

Incident Summary Page for the Smokejumper Line of Duty Death

Name of Smokejumper LODD: Donald "Don" MacKey (MSO-87) Roger Roth (MYC-92) James "Jim" Thrash (MYC-81)	Incident Name: South Canyon Fire Incident Date & Time: July 2, 1994
Smokejumper Base: McCall and Missoula	Incident Location: Glenwood Springs Colorado

Personal Information

Donald "Don" Mackey (Missoula 1987), was a 7th season smokejumper who started his fire career on the Bitterroot National Forest in 1984. A strong woodsman, hard worker, excellent with the chainsaw and known for his ability to tell a tale or turn a tough assignment into a good deal, Don fit in seamlessly with the smokejumpers.

Born in Sacramento California. Don's family moved to the Missoula area when he was 8 years old and he fully embraced all that outdoor western Montana had to offer. Don 34, was survived by his two children and family.

Roger Roth (McCall 1992), was born and raised in L'Anse, Michigan. Following a year and a half of college he started work with the National Park Service as a trail crew leader at Isle Royale National Park in Michigan. He later worked winter fire positions for the US Fish and Wildlife Service at the Florida Panther Refuge and the National Park Service at the Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida. He later served on the Arrowhead Hotshot crew in California.

A 3rd season smokejumper, skilled mechanic and private helicopter pilot he was revered at the McCall base for his helpful spirit and never ending smile. A member of the Oneida tribe of the Iroquois Nation, Roger 31, was survived by his parents and family.

James "Jim" Thrash (McCall 1981), grew up in Southern California and found his way to Idaho and smokejumping through baseball and teaching. He started his fire career with the Forest Service in McCall in 1979, his wife Holly working there as well. A rookie in 1981, Jim served 14 seasons as a smokejumper, squadleader and spotter.

An avid outdoorsman, Jim and Holly established the Salmon Meadows Lodge - Warren Outfitters hunting guide business in New Meadows Idaho. Known for his wit, humor, kindness and earnest sense of justice and fair play, Jim, 44, was survived by his wife and two children.

Brief description

On July 2nd a lightning storm ignited a small fire on Storm King Mountain, near Glenwood Springs Colorado. One of many fires started that day, it was initially monitored and considered a low priority as structures were not threatened, and fire resources were thin.

Located in the steep Upper Colorado River, Interstate 70 corridor, on July 5th a seven person District BLM crew hiked into the fire up a drainage to the east. This crew set to work building a helispot and constructing direct handline on the west flank below the helispot. Recognizing the difficulty of the terrain and an unfavorable fire weather forecast, the BLM Incident Commander requested additional resources including air support.

A load of eight smokejumpers from Grand Junction were assigned and arrived on the fire around 5:45pm. Led by Don Mackey (MSO'87) the smokejumpers were directed by the Incident Commander to continue direct fireline construction. Mackey informed the Incident Commander, who had since left the fire with his crew, that the fire had crossed the initial fireline and was actively burning. The smokejumpers reorganized their tactics and began building direct fireline on the east flank of the fire, working until the early morning of July 6th when rolling debris and darkness halted progress. The fire had almost doubled in size that day from approximately 29 acres to over 50 and MacKey requested through Grand Junction Dispatch additional resources, including two Type 1 crews.

Resources began arriving on the morning of July 6th. An eleven person FS/BLM crew hiked in again from the bottom, a helicopter with two helitack personnel flew Mackey and the BLM Incident Commander on a reconnaissance flight, eight additional smokejumpers from Grand Junction parachuted in and the Prineville Hotshot crew was to be ferried in by helicopter.

Based on what was seen during the recon flight a plan was set in motion, the FS/BLM firefighters were to construct a second helispot along the main ridge to the west - H2, the smokejumpers began direct handline construction on the west flank of the fire to be supported by nine Prineville Hotshots, with the remaining firefighters and hotshots improving the fireline between helispots H1 and H2.

A Red Flag weather forecast was issued for July 6th as a passing cold front would bring shifting winds and increased wind speeds with gusts to 35 mph. The cold front arrived around 3:20pm, fire activity, with torching and spot fires, began to pick up. Previously under burned Gambel oak, Douglas fir and mixed pinyon-juniper crowns within the burn area reignited. At 4pm the fire blew up, active fire

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below the handline pushed by the wind, crossed a drainage and raced through under burned and unburned fuel threatening the firefighters working the west handline and main ridge line.

The Incident Commander ordered all personnel off the fireline and directed Mackey to bring the handline firefighters up from the bottom of the fire. Other firefighters began moving to the ridge line and towards the safety zones of H1 and H2.

Don Mackey, at the time, was with a group of smokejumpers at a lunch spot on the west flank line. He told them to retreat to a burned area below H1. He then headed west along this handline to tie in with the jumpers and hotshots building fire line there. Smokejumpers Roger Roth (MYC'92), James Thrash (MYC'81) and Eric Hipke (NCSB'90) were among this group. As they all started uphill jumper Kevin Erickson (WYS'88), who was closer to the ridge line, radioed Mackey of a spot fire immediately behind them and yelled encouragement to drop their tools and equipment and run. Thrash towards the head of the group stepped aside and gave the word to deploy fire shelters, Hipke continued past and ran following Erickson to the ridge line.

Don Mackey, Roger Roth and James Thrash along with nine Prineville Hotshots - Kathi Beck, Tamera Bickett, Scott Blecha, Levi Brinkley, Douglas Dunbar, Terri Hagen, Bonnie Holtby, Rob Johnson, Jon Kelso, died just short of the ridge line. The group of smokejumpers Mackey directed to the burned area survived in fire shelters. The smokejumper line scout survived in the burned area.

Suffering burns Erickson and Hipke escaped to the safety of Interstate 70 down the east drainage, as did the firefighters, smokejumpers and hotshots who were on the ridge line.

Helicopter crewmembers Robert Browning, Jr. and Richard Tyler chose to run the ridge line to the northwest and did not survive.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://wffoundation.org/100fires>

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1994/07/06/south-canyon-storm-king/>

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/south-canyon-fire-entrapment-fatalities-1994>

<https://www.southcanyonfire.com/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Canyon_Fire

