

Jerry Messinger, USFS Pacific NW Regional Supervisory Air Tactical Group Supervisor

7/25/2024 I'm in N426PJ, a Bell 429 Global Ranger as "air attack".

Flew 3.1 hours Telephone fire, Falls fire, departed GCD around 0855. Landed in a meadow for about 45 minutes to meet with Division CC. Returned to GCD via Falls fire, checked in with Div W, P on north end. New lightning fires to north of Falls, now merged into 1 fire, "Sand".

After lunch was requested for new fires within Falls TFR. Parasol Butte, and 5 miles south, Poison Creek. Both are about 2 miles east of Hwy 395, NE corner of Falls TFR.

Visibility was not great but ok for helicopters. Visibility improved on the northern fire (Parasol) especially on the north and west side, heel of fire. Helicopters 526MW and 573RF sent to Poison, advised BIC visibility was actually really good on areas of Parasol and requested SEATs from Burns. Advised 4 available, I requested all 4. T-863 flight with T-860 came first, about 10-15 minutes later perhaps, T-844 flight with T-883 came. (Videos of first 8 drops).

Moved copters to 127.525, and moved SEATs to 132.15 to have isolated comms in their respective work areas and not be distracted by the linked (to helibase) victor/TFR freq of 124.225

Advised BIC Parasol visibility was good. Noticed the SEATs were all going west of 395 through the central part of the Falls fire, assumed route had acceptable visibility, wasn't great down 395. Copters will not depart Burns without 3 mile VFR since it is Class E to the ground there.

After the first two sets of drops (2 sorties each by each flight of 2, or 8 total SEAT drops) I had 526MW come up to Parasol for a couple drops on a spot fire while the SEATs were all gone, and instructed him to return to Poison while Air Attack was off to John Day for fuel. This provided good separation. Helibase could monitor all aircraft on AFF and had comms on TFR victor. Parasol IC agreed to clear the line and describe targets for the SEATs on the Air-to-Ground FM while I was gone. Copters and SEATs all instructed to go back to TFR 124.225, all aircraft would be on same victor while I was gone, Helibase could monitor or talk to them if needed.

Went to John Day for fuel, made a quick turn-around. Only had 1.7 left for 8.0 flight time limit. Lifted at 1820 and planned to be back in time to meet 8 hour daily flight time limit, with a 12 minute grace, 5 more minutes for daily power check, Computed flight time to and from Parasol to John Day in my head and figured 1 hour on scene. It was only 10-12 minutes one way from John Day, visibility north towards John Day not bad.

Arrived with T-860 and T-863 completing their 3rd round, they went with southbound dozer on heel of fire per IC, dozer line complete there and fire looked almost out, great work. Northbound dozer making good progress past where SEATs started, if they catch the spot across the road SE bottom corner, we will catch this fire. SEAT drops helped keep the NW heel in check so dozer could get around there, and kept it in grass/Sage and out of trees. Retardant doesn't always work, it did today.

860/863 reported no issues with drops and IC instructions, I wanted to be sure comms all went well. I requested one more load and return. Just then heard something about an ELT, not sure if someone heard one or asking if someone heard one. Heard a distant T-883 "landing at Burns" not sure if that was on 122.8 (same Unicom as John Day) or on the BIC flight follow channel, and then BIC called me reporting they'd lost comm with T-844, all in maybe 20 seconds.

{Later I discovered T-833 and T-844 inbound for their 3rd load, were ahead of 860/863 and 844 lost comm with 883 his wingman apparently (this is second-hand). Was told they were inbound to the fire, not

outbound, 860/863 apparently caught up, passed them, made drop 3. 883 apparently went back to Burns either loaded, or jettisoned the load, and 844 and 883 were inbound to fire with round 3 but never got there. Have not talked to any of them.}

Continuing...immediately got last AFF location from Dispatch, advised 860/863 they were 1 mile, 12 0'clock from that position, from the spot after I plugged it into Fore Flight. They circled the area once looking as I sped that direction, it was WSW of Parasol Fire probably 10 miles, north end of Falls fire and near the new Sand fire to the north. I think we all were beginning to realize the worst, I advised 860/863 to call it a night, his voice in his response told the story, I think we all feared the worst.

Dispatch AFF last location (where they went red) we started gridding south from there, depending on airspeed could be 4-6 miles in 2 minutes, AFF is a 2-minute ping. I was still thinking still he was off the fire and returning to Burns, so headed south. Burns Helitack, helicopter 377PA launched from Burns to help search, I cleared them in and we coordinated a loose pattern for search. I turned on breadcrumbs to see where we went and not overlap too much. Visibility wasn't terrible through there, definitely some decent visibility windows. I figured that's where the SEATs were tracking in and out of Burns to Parasol. 860/863 were in the area on the way back because they all took the same route. I asked BIC for last Airspeed, Altitude, and Heading, was given 178 kts, 7,300, 006. Got a second Lat/Long right after that BIC had been provided by T-844 company, was told it was from Flight Aware or Flight Radar, then learned those numbers were from that Lat/Long, not the AFF last known position. Those coordinates were a couple miles NW of AFF coordinates. Got cell 3 bars and LTE up there, pulled up flight radar myself, it was only then I realized it jived with 006 and they were headed to the fire, not returning, seeing flight track. End of track jived with second lat/long. First lat/long to this one suggested he turned NW, but last AFF hit was actually 060, so he turned quite a bit NW after the last AFF ping. Last Flight Aware/Flight Radar hit was tracking 006 or slightly NE. Tried to establish grid at 006 off that waypoint, going north this time. Skyler Vaughan my pilot and I discussed AFF is 2 minute ping, not sure flight radar/flight aware, probably much faster pings. ADSB is 1 seconds pings I believe, I assume those apps use that data.

East-West running canyon (Lonesome creek) very steep, heavy fire activity, heavy smoke, unable to search south side of ridge where I suspected he might have hit the top of the ridge or something, was just west of last ping.

(Location found that night/next morning) Turns out we flew over the crash site twice, slightly east and slightly west (100-150 meters or so each) but it was pretty smokey. Never saw any black smoke, thought a crash could produce black smoke. Heavy forest fire burning all over that area, lots of downed logs burning heavy, creating intense smoke (gray wildland fire type smoke). After seeing crash site following afternoon in much better visibility...virtually nothing left, a few small pieces, a white/red piece perhaps just a trim tab, a small piece of aluminum probably, in aircraft green primer (thus inside of metal showing). Would have been hard to see any of that the evening of the 25th with that smoke.

Last ping, heading 006, to where he impacted...he must have made a sharp right turn of at least 90 degrees to approximately true west. The trees clearly showed a fairly steep descent into terrain right before impact.

OK, Pure speculation and curiosity: AFF final position indicated 060 heading, must have turned left 70-80 degrees, right after that ping. Guessing he was working through the smoke, and it was an hour later when I first got there so it can change, but wasn't that bad when I got there, some good corridors to follow thru with decent visibility. Was he poking thru bad smoke? Didn't like it and made the sudden left seconds before impact? Descending...spatial disorientation in the smoke? Loss of SA, on attitude

indicator? Why descending? Or was he low and suddenly saw that ridge above Lonesome creek and cranked it left. Maybe...hit ridge (treetops) on S. side of Lonesome (curious where the wheel was located) and perhaps other control surfaces and couldn't climb, or hit prop on a tree and lost thrust, and altitude by turning sharp?

I Noticed on one inbound, don't remember but think it was the second hop...883 and 844 were 7-8 miles separated, picking their way thru separately? Did 883 take a more conservative route and get behind? Agreed upon having increased separation due to vis? (They have a discreet channel like the scoopers, talk to each other. Sometimes you hear them setting up drops and pointing out things to each other for safety, when they are on my/our freq and not whatever they use internally, I know SEATs and Scoops who do formation flights all do that). 883 testimony will answer some of this hopefully.

After 2nd 844/883 sortie, (3rd total flight overall to Parasol, 4th being 860/863's second sortie that was still inbound) I noticed ever improving visibility, mentioned to 844 I could see 10 miles or better south along 395, past the airstrip, suggested it as a route. It's always their call and I tend to mention that if they don't like it, call it off. 844 departed off the fire after second sortie south along 395, 883 followed. Noticed a bit later while checking on Poison fire and copters, and waiting for 860/863 to return for their second sortie that 883 turned around and came straight north. I ensured he was not in conflict with copters who were dipping in a large pond just east of 395. 883 was climbing and at least 1500 higher and staying just west of 395. I asked 844 how the vis was and noted his wingman did a 180. He said it "wasn't bad, just a little pocket there [of poor vis]" or something to that effect. 883 went all the way around. I kept an eye on him as 860/863 were inbound, but didn't have to say anything as they talked and were saying they saw each other on the screen (as I was, I had all targets on ADSB almost all the way to Burns). Not sure if 844 waited for 883 back in Burns before launching on 3rd sortie to join up as a flight again or not as this is when I was back in John Day for fuel, because 883 time back to Burns had to be 15-20 minutes later by doing the 180 and going back the route they had been using. I was still out for fuel when they launched for round 3 so not sure the stagger times there when 844 crashed and where 833 was. Sounds like they didn't make round 3. Not sure if 844 jettisoned load of retardant or not prior to impact. Must have had at least half a tank of fuel left?

Not sure if that suggests 844 was less risk-averse than 883 in terms of visibility at least, by poking thru where 883 turned around? Pure speculation, I understand he was a 24,000-hour pilot. People talk casually sometimes that the SEAT pilots are sometimes more aggressive, really believe in fire-fighting and are mission and service oriented and perhaps more willing to "try" but that can be true of a lot different kinds of pilots, or fire fighters too. No idea if this is the case here.

844 totally nailed his first 2 drops for me, first was a gap between 863 and 860 drops, second drop grabbed fire that was about to hook the retardant and totally held it. Dozer was about to engage, all 4 SEATs held that heel out of the timber and into light grass/sage and made it a catchable fire.

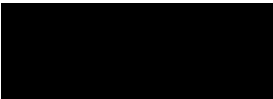
Copters pretty much followed 395 straight to and from Poison fire and Burns, they may have thoughts on visibility where 844 went through southbound after 2nd Sortie, 526MW and 573RF both had done a fuel-and-return somewhere in that general time frame.

Any questions, I'm available. I have videos of first 8 drops, including the last 2 that I believe 844 would ever make. May be nice for the family or something as a memorial? Maybe someone could reach out, those drops were right on target in tricky cross wind conditions, normal types of drops and safe, but harder to gauge drift and put retardant where you want it for the fire. RIP

7/25 Sequence of Events for T-844: Parasol Fire SEATs

- 1520 Third dispatch of the day. Kneeboard to Parasol fire.
- 1536 T-844's first roll time out of the pit loaded with retardant for Parasol Fire. Waited on taxiway for T-883 to be loaded with retardant and departed as a flight of 2 with T-844 in the lead.
- 1628 T-844 in the reload pit for a load and return. Loaded and waited again for T-883 to go out as a flight of two. T-844 in the lead. While in the pit, Jim told me over the radio, to let the CO Fire planes know that the air was good on the west route. T-883 was on the ramp waiting behind T-844 and he said that he had already relayed the message to T-860 and T-863.
- 1718 T-844 in the reload pit for a load and return. Loaded and waited on the taxiway for T-883. T-844 was in 12 minutes before T-883. Later, T-883 told me he had returned a different route because he was not comfortable with the visibility in the route that T-844 was taking. He said the route to the west was clean air with good visibility.
- 1730 T-883 in the pit for reload and joined T-844 for flight of two back to Parasol fire.
- Around 1810 dispatch called and asked if we had contact with T-844 and that he was red on AFF. We did not have contact with T-844.
- Around 1815 T-883 had dropped and we watched him look for T-844 in area of where T-844 was shown on AFF. We listened to the radio traffic and heard that T-883 could not locate or contact T-844. Helicopter 377PA was asked by dispatch to try and locate T-844 and they launched to search.
- 1819 I texted Jim to recycle his AFF. He had gone red on AFF the previous day and reset his AFF to show back up.
- Around 1820 T-883 called in to dispatch he was returning BNO on a hold.
- 1836 Received a voicemail from Angie Forbes that she had been in contact with Wakefield and the ELT had been triggered for T-844. She said she had passed the information on to Glenn Claypool, Kristina Curtis, and Matt Shaddle.
- 1837 T-883 was parked in West parking on SEAT base ramp. After shutdown, Dan told me that he had gotten the report of the ELT also.
- Time unknown: Sarah had pulled up Flight Radar 24 and the most current flight path of T-844. We relayed the location, heading, altitude, and speed that was recorded on T-844s last location from Flight Radar 24. It had him at 6,250 ft, 178 kts, and heading of 6°.
- I took pictures of the flight path from Flight Radar 24 and sent them to the manager aboard 377PA to help with locating T-844.

Paul Weil



Summary of July 25, 2024
By Sarah Kling [REDACTED]
Airbase Tech

14:16-After T-844 and T-883 completed their drops on the Ritter fire (second fire and second flight of the day) the drivers filled the tanks with fuel to prepare in case of another dispatch.

15:20- Dispatch called and had an order for all 4 seats to go to the Parasol Fire to the North near Hwy 395. Each pilot received their knee boards.

15:36-T-844 left the pit with 671 Gallons of retardant and pulled out of the pit and waited for his flight partner T-883 to be loaded so they could leave as a flight to the fire.

1628- T-844 returned to the pit and took 724 Gallons and waited for his flight partner T-883 to be loaded to go out as a flight to Parasol Fire.

17:18 T-844 returned and was loaded with 748 Gallons of retardant. T-844 pulled out of the pits and held down at GA while waiting for his Flight partner to land and get loaded. T-883 did not land and come into the pit until 17:30 witch was abnormal because usually they would come in together and T-883 would be sitting behind T-844 waiting in line, but T-844 had landed quite a bit before T-883.

- *Awhile after the 4 seats had loaded and headed to the Parasol fire the Falls helibase called the SEAT base and inquired about the visibility to the fire. The base relayed that the pilots had mentioned that the smoke was starting to settle in and that they were going to head farther west to loop around the smoke.*
- *Dispatch Called around 18:10 to ask if T-844 was at the base getting loaded (on a previous day that had happened on the Telephone fire, It had shown him over the fire but he was sitting on the taxi way waiting for T-883 to get loaded. T-844 recycled his AFF system and started to register his location). I informed them that he was not and he was out at the Parasol Fire. They said that his marker on AFF was red and they had tried him on every frequency and could not reach him. The base said we would try to contact him and let them know if we got contact.*
- *The seat manager sent a text that said he was not showing up on AFF, we also tried to get him on our Ramp frequency.*

- *Dispatch called Burns helibase because they were going to be on their way to John Day for a fire, but were being rerouted to the last known lat and long of T-844. While on the phone with them I asked the Dispatcher if they had been in contact with T-883 his flight partner. She informed us that they had and he lost contact with T-844 also and he was going to circle the area and see if he could locate T-844.*
1837- T-883 landed and parked The Seat manager was out at the Ramp to help park him and then they came into the base to try and get a more accurate location of T-844, He also said that visibility was not good in the location and he couldnt see anything on the ground.
- *I had also looked up FlightRadar24 to see his flight path and see what the location they had for him. We called dispatch and relayed that information to give to H377PA(Burns Helitack) and H-426PJ(Aerial Supervision on Parasol Fire)*