**A TREAD FROM ABOVE**

by

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with Greg Way

The call came in on Friday evening July 27, 2018. Ryan picked it up. Two wildfires had broken out in northern California within twenty miles of each other. The Ranch and River fires, which came to be known as the Mendocino Complex Fire, were blazing through the wilderness east of 101 threatening the town of Lakeport. California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CalFire) was requesting contract bulldozers to come to its aid. Ryan called his bulldozer operator, Matt, who headed out to take a twelve hour shift that night, dozing the land to clear it of anything that could burn. On Saturday morning Ryan’s friend and employee, Greg Way, with 20 years’ experience in firefighting and Public Works, took over the next twelve-hour shift. He headed for Benmore Valley, a high depression in the mountainous area between Hopland and Lakeport. The Division Supervisor had directed that the bulldozers create lines four blades wide whenever possible. The terrain was steep, and in some areas, they could run the dozer only twice, clearing two blades wide. Every quarter mile when viable, the drivers would create an additional break ten blades in width called a safety zone, where the dozers could retreat if the drivers found themselves in danger. These ten blades created a clearing about 200 feet in any direction. Two hundred feet is the recommended distance between a firefighter and flames that are fifty feet high. No one could have predicted that Greg and the crew would be facing flames three times that height the very next day.

Early Sunday, July 29th, Greg headed to base camp and gathered for a briefing before mounting the dozer for another day’s work. The briefing was unsettling. An update was given on the Carr Fire which had been burning for a week, farther north near Redding, California. It had already devastated nearly 89,200 acres and was only 5% contained. What was more troubling, two fatalities were reported--men on the line who had died fighting to bring that fire under control. The firefighters left the briefing sobered, but ready to face the danger before them*.* On that Sunday Greg’s division, Oscar Oscar, (OO), was sent to the east flank of the fire with the objective of stopping it from jumping highway 175. They needed to prevent it from reaching Lakeport, knowing it could then easily engulf the landscape all the way to Santa Rosa sixty-five miles away. Greg and two other dozer operators split off from three others to take opposite ends of the fire’s east flank.

On top of the ridge, Greg had a clear view of the fire. The morning wind blew a mild 12 miles an hour, the relative humidity was 12%, and the fire was still a good mile away. The dozers got to work continuing to create the fire breaks. By mid-afternoon, the drivers had put in about 2 ½ miles of dozer lines. But then, conditions changed dramatically.

Fire creates its own weather, and this one had now whipped up the wind to a frenzied 70 miles an hour. The manzanita, scrub oak, and chamise covering the sides of the canyon walls, exploded in flames. Being plants with small branches, highly flammable oils, and a sizeable build-up of dead brush, they were inhaled by the fire with breathtaking speed.

Greg assessed the situation. The fire was now a mile wide and a mere quarter mile away. Unexpectedly, the wind had changed course. The fire was headed straight for them. There was no way to outrun it. The only option was to retreat to their safety zone and ride out the burn-over they were sure would come. The dozers arrived at the clearing and lined up next to each other with their blades facing uphill, about 50 feet from the top. They hoped the metal of the blades would deflect some of the searing heat as the fire approached. The drivers followed the safety procedures, dropping their aluminum curtains around the windows of their cabs to protect themselves and the equipment inside, and leaving motors running to power their air conditioning.

Within minutes, the three drivers were completely surrounded by fire. Unfortunately, Greg’s cab was an open one, with no glass windows and no air conditioning. As the 100 to 150-foot flames soared up and over the ridge, the strength of the wind blew his curtains and the scorching heat directly into Greg’s face. He was struggling to breathe. It was then he decided he would be better off getting out of his cab and seeking shelter if he could make it to the bulldozer next to him.

Greg secured his helmet, grabbed his fire shelter, and exited the cab, pausing to make sure the curtains were in place. He stepped out onto the dozer’s track. Without warning, the dozer began to roll backwards. Before he knew it, Greg’s leg was sucked between the fender and the track, a space of about 4 inches. Greg blacked out. The dozer continued to roll down the hill, the metal plates and grousers passing over the left side of his body from his ankle to his shoulder, crushing him as each grouser bit into his flesh. Somehow, he got spit out, and dropped almost six feet to the ground. He regained consciousness in excruciating pain. He was still hemmed in by walls of blistering flames. Greg’s first thought was, “Did I survive that, just to be burned to death?” He could hear the clank, clank of his dozer’s tracks moving down the hill. Unable to see, he rolled away from the sound. In a few minutes his vision began to return, blurry at first. He took a quick assessment of his injuries. Was he bleeding out? Was he missing a limb? Was anything broken? Everything was still there, although his left arm and leg were bleeding and felt useless. The other drivers, snug in their cabs behind curtains had no idea what had happened to him. Greg then cried out to God, “Please help me!” Peace flooded him and he gained the strength to grasp his radio and call for help: “Emergency traffic. E141. Firefighter down. Emergency traffic. E141. Firefighter down.” Using his one good arm and leg. he then inched his way painfully 30 feet up the hill to retrieve his helmet and fire shelter which had been wrenched away from him in the accident.

A fire shelter is a last resort. Made of an outer layer of aluminum foil and backed by a silica weave that reflects heat, it deploys in the shape of a fat silver cocoon that traps breathable air inside. Using one is often the last attempt to survive a burn-over.

Reaching his fire shelter, he rolled himself into the aluminum cocoon, only to realize he was right behind the second dozer. If the driver decided to put his machine in reverse, that would be the end for Greg. He exerted the effort to roll out of its way. It was then he noticed about 20 yards away, the swamper’s truck, a regular pickup truck used by CalFire for maintenance and scouting. Greg painstakingly made his way over to the truck and hoisted himself into the passenger seat with his one good arm. The swamper, listening to his radio, had heard the call for firefighter down, but Greg’s radio had changed channels when he fell from the bulldozer. Instead of being relayed to the Oscar Oscar division, his report was broadcast elsewhere, so as yet no one knew who or where he was. The swamper was shocked and surprised to find Greg was the one who had made the call. He did what he could for Greg according to his medical training, but due to the severity of Greg’s injuries, he knew he had to get him medevacked out as soon as possible.

The swamper radioed Air Operations, transmitting the emergency. All other communication ceased, so that Greg’s accident became the focus. Air Operations dispatched a Sac Metro helicopter equipped for landing in a hot zone, but once there, the pilot realized this was no ordinary hot zone. The raging inferno beneath thwarted any plans to land. The copter found the nearest possible spot to touch down. It was 2 ½ miles away, off Scotts Valley Road. The only way out for Greg was over ground. The Golden Hour was swiftly receding beyond their reach.

The first 60 minutes following a traumatic injury has been termed **the Golden Hour**. The idea that trauma care must begin within this 60-minute window has been practiced for more than four decades. After the first hour, chances of surviving trauma decrease significantly. The time it takes the Emergency Helicopter to leave base and reach the patient, and the time spent with the patient prior to departure to a trauma center, can impact how quickly the patient will receive essential care.  Ideally, the patient should be reached within the first ten minutes.

Greg was well aware of the Golden Hour. Not knowing the extent of his internal injuries, and now facing an overland trek just to reach the helicopter, his greatest fear was that he wouldn’t get the medical help he needed in time. With the two bulldozers, one fore, one aft of the swamper’s truck, they nudged their way through downed trees, copious debris, and live fire, to get Greg to that helicopter. Greg, reclining on his right side, endured the agony of every bump, jolt and bounce as they jostled over the rough terrain. Twice they had to back out of an area, drop their curtains and wait out a burn over before they could continue. The radiant heat had reached an unbearable 1500 degrees and was hot enough to melt the lightbar and aluminum toolboxes on the swamper’s truck. The 2 ½ mile trek literally took two and a half grueling hours. Greg was airlifted to Kelseyville, then transferred to a CalStar Medical helicopter which flew him to Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital. The copter landed about 3 hours after the accident. Greg was rushed into emergency care. Several tests revealed that although Greg suffered extensive soft tissue and nerve damage, miraculously, no bones or internal organs were damaged. The ER and trauma doctors were stunned that there had been no loss of limb, broken bones or severe internal injuries from the crushing that Greg had endured. He was told, “There’s no way you should have lived.” In the ensuing days, the swelling and bruising worsened to the extent that Greg had to be taken back to Emergency. Nerve pain erupted sporadically through his back and mid-section like high voltage electric shocks, that shot down his legs and made it difficult to breathe. Several large hematomas appeared around his midsection. His pain medications in effect brought the pain from a level 10 down to about a level 5 or 6. He was never pain free.

Nine months later, debilitating pain still coursed through Greg’s body. But then something inexplicable happened. A pastor in Greg’s church came to his house and prayed for two hours, both giving thanks to God and praying for healing. Thirty minutes after he left, friends called and told Greg they felt prompted to pray for him. In thirty-minute intervals, three other phone calls came in, each time the callers declaring they were prompted just then to pray for Greg. The next morning, Greg woke up with no pain. He stopped all his pain medications. For a few days, he was still on the nerve block to dull the electrical shocks, but he realized he had felt none after the night of prayer. He then stopped the nerve block. Not only was he pain free from then on, but an old injury from nine years before which had left him with a pinched nerve in his lower back and permanent numbness in his left leg was also completely gone. Greg pursued physical therapy to regain strength after being greatly weakened for so long. At first, he could not even walk upstairs. He couldn’t push more than 10 pounds on the leg press. But within months he was pushing 300 pounds. He now feels stronger and better than any time in his life.

“This experience thoroughly tested my walk with the Lord,” Greg confesses, “but I am also convinced that He was there protecting me and even healing me in the midst of that accident. Almost a year later, He woke me in the middle of the night with the words “A Tread from Above.” I’m still wrestling with how to see that. The *tread* on a vehicle enables you to move over more demanding terrain. *To tread* means to walk in a specified way. As a Christian, that means a lot to me, because we do need to walk in a specified way with the Lord and to accept the more challenging things that come our way. This experience demanded a lot from me and from my family. We learned that even when hard things happen, He is there. When things happen, rely on Christ. My wife and I put our trust in Him and had faith that He would heal me. And He definitely did.”

***Firefighters have one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. They frequently act as first responders not only for fires, but also for car crashes, medical emergencies, floods, and rescues of all kinds. They are heroes both in everyday situations and in extreme disasters. The Mendocino complex fire, of which Greg was a part, broke out July 27, and raged for almost two months. It was fully contained on September 20.*  *The 2018 wildfire season was the deadliest and most destructive on record in California, with a total of more than 7,500 fires burning an area of over 1,670,000 acres, the largest area of burned acreage recorded in a fire season.***