

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: “Life First” in Action

Date: July 9, 2018

Location: Initial Attack in Region 2

The Firefighters’ Perspective

What in the hell just happened?

The night before had been a good night sleep-out on the fireline. It is now 0600 and time to wake up with the early morning sun to greet you and brisk mountain air to breathe. The containment line that you created the day before held throughout the night. The fire is barely smoldering at this point. It is almost out.

A morning check-in with Dispatch reaffirms that the fire has been contained with some interior heat. Unfortunately, the cool mountain air does not last long as the sun climbs higher and higher into the sky.

As the morning continues to progress into midday the sun’s rays continue to strengthen and bring more heat. This once almost benign fire now begins to show some life.

While still contained with minimal chance for spread, the still-smoldering fire is now generating more smoke and heat as the effect of the night’s humidity is diminished by the sun’s rays.

You realize that your earlier estimates of having the fire out within 24 hours are starting to wane. You make an additional update to Dispatch, explaining your situation and request to spend a second night on the fire. Within what feels like minutes, there is a helicopter flying above your fire requesting that all fire personnel—you and your rappel partner—need to hike off of the hill.

Here’s what immediately goes through your mind:

What in the hell just happened? Multiple hours of hard work are now down the tubes. A fire that is almost completely out and we are leaving it? A longer hike out through rough and rugged terrain just before nightfall? Something is not right and we don’t know what it is!



The challenging boulder field at the smoldering fire location that confronted the two firefighters—rappelers—on this IA incident.

The Fire Managers' Perspective

The Chief's Vision for Success

In 2016 the U.S. Forest Service developed and moved forward with a "Life First" Initiative within its wildland fire program.

The Chief's stated vision for success in the 2016 fire season was to: *"Implement strategies and tactics that commit responders only to operations where and when they can be successful, and under conditions where important values actually at risk are protected with the least exposure necessary while maintaining relationships with people we serve."*

Depending on the background and experiences that wildland fire personnel and managers had, this initiative may or may not have been a new concept. One thing that "Life First" did was create a common language that fire personnel, fire managers, partners, and cooperators understood and could work toward.



Fuel and topography overview of this IA fire.

A Smoke Report Comes into Dispatch

Let's fast forward to how those two rappellers were dispatched and inserted on their initial attack fire.

It's July 8, 2018, just after 8 p.m. A smoke report comes into Dispatch. Local county resources are enroute. Dispatch notifies the Duty Officer (DO) and the DO decides not to send any resources until the county provides an update to minimize firefighter exposure during the evening and night hours.

One thing that "Life First" did was create a common language that fire personnel, fire managers, partners, and cooperators understood and could work toward.

Later that evening, the DO requests that a helicopter and rappellers respond the following morning. The next morning, the helicopter with rappellers is unable to find the smoke. In late morning, the DO and engine respond to the area to try to observe the smoke.

Finally, by early evening, the engine is able to see a smoke and requests the helicopter with rappellers back to the incident. This is the fourth or fifth location in which the fire had been plotted. Once on the helicopter with the rappellers was on scene, once again the smoke was difficult to find. The helicopter actually had to fly a line from the engine up to the smoke before they could locate it.

Overnight Stay on Fire Approved

As per standard operating procedures, the rappel crew sized-up the fire, identified helistops, and a pack-out path.

Before engaging the fire, the rappellers contacted Dispatch with a size-up from the air: one-tenth acre, fire smoldering, in timber, calm winds, no additional resources, structure approximately ½ mile to the SSE, and ability to contain with two rappellers asking permission to spend the night on the fire.

Rappel operations and the overnight stay was approved by the Forest Duty Officer (FDO).

It is now mid-evening and the rappel crew is on the fire. An updated lat/long, estimated containment time the following morning, and Incident Commander (IC) is communicated to Dispatch.

Fire size is communicated to Dispatch at 0.25 acres, low-spread potential, poor access, and containment at 0700 the following morning.

The rappellers were constantly evaluating risk.

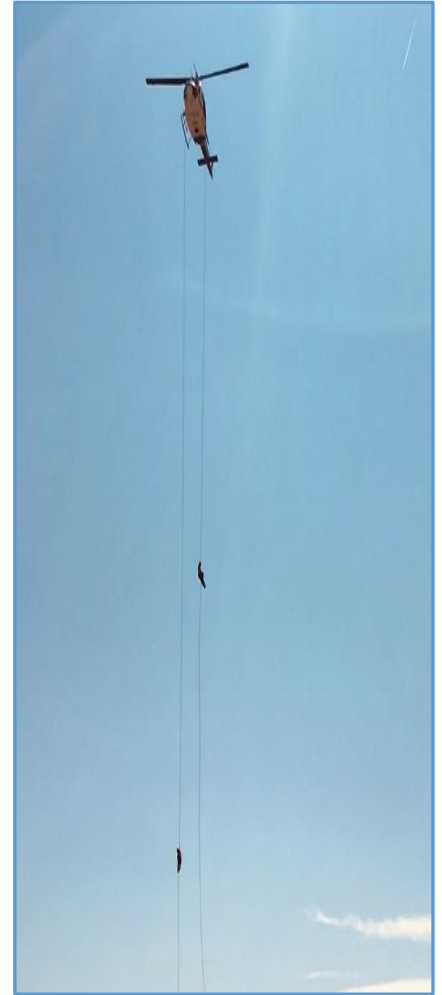
The rappellers' risk assessment from both the air and on the ground validated to them that this was a lower complexity fire. It did not feel any different from other rappel fires that they initial

attack. For the duration of this fire, the rappellers were constantly evaluating risk.

Fire suppression efforts began at approximately 1900. The two rappellers worked diligently for the next couple of hours, achieving 80 percent containment prior to calling Dispatch with the update and that they were heading to camp.

Rappellers: "We Need to Spend Another Night on Scene"

The following morning at 0700, the rappellers called Dispatch stating that the fire had not moved over night and they had achieved 100 percent containment. They would provide Dispatch with an update later in the afternoon. This afternoon update indicated that the fire still had a large amount of heat. The rappellers made a request to spend another night on scene, stating that this was necessary to put the fire out.



A practice rappel.

Two Sides to Every Story

There are two sides to every coin and this story is no exception.

The Region, and specifically the Forest, has been experiencing a very complex fire season. Personnel have been going full-steam ahead. A variety of detailers have been needed to complete all tasks of the fire suppression efforts. This includes firefighters, Duty Officers, Agency Administrators, and Dispatchers. The Forest Duty Officers and Agency Administrators understand "Life First" and believe in the "Stop, Think, Talk and Act" philosophy.

On July 9 when the two rappellers were inserted into this small IA fire the acting District DO was in the general area observing, but was unable to see their helicopter. After the rappel was complete, the acting DO observed the helicopter lift out a drainage that had been identified in 2011 by the Forest as a "tough piece of ground"—an area that had few values and posed a much higher risk to firefighters on the ground.

The Forest described this area as a place to not put ground personnel due to: the remote rugged terrain, cliffs, steep slopes, inability to quickly respond to a medical emergency, limited values at risk, along with other hazards.

Knowing the new location of the fire and the rappellers on the ground was the first indicator to Fire Management personnel that they should “Stop, Think, Talk and Act”.

***The Forest and DO recognized
that the only value at risk on the hill that day
was the rappellers.***

Fire Managers Evaluate Overall Risk of this Mission

Forest Fire Managers started to ask tougher questions and evaluate other conditions. They also received some pictures of the fire. There was concern that the Forest now had rappellers in an area that was deemed “high risk” in 2011. Very limited medivac locations in this area would require significant work to develop and improve. Difficult and steep pack-out options included multiple cliff bands, the potential for thunderstorms, the probability of limited communications, and a primary medical evacuation plan that rested solely on aircraft.

The next day, Fire Managers were still evaluating the overall risk of the mission with the rappellers being their number one priority. At 1220 the IC on the fire provided Dispatch with that update, stating that the fire had a lot of heat and, therefore, the IC requested an extension to stay on the fire one more day. Upon hearing this latest size-up, the DO requested that recon flight of the fire.

This recon flight reaffirmed the discussion that had occurred in the office just hours before. The DO also observed that the small fire was nearly out and had low potential for spread. The DO recognized that it was probable that the two rappellers could take care of this fire with a little more time and likely without incident.

But weighing even heavier in the DO’s mind was this idea about “Life First” and actual values at risk.

***“It was one of the toughest decisions that I’ve made.
But I had to pull them off of the hill.”***

Duty Officer

The Forest and DO recognized that the only value at risk on the hill that day was the rappellers. The DO also realized that a stream of ominous “weak singles” was occurring. Furthermore, without a break in this stream, there could quickly become a high-risk alignment that could result in a system failure.

The Most Important End State

After this comprehensive recon flight, the DO chose to pull the rappellers off of the fire. *“It was one of the toughest decisions that I’ve made. But I had to pull them off of the hill,”* the Duty Officer would explain.

Each day fire personnel and managers make risk-based decisions and implement actions based on the information that they have. As that information changes, adjustments to the original plan may be needed with a new course of action.

The most important end state of any decision is that each and every one of us lives to tell the story and can return to the line another day.

LESSONS

Deliberate Discussion Points that Lead to a Successful Outcome

- ❖ The hazardous conditions of the fire's location with the nearest values at risk being well removed from the fire proximity led to the decision during initial attack to withdraw the rappellers and reevaluate tactical options. The new plan included the development of future management Action Points and a focus on structure protection plan development.
- ❖ The Forest recognized that these rappellers were counting on them to make good decisions and not place them in situations of unacceptable risk.
- ❖ The majority of the time we are successful in our jobs—we come home alive at the end of the day. The odds are often in our favor. The decision to pull the rappellers off the fire took courage to make. It took courage and was difficult because it was right.

✓ ***Faced with a similar circumstance will you make the right decision in the future?***

- ❖ The firefighting effort is challenging, dynamic and has a human element. Therefore, there will never be the perfect plan. What is important is that the plan that we implement has been thought about deliberately—and is constantly revisited and revised as needed.
- ❖ While the Forest recognized and implemented “Life First” principles on this fire, work remains to continue to improve effective communication to all employees, incoming resources, and support personnel—especially during periods of high fire activity.
- ❖ Risk decisions were being made at appropriate levels. In 2011 the Forest did a deliberate risk assessment of the area and determined that the risk was too high to place ground resources in this area. The rappellers had done an operational risk assessment of the fire and accepted the risk to engage.
- ❖ As conditions/information changed, so did the risk. The Forest convened a meeting with Fire Management and discussed possible alternatives and their associated risks. They developed a solution that was not free from risk; however, the risk was mitigated to an acceptable level. This was a deliberate risk assessment that was validated by the recon flight from the DO.

✓ ***This decision resulted in pulling the rappellers off of the fire.***

- ❖ Every decision and action has associated risk. It is important to make risk-based decisions and to implement deliberate actions that minimize risk and brings each of us home at the end of the day.

✓ ***It is not reality to armchair quarterback and second guess a decision or action with hindsight bias. This is because the hindsight decision or action never occurred, therefore never creating an outcome. However, there should be opportunities to learn through***

effective communication to help ensure that sound decisions and actions are made and implemented in the future when similar situations are faced.

Risk Management

Risk management is a process by which we can maintain an acceptable level of safety in the performance of our work. The goal of risk management is delay, reduce, or manage threats that can lead to a potential accident to the lowest acceptable level.

There is no such thing as “zero” risk. Risk can only be delayed, reduced, accepted, or transferred. After these measures have been addressed, residual risk remains.

This means identifying and abating hazards, refusing to accept unnecessary risk, and making risk-related decisions at the appropriate level are all critical to obtaining a safer work environment.

❖ **Strategic Risk**

This is where there is time and resources to schedule a process that will enable us to employ the strengths of a collection of individuals with varying specialties and backgrounds.

❖ **Deliberate Risk**

This is where decisions are often made in a controlled environment where there are more options of time.

❖ **Operational Risk**

This is immediate decision making associated with a time critical situation.



Rocky Mountain
Area Coordination
Center

This RLS was submitted by:

**RLS Team: Todd Legler, James Muir,
Seve Flores, with support from the
Rocky Mountain Wildfire
Coordinating Group.**

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?
Click this button:

Share
Your Lessons