

## A PERSONAL PORTAL TO WILDLAND FIRE SAFETY

### Robert W. Mutch

In 1976 I served as the fire behavior specialist on the fatality investigation review team on the Battlement Fire near Grand Junction, Colorado. For several days the team, under the direction of Team Leader Max Peterson, collected information, tracked down significant photo documentation, interviewed firefighters, analyzed weather and fire behavior data, and prepared a report of findings. This was the wildfire where retardant pilot Don Goodman of Missoula, Montana, died in a plane crash the day before the three Hotshots from the Mormon Lake crew were killed on a ridgetop. The fire swept up a steep chute from a burnout fire set far below by another crew from the Coconino National Forest in Arizona, overrunning four Mormon Lake crew members.

The crew burning out did not know there was a crew above them; and the crew on the ridge did not know that a crew from their own Forest was burning out directly below them. Appropriately a lot of attention today is being devoted to the importance of situational awareness and understanding, but on this day in Colorado in July 1976, situational awareness was nil.

Interviews with surviving crew member John Gibson at a burn ward in Texas and with personnel from the Coconino—coupled with knowledge of the last movements of the victims as they lay down on the ridgetop fireline just ahead of a high intensity burnover in Gambel's oak—left a permanent impression of tragic errors, suffering, and death. From that point forward my fire outlook changed forever—the new outlook was one focused on doing everything possible to spread the “lessons learned” to others all the time, everywhere, every way.

Because this “passion for safety” is so deep-seated, I took immediate notice of the remarks made by Kelly Close following his experience as a Fire Behavior Analyst on the Cramer Fire investigation team in 2003. He, too, went through a career defining catharsis. Because his journey during the fatality investigation mirrored mine, I followed his words intently: “I don't have all the answers, and will always be searching and learning. The Cramer Fire has forever changed how I look at my role as an FBAN. Not just on fires, but in interagency training courses and firefighter training and annual safety refresher classes within my own organization. It's becoming very apparent to me that the primary role of the FBAN **must** be for firefighter safety”.

Finally a friend recently placed a very meaningful name on this haunting feeling that has followed me since Battlement—a feeling that has placed human safety as the number one priority. We are indebted to Paul Chamberlin for describing the concept of a fire safety **Portal**. He reported in 2004 that career firefighters can pass through a “safety awareness portal” where new perspectives are achieved and their reality is meaningfully altered.

He went on to say that transiting the Portal is often related to traumatic events. He likened the transiting of the Portal to a wake-up call; and he projected optimism that well-conceived fire safety initiatives can assist people in transiting the Portal without personal trauma. Certainly a worthy goal for each of us to strive towards as we attempt to institutionalize lessons learned.

So 28 years after Battlement, I now have a measure of closure in knowing that passing through the Portal has very possibly been life-altering and beneficial for many.