

# Two More Chains



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## RAPID LESSON SHARING

By Travis Touchette, Director  
Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

As we look across the history of wildland fire, one thing is clear: How we learn has changed. For decades, much of our formal learning came from our worst days—fatalities, entrapments, serious accidents—and the reports that followed. But our learning has evolved.

Today, we know that important lessons are not limited to catastrophic events. They show up in positive outcomes, close calls, equipment issues, near misses, creative field fixes, and those moments when someone says: *“This went well or this almost went bad, and somebody else should know about it.”* That is where Rapid Lesson Sharing (RLS) has become such an important part of the wildland fire learning system.

This issue of *Two More Chains* is about that evolution. We look at the history of accident reporting, we hear from the field about what makes a good RLS. We also focus on the next step: turning lessons into action through local conversations, SOP adjustments, equipment changes, training, and briefings.

This issue also marks a meaningful moment for *Ground Truths*. Travis Dotson closes out more than 15 years of writing that column by reflecting on what it means to speak up, challenge assumptions, and still lead with compassion, humility, and a willingness to listen. In this issue’s *One of Our Own*, we also hear from Travis as he reflects on 17 years with the Lessons Learned Center—including the birth and growth of Rapid Lesson Sharing. Thank you, Travis, for all of your contributions to the Lessons Learned Center—and, most importantly, to the wildland fire community.

Learning in this business is not passive. It requires us to stay curious, listen, read past the headline, and take one practical step that makes us better prepared for the next shift, assignment, or incident.

Let’s keep learning.

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### Cover Photo

*The Campbell River Fire in the  
Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in  
Alaska. Photo by Beth Ipsen.*



# GROUND TRUTHS

By Travis Dotson  
Wildland Fire Lessons Learned  
Center Analyst  
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## Style Points

I have written this Ground Truths column for over 15 years. This will be my last. I have rambled, ranted, and wrestled with windmills right here on this page for all to see.

I have had more than a few instances of stirring the pot enough to make my supervisor's phone ring—for both good and bad reasons. At one point, there was even a serious endeavor to have me “silenced.”

I remember early on, maybe two or three years into Ground Truths' existence, I was conversing with a person who ran a well-known national fire program. They

were talking about *Two More Chains* overall and how much they liked it. They said: *“Ground Truths is great! I like the content. I know that comes from you, but what I am really impressed with is the wordsmithing . . . the actual artistry of the writing.”*

I was trying to put on my humble “Aw Shucks” face when they looked me straight in the eyes and asked: *“So who does that for you—who actually writes it?”* They were dead serious. Ouch.

### Tackled a Variety of Subjects

On this page I have tackled a variety of topics, both operational and cultural—it's almost impossible to separate the two. The subjects I chose to tangle with were all deserving of attention, but in hindsight, I am struck by the importance of HOW you say something. This is a very basic lesson, but I am a very basic person, so it checks out.

When I look back at stuff that was published over a decade ago, some of it holds up and some of it not so much. The stuff that still lands is typically rooted in

compassion and empathy, mixed with a little vulnerability here and there. Those pieces might still have a bit of brash and a dash of aggression, but the spirit is caring and hopeful. Anything put out with a flavor of bitterness, resentment, or anger does not age well, like fine “whine,” you might say.

### Saying What Needs to be Said

On the line, in the office, or on the page—I am clearly an advocate of saying what needs to be said. I also

love style points granted for delivery. Nothing is cooler than a well-timed one-liner that packs a punch, makes a point, and inspires grandiose re-tellings for years to come.

On the other hand, a rabid, rath-filled rant intended to injure is distasteful and has more of a desperate vibe than anything else. Don't do that.

Don't get sucked into ego-fueled fireline theatrics and performative pontification. That's the fast track to irrelevance. Make sure your “why” isn't about you.

### Don't Forget to Listen

Most importantly, don't forget to listen. Listening is a superpower and you will waste your words if they are not informed by the insights of others. Influence is a two-way street. Choose your inputs wisely and make sure your outputs are necessary. Positive impact is hard to achieve with ill intent.

Speak up. Use your voice. Just know that HOW you say your piece will often reveal your motive. Pay attention and you might get to know yourself.

Carry on, Toolswingers

# Insights into the History of Wildland Fire Accident Reporting

*Wildland fire spent decades only looking at our worst disasters.*

*Today, most of what we publish at the LLC isn't in the disaster category.*

By Erik Apland, Field Operations Specialist

Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

To put it lightly, accident reporting has changed a lot in the history of organized wildland fire suppression. The most famous, most impactful wildland fire in American history, the [Great Idaho Fire](#) of 1910, had, as far as I can tell, no official report. To this day, the exact identities and even the exact number of the dead on this incident are unknown.

The first incident review in the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's (LLC) database is from the fatal entrapment of Civilian Conservation Corps firefighters on [the 1939 Rock Creek Fire](#) in Nevada.

The work of two high-ranking officials in the U.S. Forest Service, this investigation report begins: "Under circumstances such as surrounded the Rock Creek Fire, men are necessarily excited. Events succeed each other with such rapidity that it is almost humanly impossible to remember all the details, and it is improbable that any two men would remember them in exactly the same way."

Well said.

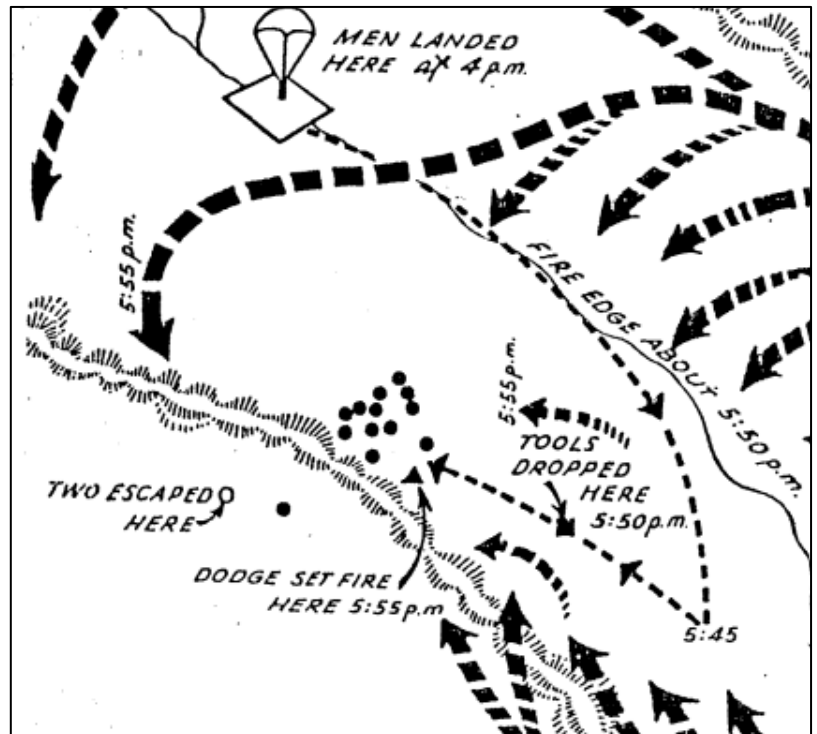
The report's 25 pages are dominated by as exact an account as possible of the events surrounding the deaths of these five firefighters and is exceedingly light on recommendations. The recommendations section states plainly the bias for action inherent in the service: "Starting from an absurdity, it is evident that there would be no fatalities fighting fires with CCC boys if they were not permitted this line of work."

Namely, there is one concrete recommendation: to limit firefighting to those 18 years-of-age or older, and "boys shall be certified for fire duty only after examination by the camp doctor and certification by the camp superintendent and commander." The entrapment itself is blamed on fire behavior that was unpredictable based on previous experiences of sagebrush fires as well as on "uncanny timing."

The [1949 Mann Gulch](#) Fire Board of Review's report ten years later follows the same pattern as Rock Creek: do more of the same training that we are already doing and invest more into fire behavior research. No wide-ranging recommendations.

Similarly, the [1953 Rattlesnake Fire](#) Board of Review Report, and again after the [Inaja Fire](#) in 1956.

Perhaps the best way to understand these reports is to appreciate how the U.S. Forest Service leaders were trying to understand what was happening,



*Hand-drawn map from the 1949 Mann Gulch Fire Board of Review Report.*

and to some extent believed that they didn't yet know enough to recommend sweeping changes.

### **Next: Five Decades of Checklists and Pointing Blame**

It turns out that Inaja was the last straw.

The resulting [1957 Fire Task Force Report](#) ordered by the Chief of the Forest Service contained decades of lessons and recommendations. For the next five decades, reports were different. They no longer accepted that occasional tragedies were a result of our imperfect understanding of fire.

We now had the 10 & 18: the fundamental rules that should keep every firefighter safe. Successive reports added checklists and other recommendations: the downhill checklist, the mandatory use of flame-resistant clothing and fire shelters.

The controversial [1994 South Canyon Fire](#) report famously pointed much of the blame for this tragedy on the fire leaders on Storm King Mountain that day. A growing sense that learning was being stifled by a focus on rules and blame began to take hold and reached its high point with the [Thirtymile Fire](#) (2001), [Cramer Fire](#) (2003), and [Esperanza Fire](#) (2006) reports.

### **A New Focus on Lessons Learned**

A huge change took place in 2005 when the Forest Service's response to the [Tarkio Fire](#) entrapment included, for the first time, a Lessons Learned Analysis. Tarkio became that rarest of creatures—providing the link between one species and another. It is almost two reports stitched together, one immediately following the other, in the same document. First is the traditional report—the narrative, findings, causal and contributing factors, and the 10 & 18 analysis—and then the Lessons Learned Analysis, with its thesis: “Knowing the outcome, it would be easy to criticize individuals and the IMT regarding elements of this story. We ask the reader to avoid that and instead, use this experience to improve your own ‘recognition primed decision making...’”



*The dozer and pickup truck involved in the 2005 Tarkio Fire entrapment at the entrapment location on a steep hillside switchback.*

Agencies now had a new model they could choose to follow. Increasingly, the style of reporting that focused on lessons learned (whether Facilitated Learning Analysis or Lessons Learned Review or anything else it might be called) spread throughout the wildland fire world.

This leads us to the creation of Rapid Lessons Sharing (RLS). If the point is lessons—not tragic outcomes, documenting violations, and making recommendations—then the event that triggers the lesson doesn't have to be catastrophic.

Wildland fire spent decades only looking at our worst disasters. Today, most of what we publish at the LLC isn't in the disaster category. We are trying to learn what we can from our normal work and minor accidents. Lessons are available every day, it's just a matter of recognizing them and sharing them. This issue is all about one easy way to do that.

# What Makes a Good RLS?

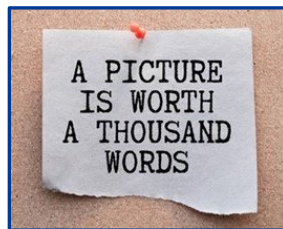
By Ryan Myers, Assistant Director  
U.S. Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management;  
Risk Management Officer (RMO)  
Southwestern Region 3

From my seat, there are a handful of qualities that make a good RLS. That said, it's kind of like making chocolate chip cookies—there are many variations, but the key ingredients are mostly the same.

Is the RLS actually rapid? This quality can be thought about in two ways. Was the lesson shared in an expedited manner; and can it be consumed quickly by others. Some lessons are more important to share quickly than others. But, in my opinion, all should strive to have a quick turnaround to publication.

On the consumer side, I prefer RLSs that are short and easy to digest without requiring too much time or effort. People are busy and can be easily distracted (squirrel!). Products on the shorter side seem like they are more likely to be read and shared.

I love to see RLSs that include pictures, videos, diagrams, or other visual aids that help tell the story or demonstrate some part of the lesson. Many of us are visual learners and, as they say:



Is the RLS in some way novel or unique? I know that it is important for lug nuts to be tightened to the correct torque (and not over-tightened!). But I don't necessarily want to read another RLS about lug nuts unless it is sharing something new.

Is the RLS widely applicable and easily adoptable? These might be the key ingredients (like sugar and chocolate chips in the cookie recipe). If the lesson is very specialized or specific to only a small population, perhaps there is a better means of sharing the lesson. Similarly, if "the fix" is highly complex or super expensive, it probably won't help change the way we do business on a meaningful scale.

Now, I'm not saying that an RLS needs to tick all these boxes in order to be worthy of sharing. There are plenty of really good ones that lack some of these qualities. But for my money, these are the key ingredients.

## **As an RMO, what types of situations would you want or expect field folks to initiate an RLS?**

In our line of work, if you do it long enough, you will be involved in IWIs or other "non-standard" parts of the job.

Some of my favorite RLSs have been about creative innovations from the field that were conjured up in response to some crisis or situational need (e.g., a make-shift soft stretcher). Many of these innovations have helped others (who remembered reading about a similar situation) and some have even gone on to become widely standardized. I would ask that anyone with sharable innovations to consider sharing them. Don't assume they are already widely known.

Do you have one of those old, salty firefighters on your module who occasionally shares a little nugget that makes the job safer, more effective, or more efficient? Perhaps a unique tool modification, or a better way to roll hose? Consider sharing it!

These don't need to be game-changers. Little things can also add up and make an impact. Some might even evoke "why haven't we done it this way all along?" type responses.

If you're unsure about whether or not you should submit an RLS, just do it. Anyone can submit one on the [LLC website](#). And, I'm sure the LLC staff would love to hear your story or idea—even if it doesn't end up being published.

# Insights from Two Who Have Built RLSs

**Rapid Lesson Sharing**

Event Type: BKR Radio Battery Clamshell Short  
Date: August 16, 2025  
Location: Rock Fire Idaho

**Heads-Up on this BKR 5000 Radio Battery Clamshell Issue**

On August 15, 2025, on the Rock Fire, the Complex Incident Management Team (CIMT) received their in-brief from the local



## **Description:**

A radio was returned to the communications unit when it did not work. When the Communications Tech opened the battery pack to try replacing the batteries, they noticed that on one side the batteries were placed opposite of their required positioning. This caused the batteries to overheat and leak, melting parts of the internal clamshell and expanding the batteries on the other side. Fortunately, this was noticed prior to going to the line and only the clamshell was damaged.

**By Timothy S. Garity, Training Specialist  
National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center  
U.S. Forest Service**

## **What motivated you to participate in Rapid Lesson Sharing?**

I am a SOFC (Safety Officer Complex) on one of the Great Basin Complex Incident Management Teams. When our Communications Unit Leader showed me the battery case of the radio and mentioned that it was a known issue with that model, I was surprised. Even though it was a known issue in the communications group, I had never heard about it and thus assumed others hadn't either.

To me, the Rapid Lesson Sharing platform seemed like the fastest way to ensure that others would be made aware of this potential issue. While a SAFENET was also issued, the number of followers that the Lesson Learned Center has and the subscription option to receive RLSs allows for situations like these to reach a wider audience—regardless of who the RLS reader works for.

In this instance, I thought if this individual could make this mistake, so could I.

As a single resource on assignments, a malfunction with a radio has the potential for consequences. Bringing awareness to this “known” issue, for me, was a way to prevent this mistake from happening again.

## **In what ways has RLS helped you and others improve safety or operational practices?**

I have used RLS throughout my career to bring awareness of the topics that I believed were relevant to those I supervised and those who I work with. The subscription option to receive RLSs is great in my current position as a Training Specialist with the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center. It enables me to share relevant topics with our audience while in the training season.

I have also found RLSs useful while on incidents with the Incident Management Team to post at ICP—or make them part of the morning operational briefing when the topic may be applicable to our incident.

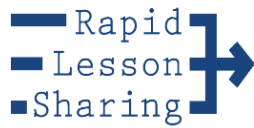
## **How do you think Rapid Lesson Sharing could be improved to better serve our organization?**

I believe showcasing the simplicity of the platform is a great way to improve our organization. We are constantly reminded that we are a “Learning Organization.” This platform can highlight successes from our wildland fire community—not just issues from accidents or mistakes.

Unfortunately, I feel there is a stigma with “Lessons Learned” being related to a negative outcome. There are some talented individuals and programs doing great things and building efficiencies in our line of work. Seeking innovations and success from the field could improve our community even more and RLS could support that messaging.

**Are there any specific examples where RLS made a difference in preventing incidents or enhancing learning?**

I cannot pinpoint a specific example. But I do recall Alex Viktora (former LLC Assistant Director) mentioning something like *“Lessons are only learned if they are applied.”* That has always resonated with me. And this is something that I share through our program. I believe the RLS to be key in applying the lessons learned from others and if any of those lessons resonate with one individual, that ripple effect is immeasurable.



**Event Type:** Linseed Oil-Soaked Rag Near Miss  
**Date:** March 31, 2026  
**Location:** Superior National Forest, Kawishiwi Ranger District; Minnesota

**How this Unit Learned from and Took Positive Actions After this Linseed Oil-Soaked Rag Near Miss**

On March 31, 2026, preseason tool maintenance was carried out on the Kawishiwi Ranger District. At 1530, after conditioning wooden-handled tools, an oil-soaked linseed rag was disposed of in a [Justrite 21-gallon oily waste can](#) in the Kawishiwi Ranger Station’s wood and paint shop.

Forty-eight hours later, a burning smell was noticed coming from the shop. Upon inspection, smoke was seen coming from the Justrite rag can. The can was immediately moved outside through the shop’s side doors. Opening the can there revealed one to



*A Justrite 21-gallon oily waste can.*

**Description:**

After pre-season tool maintenance including tool handle conditioning on the Kawishiwi Ranger District, Superior National Forest, a number of linseed oil-soaked rags were deposited in a metal oily waste can. Two days later, a burning smell was noticed in the shop. The oily waste can was moved outside into a safe area and opened, revealing at least one smoldering oily rag. Following this incident, research was done to learn more about the unique dangers of linseed oil-soaked rags, and how to properly deal with them in the future.

**By**  
**Cody Hobart, Regional Safety Manager**  
**Eastern & Southern Region**  
**U.S. Forest Service**  
**and**  
**Carl Skustad**  
**Wilderness/Recreation Program Lead**  
**Kawishiwi Ranger District, Superior National Forest**

**What made you want to share your story and lessons with the LLC using the RLS process?**

We wanted to share this story so others can learn from it and so a near miss doesn’t happen to another unit. Too often we hear, *“that happened to us too, a year ago,”* after the fact. Whether it’s linseed oil-soaked rags or another accident/near miss, these are hazards that show up across multiple units—and we can prevent more serious outcomes if we share what we see early.

The Region and Unit promotes a learning culture through our “Letter of Intent on Safety” that emphasizes learning and a culture of care. Because reporting hazards and participating in lesson learned reviews is supported without disciplinary action, it’s important to use tools like the RLS to help increase awareness and prevent similar events in the future.

**Do you use/promote RLSs on your unit?**

Yes. We consistently promote RLSs as a way to share safety messages, raise awareness, and reinforce our culture of learning. Employees are encouraged to share experiences openly and RLSs help us get those lessons out quickly and consistently.

**Any other thoughts about the RLS?**

The RLS process works well overall—simple format, easy to use, and effective even with limited resources. With the Lessons Learned Center providing editorial support, we’re able to produce a professional product quickly. They’re an important tool in strengthening our safety culture and preventing future events.

# Shop Talk

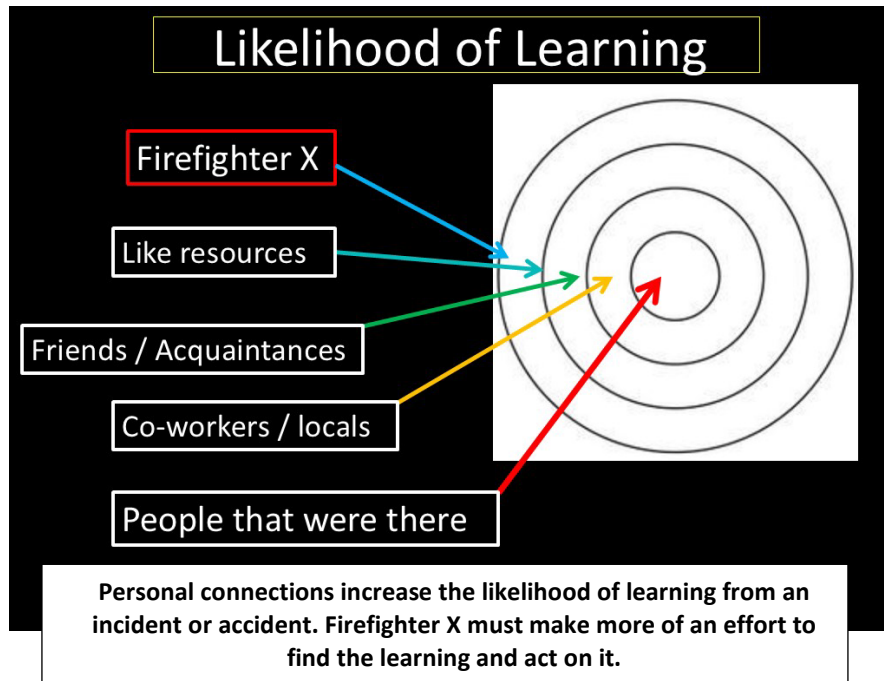
## Turning Lessons into Action

Submitting an RLS or other incident report is only part of the organizational learning process. The next step is for someone reading the report to make changes based on the lessons learned. Let's talk a bit about what that process looks like.

Using the "Likelihood of Learning" model, we see that the folks who experienced an event or incident are going to learn the most.

They experienced the thing. They took away personal lessons. Maybe other folks on their module—or the larger work unit—will take some learning away, too, because of the existing relationships.

But what about everyone else? All those "Firefighter Xs." They read the story. Then what? They don't have a personal tie to drive action.



## Steps to Help You Move Lessons into Actual Learning

**Step 1:** Read incident reports and their respective lessons.

**Step 2:** Identify lessons relevant to your local unit or module.

**Step 3:** Create an action plan to implement the lesson(s) locally. Like altering equipment, SOPs, or creating training for new practices.

**Step 4:** Share those steps with your module or unit. This could include through conversation, email, teaching, drills, or getting the topic added to a refresher or meeting agenda.

*Don't want to go it alone? Why not stand up a unit committee whose focus is to turn lessons into action?*

## So, What are You Waiting For? Start Small.

Here's some low-hanging fruit:

- ❖ Color code trailer hitches and trailer balls so they can't get mixed up.
- ❖ Mark lug nuts to see if they are loosening over time.
- ❖ Color code drip torch collars, tanks and nozzles—different brands aren't interchangeable!

*As you become more practiced at the process, take on bigger issues.*



**Travis Dotson**

*In this insightful and revealing conversation between Christina Anabel, Operations Manager with the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC), and Travis Dotson, Analyst with the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, Travis reflects back on his 17 years at the LLC. He became the LLC's Analyst in 2009. Travis has announced that he will retire this July.*

## **Looking Back at His 17 Years at the LLC Including the Birth of Rapid Lesson Sharing**

**Christina:** Why did you apply for the Analyst position at the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC)?

**Travis:** It was a pretty rough time in my life.

I had just gone through a divorce. I had just accepted a job offer that I really wanted. And then, two weeks later, they rescinded that job offer. I was working as a Training Specialist at the Fire Use Training Academy. I loved that program, but I was informed it was being moved, so they told me I had to move as well.

So now I learn that I have to relocate from Albuquerque, New Mexico to Tucson, Arizona.

Then a buddy of mine sent the announcement for that LLC Analyst job in Tucson. I had been critical of the Lessons Learned Center—so it's possible he sent it as a joke. But, I thought: *Well, if I have to move, I should try for a higher GS level.*

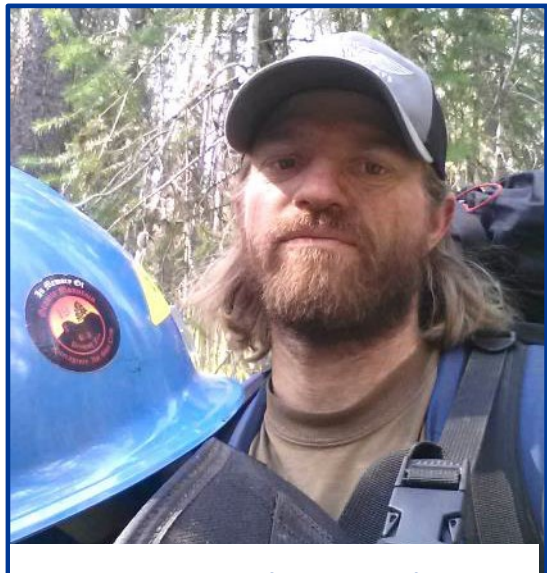
So, I applied to be the Analyst at the LLC and I was offered the job. Next, I thought: *"Oh no. How am I going to be part of this organization that I liked the concept of, but had been vocal about what I thought was missing?"*

It felt like Big Earnie was saying: *"You been running your mouth. Now let's see what you got"* and kicked me out the door. That's how the universe works for me sometimes.

**Christina:** How did that go for you, that first year when you were putting your money where your mouth was?

**Travis:** It was really hard.

Nothing's ever what it seems from the outside. You get into it and you start to understand. There was a lot of conflict. Part of that was me and my personality and what was going on with me at the time. If I had it to



*Travis on a pack-out from a small fire on the Payette National Forest in 2014.*

do all over again, I wouldn't be so abrasive. It was really good for me to be exposed to the bigger system and be shown how difficult it is to influence behavior.

This is a hard job. To come from a field-oriented job into something like this was a tough transition. I didn't like it at first, that's for sure.

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*I was also exposed to the scale of the LLC mission. It was bigger than I realized. I had to zoom out quite a bit. I had always believed wholeheartedly in the mission.*

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**Christina:** Oh, interesting. The fire nerd part of you didn't rise up?

**Travis:** I think that's what saved me. That piece of me that was so into wildland fire culture and could see the potential. I was also exposed to the scale of the LLC mission. It was bigger than I realized. I had to zoom out quite a bit. I had always believed wholeheartedly in the mission.

**Christina:** I imagine putting in for an analyst position coming from field operations was intimidating.

**Travis:** For sure. But part of me likes that stuff. I remember when I first stumbled across the findings from the human factors workshop. I was so into it and I wanted to read more and figure things out. I love that kind of stuff. [The Wildland Firefighters Human Factors Workshop was the landmark five-day session held in Missoula in June 1995 that gathered experts in psychology, sociology, and fire science to address firefighter decision making, crew cohesion, and organizational culture under extreme stress.]

That part of me is what drove me to go through Technical Fire Management (TFM) which is very academic. TFM is ultimately what made me qualified to even apply for the LLC Analyst position. So, even though I was working as a training specialist and a smokejumper when I applied to the LLC, I still had this desire to do analyst-type work.

And when I took the job, I didn't stop jumping. I went back to the smokejumper base on details to feed that Ops side of me, which I believe made me a better analyst. Luckily, I had some visionary people who supported that.

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*Anytime you spend time in a different crowd, you tend to gain perspective.*

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**Christina:**

That's awesome you had that support. It's important to keep grounded in the field and to be able to walk both sides. It seems like it provides a better lens.

**Travis:** Yeah, anytime you spend time in a different crowd, you tend to gain perspective.

### **The Creation of Rapid Lesson Sharing**

**Christina:** When you came to the LLC in 2009 there were some things that you wanted to change. I don't think a lot of people know this—or maybe they do. You were the brainchild behind Rapid Lesson Sharing, the RLS. I'm curious to know where that idea came from?

**Travis:** It was more like a group of people in synergy. Wildland fire was moving away from accusatory accident investigations toward a more compassionate view of unintended outcomes, as well as a different perspective on how we actually learn from those events. And that's when the “peer review,” the “accident prevention analysis,” and the “facilitated learning analysis” were all gaining acceptance. A lot of those endeavors were centered on the voice of the people involved in the event.

I was totally part of that culture shift, a young disciple. So, to me, Rapid Lesson Sharing was the next step of lifting the voices of those involved—like a DIY version of incident reporting. The idea was just kind of bubbling. It just wasn't yet in focus.

And then somebody did it!

I don't even remember now who it was. Someone from a helitack crew sent us an email with a couple photos and a paragraph and said: *"Probably somebody else could learn from this."*

When we received that email, I realized: *"What if there was a system around this? What if there was a button you could push and you could—share your own lessons!"*

That was the very first RLS. A crewmember was [loading external baskets on a helicopter](#), and there was a loose file stuck to a Dolmar. He noticed it and didn't want it coming out and going into the tail rotor. Wanting to make the flight safer, he grabbed that file and tossed it—and it went into the main rotors.

**Christina:** Oh, no.

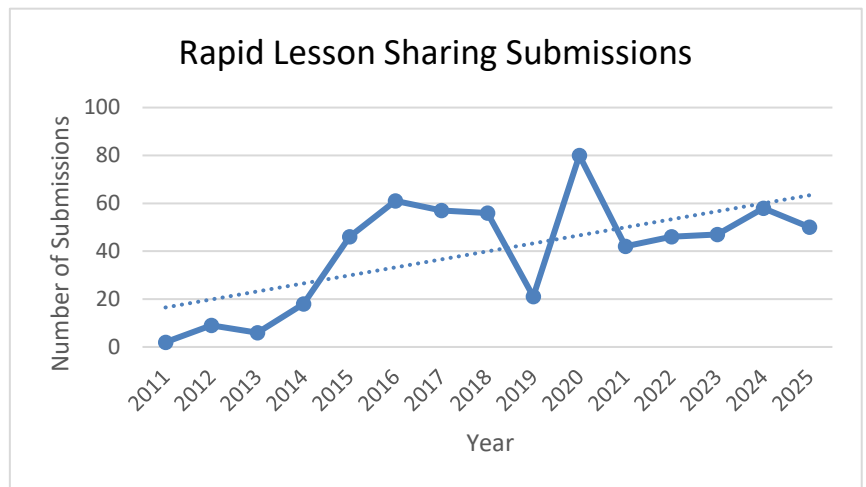
**Travis:** Yeah. Some very useful lessons, right? But that was really the moment when it came together. The realization that we could build a system that would encourage this. For me it was a "Power to the People" kind of deal.

The LLC staff was all about innovation and, once we had the vision, fully jumped in to make it happen. We put it out there and it grew.

**Christina:** It certainly has. How long did it take to get that momentum going?

**Travis:** We had two the first year, including that helitack one that initiated it. And then nine the next year, six the year after that, and then 18, 46, 61 . . . It just started growing like that, and that's about where we hover now.

In 2020 there were 80 RLSs and that was mostly COVID. I think that's the moment in which RLS shined. Lots of other organizations wanted to share their lessons about how to navigate a pandemic. We already had a system in place. We were therefore ahead of the curve in terms of sharing lessons, and it just went crazy. We had so many RLSs, we had to do two different COVID-related RLS summaries to consolidate them into something usable.



We had so many RLSs, we had to do two different COVID-related RLS summaries to consolidate them into something usable.

**Christina:** That was definitely an important time to have that mechanism in place to share out because nobody knew what was going on. Everybody was just learning their way through it.

**Travis:** The Lessons Learned Center has full-time staff dedicated to these efforts. Most organizations don't have that. I always say that the Wildland Fire system was very forward thinking by standing up and staffing a place like this.



*Travis with his family.*

## How has Rapid Lesson Sharing Affected the Wildland Fire System?

**Christina:** What impacts or changes have you seen in the Wildland Fire system since the RLS came into existence?

**Travis:** I think RLSs big impact is really equalizing the access for contributing to the learning organization and really helping to put teeth to the term “learning organization.” A lot of people say “we value what you experience out there”—but it’s hard to prove. For many in the field, their voice never actually lands someplace that is visible.

In the wildland fire world if you experience a close call and you want to tell people about it there is a way to share it. You take some pictures, write it up, and send it in. And then your coworkers get an email with your story. Or you see it up on the bulletin board—and you did that! You were brave enough. When you see your RLS out in the world that is tangible proof that YOU are part of the learning system. It helps build trust. And then sometimes the lessons themselves are the biggest impact. Like that one we had recently about how to properly dispose of a [linseed oil-soaked rag](#) so it doesn’t burn the shop down. That’s a real practical lesson.

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*The Lessons Learned Center has full-time staff dedicated to these efforts. Most organizations don't have that. I always say that the Wildland Fire system was very forward thinking by standing up and staffing a place like this.*

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**Christina:** Very.

Something we get a lot of questions about is seemingly redundant incidents. There’s a lot of hit by tree limb incidents or a lot of chainsaw cuts. Is it really worth it to submit another “like” RLS? What do you say to those folks who might feel this way?

**Travis:** I can totally see that.

How many times do we need to talk about somebody getting hit by a tree? It does get repetitive. But what I’ll say from the Analyst’s perspective is that the event itself—for instance, the tree strike—is not always the most useful thing. The utility of a report is often hidden in the events surrounding the “main” event.

Just like the first time we had somebody mention a “soft stretcher.” It was like: *Oh, that’s cool. They had something in their pack that’s the size of a space blanket. Neat.* But then I saw it reported again in another RLS. And I thought: *Oh, hey, there’s that soft stretcher thing again.* And then I saw it again. But at the same time, I was also seeing other incidents in which we were still building litters out of sticks and fiber tape.

That’s what urged us to bang the drum about soft stretchers. Now they’re going to be part of the standard first aid kit from the National Cache System.

We don’t always know what’s going to be valuable on the front end in our incident reports. A lot of times that’s just not visible until later on. So, to answer your question about the potential redundancy in RLSs, I would always err on the side of writing it up because it doesn’t hurt, and, a lot of times, it is useful later.

**Christina:** I think there's a lot of folks out there who've never submitted an RLS. How can someone decide if other people can learn from their experience?

**Travis:** Just ask yourself: *What do you know now that you wish you would've known before? Could this be useful to other folks?* And, know that we have staff to help. You can just call or email us. Our contact info is on our [About Us](#) page on our website.

Just say: *"Hey, I have this scenario, does it make sense to share?"* Nine times out of 10, I'm going to respond: *"Oh yeah, for sure. Send me your photos, tell me in your own words, don't even try to spell things right."*

**Christina:** It has to be a really great feeling when people come up and let you know about a personal impact. I know that my life has been personally affected by an RLS. Before I worked for the LLC, I reached out and was like: *"Hey, just so you know, this saved a life, thanks for doing what you do."*

**Travis:** That is extremely satisfying. We don't get a lot of that. And so it's precious to us when we get that kind of feedback.

**Christina:** I've heard you mention things that the LLC should consider reemphasizing. Do you want to talk more about that?

**Travis:** Yeah, the Lessons Learned Center was originally a lot more tied into and influenced by the academic world. We don't have that as much as we once did. Lessons don't only come from practitioners out there in the field. Sometimes they come from a completely different profession or from research or from academic innovators.

Lessons and best practices can come from all kinds of different sources. Sometimes a good book that has nothing to do with fire is a good source for applicable lessons. The LLC was a lot more in tune with that early on, whereas now we're almost entirely focused on lessons from the field.

And while that's really important, so are those other sources. We once had an employee who was focused on "Advances in Fire Practice" which was more linked-in with the academic world. We don't have that anymore.

The other thing we have lost is the "communities of practice" element. We once provided digital space on our website for groups to form their own community and share information, ideas, lessons, etc. We don't have that anymore.

### **What is Your Proudest Moment?**

**Christina:** This is probably going to be your last *Two More Chains* issue. So, I have some questions about your time with the LLC. What is your proudest moment?

**Travis:** Moments are hard to pin down because this is a job where the payoffs are more of a slow shift. But I did receive a "Paul Gleason Lead by Example Award." It was presented to me at the Learning from Unintended Outcomes course at NAFRI (the National Advanced Fire and Resource Institute), in front of that whole crowd.

That was a big moment for me. I also got to see former LLC Director Kelly Woods receive a Gleason Award for her outstanding leadership here at the center. That brought me joy.

Some of the most meaningful moments happen when I'm out on a fire, or at a class. And somebody—completely random—comes up to me and they're like: *"Dude, I've read your stuff and I really like XYZ."* I always ask them: *"Well, did you ever use any of it?"* And if they say: *"Yeah, because . . ."* Then I know it had a positive impact.

Those are powerful moments.

The most gratifying thing in the world is if somebody says to me: "Hey, I saw that RLS and we went out and did what it said." I've even had that happen where people say: "Hey, come check out my engine." And they have the little plastic lug nut indicators on them—a lesson from numerous RLSs. That is a true lesson learned. Being part of bigger efforts, that's another major benefit of working here.

The "Medical Incident Report" was not always in the IRPG [Incident Response Pocket Guide]. When the Dutch Creek Protocol came out and we learned about this new thing called the Medical Incident Report (MIR), LLC Director Brit Rosso asked: "Why isn't this in the IRPG?"



*Travis receives his 2011 Paul Gleason Lead by Example Award. Brit Rosso, Director of the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center, is beside Travis. Chad Fisher, Wildland Fire Safety and Prevention Program Manager with the National Park Service, presented the award to Travis.*

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***The most gratifying thing in the world is if somebody says to me: 'Hey, I saw that RLS and we went out and did what it said.'***

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Later that same afternoon, I went to Brit and asked: "What if we put the MIR on stickers?" I explained how we could send these stickers to people and that way it could be in the IRPG until they print the next one.

Brit's response: "Let's do it." And we totally mocked it up and printed some out. We ended up sending more than 100,000 stickers out for people's IRPGs. Every LLC staff member contributed to that.

That's how the Medical Incident Report got into the IRPG before it could be printed. And we know those pink sticker MIRs got used on actual incidents.

Being part of something like that is rewarding. That next IRPG also included "Planning for Medical Emergencies" or the three questions. (1. What are we going to do if someone gets hurt? 2. How are we going to get them out of here? 3. How long will it take to get them to a hospital?) Those came directly from LLC Director Brit Rosso.

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***We also jumped into podcasting early. There weren't really any wildland fire-focused shows when the LLC got into it. And that was all Alex Viktora, the LLC's former Assistant Director.***

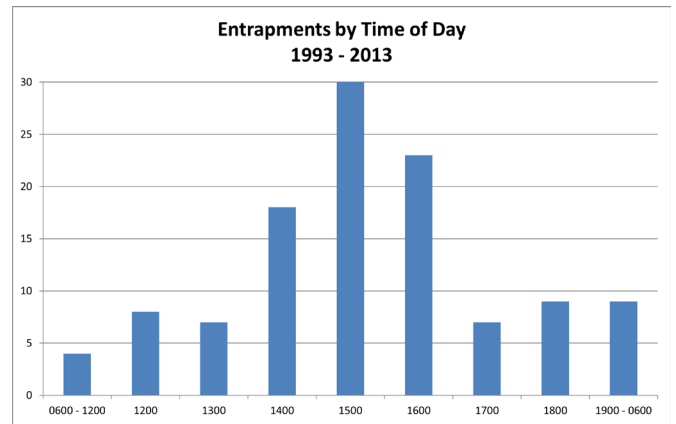
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The "Lunch Spot" article I wrote in *Two More Chains* came out in early 2014. The analysis I did on entrapment times that was featured in that article highlighted the similarities of afternoon entrapments. WFSTAR made the "Analysis of Burnovers" video later that year and initiated the Take 5@2 effort. Six Minutes for Safety used Take 5@2 the following year for The Week of Remembrance and put that concept

on blast. In 2018, the “Common Denominators” page in the IRPG was updated to include “During critical burn period between 1400 and 1700.” To have a role in things at that level is gratifying.

We also jumped into podcasting early. There weren’t really any wildland fire-focused shows when the LLC got into it. And that was all Alex Viktora, the LLC’s former Assistant Director. What a brilliant move in terms of meeting our mission. I know our show proved that the audience was there. We have shared some important lessons through that venue.

And the existence of the LLC blog, our “Independent Action” blog posts in particular in which anybody can write something and send it to us. We’ve had people submit amazing stuff. The most recent example was Hunter Bell, someone out there doing amazing work on structure protection. And he’s got these great ideas and this great “Handy Dandy.” When we shined light on Hunter’s insights and innovations it led directly to the national cache system adopting the sprinklers that he recommended—a total game-changer in that realm. Being part of that kind of stuff is amazing.



*Graph that appeared in the “Lunch Spot” article written by Travis in Two More Chains.*

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*“My number one lesson, the one that shows up the most. Time and time again that lesson is be nice, be approachable, and invest in relationships.”*

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### **My Number One Lesson**

**Christina:** You’ve had an illustrious career with the LLC, for sure, and the well-deserved Paul Gleason Award. But it sounds like most of the satisfaction for you has been people taking action on their own, and using what’s out there and creating change.

**Travis:** Absolutely. It’s always more satisfying to highlight the effort and ideas of our amazing workforce.

**Christina:** What’s your biggest take home lesson from your years with the LLC?

**Travis:** My number one lesson, the one that shows up the most. Time and time again that lesson is be nice, be approachable, and invest in relationships.

Anytime there’s a review of urban interface fire, it’s always the number one recommendation: the people who are working in silos should work together, right? The fire department should be friends with the police department. And the police department and the fire department should be friends with the equestrian community, and so on.

It’s the number one lesson. Get to know your neighbors, work together, be friends. And it’s the same thing on the fireline. We have multiple instances where a crew was leaving an area because they saw something that they thought was dangerous and they walk right past other crews and don’t say anything to them. And those crews later get overrun by fire.

Maybe it’s just a rushed situation, or maybe it’s a cultural thing. But this piece about not talking to other crews is dangerous.

And we also have “Be Nice” success stories. Those instances where crews did make an effort. Like when the hotshot crew met up with an engine crew and were intentionally nice and they got to know each other early on in the shift. Later on in that shift, the thing that saved somebody’s life is the relationship forged earlier in

the day. Because they had some familiarity, collaborating when seconds mattered, that's what allowed somebody to be saved.

The overriding lesson here: Don't be an asshole. And maybe that's what I came to the LLC to learn about myself! Or maybe that's why I think it's the most important lesson. Because it's the one I needed to learn. So, I try to tell people that all the time.

**Christina:** Don't be a jerk. It's a pretty easy lesson to remember.

**Travis:** Well, you would think.

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*But sometimes we also need to tell the field how some of the culture is problematic. And that's an uncomfortable place to be. Having your mission be to check your peers up, get them to reevaluate.*

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### **Future Advice for the LLC Staff**

**Christina:** Any last words for the LLC staff as we move forward into the future. What advice do you have for us?

**Travis:** Don't get captured. That was the motto when I first got here. This came directly from the Center for Army Lessons Learned who the LLC benchmarked early on. Their number one piece of advice was *"Don't get captured."*

What that means is a Lessons Learned Center's mission is fairly unique because sometimes it involves pointing out things that are uncomfortable or unpopular. A lot of people say: *"Yeah, we need to tell the managers and administrators how out of touch they are."*

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*There have absolutely been times when agencies have come to us and said: "We want you to promote this program that we're doing." We have to explain: "No, actually we can't do that. We're not going to promote your agency-specific effort. We deal with lessons."*

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True. But sometimes we also need to tell the field how some of the culture is problematic. And that's an uncomfortable place to be. Having your mission be to check your peers up, get them to reevaluate.

But as soon as you're captured or "owned" by one group or another, you lose your ability to be honest.

There have absolutely been times when agencies have come to us and said: *"We want you to promote this program that we're doing."* We have to explain: *"No, actually we can't do that. We're not going to promote your agency-specific effort. We deal with lessons."*

You have to say "No." Otherwise, you become propaganda. People in the field don't trust you if they know you're a puppet.

It all comes back to trust. But you also can't get captured by the field. If you're just repeating whatever the most popular thing is right now in the field, you're just as captured. We can't be advocates for any one group—including the field.

We can only advocate for lessons.

**Christina:** But kindly.

**Travis:** Yes, absolutely.

### **A Memorable Story from Your Career**

**Christina:** Well, it seems like this is a tradition. So I won't let you off the hook here: Tell us a memorable story from your career.

**Travis:** I have this pointless story that, for some reason, I love to tell.

I was a seasonal on a hotshot crew, there was another crew that still drove a bus, like a school bus. We thought we were cool because we had crew carriers.

Both us and this other crew were on this fire in Oregon. We got to ride in on the caboose of a train. I'd never been on a caboose before. Of course, after the fire, we didn't get to ride the train out.

For the hike out to the road, somebody had to fell a tree across the river to make a foot bridge. We're from the southwest. Every river in Oregon seems like a giant river. There are several crews hiking off this fire, including the crew with the bus. We walk across the tree to this parking area and we're hanging out waiting for our buggies. This other crew is backing up their bus. I can see that they're backing right toward a "no parking" sign.

I was frantically pointing and telling whoever I could to come watch. I was like: *"Hey, check it out, check it out!"* Mind you, I was not trying to stop it from happening. I was trying to gather as many people to witness the carnage.

Sure enough—Boom!—they just totally demolish that sign. And then everything stops. We're over there like a pack of hyenas pointing at them, like, *"Ha Ha!"* Just like Nelson from the Simpsons.

The driver comes out and he and his backer just stare at each other. I remember their crew foreman reaming them out while they're doing pushups. The whole time we're all still standing there laughing.

It's such a cultural thing. Make fun of the other crew in their moment of misery. Of course, we would have put our lives on the line in a heartbeat if any of them needed help. But a bus smashing a sign was well within the realm of good clean heckling.

Still, to this day, I picture that sign getting folded over and a group of us just waiting for it.

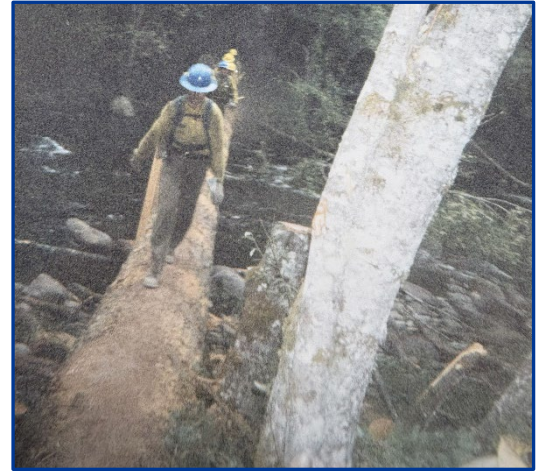
So don't be a jerk; don't do that.

**Christina:** Be kind.

**Travis:** I really want to say that if I got to do it all over again, I would run over and yell: *"Wait, wait, wait . . ."* and save the sign. Can't guarantee that though.

**Christina:** That's honesty right there.

**Travis:** I'm a work in progress.



*The crew on the tree that was felled to make this river crossing.*

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