

Helicopter pilot flies firefighter to safety in water bucket



An incident report submitted to the US Aviation Safety Communiqué (SAFECOM) database reveals a dramatic story of a firefighter who was flown to safety in a helicopter water bucket to escape a fast-moving wildfire.

The pilot was performing water drops for the US Forest Service from a Bell 205 A1++ helicopter at the Pole Creek Fire in Oregon on 28 September. During the drops, he was in contact with a firefighter on the ground who was walking along the three-mile fire line, pointing out where water should be dropped. Initially, winds were light and the fire was slow moving, but the pilot became concerned as the firefighter had walked to the centre of the fire line and had not left himself an escape route. Later, the wind shifted and became stronger, and a second fire line developed behind the first, re-igniting a previously burned area.

With fuel running low, the pilot located the firefighter, who did not realise he was within 500 ft (150 m) of a raging fire that was hidden from him by smoke and trees. The pilot described the scene: "I urged him to start moving quickly north away from the fire, which he did, and when I circled again the fire was 50-per-cent closer to his position. The fire was moving in waves of heat toward his position: the air between them was actually shimmering! A 200 to 300-yard-wide wall of trees would instantly ignite, and this in turn was igniting the next row of trees in front of it. My ground contact was centred in this wall, with the fingers on either side." He continued: "I felt that he was in

grave danger. The fire was moving much faster than he was: there was no way out to the southeast or to the northwest, because he was in the centre of a crescent between the two fingers of fire."

The firefighter could have deployed his fireshelter, but the pilot determined that the speed at which the flames were moving meant there was not enough time to refill the helicopter water bucket and make a drop on the man's position before he was overtaken by the blaze. The pilot explained: "In front of him, to the north, there was a small opening in the trees, and I was able to determine that I could hover into it without damage to the helicopter. I lowered the helicopter until the bucket was on the ground. I hovered and watch the speed he was moving and the speed of the fire coming towards us. The fire was moving very quickly, so I strongly suggested that he climb into the bucket so that I could haul him out. I felt that there were very few options and vigorously urged him. I honestly felt that we had only seconds or a minute before the fire was [at] the spot. I am sure he could feel the fire, because I could certainly feel the heat. He climbed into the bucket and wrapped his arms around the wires as I slowly lifted the bucket vertical. We were in radio contact during this time. Once I was sure he was secure in the bucket I flew to the north, perhaps a quarter mile [0.4 km] to an open area where I felt he could walk to safety. I carefully lowered the bucket to the ground and he got out and walked to the trail."

Looking back at the area the firefighter was extracted from, the pilot said it was 'fully torched' with a carpet of dead trees burning intensely. In his opinion, a fire shelter would have been unlikely to have protected the man, and the airlift was the only option.

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