

Smokejumpers

adapted from an article by Jonathan Ore



- 1 When fires spark in some of the most inaccessible swaths of Canadian wilderness, elite firefighters known as smokejumpers are called into action. They parachute out of planes to quickly reach fire sites that do not have roads or bridges for traditional ground-based fire crews, suppressing them before they grow out of control. “Yeah, it’s an exciting way to get to work,” James Bergen, wildfire officer for the North Peace Smokejumpers says. “There’s very few jobs out there that you get to wake up in the morning and not really, honestly, know where you’re going to be that afternoon.”
- 2 The practice of sending firefighters into remote locations by fixed-wing aircraft began in the United States in the 1930s. Canada’s first smokejumping squad was founded in 1949. People who wish to enlist must have at least one year of firefighting experience under their belt before taking a two-week training course to learn how to jump out of planes and rapidly get into action once on the ground.
- 3 The North Peace Smokejumpers wear heavy heat-resistant Kevlar suits and operate in teams of up to 13 aboard a DC-3 or DHC-6 plane. Spotters accompany the team aboard the plane to scout out the safest landing spot. Team members then leap out of the plane, at an altitude of about 1,500 feet, landing near the site of the fire. The 60 to 90 seconds they spend in the air provide a moment of serenity before they land in the drop zone and get to work.

- 4 Despite the dramatic descent, Bergen describes it as “crazily safe,” adding that there are safeguards built into the system. Cargo drops carrying gear, such as hoses, water pumps and chainsaws, arrive shortly afterward. Most deployments last between two to four days but can stretch out to a couple of weeks depending on how long it takes to get a fire under control. Teams are equipped with first aid, tents and sleeping bags for long deployments.
- 5 Bergen says fire crews manage to suppress most wildfires before they flare out of control. “In the last couple of years here, it’s those six per cent of fires that got extremely large,” he estimated. “But in the meantime, I mean, we’re already over a thousand fires in British Columbia (B.C.) this year, and no one’s even heard of them.” However, B.C. recently experienced two record-breaking wildfire seasons in a row, and numerous fires have already torched swaths of the north and interior.
- 6 Sarah Henderson, a senior scientist with the B.C. Centre for Disease Control, says the province is starting to conduct studies to learn what communities are being exposed to the most smoke, and whether they 24. “I like everybody to protect themselves from wildfire smoke but there’s certain populations who really should take extra care: anybody with pre-existing respiratory or cardiovascular conditions, or even conditions like diabetes,” she said.
- 7 Even with protective gear and specialized training, smokejumpers must also do whatever they can to avoid being engulfed by smoke. Bergen says smokejumpers usually tackle a fire at its tail, rather than its head, to avoid billowing smoke. “It does affect your ability to breathe. But we try our very best to stay out of that heavy wall of smoke.”
- 8 With 17 years and counting as a smokejumper, Bergen has now mostly transitioned into a management role. He still tries to get into the field at least once a year, however. “When the fire gong goes off, whatever other stuff you’re working on — paperwork or, you know, people’s time diaries or the hum of government — that all 26 and you get to go do what it is you really love.”

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