



Photo Mark Erickson

Actual deployments on wildfires (such as on the Shelley Fire, R-3, shown here) reinforce the need for proper training procedures.

Dangerous Techniques For Fire Shelter Training

Dick Mangan, Program Leader

A recent article in a national firefighter magazine described a “live-fire” training exercise for wildland firefighters. In this training, fire shelters were deployed, firefighters were put inside, and a practice fire was allowed to burn over them.

Ted Putnam, fire shelter specialist at the USDA Forest Service Missoula Technology and Development Center (MTDC) in Missoula, Montana, strongly recommends against such “live training” using a fire shelter. “We’ve had previous experiences in this type of training where firefighters received burns and narrowly avoided serious injury or death,” he said. “This is not the most effective training method, and the high risk is not worth the minimal gain.”

The latest training techniques recommended by MTDC are contained in a pair of companion publications: *Your Fire Shelter* (PMS 409-1/NFES 1570, May 1991) and *Your Fire Shelter—Beyond the Basics* (Facilitator’s Guide PMS 409/NFES 2179, June 1991). These publications, which include lessons learned from previous fire entrapments and shelter

deployments, encourage training that emphasizes hands-on deployment of the shelter in a safe learning environment coupled with the exercise of “visualization” to help firefighters mentally prepare themselves for the greatest variety of conditions likely to occur in an actual entrapment and deployment.

Although MTDC discourages live-fire training, crews continue to use it. For more realism in training, some crews occupy shelters near burning brush piles. This achieves realism, but is still dangerous. Steps must be taken to ensure that a trainee doesn’t panic, leave the shelter, and run into the fire. Safeguards should include fire suppression equipment such as an engine and a radio link with the trainee. For this training only a new or fully serviceable fire shelter should be used. Do not use shelters taken out of service.

“Even with engines ready to spray water, problems have occurred, so we recommend even these more controlled fire shelter training experiences not be used,” Putnam said.



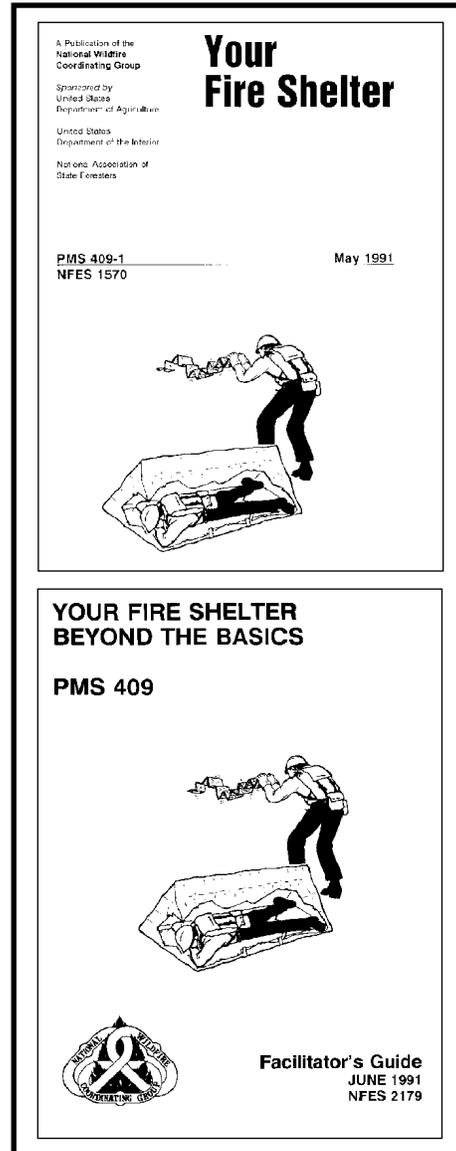
“The point is that crews have devised many realistic training sequences for shelter use over the years and even with what appears to be foolproof safety precautions, things have gone wrong,” he explains. “When practice fires are allowed to burn over people in shelters, there is even less control and, therefore, greater risk.”

Putnam emphasizes hands-on practice so that firefighters can learn to deploy their shelters in less than 20 seconds, which is essential in an actual deployment. To assist agencies in this training, MTDC is designing a “practice” fire shelter based on an idea developed by the California Departments of Corrections and Forestry. It will be available through the GSA Wildfire Protection Equipment and Supplies catalog in the Spring of 1994 and should be considerably cheaper than the fire shelter.



Safe training techniques include deployment coupled with visualization.

The publications *Your Fire Shelter* and *Your Fire Shelter—Beyond the Basics*, as well as an older video, titled “*Your Fire Shelter*” (NFES 1568) are available from the National Interagency Fire Center, 3905 Vista Ave., Boise, ID 83705



Proper training techniques are described in NFES publications.

For specific information about the fire shelter and its use, contact:

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