

This is a story of a natural disaster and an heroic man.
The story pits the basic element of fire against the quick thinking Edward Pulaski and his crew of panicked fire fighters.

In August 1910, the Northwest had an exceptionally dry spring and an equally dry summer. A number of small fires were started by lightening and sparks from the railroads in the forests of Idaho and Montana.

Edward Pulaski was a US Forest Service Ranger at the time. He was in charge of 150 men. The men were fighting various fires throughout the forest nearby Wallace, Idaho.

On August 20th, weather conditions changed. A wind began to grow. Small fires were blown into big fires. Big fires were blown into bigger fires. Eventually, hurricane force winds were born. Finally, a firestorm of epic proportions was born. A Great of 1910 Fire spread throughout the surrounding mountains. It became to be known as the “Big Blowup” or the “Big Burn”.

Pulaski later wrote that there was “a terrific hurricane so strong it almost lifted men out of their saddles.” The winds swept through the forest with the roar of a thousand freight trains. Others described the fire “as hissing, roaring flames, with terrific crashing of falling timber that was deafening and terrifying.

Edward Pulaski rounded up about 40 of his men. He led them down the mountain toward Wallace.

In the meantime, citizens of Wallace, in an effort to save the city, ignited a backfire. A backfire is intended to burn a safety zone that will hopefully stop an approaching bigger fire.

Pulaski and his crew of firefighters were trapped between these two fire fronts.

Pulaski had prospected the area during the last 25 years. He knew of two prospector tunnels nearby. He decided the only escape was to lead his men to one of these tunnels.

Pulaski put a wet gunnysack over his head to aid in his search. He penetrated the dense smoke to where he could see the larger tunnel. He hurried back and led his men to the Nicholson Tunnel. He got them there just in time.

Pulaski's crew consisted of 42 men and two horses.
He herded the men and the horses into the tunnel except for one unfortunate man.
That man had fallen a few hundred feet behind.
The fire caught him before he could reach the tunnel.

Inside the tunnel must have been a terrifying experience.
Outside, an intense heat was caused by the inferno.
Inside, the cold air was being sucked out.
Smoke and hot air rushed in.

Pulaski ordered his men to lie down face down in a little stream
to keep from suffocating from the gas and smoke.
Some men prayed and some men cried.
Some men began to panic.
Some men even tried to escape from the tunnel.
But, Pulaski held the panicked men at gunpoint
to keep them from running out to certain death.

Through the night, Pulaski battled the blaze at the mine entrance.
He used horse blankets and mine water to douse the burning timbers.
He finally passed out from heat, gas and exhaustion.
All the men in the tunnel eventually became unconscious.

Hours later, one of the firefighters recovered.
He crawled from the tunnel and dragged himself to Wallace.
A crew was sent to the tunnel to rescue the remainder of the firefighters.

Pulaski remained unconscious until the next morning.
When he heard someone say, "come outside boys the boss is dead."
Pulaski replied, "Like hell he is."

Most of the crew was rescued.
But, five men suffocated.
The horses had to be shot because they were wheezing so badly from the smoke.
The fish in the nearby stream had all died.
Rocks on the side of the stream were too hot for the survivors to sit on.

The burned and tattered firefighters had to climb, drag and crawl their way
through two miles of blackened, blown down and exploded trees to Wallace.
Pulaski suffered burns, damaged eyesight and respiratory ailments
that remained with him the rest of his life.

The “Big Burn” took an awful toll.
One third of Wallace, Idaho was burned to the ground.
Three million acres of timberland was destroyed.
Eighty-seven people died while fighting or fleeing from the fire.
Daylight was turned to night as far east as Watertown, NY
Smoke from the big blaze reached one-third of the way around the world.
The Big Blowup was global in size and effect.

The fire was eventually extinguished when the weather changed again.
The Great Fire of 1910 was eventually extinguished by
dropping temperatures, cooling moisture, and high elevation snow.

After a long partial recovery, Pulaski continued to work for the forest service
Until his retirement in 1930.
He was instrumental in providing grave markers for some of the victims.
He wrote a description of the ordeal for a writing contest
sponsored by the forest service.
Years later, he created the “pulaski”.
The pulaski is part hoe and part axe.
It is a basic fire-fighting tool still used today to battle wild land fires.

The story of Pulaski and the Great Fire of 1910 lives on today.
It has become more than folklore.
It has become woven into historic fabric of the Northwest and the Nation.