

Excitement at Round Mountain!

by Shannon Hodgson

We have had a bit of excitement here at the Round Mountain Lookout! July 16 we had some thunderstorms roll through then in the night Joey and I were bounced out of bed by a lightning flash and loud thunder boom.

The next day:

At 12:25 I reported a small smoke about 2 miles south of Round Mountain. Incident 445. Later to be named the Wickiup fire (168 acres). Due to the tall trees at the top of my mountains edge, I thought I would walk out the rock pile to the south of the lookout to look to see if there were any other smokes, since lightning sometimes jumps and starts two fires. As far as I could tell it just was one smoke.

On my walk back, over my left shoulder I noticed smoke - a wide wall of it billowing over the trees from the southwest of the mountain. I was not sure how close or how big. I ran back to the lookout, as fast as I could, in flip flops.

I called my Duty Officer (DO) on the phone and informed him that I had a fire on the side of my mountain. "I don't know how big or how far away, but it is billowing up from the southwest side; this is probably going to be the worst fire report I ever give, send everyone!"



I spun my firefinder around (not that an azimuth was even relevant at that point), just going through my default motions. I wrote up a quick report. "Central Oregon Dispatch, Round Mountain with a smoke report, on the side of Round Mountain."

Dispatch: "Go ahead with your smoke report."

"I have a smoke on the southwest side of my mountain. Azimuth 240 degrees, base not sighted. Less than a mile away. Southwest of Round Mountain. Medium, blue gray column, size unknown. Report time 13:25."

Dispatch: "Round Mountain, do you have a legal for this smoke?"

"Oh yeah, Township 21 Range 8 Section 13" I have it memorized ... it's my address.

Dispatch: "This will be our incident 447."

Fortunately an engine was in the area checking the North Twin fire we had a few days earlier. They drove over. The engine captain hiked up and estimated 10-12 acres and ordered a helicopter and several other resources. A big yellow Sikorsky was on scene in about 25 minutes sucking water out of North Twin Lake and dumping it on the Round Mountain Fire.



The DO called on the phone, "Are you ok? How close is the fire?"

I was ok. But, the smoke was getting bigger and turning darker.

He said just as a precaution, I should think about what I might want to take with me in the event of an evacuation.



15 minutes later air attack was on scene, ordering more resources: Dozer. Helicopter with bucket. Hand crews and more engines. Then two SEATs (single engine air tankers) and a LAT (large air tanker).

Next I called my husband Joey, who was at home on a day off and I gave him a situation update.

I got a text from my friend who works in dispatch, "Don't panic. They are sending everything. You are the priority right now."

That helped me calm down.

The Battalion Chief (BC) called said he was on his way up, "What is it looking like up there?" I told him the smoke is getting bigger and darker. He said he would be up in about 20 minutes.

I looked down and realized I was still in pajamas. Remote lookouts are always having Casual Friday. I thought it might be a good idea to get dressed since the boss was coming up and I might be evacuated.

I set up my iPad and pushed record video. I knew I was going to want to watch it later and my mind was spinning. What to pack. What if it burns up and I never get to come back again. I looked around the room and started packing bags. Text and calls coming in on my personal and Round Mountain phones constantly interrupted my thoughts. Friends and co-workers "Are you ok? I just heard..."

The BC called on the radio, "How many minutes out are you? I need you to drive down around the corner and park next to my BC Truck." I told him I was 10 minutes out. He didn't seem to like this. I needed to hurry, before the fire reached the road and blocked my access.

I made several trips up and down the steps, loading my car. My acoustic bass, my husband's backpacker guitar, two zero-degree down sleeping bags. The battery cd/radio player I had just gotten for my birthday. The three paintings I finished last week. My coat. A bag of food and water. The phones. Hand held radio. Extra battery. Log book. Pen and fire reports on clip board. I wanted to take the fire finder ... too heavy. Not enough time.

On one trip down the steps a SEAT flew right over my head and was so close I thought it might hit the lookout roof. It dropped its red slurry down the hill about 25 feet later. I shut all the windows, locked the door and said to the sky, "Don't let this burn up." Then I said to my ground squirrel friends, "Go get in your holes. You will be safe there."



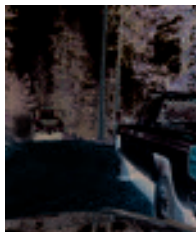
I drove down the road and parked next to the BC's truck. The BC was there watching the fire. He told me to go by "Shannon" on the radio to keep it less confusing. The fire was now named called Round Mountain. Then he said to help the Fuels Tech find Incident 445. It was good for him to give me a distraction task. Additionally, I was glad he didn't just tell me to leave and go home.



About 25 minutes later the Fuels Tech was on scene; it was now 10+ acres. But, the Round Mountain Fire was priority, getting all the resources.

Around 16:00 the BC went down to be Incident Commander on the Wickiup Fire. Wind was pushing it towards a housing development and they were talking about level 1.

Another guy replaced him here; I was told to stay in contact with the Willamette guy. An engine went by, up the hill to do structure protection. I told them to do whatever they could to save it, "It's a 91-year old lookout."



I stayed in the corner watching the show till about 19:00 and then drove home. Exhausted.

I was on administrative leave for nine days. The first two days were rough, not knowing if they were going to catch it.

On July 26, I was allowed to return. The lookout was still there. It was



plumbed with sprinklers and a team was there working on the hot spots. I had fire staff on my deck every day for the next five days. I had to adjust to that. I



gave several short classes on the firefinder to curious firefighters. The fortunate ones got coffee served to them at 14:30. It was nice to have help to carry 40-pound water jugs up the hill. However, the squirrels and I looked forward to having the place to ourselves when they all left at the end of the week.

Wickiup Fire 138 acres, Round Mountain Fire 108 acres. Lightning caused, no structures lost!



Strangely the day of the fire, my notebook "Log Book" was on the last page. I was thinking, "Oh No. This is not a sign of the end of this Lookout." I quickly got out another notebook and wrote 2024 on the front of it!



There were several other lookout evacuations elsewhere, some of which will be covered in the next issue with the 2024 version of "Lookouts vs. Fires."

FFLA Chapters and Affiliates

Chapters, local chapters and affiliates are where things get done!

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