

# Run For My Life

By J. W. Henson

At 17 years of age I was thin and could run faster than the wind could blow. One day a call went out for volunteers to act as firefighters to come and help extinguish a fire along the eastern slope of White Oak Mountain. From Rabbit Valley Road I worked my way around the southern flank of the fire and between it and the crest of the mountain. I soon found myself in a steep, deep draw leading to the top of the mountain. The defile furnished an easier climb to the summit than along the near vertical face of the mountain. It was a beautiful fall afternoon with the blue-gray smoke furnishing a filter against the brilliant disc of the sun casting a brownish hue before the inferno. The fire was blowing itself into a roaring storm. It rumbled as a freight train under full throttle coming upon me from the rear. I paused to look down upon the conflagration with its blazes jumping from tree to tree and rapidly filling the gulch behind me. The heat was fierce on my face. My breath was coming in quick short gasps and my lungs felt as if they would burst from the exertion of the upward climb. A wind was rushing upward like the draught in a chimney. It was carrying the fire forward at a very fast pace. I would grasp one tree and pull myself forward and then push upward toward the next tree. I had to have that kind of a hand up in ascending the ridge. There was no one else about to save me. I was all alone and totally on my own resources for deliverance.

I studied the possibility of making a blind dash down through the fire and into the clear burned area beneath. However, the fire was jumping from tree to tree and burning cinders were falling onto the leaves and brush on the ground below. The ground fire was lagging behind the rush of flame in the tree tops making a long gauntlet of the forest fire to run across. I paused for only a second and then turning, I looked to the top of the mountain. It was a long, steep climb to the summit and the draught was drawing the fire ever faster to the top. Having turned I started running again for the pinnacle. About half way up I stopped again and surveyed the fire. It had closed up considerably on me since I started the run. I could feel the heat from the searing wind and hear the horrible roar of the leaping flames. I started running again only to find my strength dwindling, my heart thumping against my chest and my lungs about to burst from the exertion. The acrid fumes from the fire were choking. I was reminded of once when I was just a small child. I rolled up a page of the daily newspaper into a small tube, and lit one end with a match. Placing the other end to my mouth took a deep inhalation. The choking heat, flame, and strong fumes hurt in a most unpleasant way.

I kept my eye on the top and drew myself ever higher, knowing that the fire must pause and rest at the summit. The heat was searing, the noise overwhelming as I at last pulled myself over the top and a short distance down the other side before pausing to rest.

It was there that I learned that a fire is drawn up a steep fold in a mountain like flames leaping up a chimney. The only difference is that the wildfire finds new fuel at every leap of the flames. I lay there recovering my breath and considering the fate from which

I had just delivered myself. I learned a huge lesson that day, but accomplished little else. The flames were held at the top of the ridge. No one was around to counsel or report the near loss of my most valuable asset; life itself, and I never told them.

JWH III.