

Floating over flames

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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GHS grad parachutes into forest fires.

You could call Luke Ritz an adventure junkie.

After a four-year tour in Iraq with the Army, the curly-haired Gothenburg High School graduate received a degree in fire science and landed himself a job in the Big Apple.

Upon graduation from the New York City Fire Academy, he hoped to fight fires in the nation's largest city.

"After getting out of the Army, I wanted to find something exciting to do," Ritz said.

But, as a probationary member of the academy, budget cuts meant Ritz and other new trainees were the first to go.

"I had an apartment there and everything," he said.

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The 27-year-old soon found another job far away from city lights—in the middle of the mountains in Montana where he began work as a wildland fire fighter for the U.S. Forest Service.

Based out of Big Timber, MT, Ritz and other federal fire fighters traveled to wherever they were needed to fight forest fires from April to October.



“We did everything from digging a fire line to felling trees to make a break in the fire’s fuel,” he explained. “It’s definitely an exciting job when a fire’s big.”

One of the massive fires he fought burned 400,000 acres of Alaskan wilderness.

During his first fire-fighting season two years ago, Ritz became aware of an elite unit of wildland fire fighters known as smoke jumpers.

“They parachute out of planes with their gear to work on small, remote fires,” he explained. “The whole program is designed around putting out a fire in its initial burn phase with a small number of people.”

Ritz applied to become a smoke jumper and was hired for the 2010 season.

Of the 66 smoke jumpers based in Redmond, only three—including Ritz—are emergency medical technicians.

“I think that helped,” he said.

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During rookie training in Redmond, OR—where Ritz is now based—he learned how to use equipment such as parachutes and how to steer and land safely on the ground and in trees.

“You thread the needle between the trees and you don’t always know what you’re landing on,” he explained.

Out of Ritz’s 26 jumps, he’s never landed in a tree but once touched down on a boulder.

When landing with a parachute, smoke jumpers are taught to distribute energy away instead of absorbing shock into the body.

“Your turn your feet quickly to the side and roll,” Ritz said about the technique.

If caught in a tree, smoke jumpers rappel to the ground and use climbing spurs to ascend back up.

They are also taught the importance of escape routes when it’s time to evacuate a raging fire.

In addition, smoke jumpers camp in remote areas for up to a week and are known to lug 110-pound packs—in addition to chain saws and fuel—for five to 10 miles at a time.

“We have to take everything out that we bring in,” Ritz said.

The longest pack out from a remote area Ritz experienced was six miles before the jumpers were picked up by vehicles.

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When they're not fighting fires, smoke jumpers work in a building at the jump base where they make their own parachutes and some of the other equipment used in fighting fires.

An alarm sends them scrambling to put on special puncture-resistant Kevlar suits and grab their packs.

"In two minutes or less, we are all ready to go," he explained. "We put on our parachute harnesses and someone inspects us while we're going out the door."

The smoke jumpers board a plane that can hold 10 of them and their gear. They are then flown to a remote area where the fire is usually still under a quarter of an acre.

Two jump out at a time and start working on the fire. More jumpers are called if needed.

Because the smoke jumpers can inhabit a remote area for several days, boxes full of freeze-dried food, saws and other fire fighting equipment tied to parachutes are dropped from the plane.

"Most of the fires we can put out in two to three days," Ritz said.

Often they will work through the first night and take turns

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