

A Look Inside the Yellowstone Airport Smokejumper Base



SEATs (Single Engine Air Tanker) AT-802 Photo Credit: Aeronautics Staff

The Yellowstone Airport is home to the West Yellowstone Fire Center. The United States Forest Service has owned and operated the smokejumper base since 1955. The base was originally established at the old airport west of the town of West Yellowstone before the airport moved to its current location in 1965 where it still operates today. Nationwide, there are approximately 450 smokejumpers, and WYS is home to 28 of them. The primary mission for the base is for a quick response to any wildland fires within the regions of Yellowstone National Park, Teton National Park, Gallatin Custer, and Caribou-Targhee National Forests. However, the smokejumpers are prepared to deploy anywhere in the nation when needed.

During the operating season the base is open to the public for facility tours. Joe Rock, Operations and Training Manager, says he will sometimes give three to five tours in a week. He enjoys when the schools take field trips to the base showing students around and giving them an in-depth experience into the life of a smokejumper. If you visit the base yourself, you'll see all of the jumping equipment including jump suits, packs, and harnesses, which are all made by hand by each jumper who uses them. In addition to hand making their own equipment, the jumpers also rig their own parachutes. To properly and safely do this, each jumper must become a Federal Aviation Administration certified parachute rigger.

At the back of the base is an equipment room which holds everything from chainsaws to sleeping bags. The jumpers use this room to prepare and maintain all of the equipment they might need while on a mission. There are several boxes outfitted with gas for the chainsaws, water, food, and a myriad of other provisions to support the jumpers while fighting fires. Each box is rigged with its own parachute, which the jumpers drop separately and later recover on foot.

Joe Rock has been with the USFS for 22 years and is originally from Wilsall, Montana. He spent much of his childhood around the smokejumper base in Missoula. For Joe, the best part about being a smokejumper in West Yellowstone is not only the team he gets to work with every day, but also all the cool places he gets to visit. He recalls his first jump from West Yellowstone into Yellowstone National Park as well as jumping in the Alaskan Brooks Mountain Range while simultaneously seeing the frozen Bering Sea and parts of Russia while parachuting down. On average, a smokejumper will jump five to ten wildland fires per year. Joe says that most of the time the public never knows when smokejumpers are deployed. "If we are doing our job right, then we are staying out of the public eye," he said.