
Buffalo Soldiers Fight Fires and Stereotypes
TRANSCRIPT

NARRATOR: 1908 had been a very dry year, and 1909, worse still, but nothing could have prepared the Forest Service for the drought that befell the Northern Rockies in 1910.

Timothy Egan, Author: All of May, no rain. All of June, no rain. All of July, no rain. The forest is tinder dry. You walk over the thing, it's like potato chips crinkling walking on the ground.

NARRATOR: July 26th, 1910 — a violent electrical storm — bolt after bolt of lightning, and no rain. By the next morning, nearly 1,000 fires were burning across 22 National Forests in the Northern Rockies. The biggest wildfire to ever hit the Northern Rockies, had begun. But men willing to fight fires were in short supply.

Timothy Egan, Author: It's a hundred degrees, it's dry, it's dusty. It's on really tough vertical terrain. At one point they literally said "Men, men, men." A lot of people suffered injuries; they quit, they mutinied. They opened the jails. Some guys who had their handcuffs on when they were sent out to the front lines.

NARRATOR: And a call went out to Washington for help. Taft sent a total of 4,000 thousand troops to the Rockies, including seven companies from the 25th Infantry, known as the Buffalo Soldiers. The town of Wallace Idaho had never seen anything like them.

Charles E. Williams, Buffalo Soldiers National Museum: The Buffalo soldiers were the first African American men to serve as peacetime soldiers in the professional army. They served all over the American southwest. They protected railroad workers and fought Indians, you name it they did it.

Timothy Egan, Author: This is the first time they were ever sent to fight a fire. And they are sent to a very white area. And so when this all black platoon comes and sets up camp, people scoff at 'em, people say racist things about them. The newspapers say they play cards and drink all night. They say, "What can a black man know about

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possibly fighting a fire?" But it turns out, what happened with the Buffalo Soldiers is a tale that should go down in American military history.

NARRATOR: By the afternoon of August 20th, the railroad town of Avery had been successfully evacuated by the Buffalo Soldiers. Now, the troops, and the few men left in town, found themselves facing a wall of steadily advancing flames. Boarding one last train to the East, they raced across trestles, already ablaze, through a furnace so hot the paint melted off the outside of the railcars. Then, the fire jumped ahead and blocked their way. With nowhere else to go, they were forced back to Avery.

Charles E. Williams, Buffalo Soldiers National Museum: They realized, if we can't turn this this fire, it it's gonna burn up not only the city, it's gonna burn us up too.

NARRATOR: At 11:00 that night, with the conflagration only half a mile away, the Buffalo Soldiers lit a backfire and held their breath.

Steve Pyne, Author: If you time a fire correctly and you light it in front of the main fire then those flames from the smaller fire will be sucked in.

John N. Maclean, Writer: If there's no fuel left to burn, there's no place for this fire to go. The forward motion of it will be stopped.

NARRATOR: "Plunging at each other like two living animals, the flames met with a roar that must have been heard miles away," remembered one ranger. "The tongues of fire seemed to leap up to heaven itself and after an instant's seething, sank to nothingness." Miraculously, Avery was still standing.

Charles E. Williams, Buffalo Soldiers National Museum: After the town was saved, newspapers were busy interviewing everybody, and one account in Avery made the comment that, "My whole attitude about the black race has changed as a result of what I've seen and witnessed from these fellows."