

# TWO MORE CHAINS



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## RISK, GAIN, and LOSS: *What are We Willing to Accept?*

By Curtis Heaton

**A**re you sure we do not have acceptable losses in wildland fire?" I quietly asked.

***"Do we have acceptable losses in wildland fire?"***

The group shifted around uncomfortably waiting for someone to speak. It was a beautiful fall day. I was facilitating an L-580 Gettysburg Staff Ride conference group under the shadow of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Monument.

The theme at the stand was Leadership and Risk. One of my fire peers had just passionately stated: "We are not the military and we do not have acceptable losses." The location was fitting. The 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Volunteers had incurred an 82 percent causality rate in just five minutes of pitched fighting. It is one of the greatest single engagement losses in the history of the U.S. military. We were standing at the very spot where they received the order to attack.

Once again, I asked: "Do we have acceptable losses in wildland fire?" I could sense that critical thinking and group sense-making was beginning to occur.



1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Monument

### The 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Stand

On the afternoon of July 2, 1863 Confederate forces launched a major offensive aimed at defeating the Union forces positioned outside of Gettysburg. As the battle raged, Union Major General Winfield Scott Hancock sensed the Union plan was failing and the Confederates were poised to break through his thinly held lines. A breach meant the Union army would be divided and crushed. Hancock needed time to shift resources. He turned to the only resource he had available, the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Volunteers.

Hancock ordered the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Regiment to: "Take those colors!" Outnumbered 6 to 1, both Hancock and the brave Minnesotans knew they were wading into a conflagration. This risk was the only option Hancock had in his arsenal. His time wedge had closed. He had no room to maneuver—no margin.

Events beyond his control had placed him on Cemetery Ridge—the center of the Union defense. Decisions made by his leaders and the actions of others had placed him at the crucial part of the battlefield.

### They Followed the Plan . . .

The 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota had simply filled a resource order that morning. They followed the plan and arrived at their drop point and now they were staring at a wall of Confederates. Both the threat and consequences were clear. They had to stop the rebels, a force of 1,500 crack troops. A total of 262 Minnesotans engaged. Five minutes later 47 Minnesotans were left standing. The actions of 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota disrupted the Confederate offensive and bought Hancock time to move up Union reinforcements. The Union line held that day.

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# GROUND TRUTHS

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## Brothers and Sisters?

**H**ave you ever heard:  
“They lost Situation Awareness.”  
“This is clearly a human factors issue.”  
“Obvious violation of the Fire Orders.”

Have you caught yourself making these types of statements? If you have, take notice. This piece is for you.

What the listener hears is: “They screwed up.”

Are we willing to own these statements? Would you say it to their families? Would you say it at their funeral? Integrity is owning your words. So, before we pass judgement, let’s own our words and imagine ourselves in the decision-maker’s shoes.

### This is What You are Saying

I’m sick of hearing how dead firefighters screwed up. “They should have been perfect.” Make no mistake, this is what we are saying when we blame bad outcomes on “poor decisions”. A decision can only be measured through hindsight. Hindsight is free. There is no cost, no pressure, and no stress. The outcome of a decision is crystal clear in hindsight. Remember the last time you had to make a tough call? Did it turn out good because of brilliance or just plain luck? Do you want to be labeled as a “screw-up” by your peers when your decision doesn’t turn out so well?

Everyone is out there doing what they have learned to do, good or bad, in a dynamic and unforgiving environment—period. This environment bites back and not only when you “aren’t paying attention”. It bites regardless of how superhuman your Situation Awareness skills are.

If you blame a firefighter for a bad outcome you are insinuating we work in a predictable environment AND we are capable of flawless performance. Do you really believe the wildland fire environment is predictable? If you do then you haven’t been on many fires. As for expecting flawless performance from humans—if I need to explain that one, you’re hopeless.

I understand that most of what we say and think is just the result of what we are taught. We’re just repeating what was modeled for us. I’m saying you should question how you were brought up and actually THINK about what you are verbalizing.

### What a Crock

Here are some other things we like to say:

“RIP Brothers and Sisters.”  
“Always Remember.”  
“Never Forget.”

So, in one case we want to be brothers and sisters and be compassionate and identify as peers with those no longer among us. But in the next breath we utter hypercritical: “They screwed up, I’m not like them” sentiments. Which one is it?

Are we brothers and sisters or not? You can’t have it both ways. We have somehow accepted a ridiculous notion that learning is best achieved by pointing out and distancing ourselves from “failures”. What a crock.

**Truly opening our hearts and minds to our collective equality is what propagates insight applicable to future situations, not regurgitating hollow platitudes disguised as comprehension.**

### Start With This Notion

The learning is in acknowledging that we are ALL the same, we are ALL subject to a “bad day at the office”. We’ve come to accept working so close to the edge that any unforeseen circumstance can be

catastrophic.

You must start with the notion that every firefighter is you and you are every firefighter. Only then can you access the humility required to benefit from the experience of others.

Truly opening our hearts and minds to our collective equality is what propagates insight applicable to future situations, not regurgitating hollow platitudes disguised as comprehension. If you are going to speak of “brothers and sisters” you better live it.

We have never operated flawlessly and we never will. How long is it going to take for us to accept this organizationally?

### Accept This Simple Reality

Accepting this simple reality is the first step to redesigning our system with room built in for normalcy. Without accepting this, continuing to expect perfection, we are doomed to be where we are now.

If you believe we can improve, don’t be a part of the problem.

Look back at bad outcomes with compassion for those involved. Embrace complexity and reject oversimplification. Acknowledge the natural spectrum of performance and advocate for a system that incorporates it.

Otherwise, don’t pretend we’re brothers and sisters.

Be family, Tool Swingers.

[Continued from Page 1] From a General's perspective, the risk of losing an entire regiment was worth the gain of saving the Union line. But what about the Private? Why would the Minnesotans willingly accept so much risk? Are we any different? How can we learn from their sacrifice? <http://www.brotherswar.com/Gettysburg-2k.htm>

### Why Gettysburg?

The Battle of Gettysburg was arguably the key battle in the Civil War. Two great armies collided at a crossroads and fought for three days—incurring tens of thousands of casualties. It is considered “the high water mark of the Confederacy” and may have decided the outcome of the Civil War and the fate of a nation. It is the most studied incident in American history.

For all of these reasons and more, the Battle of Gettysburg is a great place to study leadership and decision-making.

## The L-580 Gettysburg Staff Ride

### Identifying Leadership Parallels

The NWCG Leadership Committee developed the L-580 Gettysburg Staff Ride for senior fire leaders. Through dialogue at a series of stands, military Subject Matter Experts share their knowledge of the battle and their own personal leadership lessons.

The role of the wildland fire conference group leaders is to identify leadership parallels between a military “incident” in 1863 and those of a modern-day fire incident.

Union and Confederacy leaders are profiled and the timeless tenets of leadership and decision-making are discussed. The Staff Ride ends with an integration phase where attendees “look in the mirror” and reflect on what it means to be a leader.

## How We View Risk in Wildland Fire

While “Risk” comes up at various points during the Gettysburg Staff Ride, it always reaches passionate debate at the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota Monument.

I consistently hear my peers dismiss lessons from the military because “*We do not have acceptable losses in wildland fire.*” “*They make decisions differently.*”

I disagree.

There have been more than 500 wildland firefighters killed in the line-of-duty during my career alone—roughly 20 per year. We lose billions of dollars in capital and resources, we experience a number of serious injuries, as well as both physical and emotional trauma, and much more. This is what our current system produces—the loss we “accept”. We also protect many things: life, property, resources, infrastructure. But nothing is ever free in the risk equation.

The uncomfortable discussion about risk, gain, and loss only seems to occur when the Staff Ride participants begin to realize their decisions and actions as leaders can result in the loss of life. When it becomes *personal*.

Many have never experienced a really bad day (and, fortunately, most never will). But as an occupation, wildland fire is deadly and destructive. It is also a beautiful, simple, and necessary act of nature. And as leaders within that occupation, we need to be honest about the consequences of our decisions and the human factors that influence them. We need to be honest how words and behaviors reflect our *personal* view of risk.

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**Do we normalize risk by simply avoiding the topic?**

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**Hancock could not draw a bigger box.**

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### Language

Do we normalize risk by simply avoiding the topic? Verbs for discussing risk have become nouns in our language. In essence we “normalize” the action. Our words and processes make risk *acceptable*. We have developed a script in order to avoid the uncomfortable discussion about risk and loss. We accept that risk is in everything we do, yet culturally we continue to talk about risk in an ancillary fashion to the actual decision-making.

Initial *Attack*: we *attack* wildfires. Hancock ordered 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota to *attack*. Attack is defined as a “violent or harmful act”. Is that what we always want to achieve? Hancock sure did. We build a *plan* rather than *engage in planning*. “WFDSS” was designed to encourage critical thinking—it is now a *product* that we have to develop. Objectives like “*Protect \_\_\_\_\_*” is a common objective on an incident. This objective is built on the assumption we can protect anything and that the risk is always worth the gain.

What is the cost to our people for *protecting*? “Keep the fire north of \_\_\_\_\_, south of \_\_\_\_\_”. The *Box*. This common strategy statement assumes all of the hazards found within the box can be mitigated and the exposure justifies the gain. When it fails, we just draw a bigger box. Hancock could not draw a bigger box. He was at the edge of margin. Strategy should be based on time, space, and assets. A strong strategy encourages maneuverability and flexibility. It creates more margin, rather than reduce it.

### Processes

Processes are built into the system to decide, act, and *then* mitigate risk.

That sequence seems flawed. Sense-making has given way to documenting. We seem to believe we can mitigate everything—just make sure you document it. Fifty or so pages into the Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG) addresses some type of hazard mitigation. “*See the safety message on p. 17 in your IAP and reference p. 24 in your IRPG on dealing with those downed power lines and be safe!*”

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[Continued from Page 3] The 5-Step Risk Management Process in the IRPG was designed as a critical thinking/analytical tool to support and mirror the decision-making process. Is that how it's being used? Or do we make a decision and use the tool as a subjective filter to justify a predetermined course of action—and to be comfortable with the risk we have transferred?

We have a page in the IRPG dedicated to “How to properly refuse risk”. Risk has to be *properly refused*? Risk should always be evaluated and discussed. “Refusing” should be thrown out of our vocabulary. The very stigma associated with this term creates unnecessary friction in the system.

A little friction in the system is good, it encourages us to run a diagnostic, to understand why there is friction. However, if we generate too much friction then the system erodes from within. It destroys itself. We should view every discussion about risk as sense-making, a tactical pause, inquiry—put any label you want on it. But *encourage* all discussions about risk. The system has enough friction in it as is, we need not create more.

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**I think of Robert E. Lee  
as a Haines 6 coupled with high  
winds and record drought.**

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### Scripts

Perhaps we have developed a “script” that we are all too comfortable using. You have heard it countless times. It goes like this: “*Critical fire weather today...extreme fire behavior...don't let your guard down...maintain situational awareness...show a lunch break...*”

It is a well-used script. It has defined a culture. Follow the rules and everything will be okay. Just make sure you document everything in case things do go bad. Did the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota get a safety briefing before they attacked?

We act this way because we are human. Humans are creatures of habit; we love patterns. They make us comfortable. We do it this way because we have always done it this way. When facing uncertainty, humans often revert to fear or quickly dismiss uncertainty so we *feel* we understand what is occurring. We *feel* like we are in control. We can feel *normal*.

Sense-making requires effort. Recognizing how we are influenced by these scripts is the basis for critical thinking—thinking about how we think. Fire has no script. It behaves solely on the conditions. Hancock had no script at Gettysburg. But he clearly understood the conditions and the risk—as did his Minnesotans.

Scripts can be good. Like incident organizers and prescribed fire burn plans that help us to make sense of policies and aid in training and development. Hands down, the wildland fire community is full of outstanding problem solvers. Day in and day out we are constantly adapting plans, tactics, and modifying those scripts to fit reality. We unfold the map on the hood of the truck at DP7 and pause to make sense; to understand. Here we rewrite the script based on our observations, perceptions, and conditions. Here we engage in group sense-making.

Scripts and adaptability are strengths in our culture. And yet they also affect our ability to perceive and detect anomalies and how we communicate deviances. The danger surfaces when the script replaces critical thinking and sense-making. When the script becomes thought.

### Sense-Making and Critical Thinking

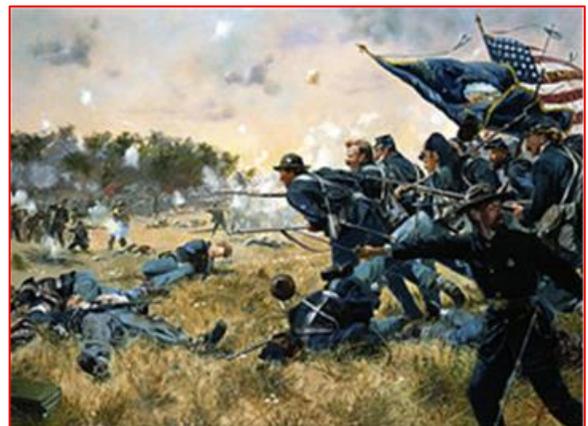
Hancock and the Minnesotans had little time for group sense-making on July 2, 1863. The Confederates, led by the legendary Robert E. Lee, were pushing hard for the Union line.

Robert E. Lee was the best. He was both feared and respected. I think of Robert E. Lee as a Haines 6 coupled with high winds and record drought. General Lee was extreme fire behavior in 1863. The Confederates were a 30,000-foot convection column ready to collapse on top of Hancock and the Minnesotans.

Hancock had to make sense of what was occurring and he had to think critically. He was not only trying to predict the future but he also needed to share his vision with the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota. He accomplished this solely through his presence and character. He had no process to fall back on or script to reference.

Hancock clearly understood what was at risk strategically. The price for losing the battle would be high. He knew what was at stake—his country. He was a smart guy and understood the politics. He also had a pretty good idea what Robert E. Lee was trying to do. He had *learned* after getting pummeled by Bobby and the Confederates time and time again. Hancock was preparing to apply those lessons learned at the expense of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota.

He knew what he was asking the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota to do. He did it out of duty, not personal glory or ego, or by following a process or a script. He made sense of the situation and he communicated the risk.



**Knowing that they faced certain death, why did the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota go all in?**

[Continued on Page 5]

[Continued from Page 4] *OK, cool story Heaton, so what's your point?*

My point here is that Hancock, like all great leaders, understood risk and did not avoid it or bury it in ambiguity and false mitigations. He had no qualms about transferring risk; that was his job. He had no issues communicating the risk. His intent was clear and he was clearly accountable for his decision. That is the first lesson on risk from the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota stand.

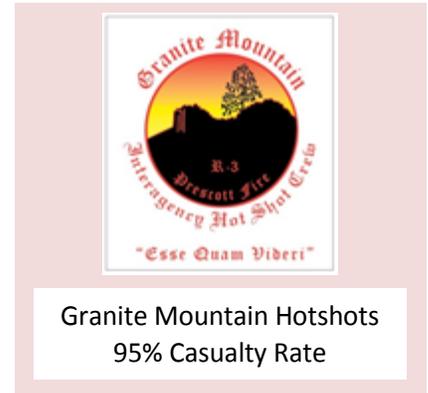
The second lesson is why the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota accepted the risk from Hancock. They merely filled a resource order and reported to their assigned drop point. Their Branch Director ordered them to attack. They could have attempted to mitigate the risk, transfer the risk, or just declined it and ran away like so many other brave but scared kids that day. But no, they went all in. Why? Why would 262 men march to certain death? Why would firefighters ever leave a safety zone?

## Why We Live and Die Together. What It Means to be 'Us'.

Why did the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota attack?

As the U.S. Marine SME for my conference group at the Gettysburg Staff Ride always points out: *"They didn't do it for Hancock. They were brothers. One goes, they all go."* The Private at Gettysburg did not fight for a cause. They fought for each other. Their greatest risk was failing their brother. This insight is coming from a veteran (the Marine SME) who understands risk and human performance under stress.

Is our model really any different? We transfer the risk by inserting the operator into a hazardous and uncertain environment and then seem surprised when a group of them die?



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**I am honored to be associated with the wildland fire community and equally humbled by what that actually means.**

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## So Who are We?

Causes are great: mission, duty, protecting the public and our natural resources. Great stuff and it all has meaning. It is all worth some level of risk. I am in no way downplaying the dedication of our people. But like the 1<sup>st</sup> Minnesota, we in wildland fire ultimately fight for each other, for our families.

This is the essence of the warrior culture. That sense of being—of belonging to something bigger and better than yourself. Finding your limits and giving it all you have. It is cool.

If you have not been part of what I am describing, then you might not understand. Live side-by-side with someone for months at a time. Share hardships. Laugh, sweat, bleed and cry with them and you do not (will not) fail them.

You will risk a lot for each other. You will do things with them you would never do alone. Ask a career Hotshot or Smokejumper or Helitack or Engine Captain what is most important to them. The answer is their people. I am honored to be associated with the wildland fire community and equally humbled by what that actually means. Being part of this special group influences my decisions, it defines my behavior at times and it may inadvertently encourage me to act in certain ways. Call it trust or duty or even ego.

It is complicated enough that I am not sure I even understand it. Our Fallen may not have died for a glorious cause but we can choose to honor them for the gift they left behind; the gift of knowledge. We can choose to learn from their sacrifice. It is a priceless gift and not one to be taken lightly.

## We Need to Be Real About Accepting Risk

This esprit de corps is not something that we should try to "fix". Rather, it needs to be better understood. It is why we are often so successful. It doesn't take much motivation to get our people to engage a fire. It is who they are. It is why they signed on. It is also why we have mass casualty events.

Who wants to be the first one to pull out? Who wants to be the first one to question the boss or tell the homeowner it was unsafe to protect their home? Who was going to say no to Hancock on the afternoon of July 2? Who is going to say it is too steep or too dry or too dangerous? Who is going to define acceptable risk?

That's why we need to be real about accepting risk. Hancock assigned the mission. We assign the missions. We are the system that accepts the loss.

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**It doesn't take much motivation to get our people to engage a fire. It is who they are. It is why they signed on. It is also why we have mass casualty events.**

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San Bernardino NF Engine 57 – 100% Casualty Rate



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**It is also about how we have normalized risk by simply allowing our people to be who they are.**

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## Risk and Leadership

[Continued from Page 5] So yes, it is about risk and it is about leadership. More importantly, it is also about how we have normalized risk by simply allowing our people to be who they are. How we continue to fool ourselves with misdirected blame, mitigated language, and layers of process.

It is wrong to continue to expect our firefighters to manage risk at the tip of the bayonet. Even with all of their skill and training, sooner or later they will not be able to manage the risk we transfer to them. We must first admit that we accept loss before we can begin to reduce it.

### Complexity and System Failure

Thirty-Mile, South Canyon, Dude, Esperanza, Yarnell Hill and countless other fires were not simply human error or unexpected weather events.

These fires were the result of a culture that allows humans to excel. Excel to the point of a systematic failure—to try to hold the line when conditions are extreme; to accept great amounts of uncertainty.

All of these fires have two reoccurring themes: Complexity and System Failure. Fuels, Weather, Topography and *People*—all four of these elements were in place and just happened to be complex enough at one level or another to outpace the group's ability to adapt to changing conditions.

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**We must first admit that we accept loss before we can begin to reduce it.**

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## How are We Changing?

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The best equipment and technology in the world cannot save a mountain climber in an avalanche or bring a spacecraft home safely. There is too much uncertainty built into these complex systems. Getting it right most of the time is quite impressive. Getting it right all of the time may not be possible. Complex systems have complex problems.

Like the rest of the world, the complexity of the fire environment has changed.

All the data supports a “new normal” in our business: an environment more complex than the system that we designed to manage it. It is a system designed around human decision-making. So, how are we changing? How do we create a greater degree of margin in the system so we can maneuver in the face of uncertainty?

How do we develop a more resilient system to respond to changing conditions and to learn from failure? How do we think and lead like Hancock without relying on the sacrifice of the Private to be successful?

### What is Our Acceptable Level of Risk?

Is acceptable risk captured in WFDSS? Is it communicated on the ICS 215 and 215a? Do we share it at the morning briefing? (“Briefing”—yet another verb [to brief] that has become a noun in our language.) If we are unable to define acceptable risk then we must be willing to accept it with whatever loss occurs.

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**How do we develop a more resilient system  
to respond to changing conditions and to  
learn from failure?**

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## Acceptable Loss or Normalizing Risk?

### *Please Help Define What We Need to Address*

After writing down my thoughts from my experiences at 1st Minnesota and getting feedback on this topic, it is clear that I am talking about two separate—but closely related—issues: **Normalizing Risk** and **Acceptable Losses**.

They are so closely related that I have struggled separating them in this article. Perhaps I am oversimplifying a complex issue. Discussing one takes me right to the other. I could therefore use your assistance.

Please help define what we need to address.

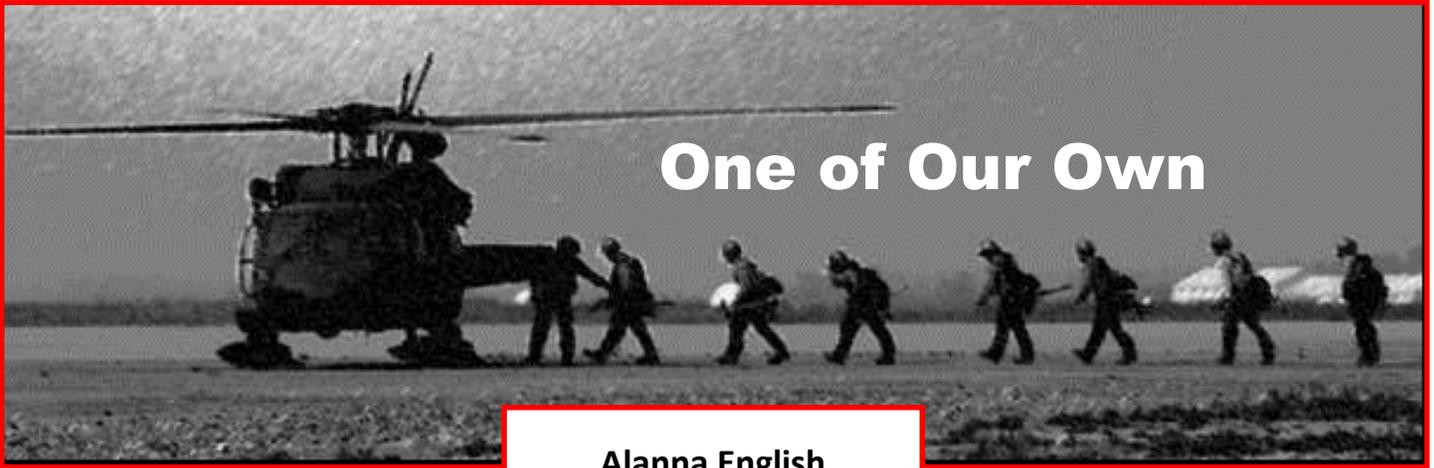
Use this link to submit answers to the following questions: <http://bit.ly/WildfireLossAndRisk>

- ❖ *How do we view loss in the wildfire community?*
- ❖ *What parts of our culture place us in the greatest danger?*
- ❖ *Under what circumstance could a bad thing happen to you?*
- ❖ *How does recognizing our limitations ultimately improve our performance?*

**After you answer these questions  
you can view the answers of others:**

<http://bit.ly/WildfireLossAndRisk>

It's your responsibility to have an opinion on these topics. Discuss these issues with those around you.  
Help develop a culture that supports open dialogue and grows as a result.



Alanna English

## You Ever Had a ‘Dumb’ Fire Assignment?

*We’re talking assignments that aren’t justifiable from a risk management standpoint.*

By Alex Viktora

**A**lanna English has been around long enough to have had her fair share of “dumb” fire assignments.

She’s currently a captain on the Prescott Interagency Hotshot Crew. She’s been on the crew the past eight years. She’s also worked on the Mormon Lake and Flagstaff interagency hotshot crews, for a total of 13 years of hotshot experience under her belt. Alanna also spent five years as an engine captain.

Her various fire quals include Air Tactical Group Supervisor.

### What makes an assignment (for a tactical, operational period) ‘dumb’?

“I would say a dumb assignment is one that doesn’t make logical, tactical sense,” says Alanna. “An assignment that has better—more obvious—options. You know, an assignment that just doesn’t adhere to the basic firefighting standards.”

### How do you account for the existence of ‘dumb’ assignments—ones that end up exposing firefighters to unjustifiable risk?

“Unfortunately, I find a lot of operational folks who are making these decisions don’t have a lot of ground experience. There are folks who haven’t kept current on what we’re doing these days as far as how suppression has changed throughout the last decade. For instance, the folks who don’t keep current with large fire suppression tactics and the urban interface.

“I truly think it’s these disconnected, operational folks who spend a lot of time looking at paper maps, or time in camp, or time in their trucks, who are not getting out on the ground and talking with experienced firefighters. Instead, they’re looking at that paper map and making decisions based on that.

“Therefore, I think that these dumb assignments are born from folks who don’t have good, solid, well-rounded backgrounds. Folks who aren’t out on the ground day-after-day in multiple regions and fuel types throughout the fire season.”



Alanna English currently has 13 years of hotshot experience and, previously, worked five years as an engine captain.

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Alanna says that as she continues through her career, she's going to do everything in her power to stay connected to the ground.

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**“We’re not going to get away from seeing risk differently. Just due to the fact that we’re all different, just growing up different, gender differences and all that type of stuff.”**

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[Continued from Page 8]

Alanna has an additional take on why “dumb” assignments might be increasing.

“I think there are even more people today who spend less time in the field. It seems like the fire agencies have become so administratively-based. There’s so many admin duties. There are a lot of people on teams who spend the majority of their regular jobs behind the desk, behind the computer, and less time on the ground. These are the people who need to be listening to local resources and experienced firefighters. These are the folks who are typically in positions where these dumb assignments are born.”

#### How do we turn that around?

“Unfortunately, we’re always going to have dumb assignments. I’d like to believe that we can minimize the dumb assignments. We’re not going to get away from seeing risk differently. Just due to the fact that we’re all different, just growing up different, gender differences and all that type of stuff.”

Alanna continues: “I think communication is key. I think training is key. Listen to the experienced ground folks. Listen to hotshot superintendents. Get out in the field during critical operational periods, during the peak fire period. Get out of the helicopter, get out of the truck, walk around, talk and listen to people.

“So the desk firefighter, the AFMO, the FMO, Fire Staff—folks who’ve gotten disconnected with being on a crew or an engine—those folks need to get out on the ground and be a part of a burnout operation—or at least see it. See what the ground firefighters are seeing. Bring these folks back to their roots to help ensure that they’re reconnecting with the risks that are actually occurring out there.”

Alanna understands that it works both ways. That the ground folks also need to try to understand the “desk firefighters” world.

“We all need to understand the different perspectives and the big picture. And, we’re on the ground. We’re not always going to get the big picture. Often, there’s just not enough time to get all the information and all of the answers.”

#### What about the right to refuse risk?

“I think there is a right and wrong way to refuse risk. I’d like to think that you’d have good reasons on why—and good alternatives to offer up. It’s really easy when there is obviously a high-level of risk. If the risk is definitely outweighing the benefits of the assignment. To me, that’s easy to refuse. Especially these days. I think we’ve all realized that none of our lives are worth the house or vegetation.

“On the flip side, I feel that even if you may not have a lot of experience, but you’ve got this gut feeling that something doesn’t feel right, and you don’t want to do this assignment for whatever reason, you have every right to refuse it. Even though you may not have the experience to come up with alternatives, or even a great reason as to why your gut is telling you this, I think that’s fair enough reason.

“I believe we all need to have control of our own safety. So even if you can’t come up with other alternatives, and you still want to refuse an assignment, I think you have the right to do that.”

This hotshot captain knows that the “dumb” assignments with less risk are more difficult to turn down. As Alanna explains, “But the dumb assignments that have minimal risks, those are more difficult. Because when we come up with alternatives and the alternatives aren’t chosen, it’s hard to refuse a dumb assignment that has minimal risk. So we typically will go ahead and do them. Those become the assignments that are difficult to explain to our crew why we’re doing them.”

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Alanna's various fire quals include Air Tactical Group Supervisor.

### So how do you explain, or justify, those assignments to your crew?

[Continued from Page 9] "We'll explain our point of view. And we'll explain how we offered up other alternatives and options. We'll explain the associated risk and we'll explain the reasons why we accepted the assignment based on the minimal risks. We'll also explain that we will completely evaluate and reevaluate the situation as we go. Basically, we just try to be as open and honest with the crew as possible so they understand where we're at and why we accepted the assignment."

Alanna knows that while this process might not sound problematic or challenging—in reality, it's no easy task.

"It's difficult. It's a difficult situation. No doubt about it. Because we undoubtedly put our crew—their welfare—as the key priority. And there's risk no matter what we do. Whether we're just driving to an assignment or walking through the woods. There's always risks."

### When is it hardest to turn down an assignment?

"I guess what would be hardest for me is if I was with a peer group that I knew, let's say a bunch of Region Three hotshot captains and superintendents I've known forever. And everybody was on board with an assignment except for me. Maybe I just had a gut feeling—nothing real concrete that I could grab on to, but just something about it that I didn't like. That would be the tough one. Who do I listen to, myself or this peer group that I've known and respected for my whole career? That would be a difficult situation.

"Talking about group think, or getting out of group think, trusting yourself and your instincts, that's tough. It would be easier for me in the other scenario where I was working with people I didn't know and it was a situation I didn't like. In that situation, I know I would have an easier time refusing."

### Is there any value in ground folks spending time in the "higher up" positions to see the process and risk at that level?

"Of course. Those of us on the ground, we like to think that we've got the best perspective and obviously we don't. So seeing that side of things would be beneficial. I think it's a great idea—even at the team level—of us getting an understanding of programmatic risk. Just to see what decisions are being made and how political the decisions are. I think there would be some resistance. Some ground folks would just dig their heels in and say: *'Nope. I don't care. My perspective is what YOU need to see—not the other way around.'*"

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**My main priority is my 'peeps'. That's the way it is. Nothing will ever change that.**

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### As we move forward, do you think that your own perspective and perception of risk will change?

"I'm sure that it might waiver a bit, or shift slightly, but not to any sort of extreme. To be honest with you, I hope it doesn't. Because if it does, that means I'm getting disconnected. As I continue through my career, I'm going to do everything in my power to stay connected to the ground and what's happening real time. That's my main priority in my career.

"And, of course," this hotshot captain stresses, "my main priority is my 'peeps'. That's the way it is. Nothing will ever change that."

[Please Provide Us with Your Input](#)

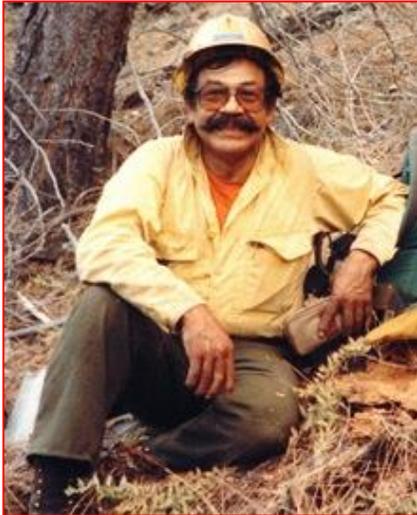
[bit.ly/2mcfedback](https://bit.ly/2mcfedback)

*Got a potential "One of Our Own" candidate?*  
Contact: Paul Keller  
503-622-4861 [prkeller@fs.fed.us](mailto:prkeller@fs.fed.us)

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## We Have Lost a Legendary Brother



**Ben Charley coined the term  
"Two More Chains!"**

The wildland fire service has lost a significant brother.

Benjamin Charley Sr. passed away this March. He was 88.

Ben was the legendary Superintendent of the Horseshoe Meadow Hotshots. He was the crew's first Superintendent, serving in that position for 15 years, from 1974 to 1989.



"My Dad was a role model for all who worked for him," said his son Dirk Charley. "His leadership influenced many toward highly successful careers. Our Dad's communication style was unique. His warm and friendly smile and big laugh will never be forgotten."

Ben is credited for coining the wildland firefighting phrase: *"Two More Chains!"*

*"Two More Chains!"* and *'Steak and Eggs, Boys!'* were Ben Charley's classic things to say," said Robert "Horseshoe Bob" Bennett, who became Horseshoe Meadow's Superintendent when Ben Charley retired.

"Ben would tell us this all the time and we would laugh and keep cutting line," Bennett said. "It would always get us jacked-up and we would cut more line with smiles on our faces. Good motivation, good leader, the best."

Ben, a 20-year U.S. Marine veteran who served in World War II and the Korean War, was also a highly respected leader for his Dunlap Band of the Mono Indian Tribal Community.

Prior to his father's death, a video was made in which Dirk Charley is featured reminiscing about his dad using *"Two More Chains"* as a motivational tool for his crew:

### Video

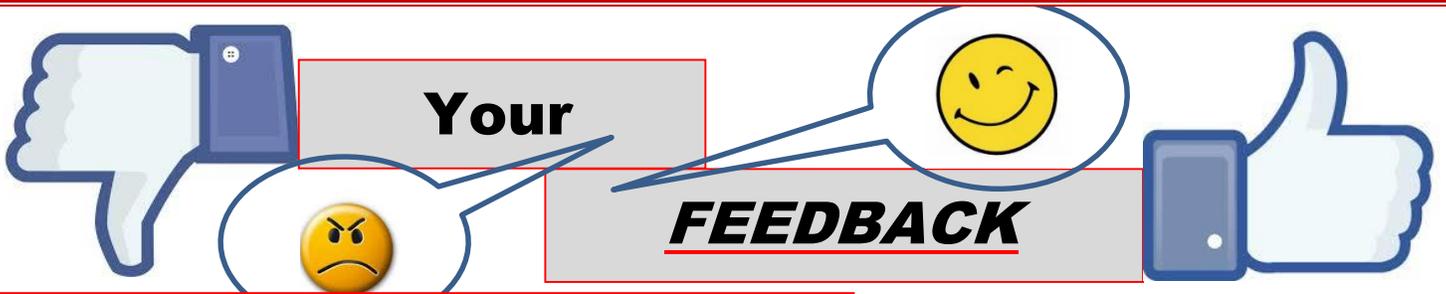
#### "Two More Chains"

<http://vimeo.com/103311388>

Dirk, Forest Tribal Relations Program Manager for the Sierra and Sequoia National Forests, is a former hotshot with the Arrowhead, Sierra, and Horseshoe Meadow IHCs. He also served as a Tanbark Air Attack Helishot/Helitack crew member on the Angeles National Forest and was the Assistant Fire Engine Operator on the Westfall and Trimmer engine crews on the Sierra National Forest. In addition, while he was on the Pinehurst Engine Crew he served as a fill-in crewmember on the Horseshoe Meadow IHC when his dad had the crew. (To see more of Dirk Charley's video interview, go to: <http://thesmokeygeneration.com/>.)

To see a 2004 "Wildland Fire Leadership – Leaders We Would Like to Meet"  
Interview with Ben Charley:

[http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/leaders\\_meet/interviews/leaders\\_BenCharley.html](http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/leaders_meet/interviews/leaders_BenCharley.html)



## Perspectives from Our Facebook Peeps

**Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center**  
 Posted by lessonslearnedcenter@gmail.com [?] · January 22 ·

Why do we fight?  
 "We don't try to 'fight' earthquakes -- we anticipate them in the way we plan communities, build buildings and prepare for emergencies."  
<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/.../1411105131937.htm>



**Coexist or perish, new wildfire analysis says: Changing wildfire paradigm from fighting to...**  
 An international team of fire experts have concluded that it is time to stop fighting fires and instead...  
 SCIENCEDAILY.COM

**Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center**  
 Posted by lessonslearnedcenter@gmail.com [?] ·

Will you accept more risk if it involves overtime?



**Persephone Whelan**

I think it is sneakier than that. Do you get stressed during a slow fire season with no OT? Does that stress influence your decisions, if only a little bit? It is these tiny tugs by all the stuff that effects our decisions and actions that add up. Now place those influences on a decision with an uncertain outcome—a not sure how “risky” this is kind of decision—and you can see that even if OT was not THE influencing factor, the influence is there.

Would it be safe to say wildland firefighters are not risk TAKERS but risk MITIGATORS regardless of the OT. I have never heard someone say: “Hey let’s go direct on that DIVS—it involves more risk, but hey, we get the OT.” This question sounds like it was asked by someone who hasn’t been in the field for a very long time.



**Matthew Carroll**

Now that I'm back out west I find myself sharing Florida's approach, especially to hurricane preparedness, and their emphasis on homeowner responsibility. You may be ignorant of that disturbance regime when you move there but you will not be able to stay that way. We coexist with all disturbances. It is a tremendous parallel that could easily be applied globally and is a missing piece of so many conversations.



**Dana Skelly**

This is somewhat frustrating due to the fact that we are talking about apples and oranges. You simply CANNOT fight an earthquake. Don't you think we would fight earthquakes if we could?



**Suzanne Flynn**

**Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center**  
 Posted by lessonslearnedcenter@gmail.com [?] · November 15, 2014 ·

We choose to expose ourselves to the risks of fighting fire because \_\_\_\_\_.



**Eric Metzger**

Drip torch.



**Will Feral**

Money.

**Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center**  
 Posted by lessonslearnedcenter@gmail.com [?] ·

The way we manage large fire is \_\_\_\_\_.



**Tony Buzzerio**



**Steve Holley**

It's fun. And every day is different!



**Emily Gubler**

Ignoring what the research is telling us.

We don't manage them, we put them out.

Wasteful and shortsighted.



**Wendy McCartney**

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**Two More Chains**, published quarterly by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, is dedicated to sharing information with wildland firefighters. For story tips, questions, or comments, please contact: Paul Keller, [prkeller@fs.fed.us](mailto:prkeller@fs.fed.us), 503-622-4861.