



National Interagency Fire Center

Memo

To: Firefighters at Large
From: Ed Hollenshead, National Fire Operations Safety Officer - NIFC
Date: 8/25/03
Re: Tragic Loss and Resolve

Never before have we, the wildland firefighting community, placed so much emphasis on the concepts and tenets of safety. The awareness, oversight, and attention to the fundamental rules of wildland fire survival have never been more keen, yet seemingly senseless deaths continue to take members of our extended family. I believe firefighters are more astute and situationally aware than the average Joe. I believe firefighters understand, better than their neighbors, the finite nature of life on this earth. I believe firefighters are better prepared physically, mentally, and emotionally to deal with the unknown, to identify and manage risk, and to make decisions based upon these honed abilities.

I would ask all of us to contemplate our daily actions and decisions in light of yesterday's tragedy. How many corners do we cut to save time, to prove a point, or to get on to the next task at hand? How many times do we do something we know to be risky before we've had the chance or taken the time to assess the risk? How many times do we knowingly violate a law or standard simply because it's inconvenient or burdensome? How many times do we ignore the gnawing in our gut because we don't believe what we're feeling is true? How many times do we "go with the flow" to avoid conflict or the appearance of weakness, even when we know what is happening is wrong? And... how often do we think we can get away with all these things before the consequences catch up with us?

I have no answers for what happened August 24, 2003 on Oregon State Route 20. None of us, really, does. In the aftermath we cannot not be satisfied simply to mourn eight young firefighters, offer prayers for their families, friends, and co-workers, and wonder "Why...?" We have the responsibility, and should be resolved to apply our training and superior sense of surrounding to our everyday living. We have the responsibility, and should be resolved to avoid the pitfalls of haste and reliance on "luck." We owe it to their memory, to our loved-ones, and to each other.