The MOUSE That Soared

Tales of the Siskiyou Smokejumpers

PAUL FATTIG

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Praise for Paul Fattig's *The Mouse That Soared*

"The story of Allen Owen, aka Mouse – a 4' 11" combat marine and legendary smokejumper, would be enough to make Paul Fattig's The Mouse that Soared a stirring read. Owen lived an inspired and inspiring life, overcoming seemingly impossible obstacles almost to the end. But the book is chock full of startling characters and high adventure that together make this a welcome addition to the literature by and about those who leap from the sky to take on wildland fire."

—John N. Maclean, author of *Fire on the Mountain* and *Home Waters*

"It is my privilege to recommend and endorse Paul Fattig's new book The Mouse that Soared: Tales of the Siskiyou Smokejumpers, a nonfiction account of an elite group of men, now historically remembered, as the ultimate standard of today's forest fire fighters. I have known Paul as a friend and former colleague on two newspapers for nearly 50 years. As a feature writer his research and personal adaptation is among the best in the business, and this collection of personal tales and comradery puts the reader on the fire line."

—Kenneth Millman, Former Special Publications Editor
for *The Miami Herald*

"As a boy growing up in the Illinois Valley of Southern Oregon, Paul Fattig often looked up into a deep blue sky as it filled with International Orange and white parachutes. These were the Siskiyou Smokejumpers. Paul and his young cohorts admired these parachuting firefighters for their courage and noble qualities. Sometimes they went to the jump spots and watched as the jumpers laughed and gathered their gear. I doubt that anyone there thought that someday that little boy would write a book detailing the big heart and spirit of the Siskiyou Smokejumper base and some of its' most memorable characters. But The Mouse that Soared *is exactly that. With a keen eye for deeply human stories Paul has produced a work that embodies the best of what we hope for in our fellow man. The German philosopher and playright, Geothe, once wrote that, 'In Boldness there is Genius and Magic.' This fine piece of writing is a living testiment to just how true that can be.*

—Murry A. Taylor, *V*eteran Smokejumper and Author of
Jumping Fire: A Smokejumper's Memoir of Fighting Wildfire.

"To write a book about Mouse Owen, you must describe his universe. Paul Fattig has done that and more. You learn Mouse's path in getting to Cave Junction. And the stories of the people with whom he worked and played are so genuine, you feel a part of the jump base. Or you wish you could have been. I was fortunate enough to meet Mouse and he was bigger than life. You never forget him.

—**Abigail Kimbell**, US Forest Service Chief Emerita

"In The Mouse That Soared, *Paul Fattig has captured the elan, the adventurism, the courage and, yes, the humor of the West's elite smokejumper corps."*

—**Michael Thoele**, Author of *Fire Line: Summer Battles of the West*

"From 1943 to 1981, the backwoods of southwest Oregon were well protected against wildfires by the Siskiyou Smokejumpers. They were a particularly useful bunch of oddballs. One has to be a bit off in the head to be a smokejumper — someone who dons a parachute and grabs a pulaski, dives out of a plane and lands next to a burning forest and sets to the task of putting the fire out. God bless Paul Fattig for preserving their particularly colorful history. Mr. Fattig's book is history preserved. To read these stories, which are normally only told among their own, is the closest thing to being there as it gets. I strongly recommend reading it while beside a crackling campfire, somewhere deep in a forest, where the only sounds are a distant coyote and you chuckling at the amazing tales of the Siskiyou Smokejumpers. Their reputation as being weird, rowdy and surprisingly useful was true. Paul really showed his interviewing skill with having squeezed so much information from them."

—**Brian Ballou,** Former USFS firefighter, ODF fire information officer, and the founding editor of *Wildland Firefighter* magazine

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I am indebted to all the smokejumpers and others who kindly and patiently submitted to oftentimes long interviews for this book. A special thanks to former Siskiyou smokejumper Gary Buck, writer and former smokejumper Murry Taylor and longtime friend and journalistic colleague Damian Mann for poring over the rough draft of this book. Their thoughtful suggestions and observations were much appreciated.

And a big thanks to all firefighters, both wildland and structural, for combating the fires threatening much of the West during recent fire seasons. They are today's superheroes.

Also by Paul Fattig & Hellgate Press:

Up Sterling Creek Without a Paddle:
Confessions of a Recovering Journalist

Madstone: The True Tale of World War I
Conscientious Objectors Alfred and Charlie Fattig
and Their Oregon Wilderness Hideout

INTRODUCTION

AVID BOOK READERS WILL RECOGNIZE the title of this tome as a tip of the hat to *The Mouse That Roared*, the 1955 novel by the gifted Irish-American writer Leonard Wibberly. His humorous book was a fictitious satire of the Cold War featuring a tiny but muscular country called the Duchy of Grand Fenwick which didn't take any guff from the international powers that be. Like the feisty duchy, the equally spirited Siskiyou smokejumpers also didn't take crap, especially when it came to bureaucrats.

But this book is nonfiction. Its title is intended to be a double entendre to celebrate both the remarkable man dubbed "Mouse" as well as the Mighty Mouse in the form of the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base and all its impressive inhabitants.I have no doubt the late Mr. Wibberly would have been favorably impressed by every jumper dropping in on the following pages. After all, they demonstrated courage and humor in abundance.

If you are looking for a person to blame for sparking my interest in writing a book about the airborne firefighters, look no further than former smokejumper Bob Wilcox. Although I shoulder the responsibility for going along with the suggestion, he was definitely the idea man. It all began one day when my wife, Maureen, and I dropped in one Saturday in September of 2015 at the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base Museum. Bob, who had jumped out of the smokejumper base in Redding, California, was serving as the weekend host at the Siskiyou base. His wife, Lucille, a friend and client of Maureen's, had invited us to stop by when we were in the vicinity. Located in

southwest Oregon's Illinois Valley some four miles south of Cave Junction, the base was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2010.

I had never met Bob but knew him by reputation when he was a U. S. Forest Service district ranger in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest. Well respected, he was known for not suffering fools gladly. I was fairly well acquainted with the base, having lived near it as a youngster and later visiting it numerous times as a journalist when Siskiyou smokejumpers were still stationed there and fighting to keep it open. They were also known for not suffering fools, gladly or otherwise.

But I hadn't been to the base since it became a smokejumper museum two decades earlier, long after it closed as an active base at the end of the 1981 fire season. In a herculean effort led by veteran Siskiyou smokejumper Gary Buck and other former smokejumpers, along with local community leaders like Roger Brandt, they have created a wonderful museum which makes visitors feel as though they are stepping back in time. It's easy to imagine jumpers hustling out of the bunkhouse, jumping into a Beechcraft and roaring down the tarmac en route to a wildfire. As a history buff who has spent blissful hours in historical sites from Ireland to Vietnam as well as visiting countless stateside museums, including a wonderful week at the "nation's attic," the incomparable Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., I thoroughly enjoy the authentic smokejumper museum and visit when I am in the area. If you are ever in southwest Oregon, the museum is not to be missed. It is open from March 15 through Nov. 15. Admission is free but donations are gratefully accepted.

As an added bonus, your docent will be a former smokejumper who knows of what he speaks. Like all the veteran jumpers who volunteer their time and knowledge, Bob Wilcox was an excellent guide. After all, he had lived in the world of smokejumping. He also knew I was a recovering print journalist with one book published and another well underway.

"There is a book here if you are interested in taking it on," Bob observed as we walked around the base. "Everything here has a story.

The Siskiyou base was one of the four original bases created in the United States in 1943. And it is unique among all smokejumper bases. It had some truly remarkable people."

Or words to that effect.

The more he talked, the more I realized he was onto something. As a product of the Illinois Valley, I already had a lot of respect for Siskiyou smokejumpers. By the time we got to the parachute loft, I was thinking seriously about the possibilities of a book on the storied Siskiyou parachuting firefighters. Sealing my fate were the jump suits hanging there, each with a name plate all but shouting out personal histories that needed to be retained for posterity.

However, much has been written about the colorful base over the years, including three volumes of the *Book of Gobi* which contains reflective stories written by former Siskiyou jumpers. They were edited by Stan "Clancy" Collins, a former Siskiyou jumper who shepherds words well. If you enjoy a good read, don't forget to pick up copies when you drop by the museum. Like a visit to the base museum, they do not disappoint.

But I needed to follow a different path than the one taken by the *Gobi* books, approaching the Siskiyou base history from the perspective of one who grew up in the shadow of the jumpers, having watched them jump and witnessed their positive impact on the valley as well as the Pacific Northwest. The book would also have to be written for those who had never leaped out of a perfectly good airplane to fight a wildfire.

Indeed, this volume would be redundant if it followed the same route as the *Gobi* books. Besides,with so many stories to tell, this could quickly mushroom into a volume that would make *War and Peace* read like a short story. The jumper tales would be superfluous, causing the most alert reader to start dozing. In the book game, it's bad form for the reader to nod off, you understand.

Harley Patrick, my publisher, suggested loosely focusing on one unique jumper while weaving in the stories of other airborne firefighters who either jumped with him or had a connection with him and the

historic base. That jumper would be the thread binding their stories together, he noted. Smart fellow, Harley.

Obviously, I also needed to find a unique individual with a special spirit of adventure, one who not only shrugged at the first hint of danger but whose life experiences were broad enough to carry the weight of a book about a physically small but historically big base which contributed to the national annals of smokejumping. If he were to serve as a strong bond tying the smokejumper tales together, he would also need to have spent the lion's share of his jumping career at the base.

More than half of the 434 men who jumped out of the base have made that final leap into the great beyond. The rest are scattered across the country. Some made a career out of stopping threatening wildfires while others went on to pursue other adventures. Among the latter would be future educators, medical doctors, attorneys, an astronaut and a rocket scientist, a superior court judge and at least one man of the cloth. They were an eclectic bunch capable of reaching high achievements, the Siskiyou smokejumpers.

With so many impressive candidates to pick from those stationed at the base over the years, selecting the central character was a difficult choice. There were the first smokejumpers who helped open the base in 1943, all conscientious objectors, followed by legendary World War II veterans like Jim Allen, Richard J. "Dick" Courson, Cliff Marshall, Robert "Bob" Nolan and Danny On. There were also veterans from the Korean or Vietnam conflicts, impressive folks like Gary Buck, ace pilot Hal Ewing, Tom "Trooper Tom" Emonds and Henry "Buzz" Florip.

Roughly half of the jumpers were military veterans, giving them a bit of a head start over non-veterans since a smokejumper base is run somewhat like a military unit, albeit during idle times a bit like the old *M*A*S*H* television show. But being a veteran was definitely not a prerequisite as demonstrated by the aforementioned conscientious objectors.

Nor can we can't forget folks such as base manager Delos "Dee" Dutton and extraordinary jumpers like Eldo "Mick" Swift and Dave

Laws. Or future astronaut Stuart Russo, rocket scientist Chuck Mansfield and world renowned mountaineer Willi Unsoeld. Then there were the regionally-raised young men who became jumpers in the form of Dave Atkin, brothers Rod and Steve Baumann, George Custer, Rick Dees, Lee Gossett, Mike Mann, Pat McNally, Gary Mills, brothers Bob and Willie Lowden, Wes Nicholson, Rick Oliver, Ray Ospovich, Gary Thornhill, Ron Versteeg and others, including the Sunny Valley boys in the form of brothers Jim, Fred and Don "Mike" Cramer. I came to know many of the jumpers when we were all urchins getting into mischief and other monkey business. By the by, the smokejumpers represented the best among us local yokels.

There were super smokejumpers among those already mentioned. Several of the folks who wore smokejumper gear when they were strapping young men recommended that Swift be the focal point of the book. Others suggested Allen, Buck, Emonds, Mills, Nolan or Thornhill, all outstanding leapers when it came to jumping into smoke. No question they did their band of brothers proud. Their lasting legacies were well earned.

Obviously, my dilemma was I had an embarrassment of riches: there were ample heroic smokejumpers. Everyone I interviewed for this book had interesting tales to tell. Indeed, many warranted a book on his life and times. Sadly, time and space prevented me from interviewing everyone still alive who jumped out of the base. Perhaps they could be in a sequel.

The jumper I decided to weave throughout the book was neither the biggest nor the baddest. Yet, like the base, he was small but lived large. He was also feisty and outspoken, a gung-ho fellow who charged challenges head on. With his big heart and sense of humor, he stood tall among his brethren. His name was Allen Dale "Mouse" Owen, a Marine Corps combat veteran who was 4-foot-10. Although the shortest smokejumper in the nation's history, he stood out among the airborne firefighters. He was also a jumper I knew, albeit only at the journalistic level.

Mouse and the base where he was a rookie in 1970 shared many traits. Both were born in 1943 and died in 1981. Small they both may

have been but they were strong, vocal and productive as well as endlessly entertaining. If there is such a thing as destiny, they were made for each other. And both were admired and respected by those fortunate enough to have known them.

To reiterate, this book is not centered on Mouse but on the base and many of the jumpers who lived and worked at the base. As you would expect, smokejumping attracts folks who live life with a certain élan. Again, many other books could be written about the Siskiyou smokejumpers. This book is simply one take on this impressive group.

You undoubtedly noticed no mention of female smokejumpers at the base. There were none, albeit Siskiyou smokejumpers sought to recruit female jumpers near the end of the base's reign but were unsuccessful. However, as you shall see in the following pages, thanks in part to Mouse's active support for allowing women to be given a chance to join the smokejumping ranks, that ceiling was broken, although not at the Siskiyou base.

Since they were created, smokejumpers have prided themselves in the fact you were able to do the hard and often dangerous work or you are out on your posterior. No exceptions. One trait I've always liked about smokejumpers is that they look you in the eye. There is not a whiff of snake oil in the whole bunch. As a former journalist who has sniffed more than his fair share of political snake oil over the years, I very much appreciated not having to suffer from that foul odor while writing this book. There were some unique personalities but I have yet to meet one who was totally barking mad. True, a few may have bayed at the moon a time or two after a hard night of imbibing.

Incidentally, as one who was reared in the Illinois Valley and having always heard the base referred to as the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base, I am sticking to that moniker. Since most bases are referred to by the name of their nearest town, veteran jumpers often refer to the Siskiyou as the Cave Junction base, or CJ for short. I hope they will forgive me that formality. But I have adopted a verb used by seasoned smokejumper who liked to talk about the year they "rookied." I trust Don Orton, our fine English teacher at Kerby Elementary School,

would have forgiven me for my continued butchering of the language he loved and cherished.

Nor will some thin-skinned readers be amused by several crude, lewd and rude subjects and incidents that pop up in the following pages. But keep in mind these are smokejumpers, not saints. Still, they have been kept to a minimum. You can avoid those short sections by heeding the "Fair warning" notices strategically placed ahead of the potentially offensive paragraphs.

Please humor me for periodically parachuting in to set the scene or offer an aside to give Oregon-challenged readers a fuller understanding of the remarkable people and unique place that comprised the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base when it was on the front lines of the wildfire battle. I can promise you that once you come to know many of the former Siskiyou smokejumpers, you will not soon forget their indefatigable spirit, audacious humor and contributions to the nation's history of wildland firefighting.

1

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

EARLY ON THE SWELTERING AFTERNOON of June 29, 1965, a thunderstorm rumbled through the northern end of the scenic Illinois Valley nestled in Oregon's southwest corner. As thunderstorms go, it wasn't bristling with firepower. But there were a few sizzling streaks of bright yellow lightning flashing out of the dark anvil-shaped clouds, followed seconds later by window-rattling kabooms and a refreshing but short summer shower. However, unlike a really cranky summer storm, there was no car-denting hail, no wind gusts flattening trees, no torrential rainfall sending gully-washers roaring through canyons.

After Mother Nature completed her hissy fit and the storm evaporated into the ether, the sweet fragrance that invariably lingers in the aftermath of a light summer rain filled the air. A few hours after the storm, it was as though the relatively small tempest had never happened. The picturesque river valley once again basked under the warm glow of a cerulean sky. It was turning into another idyllic summer afternoon in southwestern Oregon.

But a thin wisp of smoke could be seen rising from the northern end of Mansfield Mountain just northwest of the sleepy little mill town of Kerby. A lightning bolt had struck earth, igniting a tall pine tree on the rugged mountaintop. Since the storm had not dumped enough rain to quench the dry woods, the down strike hit pay dirt. Although rocky and sparsely covered with vegetation, Mansfield has enough trees and brush to fuel a wildfire. If the blaze took off, it could quickly spread, threatening not only the local forests but rural homes just east of the Illinois River which flows through the belly of the valley. The weather had been hot and dry for weeks. The fire had the potential to take a hike down the mountain and become known as the Mansfield Fire of 1965.

However, the fire never had a chance to make a name for itself. Not long after the sky cleared, the drone of an airplane could be heard overhead. It was a C-45 Twin Beech, an aircraft first introduced in 1937 by Beech Aircraft Corp. of Wichita, Kansas. Although its speed would generally top out at about 190 mph, providing there was no head wind, it was considered a reliable workhorse by the jumpers.

The slow-moving plane circled the mountain as the crew dropped drift streamers to determine the wind conditions below. The twin-engine plane then appeared to be lumbering off, heading away from the small yet growing fire. But its work wasn't done. Far from it.

Banking the lumbering plane in a wide circle over nearby Eight Dollar Mountain, the pilot brought the aircraft around, lining up with Mansfield which lies like a giant loaf of bread on the western edge of the valley. As the aircraft approached the fire, what looked like a bundle could be seen dropping from its belly. Falling like a stone at first, it suddenly appeared to jerk to a halt in midair after a parachute popped open. Resembling a huge orange and white blossom, the parachute descended slowly with the bundle morphing into an airborne firefighter. After a few more passes, the aircraft dropped another bundle which would turn into another humanoid dangling from a parachute.

Descending upon the small blaze were smokejumpers from the

Siskiyou Smokejumper Base, a U.S. Forest Service facility located at the southern end of the Illinois Valley. The smokejumpers landed close to the small fire, quickly put it out and mopped up. Incidentally, smokejumpers never jump on fires because of the inherent danger but also since the convection from the heat would carry them away from the blaze. In any case, they later hiked out, wading across the Illinois River to reach Highway 99 where they were picked up by a Forest Service rig and taken back to their base to await another fire call.

To a 13-year-old like me witnessing the smokejumpers landing on Mansfield that day, they were heroes. The word is too quickly applied these days but it was an apt description for the Siskiyou smokejumpers in that unsettled time and rugged place where positive role models were not overly abundant. In my juvenile mind, they represented the ABC's of champions: Adventurous, Brave and Competent. Few other jobs reached such lofty levels, figuratively and literally. All these years later, smokejumpers still rank mighty high in my estimation.

Our little gray house sat on an area called Sauers Flat which, as the name implies, is a level geographic area in the bottom of the river valley cradled by mountains. Named after the legendary Sauer family who had long farmed the rich river bottom, it lies just north of Kerby and directly east of Mansfield Mountain which juts up west of the Illinois Valley's flat belly. The Sauers arrived in the region around 1870, settling on the flat's fertile farmland in 1919, according to Nick Sauer, a well-liked classmate of mine through Kerby Elementary School and Illinois Valley High School, class of 1969.

From our house, you could see the wisp of smoke rising from the lightning-caused fire. But I probably would not have known about it had not a childhood chum named Russell "Rusty" Earl called to tell me on our dial-up, party-line phone about the fire and the plane dropping the smokejumpers. Rusty's family lived a quarter mile north of our little abode, giving them a better view of the firefight.

Having grown bored of listening in on the party line conversations to pass the time, I ran outside and saw the last firefighting parachutist

drifting down. For a kid in Kerby, life did not get more exciting than that. Had James Bond dropped out of the sky, the debonair spy from MI-6 could not have provoked more excitement. I was gobsmacked. You have to understand this was a period and place where the purchase of a new wheelbarrow was news. Indeed, the smokejumper landing was even more exciting than the day my big brother's 4-H pig got loose and we spent a wild afternoon chasing the fat squealer down.

The next morning, Rusty and I literally ran to the top of Mansfield to check out the aftermath of the firefight. One of five children of the widow Gladys Fattig, I had virtually no adult supervision during the summer. I could spend all day and night on the mountain. But Rusty's strict parents required that he be back home by 3 p.m. so we were racing the clock. We figured the smokejumpers would have left their parachutes which we intended to collect as souvenirs and give us bragging rights among our adolescent peers. We did not know the Siskiyou jumpers routinely packed out their parachutes and reused them. While there were no parachutes we did find a drift streamer which had been dropped to gauge the wind. As for the fire, it had burned several pine trees and some brush. Although we ran back down the mountain, Rusty got back a few minutes after his curfew and was immediately grounded. But we both returned to our respective homes forever impressed with smokejumpers and their ability to land on a rugged mountain and quickly extinguish a fire.

At the time, I didn't know a Twin Beech from a turkey vulture. The information about the aircraft and the jump was mined from the year-end reports kept in the logbook at the Siskiyou smokejumper museum. It indicates that was the aircraft flying jumpers out of the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base in 1965.

"Pilot Williams and Sheley dropped Hopkins and Kirkley on the Tennessee Mountain fire, and Cook and Hamilton to Sauers Ridge," according to the report.Ralph Williams was the pilot while Charles "Chuck" Sheley served as spotter, the veteran smokejumper who picks the landing site. The 1965 season summary reports the jumpers

were Keith L. Cook of Houston, Texas, and Clifford Hamilton of Oakland, Calif. Hamilton, Kirkley and Sheley will parachute in on later chapters.

By the by,the name Sauers Ridge puzzled me at first since it is a reference to a geographic entity that does not exist in the region. But the other fire was on Tennessee Mountain which is immediately south of Mansfield Mountain. The two geographic features are connected by Free and Easy Pass, the headwaters to Free and Easy Creek. What's more, Sauers Flat is immediately east of Mansfield. As mentioned earlier, Mansfield Mountain rises like a ridge west of Sauers Flat, making it conceivable someone from outside the area referred to it as a ridge and tossed in the Sauers moniker to complete the misnomer. Since the log book reports no other fires in the vicinity during that era, the fire doubtlessly was the one Rusty and I checked out on Mansfield Mountain.

In the small world department, one of the Siskiyou airborne firefighters jumping later that day was the future rocket scientist mentioned in the prologue. Smokejumper Charles "Chuck" Mansfield was the great, great grandson of Moses Mansfield for whom Mansfield Mountain was named. Around 1860, Moses and a brother settled at the north end of what would eventually become known as Sauers Flat. The future NASA scientist was one of four other jumpers the aircraft picked up after returning to the base before returning to the air to deliver the jumpers to two small fires on the Gold Beach District that day. It would have been serendipity to have him jumping on the mountain named after his ancestor but sometimes facts get in the way of a good story. No matter. We will return to the brilliant Chuck Mansfield anon.

During the 38 summers it operated, the Siskiyou base would deploy smokejumpers on 1,445 fires for a total 5,390 fire jumps, according to Forest Service records. That was an average 142 deployments per year jumping on fires. Although the lion's share of their deployments would be in the Pacific Northwest, the Siskiyou smokejumpers fought fires from Alaska to Virginia. How many forests, wildlife, rural homes

and human lives were saved by Siskiyou smokejumpers stopping the fires when they were small is incalculable.What is known is the inspiration for the base's creation. But we will need to go back nearly 80 years to a time when the base was a twinkle in Uncle Sam's eye.