

NASM HAS A JUMP ON FOREST FIRES FOR ITS NEW EXHIBIT*

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Linda Reimers spent the summer of 1983 waiting for Montana to catch fire. As director of *Fireflight*, a five-minute film on aerial firefighting for an exhibit that has recently opened in the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum, Reimers needed lots of shots of people battling forest fires: smokejumpers parachuting into the wilderness, lead planes guiding air tankers around pillars of smoke to drop chemical retardant, helicopters scooping water from high mountain lakes. Catching the action would be a long summer's work.

The 25-year-old independent filmmaker had a further interest in a "good" fire season: 1983 was her first year as a smokejumper for the U.S. Forest Service. As one of the first women to enter a difficult and dangerous profession, Reimers had to prove to her male coworkers and herself that she could take the heat. As the only filmmaker among the 120 smokejumpers based at the Forest Service's Aerial Fire Depot in Missoula, the nation's oldest and largest smokejumper base, Reimers found that simultaneously recording history and making it was a less than simple proposition. "Being a rookie and doing the film and trying to be as inconspicuous as possible was difficult. That's all you want to do as a rookie, just blend in."

This is an unusual group to blend into. Smokejumpers take a certain perverse pride in being the most iconoclastic collection of employees ever to find sanctuary within the musty labyrinth of the federal government. During the past 40 years, enough doctors, professors, plumbers, rakes, visionaries and free spirits have passed through their ranks to populate a small town. The Forest Service uses the talents of the jumpers during the long hours spent waiting for fires. Need to research a museum-quality movie? Look in the ranks for John Harper, a 15-year smokejumper, historian and aspiring novelist. James Kautz, a former smokejumper, was borrowed from the Forest Service's Equipment Development Center to serve as *Fireflight*'s cinematographer. Reimers was detailed to write the shooting script and direct.

Reimers hadn't set out to be either a filmmaker or a feminist symbol. In 1978 she left home in Brookings, South Dakota, for Montana State University, certain only that she wanted to get in a lot of skiing. Confused about her future, she dropped out her sophomore year and went to work for the Young Adult Conservation Corps; 1979 proved to be a big fire year, and Reimers was pressed into service on a pickup fire crew. As a "groundpounder" she spent hours on end grubbing out an 18-inch-wide line in the dirt with a pulaski, a combination ax and hoe, to rob the advancing fire of fuel.

After three more summers on fire crews and a return to school to major in filmmaking, she decided to apply for smokejumper training. Why Linda Reimers, or

anyone else, would want to be a smokejumper is open to reasonable doubt. The job lasts for only three months out of the year. The pay is hardly exorbitant: in a good season a jumper stands to clear no more than \$6,000. Conditions aren't cushy. At the base, jumpers are lucky if they can get government housing. On a fire, accommodations end at government-issue sleeping bags thrown wherever the ground is cool, freeze-dried chicken a la king, and stale water air-dropped in plastic cubes. The only difference in firefighting technique between the smokejumpers and the lowly groundpounders is the delivery system: 1,200 heart-stopping feet straight down from the door of the de Havilland Twin Otter to the granite-studded mountainside.



When she wasn't jumping on a fire or directing the shooting for the NASM film, Reimers edited footage in a basement workshop.

The fraternity of smokejumpers had a shaky beginning. The Forest Service had been using airplanes to detect fires since 1919, when leftover Army Air Service Curtiss JN-4D aircraft and pilots were pressed into service to fly fire patrols, tying notes to the legs of carrier pigeons or dropping information in tin cans. The idea of dropping men out of airplanes, however, was met with less than enthusiasm. In 1935 Evan Kelley, regional forester in Montana, wrote back to Washington requesting that any further experiments on this scheme be moved beyond his purview. Complained Kelley: "All parachute jumpers are more or less crazy--just a little bit unbalanced, otherwise they wouldn't be engaged in such a hazardous undertaking."

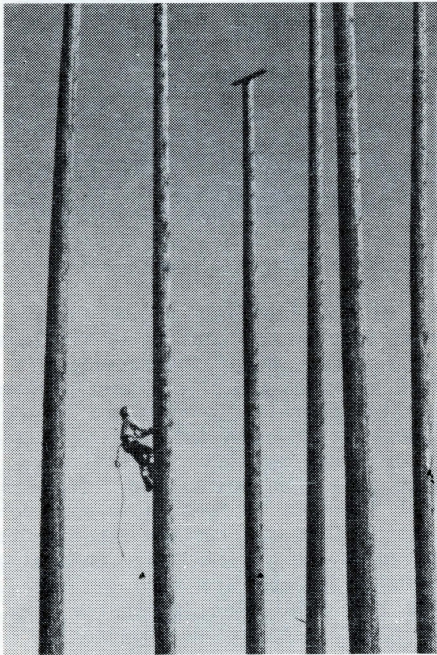
Despite Kelley's qualms, in 1939 professional parachutists survived test jumps into rough mountain terrain. In 1941 the first smokejumper training base was established at Missoula, and the jumpers quickly proved themselves to be both more effective and more economical in fighting remote backcountry fires than ground-based fire crews. Their success drew the attention of another operation of Uncle Sam's: four U.S. Army staff officers visited the Missoula base and took their notes back to Fort Benning, Georgia, where

they launched the 101st Airborne Division and trained paratroopers for what would become the Normandy invasion. During World War II, conscientious objectors filled the slots.

Today's jumpers are older--average age 27--and more experienced than those of years past. One-third look on jumping as a stepping-stone to a Forest Service career. Others return year after year, daunted by the continued depression in the Western job market or addicted to the pure adrenaline produced by combining airplanes and fires.

In 1981, the Forest Service finally allowed women to join the smokejumper ranks (the first to qualify was Deanne Shulman of Santa Monica, California); today, Reimers is one of five women among the 120 Missoula jumpers. Mary Barr, National Aviation Safety Officer for the Forest Service, says that the Service in general, and Service aviation in particular, is still almost a closed club, particularly for young women like Reimers. "It's a macho outfit. Slowly but surely we females are breaking down the barrier."

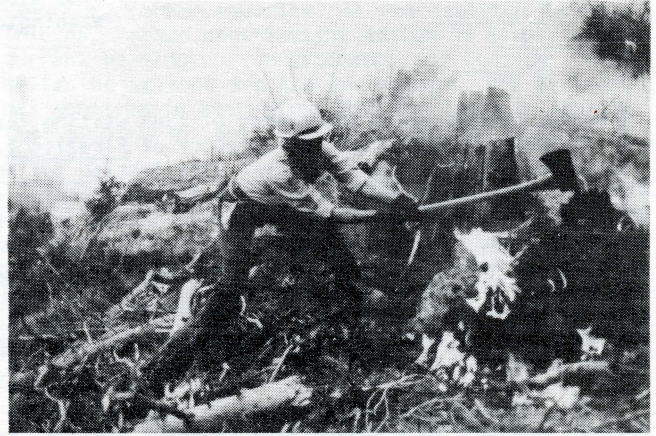
Mary Barr should know. In 1974, at the age of 49, Barr became the Forest Service's first female lead-plane pilot, thereby earning her photograph a place of honor in the Air and Space Museum. Now 59, gray-haired and a widow, Barr has forsaken stick-and-rudder work for a desk job in Washington, but she hasn't forgotten the thrill of her years of flying lead planes, directing the air-tanker operations over big fires. "You don't concentrate on the flying. You're out there fighting fire. You're right down in it, 100 feet or so off the ground with these big heavy air tankers behind you. It's turbulent, it's rough and hot. You get into a lot of tight corners, but when you get out you don't think it's so bad."



Reimers at smoke-jumper training ground

Reimers' trial by fire began in May 1982, when she came to the Missoula base for three weeks of rookie smokejumper training. As an athletic woman who practically grew up on the local golf course and went out for track and basketball in high school, she wasn't expecting to have too much trouble with the required strength test of seven pull-ups, 25 push-ups, 45 sit-ups and a mile-and-a-half run under 11 minutes. On the first day, Reimers failed the pull-ups. On the

second afternoon, the rookies were bused into the mountains to Howard Creek and set to digging a fire line around an imaginary fire. They dug through the night. At 6:30 in the morning, they packed their pulaskis and saws into 90-pound packs and headed down the three-mile trail. Halfway back, Reimers dropped her pack on the ground and said to herself, "I shouldn't be here." She had just washed out of smokejumping.



After jumping into a clearing and packing up her parachute, Reimers gets to work, here wielding a pulaski to break up a smouldering log.

She didn't plan to fail again. Reimers rejoined the groundpounders that summer and began training for next year's test--running, lifting weights, hiking with a pack. In April, a man from the Forest Service called. There wouldn't be any rookie class at Missoula. But in order to encourage women and minorities, they would allow those who washed out last year to train at the Redding, California, base. Was she interested? Reimers decided that the disadvantage of getting in under a special dispensation was outweighed by the chance to succeed where she had failed before. She had more than her pride at stake, however. That winter, John Harper had asked her to write a script for the Air and Space Museum exhibit film. If she made jumper, she could direct the film as well. This time she passed the physical tests.

The three-week training period started at 7 a.m. with five hours of simulated parachuting from jump towers and static wires. Reimers didn't think the jump and roll into the sawdust was too bad, but actually jumping out of an airplane and hitting the cleared jump spot instead of hanging up in the trees was another matter altogether--but she learned. As a full-fledged smokejumper, Reimers made her first two jumps above the Arctic Circle in Alaska, into treeless tundra as forgiving to a novice parachutist as a trampoline. Then it was back to Missoula where she and Kautz divided their time between fighting fires and filming.

Reimers and Kautz shot film until the snows of October snuffed out the last of the fires. During the winter Reimers edited the film in a basement studio in downtown Missoula and went to Washington to work with curators at the Air and Space Museum.

If the summer of 1983 had produced too little fire for either filming or fighting, the 1984 fire season delivered too much. In late August, dozens of fires sparked by lightning flared across Montana from the Rockies to the eastern grasslands. Like the rest of the jumpers, Reimers alternated between days of waiting

and intensive firefighting. She spent three days on one of the major fires, Napi Peak, near Glacier National Park, before being called back into reserve. "Filming is a lot like fighting fires," she says. "When you go, you go like crazy."

As the end of the 1984 season approached, Reimers was finishing up with details. After a hectic week recording odd bits of sound that she couldn't reproduce in the studio--the chink of pulaskis hitting stone, the jingle and swish of a smokejumper climbing a tree to retrieve a parachute--she shipped the film off to Washington. Visitors to the exhibit on the main floor of the Air and Space Museum, if they look very closely, can catch a glimpse of the filmmaker herself, memorialized by one career while performing the other. "I'm in the film once," Reimers explains. "I'm the second man--the second person--out of the plane." She

smiles apologetically, noting that, with the jump gear on, you really can't tell that the second man is not a man at all.

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Give Credit to Dignified Non-Romantic Manners

by Judith Martin*

For some decades now, we have been operating under a system that naively assumed that the only possible relationship between ladies and gentlemen was you-know-what. Therefore, the only set of manners they knew how to use with each other was, uh, shall we say, social gallantry.

Businessmen kept trying to pick up checks for business meals with female colleagues or even superiors, because the only form of meal they knew how to have with ladies was the date, in which the gentleman traditionally paid. The only language they knew how to employ was the exaggerated personal compliment appropriate to courtship but jarring in professional situations.

Spouses protested working arrangements teaming their husbands or wives with partners of the other gender, because they could only think of one activity these people might do together. Friendships were supposed to be segregated by gender, and opposite gender people could only see each other socially if all related spouses were present. The very term "just good friends" was popularly understood to refer to a clandestine romance.

Miss Manners hates to be the one to break the news that there is just not that much sex in the world. But the fact is that such innovations as coeducational dormitories and equal employment opportunity have surprised society by leading to affable companionship as much as or more often than unbridled lust.

Nor is this strictly a modern phenomenon. Sophisticated society in the 17th and 18th centuries not only assumed that respectable married people were capable of individual socializing without falling into sin, but looked suspiciously at couples who were always seen in each other's company. There must be a reason, society figured, that they displayed so little trust.

As disappointing as it may be for salacious onlookers, we shall have to relearn the social forms of trust. It can no longer be safely assumed that ladies and gentlemen who are seen lunching or dining together are doing anything more exciting than talking, or that people who take business trips in mixed groups must be having a wonderful time.

For such innocent circumstances, dignified but non-romantic manners are appropriate. The factor of gender is removed from such questions as who initiates meetings and who pays bills. In business, precedence is given to rank, and in comradeship, deference is paid to age.

Society must do its part by refraining from so many assumptions, not teasing small children who play together about their "boyfriends" or "girlfriends," and not asking adults how they "feel" about a spouse's opposite-gender colleagues or friends. The truth is that such insinuations were always in dreadful taste; they are also likely to be in terrible error.

But how, then, society wants to know, do we all find out if something really racy is going on? If mere proximity and opportunity are no longer to constitute proof of sin, how on earth are we to be sure that people are not taking advantage of this new license to disguise behavior that we are all dying to know about? Modern customs have taken care of this contingency. The answer is: They'll tell you.

*Miss Manners

