

career information



## Smokejumper

### Career Information

By Patricia Kutza

- In Montana, there's a hall of fame that has nothing to do with pro sports. It's about members of an elite fire-fighting group recognized for its commitment to very dangerous work.

Andy Hayes, who has been a smokejumper for 19 seasons, is being commemorated for having over 150 career jumps. As the 1998 season continues, Hayes goes wherever his skills are needed -- including Montana and northern Washington -- suppressing fires in areas difficult to reach by conventional means.

- It's a dangerous job. The select few who make up smoke-jumping crews join a 58-year tradition of jumping into some of the most demanding and exhilarating conditions known to man.
- Smokejumpers parachute into remote areas to contain wildfires. Once on the ground, they work for long hours under extreme weather conditions -- exposed to smoke, intense heat and fumes.
- Departments that hire jumpers include the Department of Agriculture, the Forest Service, the Department of the Interior, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the U.S. Army.

On-the-job training teaches observation skills, fire reporting and safety procedures, as well as technical skills for using fire tracking and communications equipment.

- Tim Quigley of the Redding

### Smokejumper AT A GLANCE

*The elite paratroopers of  
the fire-fighting world*

- There are roughly 400 smokejumpers in the United States
- Physical fitness a must
- Education: consider an undergraduate degree or diploma in forestry

### **Tim Quigley of the Reading**

Smokejumper Unit says smokejumpers begin at the GS-5 level -- \$10.09 an hour. Top-level (GS-9) titles -- like operations manager and loft manager -- start at \$16.25 an hour. It's not unusual, Quigley says, to find a \$10,000 difference in pay from season to season.

*Those workers interested in forest fire fighting should consider taking an undergraduate degree or diploma in forestry. It just increases the options open to them*

- **There are approximately 400 smokejumpers employed in the U.S. Quigley feels the demand for smokejumpers will remain about the same through the year 2000.**
- **Entry-level positions for a range of forest fire-fighting positions still require only a high school education.**
- **There are few women employed as smokejumpers, but female representation is increasing. Deanne Shulman became the first female smokejumper in 1981. Today, roughly five percent, or about 20 of the over 400 smokejumpers located throughout the West and Northwest, are women.**

Margarita Phillips can boast 11 seasons as a smokejumper. Now she's training as a spotter -- the person who tests the wind, picks a good jump spot and signals jumpers when to step out of the plane.

- **Can you do seven pull-ups, 25 push-ups, 45 sit-ups, run 1.5 miles in 11 minutes and carry a 110-pound pack three miles in under 90 minutes? Some agencies that hire smokejumpers require this level of physical fitness. Applicants must be at least 18 years old, have experience as a wildland firefighter, and have at least one season of experience and two seasons of general work experience.**

### **Education**

- **Applicants can expect to test their physical fitness and determination during four weeks of tough rookie training. Their ability to move quickly over steep and uneven terrain, crouch and crawl in small spaces, carry heavy equipment and supplies, and work and live co-operatively in a camping environment will be assessed.**
- **Those workers interested in forest fire-fighting should consider an undergraduate degree or diploma in forestry. Forestry technologists and technicians are two positions available for graduates of forestry technology diploma programs.**

Many colleges and universities offer two- or four-year degrees in fire engineering or fire science. These programs increase opportunities for

advancement in fire-fighting related fields.

**National Fire Academy, Degrees at a Distance Program**

16825 Seton Ave. S.

Emmitsburg, MD 21727

Phone: 301-447-6771

Internet: <http://www.usfa.fema.gov/nfa/aboutnfa.htm>

## Associations

**National Smokejumpers Association**

P.O. Box 4081

Missoula, MT 59806-4081

Phone: 406-549-9938

Internet: <http://www.smokejumpers.com/>

## Publications

**The Static Line**

**The National Smokejumpers Association**

**Smokejumper: Firefighter From the Sky**, by Keith Elliot Greenberg (1995)

**Fire Officer's Handbook on Wildland Fire-Fighting**, by William Teie (1997)



## Net Sites

## Occupational Outlook Handbook

For more information related to this field, see Fire-fighting Occupations in the OOH

<http://stats.bls.gov/oco/ocos158.htm>

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## Fire-Fighting Jobs in the Bureau of Land Management

<http://www.uwsp.edu/stuorg/fire/jobs.htm>

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## Discovery Online -- Smokejumper Stories

<http://205.168.252.100/area/science/wildfires/jumperstories.html>

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**National Smokejumpers Association**

<http://www.smokejumpers.com/>

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**California State Firefighters' Association, Inc.**

<http://www.csfa.firedept.net>

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**Forest Fire-Fighting Photojournal**

<http://www.sover.net/~kenandeb/fire/hotshot.html>

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*career information***Smokejumper*****Career Interview****By Patricia Kutza*

It's the roar of helicopters and the rush of ashen wind. Wildland firefighters are a special breed, risking life and limb to suppress wildfires in the most remote forested regions of North America. They're everyday heroines and heroes who rarely make the TV or newspapers.

Tim Quigley is a 20-year veteran California smokejumper. "I can't imagine finding any other job where I could feel such a kinship with my fellow workers. We experience such intense situations together! Problem solving is key, as well as teaming. I'd truly miss my team if I quit jumping. I've also found that the exacting criteria for qualifying as a smokejumper tends to attract similarly spirited people -- people who love to be outdoors, who love to stretch their minds and bodies to the limit."

"If you like to stay close to wherever you call home, this probably isn't the job for you. We follow wherever the fires go and that can be a long ways from home!"

Quigley, age 41, has seen a whole lot of the States since he started fighting fires in the mid-'70s. Like most of his peers, he started his career at ground level. Although there's some variance in requirements, most entry-level positions require at least one season (90 calendar days) of general forestry experience and one season of fire-fighting experience.

So are there any downsides to what may be the ultimate high-thrill job? "Believe it or not, it's the paperwork," says Quigley. "We have to document a lot -- record-keeping, that sort of thing."

Larry Brehmer feels at his best in situations exacting great stress. "We call them fire-flaps -- a series of forest fires which erupt almost simultaneously. This is the kind of time when all your mental resources are called into play to coordinate resources and plan strategy."

*"It used to be that by the time you were 24, you'd best be thinking of changing careers.*

*Nowadays, more people are getting in great physical shape and staying in shape"*

At age 34 Brehmer is considered senior in the forest fire scene. "It used to be that by the time you were 24, you'd best be thinking of changing careers. Nowadays, more people are getting in great physical shape and staying in shape. That makes all the difference in the world since no one gets a bye from year to year. You literally have to prove yourself each season by passing a fitness test. So it's in your best interest to stay fit all year."

"Our normal shift is close to three weeks [20 days] with a seven-day rest. You can cover a lot of ground in that time, which is great if you love to travel."

"I know a few men and women who'd be excellent jumpers," says Redmond-based Mary Rieger. "But they don't conform to the physical standards. One guy weighs in at 230 pounds and another friend of mine is just a tad under five-feet tall. You have to be at least five-feet tall and weigh no more than 200 pounds."

"I can understand their disappointment. Both of them have such keen intellects and a real passion for firefighting," adds Rieger. "My advice to women thinking of applying is to work immediately on their upper-body strength. Carrying your own weight in gear over very unfriendly terrain can be a cruel wake-up call if you're not in shape."

"I feel like I can say I've been in the military," says Rieger. "Some jumpers refer to it that way. The rookie training is very rigorous. Visualize spending five hours per day in full jumping gear. That's 60 pounds worth!"

"But what you learn is really invaluable -- how to exit the aircraft, how to manage and manipulate your parachute, timber let-downs, parachute landing rolls. I never climbed trees as a kid, but boy did I learn!"