

STAFF RIDE TO THE BATTLE OF LITTLE BIGHORN AND MANN GULCH FIRE



Lori Messenger

The longest hike during our Battle of Little Bighorn staff ride* takes us up to a lookout point a half mile (0.8 km) above Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer's now-famous "Crow's Nest." We are standing in southwest Montana at the final place where Custer hid and rested his troops.

From here, the infamous 7th Cavalry commander stood on that warm June morning in 1876 and tried squinting toward the enormous throng of Indian ponies where his Crow scouts were pointing. But Custer couldn't see them. These scouts told Custer that, out there in the distance, they were also seeing occasional Sioux hunting parties. Custer couldn't see them either.

The commander questioned his scouts, trying to learn as much about this enemies' behavior—and the ground they were gathering on—as he could. He seems to have sifted through this information and built as complete a situational picture as he could. Custer then made his decision and communicated it to his subordinates.

Was Custer's Decision Rational?

"Taking into account what you have learned about the Army's standard

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* For more information on the staff ride learning tool concept, see *Fire Management Today* issue on the Dude Fire Staff Ride (62(4)).



Vantage point. Staff ride participants look out from the very place where Lieutenant Colonel George Armstrong Custer made his fateful operational decisions the morning of the Battle of Little Bighorn. Photo: John Grosman, USDA Forest Service, Fire and Aviation Management, Eastern Region.

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operating procedures in 1876, how many of you think Custer made a rational decision at this time?" asks our staff ride facilitator, U.S. Army Historian Chuck Collins. The U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute is presenting this in-depth battle examination.

Our group is 30 strong, consisting of USDA Forest Service Fire Operations Safety Council regional representatives, fire training leadership, and other Forest Service rep-

resentatives; as well as fire staff from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the Montana Department of Natural Resources; and Los Angeles County.

Some participants have never experienced a staff ride before. During introductions, these novices say they hope to learn how this training tool works. The military began developing staff rides in the early 1900s and now administers them in three phases:

1. Preliminary study,
2. Field study, and
3. Integration.

In the Northern Region, we began seriously developing staff rides for wildland firefighters in 2003. That's when we started flying firefighters

and staff from a variety of agencies to the fatal 2001 Thirtymile Fire site. With this week's staff ride, we are now adding two more sites to our list of events to learn from—the Battle of Little Bighorn and the Mann Gulch Fire, which we will visit next.

The previous evening, our staff ride Incident Commander Jeff Scussel, assistant director of Fire and Aviation Management, USDA Forest Service, Northern Region, welcomed us to this week-long two-incident staff ride. He explained our objectives, to:

- Further the development of decisionmaking and leadership skills;
- Provide case studies in human factors (leadership, cohesion, and communications);
- Review high-risk, low-frequency situations and actions;
- Study and review key decision gates leading to fire management actions;
- Illustrate the value of staff rides as a national wildland fire training tool;
- Provide a team-building opportunity to regional training officers and members of the National Fire Operations Safety Council; and
- Provide selected individuals an opportunity to understand the staff ride concept and be able to apply it to their own situations.

Our required reading packet includes battle accounts from both Army soldiers and American Indians. Local tribal members Marvin Dawes, of the Crow Nation, and Linwood Tall Bull, of the Northern Cheyenne Tribe, join us to provide further insight from the Indian perspective. In addition, our facilitator Chuck Collins briefs us with background information about what the Army learned from 1866 to 1876 fighting Indian battles.

Learning in a New Way

We stand atop this ponderosa pine-covered hill, on an equally sunny, spring morning, looking miles ahead to where we know Custer and his troops will be killed.

Chuck asks us to think solely about the intelligence that Custer would have had here—without knowing what would happen next. Once again he asks, “How many of you think Custer made a rational decision?” Most of us grudgingly raise our hands. We have to acknowledge that, from all we had seen and studied so far, Custer's orders—at this decisive point—seem reasonable.

Being on the Little Bighorn Battlefield had been eerie, but for a Missoula Smokejumper, this place—Mann Gulch—hits much closer to home.

We know that frankness and honesty are important components to successful staff rides. Many of us therefore admit how, when we first arrived here this morning—even though we had been coached to remain open-minded—we were strongly biased against George Armstrong Custer. For myself, standing here now with my feet, eyes, ears—and *brain*—on the same piece of earth that Custer once occupied, I begin to learn in a new way.

For about 10 minutes, our discussion percolates. Then Chuck says it's time to move on. He has secured permission for our group to drive through private ranches so that we can better examine Custer's actions prior to the final battle.

Part of the staff ride learning phenomenon seems to be that for every question answered, three new questions arise. Facilitators need to keep the group moving, resist drawing simple conclusions, and be persistent in not allowing anyone to talk ahead of historical chronology.

At each stand Chuck follows a similar pattern:

1. Orient the ground. Show and explain what things looked like before.
2. Tell the historical story.
3. Analyze what happened before and apply these lessons to how we operate now.

Chuck also continues asking us to raise our hands if we think Custer's decision at each new point was a rational one. He explains how Army leadership made decisions in the late 1800s and how its leaders do so now. This provides for interesting comparisons to our current wildland fire organization.

Crucial Mistakes

As the staff ride hours pass, it becomes more and more clear to us that as Custer's day wore on, he started making crucial mistakes. He failed to see the evidence that the situation he faced was different than he—or any other Army leader at that time—had ever encountered. The Indians were not running. They were aggressively defending their ground.

In our staff ride prestudy information, we learned how Sitting Bull, a spiritual leader, had motivated his people to new heights of determination and organization. On the other hand, Custer's situational awareness had narrowed. He became eaten up with “*Victory Disease*.” Poor relationships with many of his follow-

ers—and even fellow leaders—caused his operation to deteriorate.

Gradually, as the staff ride continues, fewer of us raise our hands to say that Custer is still behaving rationally. We ask each other:

“When have we reached this point as fireline leaders and followers?”

Integration Phase

During integration, the staff ride’s third phase, the discussion bounces back and forth between our pre-reading, the day’s field experience, and challenges faced in the modern fire organization. Topics include:

- The importance of promoting and maintaining good relationships with your coworkers;
- The need for constant intelligence gathering and a willingness to change plans accordingly;
- Resisting assumptions about what you expect the day’s outcome to be; and
- Admitting defeat for the day and retreating before anyone gets killed—especially in fighting wild-land fires.

Many also talk about how this staff ride has allowed them to develop more important experience “slides” in their minds—to be used to compare to future incidents. One participant praises staff rides by proclaiming: “We’re not sending you to the movies; we’re putting you *in* the movies.”

Mann Gulch Fire

The next day we travel from Billings to a Helena hotel where we gather for the final portion of our Mann Gulch prestudy work. My role switches from participant-learner to facilitator-learner. Paul Fieldhouse, fire suppression and incident management training specialist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the

Northern Rockies, opens by asking the group to discuss how we might apply to our fire organization the concepts outlined in Karl E. Weick and Kathleen M. Sutcliffe’s book *Managing the Unexpected*.

We watch a 15-minute video of Bob Sallee, survivor of the Mann Gulch Fire, telling us what kind of young men became smokejumpers back in 1949. He reveals what this experience meant to him.

Next, Dave Turner, retired Helena National Forest employee, tells us the Mann Gulch Fire story from the imaginary viewpoint of 1949 USDA Forest Service District Ranger Bob Jansson who was in charge of the Canyon Ferry Ranger District where Mann Gulch is located. For him, the tragedy never seems to have ended. Turner’s presentation sets the tone for one of the next day’s assignments. We had asked each staff ride participant to arrive prepared to tell the story of one Mann Gulch firefighter.

Thursday dawns gray and misty. Just before 8 a.m., we drive our caravan of green vans and “six-pack” pickups to The Gates of the Mountains boat launch. Paul Chamberlin, Northern Rockies fire operations safety specialist for the USDA Forest Service, reminds us about ticks, snakes, loose rocks, and steep terrain. He instructs us to wear our hardhats.

As we motor up the river, the fog continues to rise—separating and dissipating like smoke released from its nighttime inversion. We pass through deep limestone cliffs. Our boat operator points to a cave he says contains 1,400-year-old Indian pictographs.



Paying respects. At the end of the Mann Gulch staff ride, participants negotiate the steep—fatal—hillside to honor the fallen firefighters where they died. Photo: John Grosman, USDA Forest Service, Fire and Aviation Management, Eastern Region.

Touching Sacred Ground

The history we are coming to study took place only 56 years before. I am hopeful we can trace the paths taken back then by foreman Wag Dodge and his smokejumper crew well enough to learn our own vital lessons.

As we step off the boat onto a stump and down to the river bank, there is a sense of touching sacred ground. Standing on the Little Bighorn Battlefield had been eerie, but for a Missoula Smokejumper, this place hits much closer to home.

We hike a few hundred feet into the mouth of Mann Gulch. Here, Dave Turner briefs us about what the weather and fuel load had been like back on August 5, 1949. Several of us pull marauding ticks off our arms and legs. We break into two prearranged groups: “the hares” take the lead with facilitator Paul Fieldhouse; I follow more slowly with “the tortoises.” To keep logistics smooth, we send Missoula

Smokejumper Dave Bihr ahead with a radio to help us locate important landmarks. Missoula Smokejumper Dan Cottrell brings up the rear, helping me herd the slower group and monitoring progress on our planned timeline.

We stop our groups for 30 minutes to an hour at each of the four pre-selected stands—all chosen where important decisions had been made. At each, Paul and I (sometimes utilizing Dave Turner's expertise) review significant events. We also invite two to three participants to tell the story of the "person of interest" they had been assigned. One creative soul pretends he is a ghost, providing him the analytical perspective to say retrospectively what he thought about the men's decisions and actions on that fateful day.

Leadership Key Topic

To give participants practice making and communicating decisions, we had prepared three tactical decision games. Paul and I had also developed several questions for each stand. Many center around whether or not our modern fire organization is adequately preparing people for the kinds of situations that the historical firefighters and managers faced in Mann Gulch.

We also discuss situational awareness, communication, crew cohesion, risk assessment, moral courage, and—always—leadership. We talk about where both Custer and the smokejumpers had reached their point-of-no-return.

The final stand takes place just above the rimrock where Bob Sallee, Walter Rumsey, and Bill Hellman passed through and made their final dash from the flame front. I invite participants to choose their own route up—just as those

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Even though the day has turned warm, chilly wind gusts buffet us at the top. Our group discusses rescue efforts. We wonder if those men died for any good reason. Then we all wander slowly back down the gulch, each of us stopping in silence to pay our respects at the monuments of the fallen firefighters.

Down at the river, we board the boat a few minutes after 4 p.m. From the chatter buzzing around me, I glean that people feel they have learned some things.

During our hour-long integration discussion at the boat dock picnic tables, most people agree that the chance to walk the physical ground instilled the lessons more deeply than any amount of reading alone could do. At the same time, participants also say that the reading helped prepare them to better understand what they saw once they arrived on the steep Mann Gulch slopes.

There is general agreement that we need to keep working on our tactical decision games so that firefighters can be clearer about what they are supposed to be doing—and *why*. We talk about the importance of communicating the commander's intent, about how we are working at developing crew cohesion, about how humans respond to life-or-death emergencies, and about how to keep situations from evolving to that point.

As the formal integration discussion concludes, dusk begins to slip around us. Informally, conversations will continue into the days and weeks ahead.

Change Fire Suppression Safety

In a follow-up staff ride report, participant John Grosman with the Fire and Aviation Management staff in the USDA Forest Service's Eastern Region, writes:

"Understanding the behind-the-scenes energy to investigate, honor, and protect this event and this site by so many folks gives me a new admiration for the people involved in this staff ride—and to those who are working to make it a standard learning exercise." Grosman also talked about the value of the prestudy phase and how *real* learning "requires personal investment of time."

The commander's intent for this Battle of Little Bighorn and Mann Gulch Fire Staff Ride is that the human factors lessons we learned will cling tenaciously to us as we advance onto our future fire grounds. We hope that participants can work to change the culture of fire suppression safety in their respective organizations. We see it happening already.

Reference

Weick, K.; Sutcliffe, K. 2001. Managing the unexpected: Assuring high performance in an age of complexity. University of Michigan Business School Management Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers. ■