Dear Reader,

To get a better perspective on our fire Dispatchers’ day-to-day challenges, we decided to go straight to the source. We asked four Dispatchers to write Blog Posts for the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC). [Links to the four Blog Posts: Trust, Relationships and Communication; Are Dispatchers Exposed to Trauma?; Nobody Gets Hurt on My Watch – I Naively Lived By that Motto; and The Incident that Changed Me.]

We were hoping that these folks could help us all better understand what confronts our Dispatchers and what insights and stories they might share with us, the broader wildland fire community. We weren’t disappointed. In their Blog pieces, these four Dispatchers provided us with their sincere and thoughtful—and sometimes very difficult and painful—reflections.

They have done so in an effort to enhance a better understanding of what they do in their fire jobs. Their heartfelt intent here is to help foster an improved and enlightened relationship and appreciation between all of us.

While their input covers an array of themes—from misconceptions concerning Dispatch to how Dispatch is often forgotten and overlooked—a consistent key theme is how our Dispatchers are also exposed to trauma. We therefore chose that subject to be the focus of this issue of Two More Chains. Excerpts and summaries from the Dispatchers’ original Blog Posts are included in this article.

An Overlooked Truth: Our Dispatchers are Exposed to Trauma

By Paul Keller

Tracey Kern, Center Manager at the Fort Collins Interagency Dispatch Center, says when she first started her Dispatch career in 2003 she was certain that Dispatchers were not exposed to trauma.

“After all,” Tracey recalls, “I thought, we are on the radio. How much trauma can we really encounter?” But fast forward 15 years. “Today, my answer is a definite YES!” she affirms. “There’s no question that Dispatch is the most important piece of the plan that everyone always forgets.”

“While firefighters are dealing with the emergency in person, we are dealing with it over the phone and over the radio. We hear it all,” confirms Renae Crippen, Center Manager at the Blue Mountain Interagency Fire Center. “We are the ones who bring in the EMS services, medevac ships, and the transports for body retrieval. We hold our breath waiting to hear the outcome.”

“The mental and emotional toll is variable from person to person,” points out Dolores Garcia, former longtime Bureau of Land Management Dispatcher. “But we often have our ways internally within the Dispatch Center to work through this, or we ‘tough it out’—maybe,” she confides.

[Continued on Page 4]
Bad stuff happens on the fireline all the time. Whether it’s a super scary close call or a ragged last breath. Bad deals are common.

We are a group that cares about one another. We care more about those we know personally, the folks we sleep or slept next to in the dirt are in our inner ring of concern. When they get a lights-and-siren ride to the ER, we go see them and make sure the paperwork is filled out right. Pretty straightforward.

When they are involved but not physically injured in a bad deal, we give them a call or send them a supportive text. But more likely we dial-up someone close to the drama and ask:

“Hey – how is my old saw partner doing?”

And the response is often:

“Ah man…he’s hurting.”

What does that mean?

In our language there is a difference between “hurt” and “hurting.” Hurt is what happens every time the crew plays volleyball. Hurting is our code word for emotional/psychological struggle—whether after a single event, cumulative trauma, or just everyday life holding our head under water.

More Folks Than We Realize are Hurting

We know how to handle hurt (visit, bring food, make jokes—fill out the paperwork).

Hurting is where we stumble around in the dark bumping into s**t before shrugging our shoulders and moving on.

There are a lot of folks hurting. More than we realize.

If you grazed wingtips mid-air, had to ditch your gear to run for your life, or had to pack your mangled buddy off the hill, it may seem like everything worked out OK for you. But it’s also possible a bit of bad is snuggled up inside your head just waiting to show you freaky flash cards in the dead of night. We tend to expect and support that reaction these days if you were in the bullseye. But we are almost blind to the next ring out.

The folks surrounding this great big trough of trauma are who we dismiss. What about those who experience the agony of horrific events culminating with cries for help they can’t sooth from a console?

Our Narrow View of Injury

We have been slow to acknowledge the possibility of those “peripherally” touching tragedy to be hurting.

Why would Air-Attack be suffering? They were safe in a cockpit playing NASCAR in the sky. Why would the other crew be affected? They just helped carry the backboard. Why would the supervisor be impacted? She was back at the home unit on days off. Why would the Dispatchers be hurting? They were just listening on the radio.

These are all the same version of our narrow view of injury. And we all know it’s BS.

These bleak events crawl inside our hearts because we care. We all have different backgrounds and skillsets related to getting by and getting better. Many among us are wired for growth through hardship and find a way to triumph in response to adversity—eventually.

Just as many of us are sitting on years of unpacked darkness that we try to drown each time it comes calling. We never know which event is going to put us on our knees—no matter how close or far we are from it.

Either way, dark days are often spent in solitude—especially if no one knows we’re hurting. If you happen to be outside the bullseye, chances are you’ll be crushed by the stampede of those scrambling to support the center. But we can change that.

Let’s Not Leave Anyone Out

Acknowledge those outer rings. The people exposed directly in Dispatch all the way to those people suffering from the slow and steady accumulation of similar events.

We know it’s happening. Let’s try getting in front of it. Let’s invest in some sort of pre-trauma training in resiliency. Let’s accept and prepare for what’s coming.

And let’s not leave anyone out.

Be Brothers and Sisters, Tool Swingers.
[On Sunday June 30, 2013, Dolores Garcia was working the Aircraft Desk at Phoenix Dispatch. She listened as the Initial Attack Dispatchers relayed a new National Weather Service alert about the potential for strong out-flow winds from passing storms. She heard that Prescott Dispatch had received a similar warning and were relaying it to their IC and resources on the Dean Peak Fire near Kingman. At that time, she said out loud to herself: “I hope Arizona Dispatch has got the same alert and is doing the same for Yarnell.” She remembers hearing the IC on the Dean Peak Fire move resources off the line. She remembers how everyone was responding once they were in safe locations. She remembers watching the radar, seeing the winds, the grounded aircraft because of winds, how they got them flying again, and how the orders came in—all for the Yarnell Hill Fire that had taken the lives of 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots.

Today, Dolores explains how she will always remember many details from that day, including conversations with Duty Officers, the Dispatch Center and Agency Managers. “They are burned into my brain,” Dolores says. What follows is Dolores describing what happened in her Dispatch world in the days that followed this fireline tragedy.]

My Goal Since that Day:
To Advocate for Taking Better Care of Our Own
By Dolores Garcia

In the coming days I would get assigned to work as a PIO on Yarnell Hill, tied to Arizona State Forestry Public Affairs/Information Officer, and work out of the Arizona Dispatch Center. I watched while the Prescott Dispatch got Dispatcher relief coordinated through the Southwest Coordination Center, allowing the primary Dispatchers in that center some days off following the Granite Mountain Hotshot tragedy. The same was either not offered to Arizona Dispatch, or when it was, it was “too little too late,” yet they were the primary Dispatch Center dispatching the fire. Many of these Dispatchers had been detailed from other areas/states. They remained in their seats through it all, for days, in various stages of shock, or denial, or numb, running on adrenaline with the occasional bout of tears. We all just wanted to get it done for THEM, Granite Mountain.

A “Peer Support” team showed up, stood at the head of the Dispatch Center, gave a short speech and said they would be available in the building next-door, for however many hours. I don’t recall anyone actually taking advantage of it, or any management encouragement to go. Today, even my memory of that moment rings with a touch of the same grit, gall and bitterness that ran through many who just wanted to get through and get this fire out for THEM.

On a trip to Prescott days before the memorial, I encountered my direct supervisor. He had advised that they had a group peer-support session and AAR for those who were on Initial Attack. He mentioned they were working as a management team to get those resources some time off. I asked if he had remembered Dispatch. They had not. With tears in my eyes, I registered my concerns to my supervisor. To this day I don’t know that it affected anything. None of my agency Dispatch counterparts nor I got any days off.

These were the same detailers who sat in those chairs on THAT day, who could have used a memorial service to heal.

For the memorial service, the local Dispatchers and center management attended from Arizona Dispatch. The detailers volunteered to stay behind, as there were limited tickets to attend, to continue management of a few other fires that were ongoing. These were the same detailers who sat in those chairs on THAT day, who could have used a memorial service to heal. And yet I saw firefighters from around the country being offered tickets to attend.

Those staying behind needed a local resource who was familiar with the area as well as the Dispatch Center to help guide the detailers in case of a new start or resource questions. So I, too, stayed behind. We watched the televised memorial from the Dispatch Center, as many did—but none so directly affected as this center.

To this day I have not dispatched since. My quals have since lapsed and tears flow every time I think of that lightning strike on the hill on June 28. The Dispatchers that worked with me in the Phoenix Dispatch Center for Initial Attack and Aircraft, the managers who were made aware of my concerns on those fateful days, and my time with the Arizona Dispatch Center in the days following, are all a part of that period of time burned into my memories.

I continue to process to this day. Part of my processing also included “giving back” to the NIMO Team and some of the resources who helped with the 2013 Granite Mountain Memorial, when I traveled to Wenatchee, Washington to assist as a PIO for the Twisp Fire Memorial in 2015.

My goal since that day has been to advocate for taking better care of our own. Not just saying it and throwing an EAP pamphlet on my desk. (Which I have had to use personally as a place to start, not knowing where to turn for more professional help.) And to remind our Agency Administrators and our Fire Managers about other supporting personnel, like Dispatchers and PIOs or PAOs and how they are affected in times of crises.

Many of us are still processing. To recognize the inherent nature of the business and the stresses and strains it places on all of us, we need to do better. We need to provide ways to cope and recognize the need for help for others or ourselves and instill the habit of reaching in and reaching out.

We need to retrain a culture that wants to help (rescuers), to recognize the need and help those within heal from trauma.
On October 26th, 2006, the day started as any other day.
I came in and heard there was a fire that had started in our neighboring Dispatch Zone that was Mutual Aid for us. Because it originated on their ground they were the ordering point. I picked my assigned frequencies for the day. I was going to give my friend the Primary Forest Service Frequency assignment. I would be her back-up because even though it wasn’t our fire, she would still be busy with it.

At 7:57 a.m., the Forest Service radio went off: “San Bernardino Emergency Traffic.” My friend answered: “San Bernardino, Go Ahead.” “Engine 57 has been burned over. I need four ambulances and a coroner!”
As a Dispatcher hearing this call, my heart stopped. I couldn’t breathe. I started questioning: Is that what I really just heard?
Then, as the field’s lifeline, in the next moment I quickly snapped out of it, realizing those field units are depending on me to get them the help they need.
So my friend and I got Medical en route and started making the notifications. As the news spread, the entire Forest was given Admin Leave—except for Dispatch. We had an Accident Investigation Team coming in to support. And we also now had other agencies to Dispatch for. So we went along with business as usual.

That is When I Blew-Up
A week later, an Accident Investigation Team member came into our Dispatch Center and said: “We are bringing Engine 57 off the line today.” My friend and fellow Dispatcher said: “OK.” This Accident Investigation Team member looked at her and said: “I know you don’t understand in your pea brain the magnitude of this, but it is a big deal.”
I watched and waited for my supervisors to step in, only to see them do nothing. That is when I blew-up at this man. “Of course we know the significance of this action,” I told him. “We were here when the first call came in. We have done the moments of silence in memory of all the Engine Crew members and we are still here doing our jobs. So don’t tell me that I don’t know the significance and magnitude of this tragedy.”
Thankfully, another supervisor heard this entire commotion and stood up for us and banned that guy from the Dispatch floor. At that point, the Agency finally decided to offer Dispatch CISM help if we wanted it. But, for me, it was too late. I had been coping with this incident my own way. I didn’t need their pity help.

Grow as a Person and Leader
Every year during that week from October 26th to October 31st—when the last Engine 57 crew member passed away—it is hard for me. I don’t have to read the book, read reports or listen to recordings of the incident. This incident is forever recorded in my head. It is triggered in October and in different situations.
I have tried to use this tragic event to help me grow as a person and as a leader.

[Continued from Page 1]

“The experiences then become slides we use for the next one and examples we use when training the rookies. We build ‘thicker skin’ and move forward—maybe,” explains this veteran Dispatcher.
Dolores continues, “Trauma becomes relative to your experiences, preparing you each time for the next one, building confidence that you can manage and handle each one that comes at you.”
She questions if we are truly seeing the cumulative emotional toll that these various slides take on our Dispatchers. At the same time, she acknowledges that these slides provide the Dispatcher with the ability to support our ground resources through challenging situations. Dolores says this includes “the confidence to have command presence over the radio when guiding the firefighter on the ground through the Size-Up/9-Line to get the information they need for the responding medical crew. The details. Those minutes when lives are on the line as decisions are made, as resources are ordered to respond.”

[Continued on Page 5]
Nobody Gets Hurt on My Watch. I Naively Lived By That Motto.

By Renae Crippen, Center Manager
Blue Mountain Interagency Fire Center

It was late July. I was sitting in a hot Communications trailer in the middle of a field watching a huge column increase in size. I was in my element: talking on the radio, documenting radio traffic, sharing information, getting people lined-out, making plans for the next day. I was the Fireline Dispatcher—literally.

This fire was explosive. There was a big black boiling column we could see from our field. We were within one mile from where the fire had started. It was burning away from us. In a short period of time, this fire had consumed hundreds of acres of light fuels and timber.

Firefighters were coming in and out of the trailer checking-in, touching base. They were excited to be there fighting this dragon. So was I.

I had so many moving pieces, so much to keep track of. I felt so much responsibility—get their paperwork in order, get them to the right place, and keep everyone safe. Nobody gets hurt on my watch. I naively lived by that motto.

Until that day.

In the early morning hours I received a call from a worried mother and later a brother of family members who were logging up by the fire. They had run up to move some logging equipment found next to burned logging equipment. The next call I was making was not to the families to reassure them that their loved ones were fine, but to the sheriff’s office to report that we had fatalities on the fire. The sheriff’s office would make that initial notification call to the family.

Over the next couple days, I spent a lot of time talking with the mom of one of the loggers who had been killed. I became her contact. At first I didn’t know what to say or do. I had never even thought about what I would do in this situation, let alone had any training. I just followed my heart and spoke to her with kindness and honesty.

[Continued from Page 4]

No Visible Scars, But . . .

“We feel guilt and blame ourselves when we can’t make things happen fast enough,” adds Dispatch Center Manager Renae Crippen. “We are the fixers. It’s truly devastating for us when we can’t fix it all. We lie awake at night going over and over again thinking about what we could have done differently and what did we miss.”

Renae points out that while your Dispatcher may not have visible scars “we often have broken hearts that are not recognized. I have been to too many memorial services in my life. I can’t hear bagpipes without tearing up.”

This veteran Dispatcher explains her personal connection to the folks she communicates with in the field. “My heart drops every time I hear about a fatality or serious injury. My thoughts go immediately to the families, the spouses, and the kids. When I send resources to fires, I don’t see a resource order or a green truck. I see the firefighters and their families.”

“We don’t ever forget your Dispatchers when something bad happens on an incident,” says Cathy Micek-Hutton, Center Manager at the Cody Interagency Dispatch Center. “They are also in the middle of the event. Dispatchers may need support just like any other firefighter. We are part of the ‘fire family’. And like a family, we all need to stick together.”

[Continued on Page 6]
Training for Trauma
Dispatch Center Manager Tracey Kern says that every year she plays the radio traffic recordings from a firefighter burn incident to her seasonal Dispatchers at the Fort Collins Interagency Dispatch Center.

“I want them to hear and experience the voices during a stressful situation,” she explains. “I tell these Dispatchers that it’s OK if a call comes in and you can’t handle it and need to pass it on to a supervisor. And I ensure them that it’s OK if after this you need to talk to someone.”

“Just as we as Dispatchers go to every fire, we also participate in every emergency,” points out Dispatch Center Manager Renae Crippen. “We do what we can to be prepared.” Renae says that includes training and practicing in scenarios for managing the “Incident Within an Incident,” collecting information, and mobilizing aid. “We have emergency contact plans. We train and practice what to do if there is an injury or, even worse, a fatality. We train and practice how to get a medevac. We train and practice who to call, who to notify, how to notify, and how to mobilize help for the families.”

Exposed to Trauma—Then Forgotten and Overlooked
Perhaps our greatest misdeed to our Dispatchers is our practice of forgetting and ignoring them.

“The adrenaline hooks us, then the season lets us go,” says veteran Dispatcher Dolores Garcia. “We are left to our own devices. While more and more line personnel receive training on ‘Taking Care of Our Own,’ Dispatchers only make up a small percentage of these types of training—usually when there is room.”

Dolores continues, “Is this why the turnover in Dispatch can be high? That has been my experience coming up through years of both field fire operations and later into Initial Attack and Aviation Dispatch. You think you are good, until you have that one (traumatic Dispatch experience).”

“As much growing as the fire agencies have done, Dispatch still seems to be the last factor anyone ever thinks about when it comes to RX Burns, Severity, Funding, Staffing, AAR, Team Closeouts, etc.,” explains Dispatch Center Manager Tracey Kern.

“A lot of plans couldn’t be accomplished without the support of Dispatch,” Tracey points out. “And yet, in my experience and the experience of other Dispatchers who I talk to, Dispatch is always the last to get notified about significant activities and events.” She says this includes not being told about IMT closeouts and incident AARs.

“We are always here at the end of the radio—sometimes not taking lunches or breaks just to make sure you have that lifeline available when you need it,” Tracey says. “All we ask is that you remember us and invite us to the communications table from the very beginning.”

Dispatch Center Manager Cathy Micek-Hutton agrees. “All too often Dispatch is left out of After Action Reviews on individual fires, end of fire season closeouts, lessons learned, and IMT closeouts, as well as preseason and postseason meetings.”

She points out how, often times, Dispatch might have a significant piece of the puzzle that is missing and how input from Dispatch can clear-up how and why things happened out in the field. “Training scenarios done in the field are valuable to Dispatch, too,” Cathy assures. “Therefore, Dispatch should also be included in the mock fire or mock emergency as you are training your crews.”
Progress?
“In 2016 on my Forest a firefighter was burned on a prescribed fire. My Dispatchers did an excellent job. And I was pleased to see that—immediately—CISM was offered to anyone who wanted this input,” informs Dispatch Center Manager Tracey Kern.
She continues, “Today, thanks to the CISM groups and the ‘You Will Not Stand Alone’ class, there are more resources to quickly provide the help that anyone needs—including Dispatchers.”
Let’s leave you here with a sincere, appropriate request from Dispatch Center Manager Renae Crippen:
“All too often the responsibility we feel as Dispatchers to ensure everyone gets home—and what it does to us when someone doesn’t make it home to their loved ones—is overlooked. Dispatch will always be there for the firefighters. Please remember us.”
When Jeff Andrews was a hotshot at the very beginning of his 30 years—and counting—in the wildland fire world, an injury temporarily bumped him out of service. “I was one of those folks back then who was placed in Dispatch for a month,” Jeff explains. This short-term assignment would prove to be very big on the learning front for Jeff. “That was my first real eye-opening experience on Dispatch,” he says. “I quickly learned that it was far more than just talking on the radio and filling out card stock.”

“I was pretty fortunate,” Jeff continues. “I learned a lot in that brief period of time about all of the other facets and components of what a Dispatcher does and what happens within a Dispatch Center. I thought it was all very interesting.”

After 13 years on the hotshot crew, Jeff would continue his fire career serving as an Assistant Zone Fire Management Officer and Forest Fire Management Officer/Forest Aviation Officer. He has also worked 10 years as Deputy Fire Staff/Forest Aviation Officer, during which time Jeff supervised a Center Manager and the Dispatch Center.

Today, Jeff has been detailed from the Prescott National Forest to serve as a Fire Management Specialist in Budget and Planning for the Southwestern Region. He is also the Incident Commander for the Southwest Area Team 5, Type 2 Incident Management Team.

And there’s another past work experience that makes this fire manager especially knowledgeable when it comes to the Dispatch world. For about one year and a half he also served as a Dispatch Center Manager.

**Becoming Dispatch Center Manager**

“My understanding of Dispatch quickly evolved when I went into that Center Manager role,” Jeff assures. At that time he was an AFMO. They advertised for their Dispatch Center Manager job three different times and were unsuccessful. Next, Jeff’s Fire Staff asked him if he’d be interested in taking that job.

“I said, sure, why not. It’s something new and completely different. Let’s give it a try. We’re at risk of losing our Dispatch Center because we can’t find folks to manage it.” Jeff continues, “So that was very eye-opening. And by no means am I a technical expert. But we had a lot of really good folks in the Center, folks who were very technically competent. They just didn’t have the time in grade to qualify for the Center Manager position.”

[Continued on Page 9]
Reflecting back today, Jeff says that serving as the Dispatch Center Manager was “the best job” he’s had in the U.S. Forest Service. “I learned a ton and it was a great experience.”

**Question:** Are Dispatchers Firefighters?

“You bet they’re firefighters,” affirms this fire manager. “It takes a whole bunch of different folks with different skills and backgrounds to manage fires. Dispatchers play a critical role in fire management and fire response. While they’re not out on the ground and subject to the hazards that somebody might be who’s on the end of pulaski, there’s a whole host of other hazards—especially as it relates to mental wellness,” Jeff points out.

“Dispatchers are as much of a firefighter as I am as a Type 2 IC.”

**Question:** Is There Exposure to Trauma in Dispatch?

“Yes, for sure,” Jeff confirms. “It’s a difficult and stressful job in so many different ways. For our Dispatchers, there’s a tremendous amount of exposure to trauma.” Furthermore, he believes this exposure contributes to the “mental hazards” of being a Dispatcher.

Jeff explains how in 2013 the Dispatch Center on his Prescott National Forest was exposed to the nearby tragic Yarnell Hill Fire that took the lives of 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots. “While that wasn’t a fire that our Dispatch Center was in operational control of managing, certainly there’s a lot of information that comes over the radio, especially the aviation traffic. And, of course, it’s difficult for folks to deal with that, especially from being in a remote position.”

**A Critical Irony**

This fire manager acknowledges a critical irony. Many people might believe that Dispatchers are physically removed from where the trauma is happening out on the line and therefore aren’t exposed to this trauma. But, in reality, that space and time component, that feeling of helplessness, actually helps to trigger a Dispatcher’s trauma. They can’t run through the radio and help.

“There’s no question that this definitely becomes a contributing factor to the Dispatchers’ trauma and their mental hazards,” Jeff assures.

**A Heavy Burden to Bear**

Jeff explains how, often times, the Dispatcher is the critical link during a tragic event or urgent, escalating medical events. “They become the link between somebody on the ground getting the help that they need and your ability to procure or come up with that service. That’s a lot to have rest on your shoulders.”

Jeff points out how our Dispatchers don’t want to let down the firefighters out on the line.

[Continued on Page 10]
“And their work becomes just as important as what’s happening out on the ground. In some cases, it might even be more important than what’s happening out on the ground. That’s a heavy burden to bear.”

**Question:** 
**During Your Ten Years of Supervising the Dispatch Center Did You Worry About Your Dispatchers?**

“Yes, for sure I did, whether as a Center Manager or as an FMO supervising Dispatch. We worry about them a lot because it’s a stressful job and there’s really no downtime. I mean, you’re always on call. And you’re often underappreciated or forgot about.”

For example, Jeff points out how while the rest of the fire folks are on vacation during Christmas holiday, the Dispatchers are still going to be on call. “That’s going to wear on a person year after year, especially for our career Dispatchers who have to keep their Centers open seven days a week, 365 days a year,” he says. “And, in some cases, I think there are Dispatch Centers that are understaffed. That contributes to this predicament even more.”

This fire manager has another perception and concern about the Dispatching job. “They work in close quarters, in an office environment 365 days a year. You know how in August and September how driving in a crew carrier can get on your nerves after a while? Line folks always have more of a physical outlet, more of an opportunity to get away—but not so much for our Dispatchers.”

Jeff shares another concern he has about our Dispatchers. “Something else I worry about is how our Dispatchers don’t get to see the final product or celebrate the fruits of their labor. Whereas you and I might be on the ground and we can see the rewards from putting in a line or putting a fire out. Dispatchers don’t get to celebrate that.”

Jeff continues, “So, for Dispatchers, it’s not as easy to rejoice over your accomplishments. And that’s a toxin as it wears on. You don’t know whether or not your efforts are appreciated immediately—unless folks are providing you feedback.”

**Overlooked and Underappreciated**

“I believe Dispatchers are critical to the success of the fire management organization. And yet they are often overlooked and underappreciated. Out of sight; out of mind.”

Jeff and his daughter Ava in Ouray, Colorado during the fall of 2012.

“**It will make a better overall fire management program if you can understand the pros and cons or difficulties with how your Dispatchers are able to perform their jobs.”**

Jeff is also a proponent of “cross-training”.

“Just as I should learn a bit more about the Dispatch job, they also need to learn a bit more about some of the other functional areas. I think they would find it rewarding and have opportunities away from the Dispatch Center, to take on an assignment that’s not Dispatch related.”

[Continued on Page 11]
“Nowhere do we really prepare you to be on the other end of a radio when you’re dealing with a tragedy.”

Question:
How Can We Do a Better Job of Preparing Our Dispatchers for Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedies?
“First, is the awareness that they’re involved in the incident. You need to recognize that and then utilize some of the tools that have been created over the last 10-20 years in terms of peer support. There’s a degree of preparation or proactive things that we can also do to prepare for these events.”

Jeff explains that besides the physical hazards, we also need to focus on the mental hazards. “I think we’ve made great progress in the last several years in recognizing the mental hazards that are associated with wildland fire tragedies.” But he stresses how we can’t overlook Dispatchers being included in these peer support efforts.

“I think we’re getting better at that and we’re evolving with peer support,” Jeff acknowledges. “But nowhere do we really prepare you to be on the other end of a radio when you’re dealing with a tragedy.”

Jeff continues, “The police departments and the fire departments have been in this business for a long time. They do a better job of training their folks to deal with these scenarios. We’re getting better at it. But, for us, it’s not that mainstream yet.”

Question
Let’s end this serious topic on a lighter note:
What’s the Funniest Thing You Ever Heard Over the Radio?

Jeff has a darn good one.

“I think of this long conversation that was between a Module Leader and the Dispatch Center. It was the description of a large glow that was visible, describing it as an escalating fire. I think it was about five minutes of conversation.

“They had this fire out there. It’s rapidly growing, an intense glow. They’re ordering up as many resources as they could—only to find out that it was simply the moon coming up from behind the mountains.”

Please Provide Us with Your Input on this Issue of Two More Chains
bit.ly/2mcfeedback
A Burning Mindful Moment

By Peter M. Leschak

A few weeks ago while thumbing through a hardcopy phone book, I chanced upon a particular name I hadn’t seen for years. It was an elderly woman I never formally met, but with whom I once shared an intimate moment: I saved her life.

On the afternoon of October 16, 2012, I was fatigued and in a funk. I was staffing Engine 731 at the Side Lake Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (MNDNR) Forestry Work Station. Since early September, we’d been busy fighting wildfires, both locally and “off unit.” A few days before, I’d returned from a week-long Division Supervisor assignment in northwestern Minnesota. The past six weeks had been engaging, but also enervating, and though I appreciated the action and the overtime, I’d had enough fun and only three days off. The morning before, we had an inch of snow on the ground. It vaporized by noon, but fuels were moist. Given shorter days and cooler temperatures, our autumn fire season was finished.

I was the only firefighter at the station, staffing because I was scheduled, not because of urgent need. By 2 p.m. all I yearned to do was go home, but the shift didn’t end until 4:30, so I needed to conjure a fresh attitude. I knew what would work: a vigorous scamper up the 126 steps of the Side Lake Fire Lookout Tower.

As is customary, I grabbed our 7x50 U.S. Navy surplus binoculars and a handheld radio, and before crossing the county highway to the tower, I checked our weather instrument shelter: 68 degrees, relative humidity 50 percent, wind light and variable—not a “fire day.” What I hoped to see from the cupola of the tower was an eagle or an osprey, or just the play of sunlight on nearby lakes. The main thing was the heart-thumping, mind-altering exertion of briskly ascending a ten-story staircase.

When I reached the cupola I was startled to see a column of smoke in the southwest. I turned my back and lifted the binoculars to the northeast. Over the years we’ve often hunted mystery smokes seen clearly from the tower that remained undetected from the ground. I asked him to call it grayish—colored was not readily apparent from the tower, and before crossing the county highway to the tower, I checked our weather instrument shelter: 68 degrees, relative humidity 50 percent, wind light and variable—not a “fire day.” What I hoped to see from the cupola of the tower was an eagle or an osprey, or just the play of sunlight on nearby lakes. The main thing was the heart-thumping, mind-altering exertion of briskly ascending a ten-story staircase.

After a few minutes I turned back to the southwest. The smoke was still there and seemed a little bigger, so I raised the 7x50s. The sun was beginning to decline and the column was partially backlit, so the color was not readily apparent—I decided to call it grayish-white. I estimated the distance at ten miles (turned out it was nine), and as I focused on it in my binoculars, I could see it might be associated with a wide powerline right-of-way with fine fuels that had supported past fires. Given that, I reluctantly concluded I should investigate.

I radioed our DNR Dispatcher to report the smoke and say I’d steer that way in Engine 731. At the bottom of the stairs I encountered Jeff, one of our foresters. “I copied the radio traffic,” he said. “You want me to come with you?”

I knew he was up to his armpits in timber sale paperwork, so I replied, “Now, that’s OK. You know how it goes. I probably won’t even find it.” That was true enough, we often hunted mystery smokes seen clearly from the tower that remained undetected from the ground. I asked him to “just keep an ear to the radio.”

Several minutes later and eight road miles along, I saw the smoke again. From a gravel curve, it was three miles due south across an expanse of muskeg. I knew instantly it was a spreading wildfire. Can’t explain why I knew, just did—I suppose the intuitive awareness gleaned from viewing a thousand columns over three decades. I radioed Dispatch, and also asked Jeff to head my way with another fire rig. I soon reached the powerline right-of-way I’d seen from the tower. It was clear, but smoke burgeoned just beyond it to the southeast. We’d had no lightning for weeks, so I assumed the fire was human-caused. If so, the likely location was an isolated nearby farm.

Peter Leschak is a career wildland firefighter for the Minnesota DNR Division of Forestry. He entered the fire service in 1981 via a rural volunteer fire department where he served as chief for 30 years. He spent three seasons with the U.S. Forest Service in Idaho as a helitack crew leader, and a total of 19 years in helicopter operations.

For several years Peter was assigned as a DIVS with one of the Minnesota Incident Command System’s Type 2 IMTs. He’s worked a thousand incidents in 14 states and one Canadian province, including tornado and hurricane recovery.

For 25 years he’s been a fire instructor in both the wildland and structure realms for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Great Lakes Forest Fire Compact, and the Minnesota State College and University System.

Peter moonlights as a freelance writer and is the author of 10 nonfiction books, including Ghosts of the Fireground. He’s produced almost 300 magazine and newspaper articles, including pieces in Harper’s, The New York Times, Outdoor Life, Backpacker, and dozens of others. He lives and works in Side Lake, Minnesota.

The Historic Side Lake Fire Lookout Tower where Peter Leschak was doing PT—scampering up its 126 steps—when he saw the unreported smoke. (Photo by Minnesota’s Historical Fire Lookout Towers Blog.)
I radioed Jeff: “I think the fire is at the end of the Monson Lake Road; that’s where I’m heading.”

Five minutes later I pulled into the homestead. There was a slowly spreading fire in lowland grass, about two acres, with the perimeter partly extinguished. Seven outbuildings perched on a rise above the fire. One was already burned to the ground. Flames were licking the walls of a second. I glimpsed an elderly man on a tractor on the left flank of the wildfire. He was calmly operating. I assumed he was plowing a line. Some old timers don’t dial 911, they just fight the fire. I did briefly wonder why he was out in the grass when his buildings were burning.

Nevertheless, I had a chance to save one, so I radioed a size-up to my Dispatcher requesting more DNR resources and the local fire department.

I hopped out of the engine, started the pump, and grabbed the nozzle of the one-inch hardline, yanking 30 feet of hose off the reel. I wiped flames off the walls of the shed and noticed there was interior fire. I opened the door, directing the stream inside, but quickly realized it was hopeless. It was a big-nozzle-big-water fire department issue.

I refocused my attention to the left flank of the grass fire and saw it was about to slop over a trail and enter a pine plantation. I drove that way, but even with four-wheel-drive it was apparent that steering the engine into the lowland was folly—E731 would likely submerge to periscope depth. I anchored at the base of the slope.

A dozen feet away, fully engulfed in flame, was an elderly woman. I automatically reopened the nozzle and put her out.

Only then did I clearly see the old man and his tractor. He wasn’t hitched to a plow but was merely towing a hay wagon—he was accomplishing nothing. At that moment he was halted on the fire perimeter. Flames curled around a rear tire of the tractor and licked the bottom of his right boot. He stared at me, impassive. I dragged about 100 feet off the reel as I rushed over hummocky ground to the tractor and swept the fire from beneath it. The man didn’t react. I was on the verge of speaking—something like what the hell are you doing?—when his eyes flicked to his right, my left. I naturally followed his gaze. A dozen feet away, fully engulfed in flame, was an elderly woman. I automatically reopened the nozzle and put her out. The old man looked at her, looked at me, then drove away into the fire. Apparently, I’d steered E731 into the Twilight Zone.

I dropped the nozzle and crouched beside the woman, who was face-down in the black, her head turned to one side. All clothing below her waist was burned away. A rubber boot was melted to one calf. The flesh on her legs and buttocks was literally cooked. Her breathing was ragged. I gently touched an unscorched swath of shirt on her back and said, “Can you hear me?” She rasped, “Yes.” With as much buoyancy as I could muster I said, “I’ll get help. We’ll get you out of here.” I thought: she’s going to die.

The old man looked at her, looked at me, then drove away into the fire. Apparently, I’d steered E731 into the Twilight Zone.

I stood and keyed my handheld radio, realizing instantly I couldn’t trip a repeater. I began trotting the 100 rough feet back to E731. In the long half-minute it took me to cover the distance, I did two things. First, I began rehearsing what would be one of the more urgent radio calls of my career. The second action—well, let’s wait on that, it’s the point of this story and is better revealed later.

[Continued on Page 14]
[Continued from Page 13] Back at the engine, I grabbed an 800 MHz portable radio from a holster hanging on the front seat. I’d decided to contact the county Dispatcher directly—cutting out the “middleman” of my DNR Dispatcher. I switched it on and heard the fire department units headed my way were about to divert to a second wildfire. I was incredulous. I actually said aloud, “You’re kidding me!” I keyed the mic and urged them to keep coming, spitting a quick report and saying, “I need your help!” (The Dispatch log would later show I was alone on scene for 27 minutes.) They acknowledged and I hailed the county Dispatch, reciting the message I’d worked out while trotting. After a summary of the woman’s injuries and circumstances, I ordered an ALS response. I’m not an EMT, but it didn’t take one to understand she needed transport under intensive care to a burn center (90 miles away) as rapidly as possible if there was any chance of survival. Which I didn’t think there was. I supposed the sooner she died the better off she would be. Harsh thought, and I felt a twinge of guilt, but it seemed to be brutal reality. Over my mobile VHF radio, I briefed my DNR Dispatcher, then hustled back to the woman.

Over my mobile VHF radio, I briefed my DNR Dispatcher, then hustled back to the woman.

When I first arrived on scene, I’d noticed a brown dog running around, some kind of retriever mix. It was now lying beside the woman, wagging its tail and whining. I crouched down, petting the dog and gingerly touching the woman’s back. “Help is on the way. Can you still hear me?” She could.

There was nothing more I could do except offer my presence and voice. I heard the tractor and looked up. The old man had swung back in our direction and the tractor was 30 yards away, headed directly for us. I felt a surge of panic. It had occurred to me it was possible he’d struck her with the tractor and that’s why she’d been prone in the flames. I didn’t dare move her. I knew the skin could easily slough off her body. Did he even see us? I leaped to my feet and wildly waved my arms. He veered away. I sank to my knees in relief.

Jeff arrived and I asked him to get the guy off the tractor and secure it. He did, parking the machine in the green and pocketing the key. He noted the old man was “totally out of it.” (I was later informed by a county sheriff’s deputy that the man suffered from dementia.)

Two local first responders appeared and we helped them wrap the woman in a moistened burn blanket, load her on a backboard, and carry her out to an ambulance that was just arriving in the yard. She was soon aboard an air medical helicopter, en route to a burn center in Duluth. The fire department was working the buildings. We turned our attention to the grass fire. By dusk, everything was cold. A sheriff’s deputy and a state fire marshal were investigating. I’d return the next morning to cold trail.

Meditation is a simple concept and a difficult practice. But the benefits—and potential benefits—manifested quickly . . . In essence, I was paying attention to paying attention.

So what was the second thing I did while trotting back to the engine to make the radio call? A month before I’d begun mindfulness meditation, and like all beginners I struggled. Meditation is a simple concept and a difficult practice. But the benefits—and potential benefits—manifested quickly. On the way back to E731, while I rehearsed my message, I experienced a truly mindful moment: I was “outside” myself, studying my reactions and behavior. It seemed I was viewing it all from a point just over my right shoulder. Even as I composed sentences, another element of my mind was appreciating and approving the circumstances. That element was utterly calm and satisfied. In essence, I was paying attention to paying attention. By the time I reached for the 800 MHz radio, I was joyful. Understand, I was not happy at the misfortune of the incident and the suffering of those involved. I was intensely happy because I was mindful. That satisfaction translated directly into performance. I recognized the emotion, then let it go. The purpose of mindfulness meditation is to live more consistently in the moment—to be present. It wouldn’t do to become attached to that moment. There were other things to do and to feel; the incident wasn’t over.

I returned to the burned woman, one moment at a time. As the proverb goes, “there’s no pressure in the present.” Stress arises mostly from worry or dread about the future, or regret over the past. You’ve heard it before: Be Here Now. Easy to state, but even “in the heat of battle,” not so easy to do. Mindfulness meditation is a means to be present more often, to understand the obstacles to presence. The Latin root of “attention” is “reach toward.” Such reaching is an undoubted asset for firefighters and meditation is a sure route to lengthening that reach.

Follow-Up Question

After reading Peter’s story about what happened that day on this IA interface fire, how many people were potentially impacted by this incident?

[Hint: Remember this Two More Chains issue’s theme.]