By Travis Dotson

Do you recognize these three photos? If you’re a student of fire you should.

Many have noticed it. The eerie similarity of the “Lunch Spot”: South Canyon, Thirtymile, and, now, Yarnell Hill. Those are the big ones—and there are certainly others.

What is it? Why does it jump out to us? Why does its potential enormity make sense on some visceral level? Let’s take a look and see if there’s anything to this.

First, what makes a lunch spot a Lunch Spot?

Insignificant Lunch Spots
We’ve all been on innumerable insignificant Lunch Spots. It’s usually just the closest available shade at the logical breaking point for the day, nothing special. On long mop-up shifts it’s the place we gaggle-up and retell stories of blue-bird powder days and missed shots on monster bulls.

It’s where we get into mischief if we’re left unattended too long.

It’s where we earn ourselves push-ups and the crew lead decides we need to go another 100 feet in—just to keep us occupied.

But on the shifts we live for, it’s something else entirely.

Safe Place for Tactical Pause
When the smoke is churning and we’re slamming line, the physical location of the Lunch Spot often coincides with a decision point. It’s commonly a spot offering a safe place to take a tactical pause.

[Continued on Page 3]
When was the last time someone told you to “Be Safe!”? Was it at briefing? Was it at the last district safety meeting? Was it after lunch before you went back to the thinning project? Chances are it wasn’t that long ago. Chances are you recently told somebody else to “Be Safe”. We say it a lot, so what?

I have one simple question: What does “Be Safe” really mean?

When I hear these two words, am I supposed to do something? Does it mean roll my sleeves down and wear my gloves? Does it mean don’t do anything that could get me hurt? (That pretty much means don’t do anything at all, right?) It just makes me wonder why people always tell me to “Be Safe” as I’m heading out to do something that’s dangerous (like fight fire).

I sometimes wonder if certain folks are telling me to “Be Safe” so if I end up getting hurt they can say: “Well, I told him to be safe!” I know that’s not really the case. People are not malicious. I know that people who tell me to “Be Safe” are well intentioned. They really do hope that I don’t get hurt. But I don’t think saying those two words has any bearing whatsoever on whether or not I get hurt.

I think the phrase “Be Safe” has lost its meaning, or never really had any. It’s almost like saying: “Hey, let’s hope nothing bad happens!” We all know hope is not a plan.

Even with all the best intentions “Be Safe” (or “Stay Safe” or any other version of that statement) has become mindless rhetoric.

So, let’s toss it. I feel like I might actually pause and think about it if someone told me to “make good decisions” or “calculate the risk” or something along those lines.

Maybe we shouldn’t say the same thing all the time. Maybe we should constantly mix it up. “Have more than one escape route”, “be patient”, “help the new folks”, “ask questions”, “have a plan”, “look at your watch” etc. (I’m sure you can think of plenty of worthwhile things to say!)

Yes, I know I am rambling on and on about a silly little phrase. But that silly little phrase is indicative of how we approach things. It perpetuates the myth that our work environment is inherently safe and individual choices are what make it unsafe.

That just means it’s always your fault if you get hurt – and I don’t buy that.

Here is how it really is: We constantly enter an extremely dynamic and inherently unsafe work environment and the decisions we make may increase or decrease the amount of risk involved, but we will never make it entirely safe.

Don’t waste your breath telling someone to “Be Safe”. Make it count. Give them the courtesy of putting some thought into it and telling them something concrete and actionable.

Or, just wish them Good Luck.

Drink water, Tool Swingers.
In an emerging fire, the midday pause is often more than just a meal stop.

[Continued from Page 1]

You top out on a ridge, tie into a road, or hit a boulder patch and pause to question whether or not what you are doing is working. The time of day, progress—or lack thereof—and some physical feature spur discussion about a potential shift in focus.

Maybe it’s going from direct to indirect, from gaining ground to “hold what you got”, or moving out to start structure protection.

“Lunch” is often started with words along the lines of: “Alright, shade-up and grab a bite while we figure out what we’re going to do with this thing”. In short, it’s often just before, during, or after one—or several—transitions. Maybe there is chatter about the next ICS level and some fussing over a complexity rating. Maybe the next level of IC was just ordered or just arrived. In an emerging fire, the midday pause is often more than just a meal stop.

What Does It Look Like?

What does this situation actually look like?

Usually the crew is tired and everyone just sighs, slumps, and swigs. The quiet ones consume carbs and offer an audience while talkers ingest fuel and dispense words. The overhead is out wrestling with the innumerable inputs dealt them in this live fire tactical decision game.

As food disappears, a few folks instinctively chuck rocks while others obsessively calculate overtime, and a small group discusses the issue at hand—the fire and their collective future. This small group always has opinions while resigned to the fact they will saddle-up and hop-to whatever mission the crew lead hands down. Bets are even placed on what’s coming and everyone anxiously awaits the crackle of crew-net.

So What?

So what? Is this moment in time on a fire even significant?

Obviously, with hindsight, we can argue it is significant. It might not go down exactly as described or always take place while the crew is eating, but these conditions and the decisions made in those moments can literally determine life and death.

So what usually happens? Maybe a conscious decision about strategy is made or a casual request for assistance comes across the radio. Maybe we just notice a way we could be of use—and BAM—the afternoon action is on.

The Conscious Decision

The conscious decision about strategy sounds something like: “Hey, let’s gear up and head back to the trucks; looks like we are going big box on this thing.” That usually gets a few hoots and a grin or two—the likelihood of big burn shows and 16’s just went way up. We’ll prep anything you want for a chance at the torch.

[Continued on Page 4]
Entrapments by Time of Day
1993 - 2013

[Continued from Page 3] Obviously, the conscious decision could come in all different forms. It could be: “Air support and dozers are 20 minutes out; let’s keep hold of that anchor point and look for potential pinch points.” Or, it might be: “Sit tight. It’s a cluster down here and we’re just going to wait till things settle out a bit.” Either way, it’s an intentional action—based on the observed conditions.

Often times, a change in strategy calls for a tactical relocation. In those moments we think about efficiency and how we can contribute. We weigh options and make a decision based on what we currently know.

Maybe we head off to a ranch. Usually we make it to the ranch, sometimes we barely make it to the ranch, and once in a great while we become proof that this work environment is way more complex and dangerous than we are willing to acknowledge.

The Request
The casual (or frantic) request for assistance could be any number of things:

- “Can you guys take a quick look at those structures up the road?”
- “Can we get a little help with these spots up here?”
- “Can we get a hand bumping this water down the line?”

Sometimes it’s not even spoken. We just see what is needed and jump in. All normal stuff. All innocent. We are a crowd of folks helpful by nature and disgusted by sluggish responses. Damn right we’ll help. In the moment, we don’t always grasp the gravity of an innocent decision to jump in and help out.

All of this takes place as we head into the most volatile portion of the day. The vast majority of entrapments happen between 1400 and 1700. That’s just what the numbers say. Do we know why? Not really. Although lots of folks have opinions about it. We can speculate.

Often, the afternoon has the highest potential for fast-moving fire. When fire moves fast we have less margin to operate in—less decision space in unexpected situations. A walk up the line at 1500 is a drastically different risk than when we last did it at 1100. Same piece of ground, different conditions, less margin. Normal decisions that typically work out fine—can end up with tragic outcomes.

[Continued on Page 5]
I don’t think we’re conscious of how complex things really are and how close to the ragged edge we sometimes operate.

Does Any of This Mean Anything? Implications? Are there any? Does any of this mean anything?

Or, is it just another made-up common denominator to throw around in the classroom to show students how salty and smart we are? It can certainly be used that way. But could it be something else? Something useful?

A set of alarming words used to initiate dialogue in the moment. A method for re-booting awareness of what we’re facing and what’s at stake:

- “Is this going to be a Lunch Spot people talk about?”
- “Are we changing tactics just before 1500?”
- “Was that a casual request for assistance on an emerging fire?”

Whether any of this is of merit is certainly up for debate. But I am convinced that using the “Lunch Spot” as an opportunity for reassessment has value.

After the shock of Yarnell Hill and all the other tragedies of 2013, we—as the Wildland Fire Service—are currently at the “Lunch Spot.”

A few folks are chucking rocks just waiting for the next assignment. There are those who see no reason to do anything different and want us to “just keep doing what we’re doing and stay heads-up.” Some are looking back at what we’ve done so far and the terrain ahead and are muttering: “It’s not worth it.”

A bold few are out scouting for a different way to do things.

I’m terrified we’re not acknowledging the gravity of the situation, not using this pause to genuinely take stock of what we are facing. Does what we’re doing make sense? I’m afraid we’re going to gear-up with good intentions and unknowingly head off to repeat history.

Because of our history, those two words have come to represent a critical decision point. It’s the small window we have to put real thought into: What we’re facing; What really matters; and What we’re willing to risk. So let’s use it.

Are We Heading Off to Repeat History?

After the shock of Yarnell Hill and all the other tragedies of 2013, we—as the Wildland Fire Service—are currently at the “Lunch Spot.”

We’ve been heads down throwing dirt for quite a while and despite all our aggressive well-intentioned efforts we just got crushed. We’re sitting in the black wondering what to do now.
Shop Talk

Fine Line Dining

Turn your MRE from chalk block to tolerable!

Apple Cobbler

Chocolate Pudding
Coca beverage combined with the creamer and sugar packets—with just a little water—will make “pudding”.

Enchilada Soup
DIRECTIONS: Cut Beef Enchiladas into small pieces. Add Cheese Spread, water, and hot sauce. Mix well.

Mexican Delight
Take the sleeve that everything comes in and roll it down until it’s 4-5 inches deep. This is now a bowl into which you can combine different parts of the MRE and mix them up for a more satisfying MRE experience. For instance, in the Chicken Quesadilla MRE: Heat the main meal, along with the nacho cheese packet. Crush the crackers. Empty everything into your “bowl”. Add Tabasco sauce. Yummy!

Mocha Frosting
INGREDIENTS: 1 pouch of MRE cocoa. 1 packet of instant coffee. Water as needed.
DIRECTIONS: Add only enough water to the cocoa mix to resemble frosting. Add coffee granules as needed to create a mocha flavor. Spread this frosting on such items as MRE pound cake, cookies, and crackers!

Pot Luck Pie
INGREDIENTS: 1 pouch Beef Stew. ½ packet Cheese Spread. 4 dashes Hot Sauce (optional). ½ pack Crackers (crumbled).

Spicy Turkey-Melt ala Shovel
Place your fireline turkey sandwich onto your shovel. Hold over heat source until it reaches desired melt state. MRE cheese can also be applied.

Got your own MRE recipes? Please share them with us: lessonslearnedcenter@gmail.com

Thanks to our brothers and sisters in the U.S. Military who contributed to these recipes.

Ideas on topics for this Shop Talk page?
Contact: Paul Keller prkeller@fs.fed.us
503-622-4861
Eric Hipke

His Lunch Spot Story – and His Vital Insights

By Paul Keller and Alex Viktora

You probably have a Lunch Spot story. We all do.

But only a select few have Lunch Spot experiences that end up being studied and reviewed. Eric Hipke knows. On July 6, 1994, starting at approximately 1400 hours, he was with those firefighters at the Lunch Spot on the South Canyon Fire.

Today—as you will see on the following pages—we can learn a lot from Eric’s experience. Especially his insights on the opportunities a Lunch Spot tactical pause can provide, including the commo that can occur, our work biases, and the valuable ability to simply decide to disengage.

First, let’s try to see that day shaping up through Eric’s eyes. Let’s see how he got to that particular Lunch Spot. And—most importantly—let’s hear the key lessons, ideas, and warnings that Eric now holds for us.

Eric Hipke bags his jump gear after jumping into the South Canyon Fire on July 6, 1994. Photo by Tony Petrilli.

“I think everybody was just thinking, like, what in the hell are we going to do now? You know? Just what exactly are we going to do with this thing?”

Fell in Line with Their Plan

“We came in and just kind of fell in line with their plan, which was to dig line down along the fire’s west flank,” recalls Eric about this very hot and very dry July day.

“We were working in brush that was from 10 to 12 feet high. I’d never been in brush like that,” says Eric. “It was awful.”

Next, nine members of the Prineville Hotshot Crew—helicoptered up onto that ridge above—hike down and join the smokejumpers with this line-digging assignment.

Eric says they probably built around 700 yards of line in approximately three hours. “Getting through that brush took a lot longer than we thought it would.”
Take a break. It was like, OK, let’s re-group and figure things out.

“We thought we’d be getting around that whole west flank by now. But we realized we were only just a partial way across it. I think everybody was just thinking, like, what in the hell are we going to do now? You know? Just what exactly are we going to do with this thing?”

**Overriding Mindset: We Want to Work**

Eric says the vibe on the fire—among those there at the Lunch Spot—was: “It’s [the fire’s] probably kind of bigger in size for the resources we have.” Even so, he describes what all firefighters can totally relate to. “But there’s this work ethic sort of thing. You know. You’re there to do a job. So you’re going to do that job with whatever you have. Psychologically speaking, we want to work.”

Eric explains the propensity toward this entrenched mindset is probably a “curse” for all firefighters. (More on that later.)

**Reevaluating Their Plan**

At the same time, Eric says how once they got to that Lunch Spot, they definitely were reevaluating their original suppression plan. One of the smokejumpers had gone out to scout the fire down into these two—double—draws below them. “He was going to see how far down the fire was and what we needed to do. He was going to go out there and gather some Intel, come up with the new plan.”

Eric explains how this being his fourth season of jumping—by North Cascades Smokejumper standards—“I was still a young guy. It wasn’t up to me to be doing a lot of the input. I wasn’t part of the decision-making structure at all. I was just a worker—waiting for somebody to come up with a plan.”

Part of the emerging plan at the Lunch Spot was to have the nine Prineville Hotshots improve and hold the West Flank line. Eric went with them. “That ended up being a game changer for me.”

**The Rest of the Story**

Unfortunately, we all know the rest of this story.

At 1520 hours, a dry cold front hits the fire. Forty minutes later, a spot fire ignites the ridge face below and races up the hill. Eric makes it to the top of the ridge—five quick seconds before the 200-foot flame lengths sweep over it. He survives. The 12 firefighters just down the ridge beneath him do not. The South Canyon Fire takes 14 firefighters from us.

**Insights and Lessons**

Eric was a North Cascades Smokejumper for the next two years. He transferred to the Boise Smokejumpers in 1996. His last season jumping was 2010. He worked as a smokejumper for a total of 21 years—making 483 jumps.

Eric believes the toughest thing that confronts a firefighter is to say: “No”.

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**Eric believes the toughest thing that confronts a firefighter is to say “No” to the plan.**

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See what other crews are thinking—how they’re looking at the big picture.

“That’s got to be one of the biggest obstacles we face. To say ‘No’ to the plan. But so many times, you may be implementing a plan that is several hours old. A plan that they came up with the previous evening—under different anticipated conditions. And now—all of a sudden—something’s changed. You need to pay attention to that,” emphasizes Eric, who now works as an Audio-Visual Specialist at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise.

“It’s up to you—to everyone—to pass that back up the chain-of-command and say: ‘Hey, things have changed. We can’t do what you wanted us to do.’

“Somebody needs to make that brave call that, hey, this is beyond what we can handle at this time—where we are and the fire behavior that’s going to happen. To say ‘No’ to the plan. That’s the bravest, toughest call anybody can make.”

Fostering Communication

Eric believes the transition to the Lunch Spot—on any fire—can provide that vital opportunity to reassess and reengage.

“People also need to be thinking about how they can foster communication among their crew. And it’s up to the crew boss to enable that two-way communication. As a crew boss, because you have all these other obligations to be thinking about, you might not be aware of everything that’s going on around you.”

Eric expands this communication task to include talking with other crews. For instance, at Lunch Spots, we typically “group up” with our own crew members.

“As humans, we tend to gaggle up in our own tribes,” Eric points out. “We should try to remember the importance of inter-crew communication. See what other crews are thinking—how they’re looking at the big picture.”

Firefighter Work Ethic

“I think our work ethic as firefighters ‘guilts’ us in to keep working. We don’t want to be the crew who is just sitting there watching the fire,” Eric says—adding that, of course, many times taking this tactical pause to determine to disengage is the absolute correct strategy.

Eric explains that we shouldn’t forget that maybe there’s a time and a place to simply sit there and watch. “And, often, that happens between 1500 and 1800 hours.

“That might be the time to reevaluate what you’re doing,” Eric says. “Just regroup, sharpen tools, hold and maintain.”

Hey, things have changed. We can’t do what you wanted us to do.
Three Individuals and One Hotshot Crew Receive Annual Paul Gleason Lead by Example Awards

Based on their work in support of the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program, last month, three people and one crew received the 2013 Paul Gleason Lead by Example Award. The intent of this award is to recognize individuals or groups who exhibit Gleason’s professional spirit and who exemplify the wildland fire leadership values of duty, respect, and integrity.

Carl Seielstad
Initiative and Innovation

Carl Seielstad, a professor and researcher at the University of Montana, has more than 20 years of operational fire experience as a hotshot crew member, smokejumper, and Type 3 IC. In 2008, Carl established the prescribed fire practicum at the UM. Each January, he partners with The Nature Conservancy in Georgia to bring students to the southeastern U.S. to run prescribed burns that restore longleaf pine habitat. In 2011, Carl led the UM’s College of Forestry and Conservation to establish and gain approval for a “minor” degree in wildland fire sciences and management. As grad student Tyson Atkinson says of Carl Seielstad: “In his vision, learning opportunities in the field are vital to giving students the principles and values of a motivated and safe wildland firefighter.”

Jim Shultz
Mentoring and Teamwork

Jim Schultz, Wildland Fire Training Program Manager for the National Park Service, was selected for his ability to develop subordinates across agency boundaries through efforts such as the “Fire and Aviation Mentoring Program” and the “National Interagency Joint Apprenticeship Committee.” He served as the Deputy Commander for the Honor Guards and Pipes and Drums at last season’s Granite Mountain Hotshot Memorial Service. Jim also helped pioneer the Wildland Fire Leadership and Career Development video series to help young firefighters answer questions regarding the correct steps to take toward making a permanent career as a wildland firefighter.

Chad Fisher
Motivation and Vision

Chad Fisher, Wildland Fire Safety Program Manager for the National Park Service, has been recognized and applauded for his work with the Dutch Creek Mitigations. His actions to reach across agency boundaries have contributed to a shift in culture regarding incident-within-an-incident planning. Chad’s dedicated effort to ensure that we understand, weigh, and communicate the consequences of placing firefighters in harm’s way to decision-makers—as well as ensuring that there is always a mechanism for evacuating injured firefighters—sets the example for all to follow. In addition, Chad has been commended for his work with firefighter nutrition, the Incident Response Pocket Guide revision, leadership development activities, FLAs, and serious accident investigation teams.

The Palomar Interagency Hotshot Crew
Initiative and Innovation

The Palomar Interagency Hotshot Crew, based on the Palomar Ranger District/Cleveland National Forest, was selected for demonstrating initiative and innovation through efforts such as their crew website and their 2012 “Leadership in Motion” video. The Palomar Hotshots continue to provide leadership development through non-traditional leadership styles and allow individuals to strive for a higher performance level as a leader. [See the Spring 2013 Two More Chains “One of Our Own” for insights into this crew’s philosophy and practice regarding leadership and team building.]

Paul Gleason
1946-2003

Paul Gleason, taken by colon cancer at 57, was dedicated to wildland fire leadership. During his remarkable four-decade wildland fire career—with 20 years of hotshot crew leadership experience—Gleason made numerous contributions to the wildland fire service, including developing LCES. He will always be known for his passionate crusade for firefighter safety and propelling his “student of fire” philosophy.

Know any firefighters who are good mentors? To learn more about the Paul Gleason Leadership Award and how to nominate a candidate:
http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/LBE_award/LBE_award_info.html

Interview with Paul Gleason for the Wildland Fire Leadership program’s “Leaders We Would Like to Meet” series:
http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/leaders_meet/interviews/leaders_PaulGleason.html
Equivocate: To use ambiguous or unclear expressions—usually to avoid commitment. To use “hedge words”.

Hedge Words: Hedge words make statements less forceful or assertive. While they are sometimes intended for politeness, they often end up “softening” the message: “It strikes me that you’re apparently mistaken—I think.” We often don’t even realize that we are using these hedge words—also known as “soft talk”. Most of the time, these words can undermine our credibility and make us appear less confident.

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By Mark Rosenthal
<markrosenth@blm.gov>

Air Attack to a Division Supervisor over Command: “I think I’m gonna use ‘Air-to-Ground 2’.”

Why do we THINK we are going to do something?

Is Air Attack changing frequencies here? Suggesting a change in frequencies? Unsure of which frequency to use? Or, is he—inadvertently—using “hedge words”? [See sidebar box (on right) for a bunch of these potential culprits.]

By the way, in this specific case—on a fire last season—this was a very good Air Attack doing a very good job. Yet he left me unsure of which frequency to use. And, as I listened carefully to more radio commo, I realized it wasn’t just this Air Attack. It became obvious that we have a problematic communication pattern embedded in our culture.

Sorta Kinda Maybe

Have you, too, noticed how we “kinda” talk to each other these days?“ How we “sorta kinda” use “maybe” and “hopefully” a lot. Or, how about this for hedging or softening: “If it’s not too much trouble, you might ask someone to see if they think they can try to give [fill-in-the-blank] a shot.”

Why do we automatically believe that clear, direct statements will “feel” too strong to our message’s receiver? Because of this apprehension, we insert a “safety net” in the form of hedge words. This unfortunate outcome is most common over the radio—where the receiver is unable to read body language, facial expressions or hand gestures that are automatically used by the sender to “soften” communications.

A Lesson for the Wildland Fire Community

Last year, during an opportunity to work with a military unit, I often heard the Lieutenant Colonel giving direction (commands) to a Captain. His orders were always clear and concise. At the same time, you could tell this Lieutenant Colonel had respect for the Captain’s skills and abilities. The military considers communication an art. Officers are evaluated on their ability to deliver clear, concise intent to their subordinates. There is a lesson here for the wildland fire community.

Another good example is how our partners in Law Enforcement communicate. Would these folks ever say: “I think I am going to ask you...” [Continued on page 12]
[Continued from page 11] to get out of the car now.” Or: “I think it may be a good time to evacuate—if it’s not too much trouble”.

We Struggle to be Clear

Why does wildland fire avoid direct statements? In our profession we pride ourselves in clear text and efficient/effective communication. Yet, in reality, we often don’t achieve it. Ironically, this is most apparent in operational communication where the margin of error cannot allow for assumptions or a lack of clarity: Air Attacks, ICs, Ops Chiefs, Hotshot Sups, Crew Leads—all levels of fire ground leaders often struggle to be clear.

We usually know what we want or need to say. So why do we couch this information with hedge words? Do we fear being direct will be interpreted as harsh or uncaring? In our business, being direct should always be interpreted as important and required.

I believe that we don’t realize how pervasive the use of hedge words has become in our everyday conversations. [See short video in the “Speaking with Conviction” video box on previous page.] How we speak to each other when we’re hanging out—is how we speak to each other on the fireline.

Practice communicating without hedge words. Commit to the certain and unequivocal. Go for the bold and be sure in your words.

Good luck.

Thank You

This issue marks the fourth year of operation for Two More Chains.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time over the past three years to share words of encouragement and appreciation for this publication. We are truly grateful for your positive input. It helps reinforce our original—and ongoing—intent and commitment to provide wildland firefighters with a useful and relevant communication tool.

And, if we should make a misstep along the way, please let us know about that, too! Your constructive criticism is highly valued.

The Lessons Learned Center Team