**Prologue to Chapter 1**

In those moments when I had time to think about things while out forest firefighting (In 1985 we were still known as forest firefighters) I tended to think about mostly mundane things that I thought were irrelevant to firefighting, like warfare. When we were kids my brother and I would stage wargames against our neighbors using clods of dirt thrown at each other to create casualties. We would build forts and charge each other’s positions with no strategy but to overrun the others by sheer force. I often wondered about the many correlations between war, fire, Indians, nature – How they intertwined somehow in the world. The similarities never occurred to me until I looked at the strategies involved in fighting fires vs. battlefield maneuvering. I then imagined the fire landscape as a battlefield. This was not a battle of human armies but a battle between man and the forces of nature. I then summarized that if I did my job and others did theirs, we would all return safely home after each assignment. War analogies were not all that I thought about, sometimes it was, in the midst of or after, a hard day of cutting fireline through the forest – what was it that drove us to do what we were doing there in the trees or on that mountain top? What battles did we fight that drove us up that mountain?

Some of us grew up on land that needed to be cleared on a yearly, if not more, basis by burning the weeds and grasses. If there wasn’t a mower or weed cutter available then the overgrowth needed to be burnt in place. Even with the weeds cut they still needed raking and piling which was eventually burnt. Other families were doing the same thing to their lands, hence in the spring and late fall smoke columns arose from one end of the reservation to the other. It seemed that fire making/tending was part of everyone’s nature. There was even a saying, at least in my family that “if you play with fire, you’re going to wet the bed”. Sometimes, with the amount of playing around we did as youngsters, it was a wonder that we did not light up a lot of our homes by the fireworks we set off. Personally, I lit paper airplanes on fire and watched as they flew then careened to the ground and burned to a crispy end. An occasional paper or wooden boat was set afire to see them sink into a watery, ashen grave in the farmer’s irrigation ditch. I watched as the plastic bag that I lit on fire spewed flaming, dripping dots of gooey flame to the ground, just to hear that sound of the fireballs going ‘vip, vip, vip…’ My playing with fire days ended after I burned my right forefinger as I whipped the plastic bread bag around in the air to see the flying fireballs and one of them ended up on my hand and searing itself into not only my skin but into my memory. A psychologist would probably have had a field day observing or just hearing about such behavior. I did not become a serial arsonist, nor a doctor or Indian chief, but a career wildland firefighter. Looking back at my youth and my fire-starting ways I was able to recognize fire behavior in its raw state, what it took to get a fire to start and to keep it going for the visual pleasure of its effect. The downside was the collateral effects: the unwanted burning of surrounding grasses and the physical pain of being burned by my own hand, plus being punished for the fire play itself. I was lucky not to have caused any widespread fire damage. But I learned that fire has its place in the world and that I would have to respect its power and usefulness along with its wrath.

I had to learn that fire was a big part of our lives. In earlier times it was utilized as a weapon as well as a tool to the native inhabitants of this land. Stories told by the white settlers in the early days of European exploration of the American northeast lands included tales of the native inhabitants burning the vegetation of entire landscapes. It wasn’t described by them as malicious or destructive in nature but utilized as a land-clearing tool. The forests were described as pristine where there was Indian influence and habitation. Further reading on this subject is found in “Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape” (Island Press, 2002) by Thomas Vale, and “Forgotten Fires, Native Americans and the Transient Wilderness” (University of Oklahoma Press, 2002) by Omer Stewart. The natives of this land had to harness fire to appreciate it. Sometimes wildfire was a result of carelessness such as leaving a campsite without effectively putting out all campfires or burning more than intended while hunting game by setting large-scale driving fires in the underbrush of the woods.

Even during the ‘war between the white men’ (American Civil War, 1861-1865) fire was an unintended consequence of the opposing armies’ actions on the battlefield. In 1864, as the war in the east continued to drag on into its 4th year, the Confederacy fought for its existence against a larger and more formidable opponent in the form of the United States (Northern) army. The military might of the northern states faced an exhausted but determined foe under the command of Robert E. Lee outside of Richmond, Virginia in what would be General Grant’s push to end the war. In the woods and fields outside of Richmond at a place known as ‘The Peninsula’ both armies clashed, gun and artillery discharge caused widespread fires in the dense undergrowth. A Southern private wrote, “The smoke was so thick and dense sometimes during the day that it was impossible to discern anything fifty yards away…The country all along the lines, which is mostly timber lands was set on fire early in the day by the explosions of shell and heavy musketry; a thousand fires blazed and crackled on the bloody arena, which added new horrors and terrors to the ghastly scene spread out over the battle plain.”\* That was on May 6. Later on May 7 Horace Porter wrote, “Forest fires raged and ammunition trains exploded; the dead were roasted in the conflagration; the wounded, rousted by its hot breath, dragged themselves along, and with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape the ravages of the flames…It was though…hell itself had usurped the earth.”\* On the Northern side, June 2, a soldier noted, “Right over the field where the battle had done its fiercest work, the fire had swept, and many a brave fellow, wounded and dying, unable to move from the place where he had fallen had the little remaining life drawn out of him by the flames, and his body burned to a crisp.”\* These occurrences took place where Generals Sheridan and Custer had played a part in the battles before Cold Harbor, seemingly unaware that their actions resulted in numerous unwanted fires and deaths. Civil War battles were gruesome enough and adding forest fires to the mix must have been terrifying to those involved having to face and eventually escape both the enemy and advancing wildfires. Later the natives had to face those same overwhelming armies in their fight for survival as the eastern peoples drove westward across the continent.

A later occurrence of fires playing a part in warfare, though on a different continent, was documented by Generaloberst Erhard Rauss, Commander, German Fourth and Third Panzer Armies, in World War II facing Soviet Army tactics. He wrote, “In midsummer, when the trees were tinder-dry, the Russians attempted to delay German forces by putting forests to the torch. Not only the physical, but the psychological impact of such fires was severe. The crackling of burning trees, the acrid gray-black smoke, the increasingly unbearable heat, and the feeling of uncertainty put troops under a severe strain. Fleeing before towering sheets of flame, men would fight through mile after mile of burning forest only to be confronted by enemy bunkers and fortified positions.” He added, “Brief, short orders organized the soldiers, and in a moment everyone was battling the blaze with picks and shovel, cutting trees, and smothering the fire with sand.” “A good fire plan saved nearly all the division’s vehicles.”\* Along with fire as a potential weapon the means to combat that threat was recognized and effective fire suppression capabilities were organized by the Germans. Historically, that same scenario could be played out throughout the ages. Native Americans found that fire could be utilized as a tactical weapon advantageous also against a determined foe, which will be discussed later. Besides battlefield uses there was also practical use of fire available to the native population.

Besides land-clearing, fire was used to cook food (indoors and outdoors) so gathering firewood was a necessity to the generation preceding my own. The lack of so-called modern appliances made the use of fire essential to living in relative comfort. Most people would consider the home environment safe, warm, and comfortable, but according to my dad and other relatives the natives from the past eras and those that remember growing up in that environment would not so readily agree with that viewpoint. While wood-gathering and hunting are seen as relics of the past or something associated with casual outdoor activity, up to the late 20th century such practices were needed for everyday accommodation in some native cultures, people needed to stay warm. I grew up at a time when my family’s house was heated with a propane furnace so I did not have to go out wood gathering/cutting by necessity as with my dad. He told me not only of the times of hauling wood by horse-drawn wagon, but also having to break ice in the river to get household water and haul that several miles back home. Thinking about my family’s struggles in everyday life while sitting on that mountainside also brought thoughts about other things my father did that were influential to my upbringing and my path to firefighting.

I watched my dad swing his hand cutter in a regular pendulum action resembling a pro golfer on the links taking his practice swings. If he had known there was money that could be made driving a golf ball around for a living, he may well have made a pile of money rather than a pile of weed cuttings. One thing that I got from my dad was that he was focused on the task at hand and the promise of a job well done. He was a believer of getting things done ‘the right way, the first time’. If he had to redo the work that you were responsible for, he was not happy about doing so. Yet he was a proud and humble man who liked seeing a job done well and in a timely manner. So it doesn’t surprise me that he did not share his firefighting stories with me even after I had been out with the crews for many seasons. He did not boast of his accomplishments.

My dad had mentioned once or twice that he had gone out firefighting with the Sho-Raps when he was younger. He said that they had gone to Washington State on a fire for a couple of weeks. I thought about his work ethic many times, especially when I became a crew boss, I would check our crew’s work progress and then come across an occasional hot spot that had been buried by dirt instead of being dug up and dry mopped\*. I thought about what I was seeing then chose the lesser of two evils sometimes as I would take time and dig up those hot areas and spread them so they cooled instead of staying hot in one spot. My pop would have grabbed those guys and brought them back to that spot and had them redo their work regardless of how long it took them to cool that spot. On occasion I would have a squad go back over their assigned area to double check and re-work some leftover hot areas. It was that thought of having a job left undone and not in a satisfactory manner that drove me to always check my crew’s progress so we would not have to do it again.

The crew’s would complain occasionally about having to go over the same area again and again. They saw the same assigned area as the day’s before and saw it as tedious and tiring especially if they heard that there was a hot fire raging elsewhere. They felt they were better used on a part of the fire where they could ‘punch line in’ instead of mopping up and patrolling a seemingly cold and dead out fire area. I could relate because I was in their place early on in my fire career. I wanted to be in a place where I felt that I made a difference, not in a blackened, already burned fire zone. I wanted to be where the action was. It seemed that time went faster when you had your tool hacking at the ground ahead of a moving fire and you kept moving.

But, as with any operation, there is a place for everyone to be. Just like military operations there is the frontline personnel responsible for the initial attack of the enemy front then there is the follow up by additional forces needed to mop-up behind the main fire front to take care of any residual pockets of resistance. It is no different in firefighting. As the main fire front has passed then the ground support troops begin their dirty work cleaning up from the main battle. It all started to come together: The war analogies and the everyday struggle for a people to survive made us stronger and less prone to carelessness when it came time to battle enemies or nature. That’s, maybe, why we return from battles/fire assignments without large-scale casualties or fatalities. We don’t take as many chances as other people (Have you ever seen a war movie where Indians stand in neat, organized rows yards from their enemy only to be mowed down by their foes armaments, reorganize, only to be gunned down repeatedly?) and only fight when it is advantageous to us. We go into places where we know we are going to return safely. Sometimes, though, we had to face overwhelming challenges to survive. Similar to General Lee we did not have our enemy’s seemingly inexhaustible resources, so we conducted ourselves only when we thought we could had a good chance to prevail and live to fight another day. Lee’s forces fought for their lands, but as time went on he could not defend even his own home from being overrun and like the Confederacy the native’s lands were consumed by the Union forces.

Like our ancestors we sought protection for the land we lived upon from outside invaders. My Cheyenne and Arapaho forefathers fought their battles against rival tribes, marauding hordes of white militia, or even the elements in trying to survive and protect what was theirs. They battled the Crow, Pawnee, Ute, and Shoshone for horses and hunting lands; they faced overwhelming odds against the white-led forces of various commands, most notably, those under one General Philip H. Sheridan. Sheridan’s policy of deprivation against the Plains tribes and, earlier, the slash and burn campaign against the Confederacy’s Shenandoah Valley in the Civil War produced its end product of subjugation of his enemies. Ironically, his later conservation efforts in the national parks and forests produced an unforeseen positive consequence: organized and effective wildfire firefighting. So as Sheridan fulfilled the government’s policy of eminent domain with the seemingly endless military campaigns against the original inhabitants of the American “wilderness” his acknowledgement of the fact that the nation’s wildlands needed protection from development spurred the military to become the protector of the nation’s parks.

It amazes me that there is a cyclical effect of one’s actions time and again. At the time, General Sheridan probably never guessed that one day the tribes arrayed in front of his armed forces would assume a place alongside his later charges on the war battlefields and the nation’s fire lines. Though the nation’s Indian population sees General Sheridan as a conqueror and fierce warlord whose forces pillaged and burned their way to white supremacy, we should still acknowledge his contribution to our present means to make a living in our nation’s forests.

We are able to make a living and to contribute to our economy by joining the military and serving our country. Not only there but also in the civilian forest firefighting crews that are counted on every year to battle the forces of nature throughout the nation. But to truly appreciate the contribution of Wind River’s Native firefighters to the economy - The merchants in the towns surrounding the reservation recognized the financial impact of having a firefighting crew on the local agency and the benefits of their efforts when the crews came home. Automobiles, televisions, children’s toys, clothing, etc. came flying off the shelves and off the car lots as crews returned home and cashed their paychecks – We need to look at Wind River’s history and the path that people took to reach into the future. Therefore we have to start at our beginnings.