

Preliminary Learning Material

Thank you for planning to attend the Island Fork Staff Ride at Route 377 Fire Department. The Staff Ride Development Team is looking forward to your participation in this learning opportunity!

Below is the preliminary learning material that you should familiarize yourself with prior to coming to the event. The time required to read this material should be less than one hour total. This preliminary study phase is a very important part of the staff ride and will greatly benefit all participants from the knowledge gleaned from this material.

- Kentucky Division of Forestry Island Fork Fire Report

<http://www.wildfirelessons.net/HigherLogic/System/DownloadDocumentFile.ashx?DocumentFileKey=155b98ba-2aaa-458b-900a-500f7432f5d4>

- NIOSH F-14 99 Fire Report (Island Fork Fire)

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/fire/reports/face9914.html>

WHAT IS A STAFF RIDE?

Staff rides are excellent learning events, with a primary focus on the professional development of leaders.

BACKGROUND: WHY CONDUCT A STAFF RIDE?

A staff ride is a planned learning event that has been used effectively by various branches of the U.S. military since the early 1900's. The common purpose shared by all staff rides is to further the development of leaders. Military staff rides typically discuss leadership, decision making, tactics and strategy. Staff rides on wildland fires discuss the same issues in a different context. The systematic study of wildland fire sites can help wildland firefighters and managers see how leaders' decisions and followers' behaviors influence tactical outcomes on fires, how terrain and weather influence both fire and human behavior on fires, and how technology, tactics and organization interact in a wildland fire setting at any complexity level. When these personal observations are combined with curiosity and diligence, the groundwork is laid for a lifetime of learning that produces leaders who are mentally prepared for wildland firefighting.

DEFINITION: WHAT IS A STAFF RIDE?

A staff ride consists of three distinct phases: a systematic Preliminary Study of a selected fire or other emergency operation, an extensive Field Study to the actual site(s) associated with the incident, and an opportunity for Integration of the lessons derived from the study and visit. It envisions maximum participant involvement before arrival and at the site to guarantee thoughtful analysis and discussion.

Staff rides should not be confused with simple visits to an incident location. In the military, when terrain and hypothetical scenarios (but not history) are used as teaching vehicles, it is called a “Tactical Exercise Without Troops.” Further, a visit to the site of a battle – or fire – involving little or no preliminary systematic study on the part of the participant is a “historical tour,” not a staff ride. Historical tours can stimulate thought and discussion, but are limited by the lack of participant preparation and involvement. Finally, the site visit is the primary factor that distinguishes a staff ride from a traditional case study or any other virtual exercise.

PURPOSE: WHAT CAN A STAFF RIDE ACCOMPLISH?

The staff ride is a unique technique for conveying the lessons of the past to present day leaders. While the sole purpose of a staff ride is to further the professional development of leaders, it may be designed to achieve one or many goals. Depending on the incident selected, the staff ride can illuminate any principle or lesson at any chosen level. Because its mixture of classroom and field study facilitates participant involvement, it ensures that any educational benefits are more likely to be retained by participants. Staff rides should be viewed more as education and less as training.

The goals of staff rides have varied from the specific testing of operational concepts to the general enhancement of professional and analytical skills. All staff rides, however, have one idea in common: to place participants on an actual piece of terrain, confront them with an operational situation, and stimulate them to reach conclusions or derive lessons from the experience.

The professional development of wildland fire leaders can be accomplished in many ways through the use of the staff ride. Teaching points from small unit tactics to fire behavior to the art of leadership can be addressed through staff rides. Because staff rides involve a high level of personal commitment and involvement for all participants, the learning that occurs on staff rides can be deeper and more meaningful for adult learners than classroom lectures.

Teaching points for a wildland fire staff ride might include:

- To develop improved understanding of human factors, including leadership, cohesion, and communications at any level desired.
- To provide case studies in the successful application of fire management principles associated with logistical support, planning and operations.
- To support an organizational learning environment for incidents where factors interact to produce accidents and disasters.
- To study high risk, low frequency situations.

- To review key decision gates associated with fire management actions.
- To demonstrate the effects of weather, slope, topography and fuels upon fire management actions and their implementation.
- To encourage fire management personnel to study their profession through the use of history.

A well-planned and executed staff ride can address a number of teaching points at the same time. One of the most important components of a successful staff ride is to stimulate active discussion among participants. The development of group awareness and knowledge cannot occur without discussion.

KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL STAFF RIDES

There are three key elements to the delivery of a successful staff ride. First, the staff ride must be designed to ensure participants become active participants in the educational process: in the exchange of information, in the formulation of thought, and in the collective analysis of the operation. Second, the staff ride must be well planned, with logistical and safety considerations taken into account and group leaders designated. The third key to success is that there must be a complete Integration of the Preliminary Study phase and the Field Study phase of the course. Without the Integration phase, the Preliminary Study is just an independent academic analysis, and the Field Study is just a historical tour. Either one is sufficient to derive lessons, but the two activities integrated together generate optimal understanding and analytical thought.