

Personal portal

On July 6th 1994, 14 federal wildland firefighters died on Storm King Mountain in Colorado.

I was a young ADFMO working on the Klamath Ranger District of the Winema National Forest in Klamath Falls, Oregon. I heard the news that 9 crewmembers of the Prineville IHC had been killed on the South Canyon fire early on the morning of July 7th.

I had worked along side of the Prineville shots on many fires since 1980 when I came to Region 6. At the end of the 1987 fire season, when I was the foreman of the Winema IHC we joined the two crews together to form one crew to work the last days of the Silver Fire in Southern Oregon. Needless to say there was a connection however slight between myself and the Prineville Shots.

I sat at my desk on July 7th and tried to understand how, in 1994, any Hotshot Crew could be involved in such a tragedy. This kind of incident just did not happen anymore, especially to experienced Hotshot Crews. Sure in 1949 or 1956 or even in 1966, or 1990 it might have been a possibility but not in the mid 90's. Had we learned nothing from Mann Gulch, Inaja, Loop or Dude? After all we had all had "Standards for Survival" and LCES many times over the years and knew the 10 and 18 forwards, backwards and sideways. What had gone wrong?

The full effect of the tragedy did not really soak in until the afternoon of July 7th. I had business at the Interagency Dispatch Center at Kinglsey Field. When I drove up to the octagonal structure that housed the Dispatch Center I saw the Prineville IHC's crew carriers parked in the area behind the office.

I got out of my pick-up and walked over to the carriers and then it hit me. One of the crew carriers would be left empty when the crew came home from Colorado. Half a Hotshot Crew and 5 other wildland firefighters had been killed on a brush covered mountain in Colorado.

I went numb for several minutes, and then took care of my now seemingly insignificant business at the Dispatch Center. I drove back to the District Office, sat down at my desk and cried over the needless loss of life.

That week in July, 1994 had a profound effect on my career as a wildland firefighter. I decided that, God willing, I would get back into the IHC program. I believed that that was where I could have the greatest impact on the wildland firefighting culture and safety.

I also wrote the only poem I have written since grade school. and dedicated it to the Prineville Nine.

Dan Fiorito
Superintendent, Union IHC

THE DRAGON

EVERY SUMMER THE DRAGON COMES, IT LEAVES AGAIN IN FALL.

IT VISITS DESTRUCTION ON VARIOUS KINGDOMS THROUGHOUT THE RELM.

THE DRAGON HAS A NAME,

WILDFIRE.

SOME YEARS WILDFIRE IS SLOW AND LAZY AND EASILY BEATEN.

BUT OTHE YEARS IT IS QUICK AND LIKES TO FIGHT HARD.

WILDFIRE HAS FRIENDS WITH NAMES LIKD FUEL WIND AND TERRAIN.

FUEL IS DRY THIS YEAR AND BURNS HOT AND FAST WIND SEEMS STRONGER,

TERRAIN NEVER CHANGES.

WILDFIRE HAS ENEMIES WITH NAMES IT KNOWS, HOTSHOTS, SMOKE JUMPERS AND ENGINES,

TENDERS, TRACTORS AND TANKERS.

WHEN WILDFIRE VISITS A KINGDOM IT'S ENEMIES RESPIND WITH STRENGTH AND NUMBERS

TO BATTLE THE DRAGON.

USUALLY THE DREAGON LOOSES QUICKLY AND RETIRES FROM THE FIELD OF BATTLE,

LEAVING IT'S ENEMYS TIRED BUT UNHARMED.

OTHER TIMES THE DREAGON FIGHTS FIERCELY AND MAY EVEN SEND SOME OT IT'S ENEMIES

TO ANOTHER PLACE,

DEATH.

SOMETIMES THE DRAGON WINS.

WHEN THE DRAGON WINS IT SEEMS LIKE THE BATTLE IS NOT WORTH THE EFFORT,
FOR AWHILE.

THE ENEMIES OF WILDFIRE MOURN FOR THEIR FALLEN COMRADES AND COMFORT
EACH OTHER.

THEY GAIN STRENGTH, FAITH, HOPE, ENOUGH TO JOIN THE BATTLE,

ONCE MORE.

FOR THE DRAGON WILL RETURN.