gained a few pounds, but in general I'm still at a place where I can do almost all the physical fitness that I want to do. And when I go to a yearly exam, the doctor often comments, you know, most people in your age group is taking some form of medication and I'm not taking any meds at all except for beer.

Wayne Williams: I've taken that med most of my career. But um, but in general I contribute that to that fitness consciousness of the seventies. And it stuck with me throughout my career. And it's so valuable. It's valuable in many, many ways. It's valuable because, okay, so you hike five, six miles to a fire. You're not thinking that you're tired. You're thinking about what's the strategy now for fighting this fire? That's the first thing. Your mind is on the subject at hand, which is taking care of the fire. There are things like injuries. I believe that if you're physically fit your at a less possibility of getting injured. Some of the other skills that we sort of talked about that come with physical fitness and that's, you know, hiking on uneven terrain, if you're fit, that certainly is easier to do if you kept yourself in shape, or hiking up steep terrain. It's really funny. Yeah. I was thinking about hiking up steep terrain and I always drop into this kind of pondering space. When I hike up something really steep. At first I noticed that I'm huffing and puffing and then all of a sudden I just forget and I'm in my mind and I'm just hiking up the hill and all of a sudden I'm at the top, you know, and, and I know that's from that fitness early in my career and I can't agree with you more about how important physical fitness is. And I actually think for the fact that physical fitness is not as prevalent on the wild land firefighting scene as it was when I started. I think that's led to a lot of coddling of wild land firefighters. And that in itself can be a safety issue because you're keeping people from doing what they should be trained to do.

Wayne Williams: We were talking earlier about this, but if people say going to that fire is inaccessible. I have a hard time with that. You know? And the reason why is that I fought fire for 40 plus years, but I don't remember ever going to a fire that was inaccessible. And I know it's not luck. And, and, and, and, and I think when you see Missoula technology and Development came out with a, I think it was around four years ago, I might be a little bit off a DVD on how to walk in the woods. Now you had asked yourself why would they do that? Well, they did it probably because a lot of people were getting injured walking in the woods. That's the only reason why I think they would come out with something like that. And when I was in my safety position with the state, I couldn't believe how many request I got to get that DVD to different land offices on the state. You know, that they felt that was an important training too.

Chuck Dumke: That's amazing to me that the, like you think about fitness, the way you speak of it and the way you, the historical recollections of all those years, and it's like fitness is the great countermeasure. It is the, it is a fatigue countermeasure. It's a safety tool. It's all the things rolled into one and as that slips away, enter in. Now all these substitute countermeasures that are sort of en vogue like, oh, we gotta make sure that crews have enough water and make sure it's going to be hot out there, so drink, drink, drink, or we got to make sure that we feed them a certain way. Otherwise they're going to have problems. Then we've shown studies over and over that yeah, you can influence the work output if you feed them differently. And so I wonder how of these other countermeasures that are now a necessity have filtered in because the level of background fitness has slipped, has slipped, slipped. Wayne. Did you ever feel like the fire season detrained you like, do you ever feel like you came into a fire season? A 100 percent bad ass and then the fire seasons spit you out at 85 percent or 90 percent?

Wayne Williams: Maybe later on in my career, possibly a little bit because I got more into administrative stuff. But in general, no, I always felt like at the end of the fire season I was pretty much on top of my game. And, and, and I think the reason why too is, um, depending on how busy the fire season was, probably one of the smartest things when I worked for the forest services, when they gave us time to work out, we took it seriously and I remember that the slower fire season, it's just meant that we did more project work, which is exercise learning wild land firefighting skills like sawing and falling and hiking through the woods with gear on your back...

Chuck Dumke: Without having to watch the video.

Charlie Palmer: Wow.

Wayne Williams: No, back then we didn't have videos.

Chuck Dumke: It was Beta Beta Max. It was a slide show before VCR slide.

Wayne Williams: Slideshows more like, no. So. So yeah, it's um, I never really thought much about that.

Chuck Dumke: Well, like that also speaks to the because I think there's, there's like a growing gap in a lot of these crews. It seems like just from observational data, we don't have a lot of data. We haven't published any papers on pre and post season fitness changes. We're working on a project, a pilot project right now I'm preimposed changes in skeletal muscle structure and mass. And whether or not that's going to shift or change, but it seems like you've got some crew members on say hot shot crews or others and they do a stellar job at getting themselves trained up for the season, but they're kind of a fitness enthusiast anyways, so they probably train themselves above and beyond what's necessary to do the job. And because of the way the job is, it seems they describe a slight detraining effect as the season goes on. Whereas those individuals that show up maybe a little less trained the fire season hones their skills and they train up everybody kind of coming to a more homogenous fitness place towards the end of the season. But I, I find that fascinating that your background fitness probably stayed what it needed to be so that you could do the job without even thinking about doing the job. Like we hike and six miles and we're not even thinking about how tired we are because we know we've got 12 more hours of digging line or whatever and then hiking back out. Whereas now it's just different.

Wayne Williams: Well, the other point that I think is important too is about heat related injuries and one of the things I sort of remember, and of course I learned this from the more experienced firefighters, is that whenever we were in severe heat and we didn't get water delivered like you do now, we either had to find a source, are we had to conserve what we had because most of the water that we had, the first shift for sure was what we brought in on our backs. So I always sort of remember learning from the older firefighters, you gauge yourself to what the heat is and your energy output and there were times where it was 100, 105 degrees and there were times where we basically were digging fire line very slow and we're also being careful about watching each other, but rarely did you have anybody ever go down because of some heat related illness.

Wayne Williams: It was just rare and it was more about just paying attention to the conditions and how they related to you. Which I also think is something that's falling off on wildland firefighting too. I think that's a lot of firefighters are sort of brokering their safety to maybe a division group soup or a type one type two team or something to that effect. Instead of hanging onto that safety and being the person who's responsible for it and that means gaging yourself when it's really hot or that means paying attention to the fuels, paying attention to the incoming weather and so forth and so on.

Chuck Dumke: That is just brilliant in its simplicity. It's it stacks together so neatly like a nice little pile. You have your background fitness that brings with it a background readiness. You're already better in the heat because of that background fitness and now because you're not told over and over and over, watch out, watch out, drink enough, drink enough, drink enough. You use the real countermeasures to

provide the safety rather than the surrogate things like, oh, I'll just bring in more about bringing more bottled water, fly in more bottled water, and then people have this misconception like we've spoke to in other episodes and that is you're not going to drink yourself out of that bad situation. At least not now. And so the fitness, if it's not there, the basic level of taking responsibility for your own safety and just freaking slowing down, like you said, I mean you're digging line that much slower, which means the metabolic heat production is tremendously lower. All of a sudden you're safer regardless of the fact that you don't have as much water. And so that's, I just, that's, it seems so simple, but it's so seemingly missing now.

Charlie Palmer: Obviously not simple.

Chuck Dumke: Not, not, not. I mean, it's a complex. Well, I can about it. I'm rolling around the complex physiology in my head, but as far as the logistical strategy, it's very simple. It's hot, slow the heck down.

Charlie Palmer: So some of our older listeners will probably remember this. If we have any older listeners, your aerial attack poster with Joe Montana. We can't have this podcast and not talk about it. I know you didn't want to talk about it, but.

Wayne Williams: Well, no, I don't mind talking about it. It's it. It was just basically, um, I was on a fire assignment in New Mexico and I ran into this forest service gentleman from region five and he was part of a program called smokey and the pros, he was an interesting fella and we were sort of just talking and I was saying, what did it be cool if we did something with the 49'ers were we had like smokey bear as the center Joe Montana behind them. And then a bunch of jumpers lined up on either side of smokey bear and their jumped gear as the offensive line. Yeah, that'd be a great idea. So I hung onto the idea and I went back to Missoula and I had to raise \$6,000 to do it.

Charlie Palmer: Smokey is expensive.

Wayne Williams: Well the 49'ers were willing to do for free. There was no problem there. The problem was the money that it would cost to do the artwork and then of course print the posters because that was the goal of smoking and the pros was to take some pro athlete, whoever they may be, throw smoky in there and then throw a theme

Charlie Palmer: fire prevention or something. Right?

Wayne Williams: Exactly. Yeah, and so I called every region that had smoke jumpers. I called their director of Fire and Aviation. I got. I was just trying to get like a thousand bucks from each and I remember back then the California region five, their regional office was in San Francisco and I, I couldn't believe it, but the director actually picked up his phone and I called in kinda late one afternoon.

Wayne Williams: I was sitting in the basement of the visitor center in Missoula and I got ahold of the director of Fire and Aviation. He was a huge 49'ers fan and he said, yeah, I'll pay for the whole damn thing, but what happened was everybody did share and we. I got the six grand. We got a diverse group of jumpers to go out to Santa Clara. We went to their training camp and we met Joe and what we found out was, is that somebody told us that Joe did not like the idea of hanging out behind smokey the bear as quarterback and...

Charlie Palmer: sticking his hands up a furry. Uh,

Wayne Williams: I don't know, to be honest with you. I don't really know one way or the other. Um, what the, if Joe Montana even said anything about it, but that was what the story that we heard and it was pretty cool because we got to meet all the 49'ers and I remember meeting Dwight Clark, you know, the guy who made the catch and I think the 49'ers are a decent team, but I really hate Dallas. So that catch was the greatest thing that happened to Dallas ever was when Dwight Clark made the catch. And so I went up to him. I shook his hand. He was super polite and I just said I'll always just wanted to thank you.

Charlie Palmer: We'll put the picture up on the facebook page so anybody wants to. If they need a refreshing, they can see what it looks like. And then you, in your role in Missoula kind of served as the public information officer for a long period of time, so you were kind of the point of contact for media requests and those folks and the liaison which put you into a position to kind of interface with some really interesting people that came through the base working on various projects. Norman Maclean, Nick Evans. It's a fairly long list. Is there anything that sticks out to you in that role in terms of some of these people then you had to deal with? Kind of is the PIO?

Wayne Williams: Boy, that's a loaded question too,

Charlie Palmer: Like in Maclean's book Young Men in Fire you're listed. I mean, you're in the credits. Wayne Williams listed in the credit sheet. I mean, that's pretty cool. Obviously you had some impact. You had some role in the writing of that book.

Wayne Williams: What I mainly did is I gathered a bunch of historical stuff like maps and photographs, things like that. But um, I also read the galley and for people who don't know what a galley proof is, it's basically the first version of the book myself. And Laird Robinson, Read it, they shipped it to us by this brand new entity called Fedex overnight and literally we had to read it in 48 hours and then ship it back to them to the University of Chicago Press. So we read through it and we sort of correct it, some of the things that were a little bit inaccurate as far as speaking from a technical side. And then I didn't ever meet Norman. He died before I got involved in the book, but who I worked with was Alan Thomas who was the editor and he still is the editor at the University of Chicago press and I really enjoyed working with him. He says I did all this stuff for the book and I don't even remember because it's one of those kinds of things. I got so many requests from people over the years. I would get like a hundred to 200

information requests a year out of that, about 50 percent were from the media and the rest was from the public. And so so many of these things came through. I sort of just, they blended all together. So maybe I did more than than what I thought I did, but uh...

Chuck Dumke: Well if you played such an integral role in that book that Norman wrote and then was finished by others, did you have any role in the Nicholas sparks book? The smoke jumper.

Charlie Palmer: Oh, did I call him and I said Nicholas Evans. It is Nicholas sparks, isn't it?

Wayne Williams: Isn't it? I thought it was Evans.

Chuck Dumke: No, Nicholas sparks, isn't he the horse whisper. Yeah, right. Yeah, I mean at that time, I mean, you're at like at the perfect age for this Robert Redford, sort of suave edgy, Missoula character. And what's the story there?

Wayne Williams: Well, nick is. Nick was a super nice guy. So he shows up. He's driving down the interstate goes...

Chuck Dumke: it is somebody else. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Charlie Palmer: There is a Nicholas Sparks. We need a researcher. Yeah.

Wayne Williams: So, so his story was as he was driving down the interstate and he saw the sign smokejumpers center and so he just starts thinking about it and he pulls into the smoke visitor center and the visitor center was closed, but I was upstairs doing something. I'm not sure what it was and I let him in and he says, I'm a writer and I'm, I'm thinking about doing a story on smoke jumping and uh, you made how many times I've heard that story or a movie or something or so. So I brought them downstairs and sat at a table like I do with most people and I just sort of brought them through, you know, my, my usual, um, steps.

Wayne Williams: Most of the time I say ABC DNF and they're out the door saying, yeah, I'm not going to do this. But he kept, he very politely just kept hanging on and hanging on. And then eventually I said, so what other stuff have you read? And he goes, well, I think the one that I'm probably most noted for is the horse whisperer. And that's all he said. And then all of a sudden I said, Holy Shit, I saw that movie. He did something to me that was pretty interesting. He calls me up one day. I'm on my way to go to a fire. I'm going as a division group supervisor, so I'm going to drive a rig up and the fire was just south of a Glacier Park and I think it was like in 2000, somewhere in there, and maybe even in 2001, something like that.

Wayne Williams: And, uh, he, um, says, hey, um, do you mind helping me with an interview? And I said, no, no, I'm, I can help you with the interview. And he goes, it's on the Today show. And I said, Huh? He goes, yeah, yeah, yeah. So here's the deal. I can get a truck to Missoula by 6:00 AM tomorrow. They want to film at the jump

base and I'll be on the set in New York and you'll be on this a portable set that they'll set up in Missoula. And I said, who's doing the interview? And he goes, oh, I don't know yet. As I said, okay. So I was able to get a delay of going to the fire and uh, and, and one of the reasons is because, um, it was sort of a sensitive thing to be on a national show an my boss just said, I don't want anybody just talking to the Today show, so I just rather have it be you.

Wayne Williams: So I said okay. So he pulled some strings and I was able to leave for the fires that are early in the morning. It'd be in the afternoon. So I show up for work 6:00 AM. They bring me into the parachute tower. They've set up all the cameras, everything put on your phones like I'm wearing right now. And the first thing I remember about the earphones is that I'm hearing everything. I'm not only hearing you know, what's going on in New York, what's going on in Missoula, but I'm also hearing some of the people on the set in New York making fun of Matt Lauer. It's just kind of these funny things. They were sort of making these jokes and I thought it was kind of funny and I really wasn't sure what was going on. And then they started the show and Nick had told me, almost say like 10 minutes before the show that Matt Lauer was going to do the interview and that Matt had in his mind and Nick said, I can't get it out of his mind.

Wayne Williams: In his mind he thinks that you're the person I wrote the book about and we both know that's not true, that the person. I wrote a book about his fictional and I said, okay, he goes, so his questions are going to be kind of going in that direction. And I thought to myself, Oh boy, now what do I do? Well anyhow, luckily after a couple of the questions we sort of leveled it off and it was a pretty, what I'd refer to it as a boring interview. I think that's what I would call. And um, we got through. There was one question that matt brought up towards the end and he just kinda threw it out there at the last minute. And uh, he said, so if they make a movie, Wayne, who's going to play your part? And it took me totally by surprise and I almost said Julia Roberts, I wanted to say it, but I was. But I figured if I said that... So what I did instead is I did the boring thing and I just simply said, well, a books, one thing, a movies probably a long ways off. I think we have a long time to think about that.

Chuck Dumke: I'd go with Woody Harrelson. I think that's a good fit.

Wayne Williams: I think we're still waiting. We're still waiting. Yeah.

Chuck Dumke: Oh, oh, that's good.

Charlie Palmer: One of the things that you've also done then is be in this role as a safety officer, which I just think is one of the most fascinating physicians in fire because in some ways it's looked down upon. I mean, I'm just kinda shooting from my hip here, but which seems completely ass backwards and weird that we would look down on or denigrate safety officers. Like, oh, look out the safety officer might be coming and telling you you got to wear your gloves or roll your sleeves down or that. The people that we entrust with helping keep us safe, there's a large elements of the population that kind of looked down upon those folks and yet,

like I said, those are the people that are really out there with our best interests in mind, trying to help us work and performance safely as possible. What stands out for you in your work and your time as a safety officer because I know that you kind of tried to come at it from a little bit different approach.

Wayne Williams: Well, I. I think the first thing is that I was just like you, Charlie, where I just felt that the whole safety aspect of wildland firefighting was a little bit off balance to be polite and so I decided to get into safety really for all the wrong reasons. One of them was I thought it would be a good place for me to go. As I got older and the other reason I've sort of talked into it, so I always tell the story. I was a division group supervisor on a pretty large fire down in the Bitterroot in 2000 very busy fire season. I had a trainee and this trainee was more than qualified to run that division. Plus we are starting get some rain. So the conditions were really starting to drop off. And so I decided, you know what, I'm just going to leave him alone.

Wayne Williams: I'll carry my radio and all this kind of go off hiking and kind of check out the fire and just kinda get a look out there. So I started hiking and I picked up this old trail that I don't think had been maintained for a long time and it sort of intrigued me. So I was hiking along and it was staying along the ridge where the fire was below and I finally parked myself under this tree. This rainstorm starting to come in and this tree was fluffy enough to keep the rain from hitting me, take my hard hat off, my pack. And all of a sudden I look way down the trail and there's some guy hiking up. And I just said, who the hell is that? And he gets closer and closer and closer and all of a sudden I go, shit, it's the safety officer.

Wayne Williams: It's like, why would he be up here? You know, it's like, all the activity is, is below us. He comes up and I'm just figuring he's, he's just going to lay into me. That's what I figured my hard hats off, you know? Uh, my fire shelters pushed off to some side. I'm eating a sandwich. I have no gloves on. So he comes up, he didn't say a word, not a word, just small talk. How you doing? Looks like it's gonna rain. And I just kept going, come on man, go ahead, tell me, show me. I'm, I'm blowing it and I need to put all my safety equipment on. Never does. So finally I just said, how come you're not saying anything to me about the, you might not have in my hard hat on or having this or that. And he says, well, the main reason is that there's nothing that can hit you in the head.

Wayne Williams: So I'm not going to complain to you about not having your hardhat on. And you're not really digging any line right now, so I'm not really gonna complain to you about not having gloves on and your sleeves are rolled up, but the fire is quite a ways below us and I thought to myself now that's a safety officer. And so he said we need more guys like you to be a safety officer. And I said to myself, if I can be like him, that would be a good safety officer. Someone who is more concerned about the big stuff like driving. A lot of times people forget that driving is one of the biggest killers on fires and the types of things that are going to really hurt somebody or kill somebody are the things that I think that safety officers should concentrate on and not so much on the rolled up sleeves and not having gloves on. Things like that. So that's the approach that I took the same

approach that that gentleman sort of gave me through example. But the interesting thing too that I felt an order for safety officers to be legitimate. They have to be honest about things and and not just a what I'd refer to as a carry the party line because a firefighter will see right through that. So I always just like, a lot of times people would say, why do we have fire shelters as an example? And I'd say if it was me, I've never been a big fan of fire shelters, but it's a rule and we have to carry him so I could have just said, you will carry your fire shelter, but I told him, you know, I'm Kinda with you. I kind of agree that maybe the fire shelter isn't what it's all packed up to be, but on the other hand we have to carry it.

Wayne Williams: So we will. And I think a lot of times when we approach things from an honest perspective, then it's easier. It's easier for you to get that safety message out. The last thing I just want to say is that one of the ways that I was able to talk about safety with people was through storytelling versus through saying something to somebody to correct an action that I felt was a minor violation of safety. So I remember one time talking with this one kid, he was kinda he was a lookout. He was up on top of a hill and he was sorta looking down this canyon and I walked up to him and I can tell he's kind of an inexperienced guy and I kind of thought, why are they having this inexperienced guy be there to look out. So I just walked up to him and I just said, so what are you looking for?

Wayne Williams: And he says, well, I'm just looking for any kind of smoke that might come on the horizon. And I told him the story about when I was a younger firefighter and when I had no experience at all. It was my second year. It's a 1975 in southern California. And I was heavily relying on me being safe through my crew leader because of my inexperience. And I remember, this is in the days when they were a division group supervisor was called a sector boss and the sector boss had come up and said, I want you to dig fireline downhill right through here. And I remember the crew boss looked over the edge and he said, I see some smoke down there, I don't want to do that. And instead of just refusing the mission on the safety card, the crew boss came up with a alternative. And I think that's something that we're missing in firefighting now.

Wayne Williams: A lot of people will refuse something because they say it's unsafe, but they're not thinking about alternatives. There's always many ways to skin a cat. So I was telling them this young kid this and I was just kinda going through it and I was trying to paint them a picture of what's the stuff that can kind of be dangerous that's below you. Because that's what his role was as at lookout. And I finished a story and I told them that we eventually jumped on a bus, went to the bottom, and dug the fire line uphill and tied back into the road later on that day and I think that was easier than me just kind of saying, you're doing this wrong, you're doing blah, blah, blah blah, but more of a relaxed atmosphere. And then I would see him and we would talk about things, you know. And I think sometimes that's good to hear you talk about things that have nothing to do with fire or even fire safety. But uh, I think that's important too because then you started to like get this one on one relationship, which is always helpful when you're trying to communicate with people.

Charlie Palmer: All right. How about final thoughts? So would just been fascinating. What. Let's wrap this thing up. What do you got?

Chuck Dumke: I just think it's, it's awesome to hear from you, Wayne. It's awesome to hear the history that is rolled into these stories. It's, it's awesome to hear the knowledge that is been accumulated over that it was extremely long career and the fact that some of the solid tidbits that we try to push forward through the long process of a research project with teams, with crews out on the line and then getting those papers and to print and then trying to translate that science to the end user. It's just awesome to hear that those messages that were pushing you knew in the seventies in a different way. You learned it in a different way but in a way that's stuck with you. And so if we can plant those seeds through a combination of experience and stories like that along with some of the newer research and populate those messages out into this community, the possibility of adding some really incredible tools to these toolboxes that need those tools. I think that's, that's a great takeaway for me today. It's just fantastic chatting with you.

Wayne Williams: Well, uh, I think as I sort of look back, the one thing that I ended my career on, of course Charlie, but you brought up with safety and I just look at safety from a different perspective and what I worry about in wild land fire is if we deprive wild land firefighters from hiking and steep terrain as an example, are we deprived wild land firefighters of staying engaged with a fire, although the fire has taken on a more aggressive stance, but they're comfortable going to a safe spot and then waiting for their opportunity to start digging line instead of disengaging.

Wayne Williams: Um, so basically not robbing them of that experience. The final thing is structures. I think that one of the things that we have drifted from is it's important to save structures. There's no doubt about it, but I think that the bigger danger is the fire itself. So if it means you have to lose a couple of structures to contain the fire, that's a much safer approach. Then leaving the fire and just protecting structures as the fire goes through because of course the fire gets bigger and bigger and bigger. So I think if you look at those types of things and there's a great deal of pressure on teams from the public and I feel for them because when I was a public information officer, you know I got to the type one level and the pressure is tremendous that those teams have to deal with. But I think in general though, if you're hired to be a firefighter, it's not much different than being hired to be a soldier.

Wayne Williams: So we shouldn't tell a soldier. You shouldn't go out there and engage in a battle because it's dangerous. We're kind of doing that with today's wildland firefighter. We're telling them it's too dangerous, it's too steep for you to hike up. There were a little bit unsure about what that fire's going to do, so we're just not even going to take you out there today. I think that that could have very bad effects over time.

Chuck Dumke: Down the line.

Charlie Palmer: You know, Wayne Williams, we're honored to have had you on the podcast. We really appreciate your insights and you taking the time to come and chat with us today. Dr. Ruby, you as well. We get to hear from you all the time, but again, thank you to you for your perspective and thanks to our listeners out there On The Line.

Charlie Palmer: You've been listening to On The Line a podcast for today's wildland, firefighter or audio engineer's Mike Matthews, production assistant Joey Moore, and I'm your host, Charlotte Palmer. Thanks for listening and we hope to connect with you again in the future. On the line.