

The Dangerous Life Of A Smokejumper

Fighting Fires From The Air



During the hot summer months, dozens of wildfires ravage the country. An elite group of specially trained parachute firefighters are ready for action. Called smokejumpers, these men are prepared to drop into inaccessible regions to battle fires that can blaze out of control.

This job is not for everyone. Smokejumpers must be in top physical and mental condition, and must be capable of making split-second decisions. Only 5,000 Americans have ever served in this capacity... and only one of them is an observant Jew—Yaakov Stern.

Zman spoke to Mr. Stern, a successful engineer, as he recounted his fascinating story. We learned what fighting fires is all about and how unique the experiences of smokejumpers are. Stern also explained how a Jew of his calling found himself involved in such an unlikely profession.



An Exclusive Interview with the World's Sole Observant Jewish Smokejumper



- Yaakov Astor

America is going up in flames. A series of wildfires broke out across America this summer, burning out of control. At one point, there were 33 major fires raging in 12 states—including Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Montana, Idaho, Utah, Nevada and California—consuming 2,151 square miles of land and rendering hundreds of families homeless.

To make matters worse, fire experts are predicting that wildfires will continue to plague the country in the coming months. Millions of acres of forest and brush that have dried out from lack of rainfall and hot weather are in danger of igniting. All it takes is one spark.

What is not as well known to many is that wildfires are a fact of life in the western United States. Many ecologists believe that these fires are a natural part of the cycle of growth and rebirth that allows the flora to start growing anew. A number of contained brushfires every year are very healthy for the overall environment. What was different this summer was that the fires were far larger and more destructive than they had been in the past.

To respond to the challenge, the federal government mobilized thousands of firefighters to assist the US Forest Service in containing and extinguishing the flames. In addition, the local fire departments in each affected area were busy full-time doing all they could to battle the harmful conflagrations. When wildfires declare war on America each year, America responds with ever more sophisticated equipment and heavily trained firefighters. They are prepared to do battle under the most impossible conditions and in the most difficult terrain. They'll do whatever it takes to make America safe again.

Like any regular army, the Forest Service employs paratroopers that are brought to the battlefield in spots otherwise inaccessible to the regular troops. Members of this elite division are known as smokejumpers. These are courageous people who are prepared to respond like lightning to a call that regular

firemen cannot handle. Think of them as the Green Berets of the firefighting world.

Smokejumpers may be sent anywhere at any time, often reaching fires 150 miles away within the hour of a call coming in. The moment they land, they rush on foot to the edge of the fire, whether they must cross stony mountains or thick forests, all the while carrying over 100 pounds of equipment on their backs. They may remain at the site for several hours or several days. Typically, they bring along enough food to last a number of days.

To be a regular firefighter requires raw physical strength and nerves of steel. Parachute firefighters must be even stronger in body and spirit. Their job is unusually taxing as well as dangerous. Every time they are called into action they are putting their lives at risk. In addition, they do not enjoy the luxuries of regular firemen, such as powerful pumps attached to inexhaustible supplies of water. One newspaper recently described the job as the Number 1 most dangerous profession in America.

Only 5,000 Americans have served as smokejumpers, and few of them are Jewish. But only one of them can claim to be an observant Jew, and that is Yaakov Stern. He has worked for the city of New York for many years as an engineer and is very active in *chesed* work.

We met with Mr. Stern over a hot lunch and it soon became apparent why he had been drafted for the job. He has a broad frame and large hands, yet he is very warm and down-to-earth. He quickly put us at ease. Mr. Stern explained in detail the work of firefighters in general and parachute firefighters in particular, and cleared up the mystery of how a nice Jewish boy wound up in such an out-of-the-way line of work as fighting wildfires.

Childhood

Yaakov was born when the flames of World War II were consuming Europe. His father, Martin Stern, was not an observant Jew. What made him change?

I was born in 1943 in Waterbury, Connecticut. My father was away in the army during the Second World War. At the end of the war I was two years old. We moved to Sheepshead Bay [a section of Brooklyn, NY]. When I was about eight, my father began to make money. He worked in the airline industry and as a veteran he had information on when the soldiers would go on vacations and would need airplanes to bring them back to the United States. He arranged the airplanes that would bring them home and he made a lot of money from it. So we moved to Laurelton, Queens.

The area where we lived had been farmland in the past, and it was still relatively lightly populated. We bought a large property and there were all sorts of animals there, like rabbits and birds. I was a child and read a lot about the Wild West and the Indians. I read about life in the mountains and woods. I took in everything and I began to train myself to live as an Indian. I made my own bows and arrows and I learned how to use knives and axes. I was a very good shot with a bow and arrow.

After the war my father brought back guns from Europe. He was a sergeant in an infantry division and the generals sent him together with a captain to bring them trophies from defeated Germany to show off. My father and the other officer went and came back with wine, jewelry, guns, etc. My father kept some of it for himself, including two guns. In fact, at home we had two golden wine cups that came from Goering's private collection that my father himself took from a palace in Austria that belonged to the former number two man in Nazi Germany.

My father gave me one of the two guns and I taught myself to shoot. When I was around 15, I went one summer to work in a motel in the Catskill Mountains. I brought along my knives, axes and guns. There, in the mountains and the forests, I felt at home.



Smoke billows from the Waldo Canyon fire.



One house survived amidst the destruction.



The most dangerous profession in America.