



## **Jumping out of the past: After decades away, smokejumpers return to Condon where training is in real-world forest and topography**

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By *MICHAEL JAMISON* of the *Missoulian*

Photographed by *KURT WILSON* of the *Missoulian*

CONDON - When the Twin Otter plane took off, it was packed to the wings, its wide-eyed passengers peering out as propeller wash leveled a field of knee-high grass.

But when it landed a half hour later, the plane was empty, not a single face behind the long row of windows.

Now that hasn't happened for a while.

At least not here.

Actually, lots of things haven't happened here for a while.

"It's been 20 years since we've had smokejumpers at this facility," said Mike Patten. Patten's a longtimer now, a veteran whose job today is to pack parachutes for the rookies. But back in 1987, Patten was a rookie himself, a member of the last class ever to jump at the Condon Work Center.

And now Patten's back, and so are the smokejumpers, and a whole lot of other folks too, as the historic Forest Service facility north of Seeley Lake enjoys an unexpected renaissance of sorts.

"I think it's a good idea to make use of the place," Patten said as he folded his chutes just so. "The Forest Service seems to be shifting more to the urban areas. This is more like the old-time Forest Service, being out here in the woods with the barracks and the mess hall. Once you close a place like this, it's forever. It'd be a shame to lose a spot like this."

But lose it they almost did.

Back when the Condon Work Center was the Condon Ranger Station, it wasn't even here. It was up north a couple miles, over on the old Seeley-Swan road.

"It was just one of many," said Suzanne Vernon. "There were several ranger stations up here in the early days."

Vernon is a retired journalist and small-town historian, used to own the local paper, and has been collecting oral histories here since 1999. It wasn't until the late 1950s, she said, that the Condon Ranger Station moved here, to the soft forested shoulder of the then brand-new U.S. Highway 83.

"That road had a huge impact," she said, making the green river valley accessible to a broader public for the first time. Even Liquid Louie's Bar picked up and turned itself 180 degrees to face the big black highway.

Those were Condon's boom times, Vernon said, and the new road carried a whole lot of logs downstream through the 1960s. The ranger station was a "major hub," she said, a buzzing hive of activity. Post-war

America was building homes, and a spruce beetle outbreak made the Seeley-Swan a logger's paradise.

Beginning in about 1958, the Forest Service built a large headquarters at Condon, Vernon said, built barracks and kitchens and garages and airstrips and then hired upward of 50 people to work there

year-round.

“Every family up here got a paycheck from the Forest Service,” she said.

During the summers, 100 or more were on the payroll through Condon. Rangers, trail crews, recreation crews, wilderness crews, building crews, fire crews, timber crews, spraying crews, planting crews, lookouts.

“It was pretty heady,” Vernon said.

But it couldn't last.

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BELOW: A visitor at the Swan Ecosystem Center inspects the smokejumper display that pays tribute to the history of the center.

**The beetle kill ran out**, of course, and the big private timber companies hit the hills too hard, Vernon said, so by the early 1970s the Forest Service was forced to scale back its harvest. Then grizzly bears were given protection under the Endangered Species Act, and people started moving in to live instead of log.

In 1973, after a frantic

15-year run, the Condon Ranger Station was downsized to a work center, and Flathead National Forest officials consolidated the Condon Ranger District with the Swan Lake District, moving its few remaining employees north to Bigfork.

“It was sad,” Vernon said. “We should have seen it coming. That ranger station anchored the whole community. The amount of employment it provided was incredible.

“And then it just stopped.”

The smaller sawmills - there were more than 40 in the Flathead alone - “they started dropping off, and the big corporate mills were still increasing their harvest,” Vernon said. “The Forest Service had been trying to keep a sustainable cut going, but the big mills weren't interested in sustainability.”

At the same time, she said, “the Forest Service bosses back in D.C. were pushing to consolidate into city centers like Missoula.”

It was, she said, the beginning of the urbanization that would one day make Mike Patten the last of the smokejumper rookies at Condon.

“But the thing of it is, there's nowhere left to jump in Missoula.”

So said Tony Navarro, the longtime jumper putting these rookies through the paces at Condon.



“There's just too much growth,” he said, “too many houses.”

By the time the plane flies out of town to some patch of forest, and the team jumps, and the shuttle picks them up, and they get back to base, “we've lost the whole day,” Navarro said.

But here in the dark green of the Seeley-Swan, where a bumpy dirt airstrip holds tight against the highway, which holds tight against the Condon Work Center, “they can make a jump and literally walk back in for another.”

Here, it's easier to find a trail for a quick physical training run, easier to find a big old tree for some sawyer practice

Of course, everyone has known that all along. Until 1987, Navarro said, smokejumpers routinely made a seasonal home in Condon, a “spike base” from which they could respond to wildland fires.

“But when you're looking down the barrel of the budget,” Andrew Johnson said, “sometimes you have to make some tough choices.”

Johnson is resource assistant for the Swan Lake District, and knows those choices all too well.

About the time Forest Service officials were choosing to downsize the Condon facility, about the time they chose to pull the smokejumpers, they also chose to put out for private bid the wilderness ranger services in the Mission Mountains and to outsource the campgrounds.

“Jobs that had always been Forest Service jobs suddenly went private or went away,” Vernon said. “The Forest Service presence here just disappeared.”

And the entire community's boom quickly went bust.

For a decade, Vernon said, the newly named work center stumbled along, always shrinking, an all-too-evident reminder aging there on the roadside.

“There was never any money,” she said. “They couldn't even paint their own lookouts. They couldn't buy a can of paint.”

Then, in 1995, the Forest Service finally announced it would shutter the facility once and for all.

“There would be no place to get a firewood permit,” said Kathy Koors, “no place to buy a map. What were we going to do, drive to Bigfork for a wood permit?”

Koors is working the desk at the Condon Work Center these days, but she's not Forest Service. Instead, she's with a local nonprofit, the Swan Ecosystem Center, which brokered a deal to keep the facility up and running.

The Forest Service kicks in a bit, but most of today's operating budget comes through ecosystem center in the form of grants. They have the maps and permits, as well as a large educational program. They pay rangers' salaries, and hire naturalists and botanists to do what the Forest Service used to do.

“We were pretty much on our own here,” Koors said. “At least until Crazy Horse.”

The Crazy Horse wildfire raged not far from here in 2003, a fiery reminder of why the Condon facility had been built in the first place. Again, crews filled the bunkhouse.

“It gave the Forest Service an incentive,” Koors said, “to realize this was a place worth keeping.”

That incentive was needed because agency budgets haven't stopped shrinking. Could a quasi-federal presence be maintained in the long haul with help from local nonprofits, or would the Condon center finally close?

“That's a very good question,” said Allen Chrisman, and he for one did not want to wait for an answer he might not like.

“We invited the Great Northern to make it their home,” the Flathead's fire program leader said. “When you're struggling with budgets and closing facilities, you have to make a decision. Is Condon important to our mission? If it is, we need to find a use for it.”

That use is Bill Miller's Great Northern, an elite leadership training crew that also fights fire.

“What we're looking for is young go-getters,” Miller said. “What we needed was a place to put them through the paces.”

Last summer, Miller found that place, here among the ponderosa pines at Condon.

“That's when it started to come back to life around here,” Koors said, “when the Great Northern came in.”

Now there are fire crews and smokejumpers, new “stewardship” timber sales and weed crews and trail crews and top-level leadership meetings.

Before dropping in here as anchor of all that activity, Miller said, he and his crew struggled with the same problems Navarro faced relative to teaching woods work in an increasingly urban jungle.

“Missoula is a logistical nightmare,” Miller said. “Here, we walk right out the back door and go to work.”

In Missoula, the Forest Service had lots of service but no forest. In Condon, miles of forest but no service.

It was time to rethink a few things.



ABOVE: “Here,” says **Bill Miller**, leader of the Great Northern fire crew and leadership training program,

“we walk right out the back door and go to work.”

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“**Condon is kind of a jewel**,” Miller said. “The Forest Service keeps crunching money, shutting down facilities. If we didn't use it, we'd probably

lose it.”

The center is located exactly halfway up the Seeley-Swan road, Miller said, and “we can respond to a lot of places right from here. Strategically and tactically, it's a very important launch pad.”

Having a resident fire unit also means the Flathead National Forest collects rent on the place, Miller said. It

means the crew can use down-time to paint and plumb and fix the wiring, to mow the airstrip and tread the trails, to do the Forest Service's forest work.

“When we got here,” Miller said, “it was evident Condon needed some TLC, so that's what we've been doing.”

And while no one believes this renewed interest by fire crews and smokejumpers will ever again resemble those “heady days” Vernon remembers so well, all seem more than pleased to have the Forest Service back, buying supplies at local businesses, talking with neighbors, providing service in the forest.

“I think it's great,” Korrs said. “We don't have that constant dark shadow of ‘there's no money, we have to shut it down.’ There's a commitment again to Condon.”

**This morning**, Enrique Olivares and Brandon Selk were among those who took off in the Twin Otter, but were not aboard when it landed. The rookie smokejumpers had bailed out somewhere over rugged foothills spiked thick with pine and fir.

When they hit the landing zone, the word already was spreading - one of the rookies had broken a leg.

“It was really intense,” Olivares said. “You're on the spot right now. There's no town next door. You've got to rely on yourself and your rookie bros.”

What Olivares and Selk and the others didn't know was the whole thing was a “scenario,” a planned training exercise. There was no broken leg.

“But the setting was so powerful,” Selk said. “It really brought out people's nature in an emergency.”

As did that red-hot wildfire the trainers set before dropping the rookies yesterday.

“You can't do that in Missoula,” Navarro said. “For that, you need Condon. It's on-the-job training without being on the job.”

“The mindset here,” rookie Olivares said, “is there's no safety net. This place is for real. You're in it. You're here.”

“It's amazing,” Selk agreed. “Up here, we know we can't just finish the jump and go back to the dorm for pizza. There's no substitute for realness, and this is as real as it gets.”

Here, they eat together, work together, sleep together, become a team together.

And tomorrow, they jump into Lindbergh Lake, “because sometimes, in these high mountain lake basins, there's not much of a landing zone,” Navarro said. “The air is completely different over water. Sometimes you make it, and sometimes you don't.”

And if you don't, it's a good thing to have practiced a water landing.

“We haven't been able to do a water jump for rookie training in a long time,” said Mike Fritsen, assistant manager at the Missoula jump base.

In Missoula, with no lake, they just push the rookies off a boat in Frenchtown Pond, Fritsen said, and then throw a parachute over their heads to simulate a water landing. Here, they'll drop the rookies into Lindbergh from on high, just like the real thing.

And that, finally, is why Condon matters, and why these folk are working so hard to bring it back to life.

“I’m sorry,” Miller said, “but you simply cannot do the kind of training that matters unless you have a facility like this. These people have to be out in the woods, because that’s where the work is.”



**A jumper breaks** the quiet surface of Lindbergh Lake near a boat with trainers filming the water jumps for historical and training purposes. “We haven’t been able to do a water jump for rookie training in a long time,” says Mike Fritsen, assistant manager at the Missoula jump base.

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*Reporter Michael Jamison can be reached at 1-800-366-7186 or by e-mail at [mjamison@missoulian.com](mailto:mjamison@missoulian.com). Reach photographer Kurt Wilson at (406) 523-5244 or by e-mail at [kwilson@missoulian.com](mailto:kwilson@missoulian.com).*

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