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Staff rides

A new concept in training future leaders? Or older leaders?

By William (Bill) E. Holmes

In the spring of 2003 I was invited by USFS Region 5 Training Officer Greg Powers to be an observer on a Staff Ride of the South Canyon Fire. Now a Staff Ride might sound like a bunch of fire chiefs out roaming around but it didn't matter to me as long as I got a chance to go to South Canyon.

I flew with a group of USFS and BLM firefighters to Denver and we rode to Glenwood Springs together. The first night we met with the instructors from the Marine Corps University (MCU) in Quantico, USFS and BLM. Students from the USFS Redding Interagency Hotshots and some of the Redding Smoke Jumpers also participated. It was very obvious from the first informal gathering that these students had really done their homework. They knew great detail about the story and characters involved in the South Canyon fire.

The first day was spent on Storm King Mountain as students broke into small groups with instructors. Each group stopped along the way at what are known as Stands, pre-designated points of significance where individual students will be given assignments ahead of time to make presentations. A good example of a Stand would be the lunch spot on the South Canyon fire. The students may also be posed questions as a group in the form of Tactical Decision Games (TDGS). Once we reached the zero point on top of the ridge between west drainage and east drainage, the students were free to roam for an hour and see what they wanted to see.

Walking the hallowed ground and seeing first hand where others have died is a powerful experience. You just cannot get the full effect of what happened and what it was like until you've walked the ground, felt the steep terrain, seen the vegetation, experienced the heat and had the wind in your face. The whole scenario seemed so different than what I had read.

At the end of the free period Marine Corp Lt. Colonel Eric Carlson brought us together at the zero point and surprised us with a mock-up of the South Canyon fire. This mock-up utilized an in-the-field ground sand table exercise (STEX). Sand tables are another learning tool used extensively by the Marine Corp University to enhance their leadership skills and decision making. Lt. Colonel Carlson used loose dirt, rocks and sticks to simulate the terrain. We were then asked to stand around the mock-up and individually share one thing we had learned from the day. We passed a stick when it was our turn to speak and used it as a pointer when necessary to highlight something in the mock-up.

What an emotional moment to stand at the zero point of the South Canyon fire where 14 firefighters perished. That was one very powerful and insightful stick that was passed around.

We were then split into two groups. One group went down the west drainage while the other went down the east drainage, the escape route used by those who survived. Words cannot describe what it felt like to descend into that tall, narrow canyon while imagining the whole time what it must have been like to scramble over logs and slide down rock chutes with fire above you and debris tumbling down. We gathered back at our cars and traveled to the firefighter's memorial next to the Colorado River in sight of the fire. Everyone walked around gathering their own thoughts of the day and taking pictures. That night we assembled at a local restaurant for dinner, and we had an informal but structured discussion about the entire trip and shared what we learned. I have never had such powerful learning experience. I couldn't wait to bring the concept back to CDF.

Staff Rides has been around for a very long time, since the early 1900's in the United States. The term Staff Ride is a military term used to describe the concept of taking military officers to previous battle site to conduct a critical analysis of what happened, establish how and why events occurred and decide what the cause and effect relationships mean now. The concept envisions maximum student involvement before arrival to a site to guarantee thoughtful analysis and discussion. This is not a historical tour! The Staff Ride links a historical event with systematic preliminary study and actual terrain to

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About the author: Chief Holmes is the CDF Unit Chief for the Amador El Dorado Unit. He is a thirty six year veteran of the fire service having worked his way up from the firefighter ranks. He served five years as an Operations Section Chief (OSC) and nine years as an Incident Commander (IC) on a CDF type-I incident command teams. He also served for one year as an OSC and Deputy IC on a California Interagency Type-I Incident Command Team. Chief Holmes is a certified Chief Officer and instructor through the State Fire Management Officer (SFMO), attended the National Fire Academy, is an S-520 graduate and teaches S-400 and S-430.

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produce battle analysis in three dimensions. It consists of three distinct phases: preliminary study, field study, and integration.

Ok, so what do military staff rides have to do with the fire service? Well, staff rides are part of a bigger leadership program developed through National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) in the post 1994 South Canton fire on Storm King Mountain. The federal wildland fire agencies wanted to do something to develop the future leaders of their agencies and prevent catastrophic loss of firefighters in the future.

In 2000 NWCG formed a Leadership Task Group (LTG) that looked at everything that was out there in terms of leadership training and doctrine. The LTG seemed to like what the Marine Crops University and Wharton Leadership Ventures, University of Pennsylvania had

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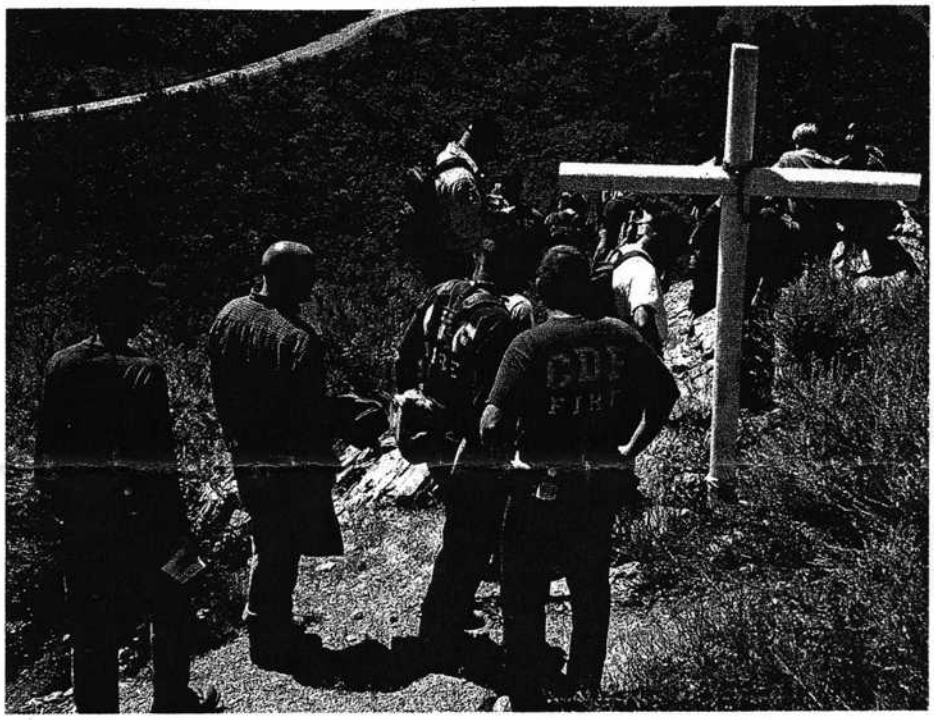
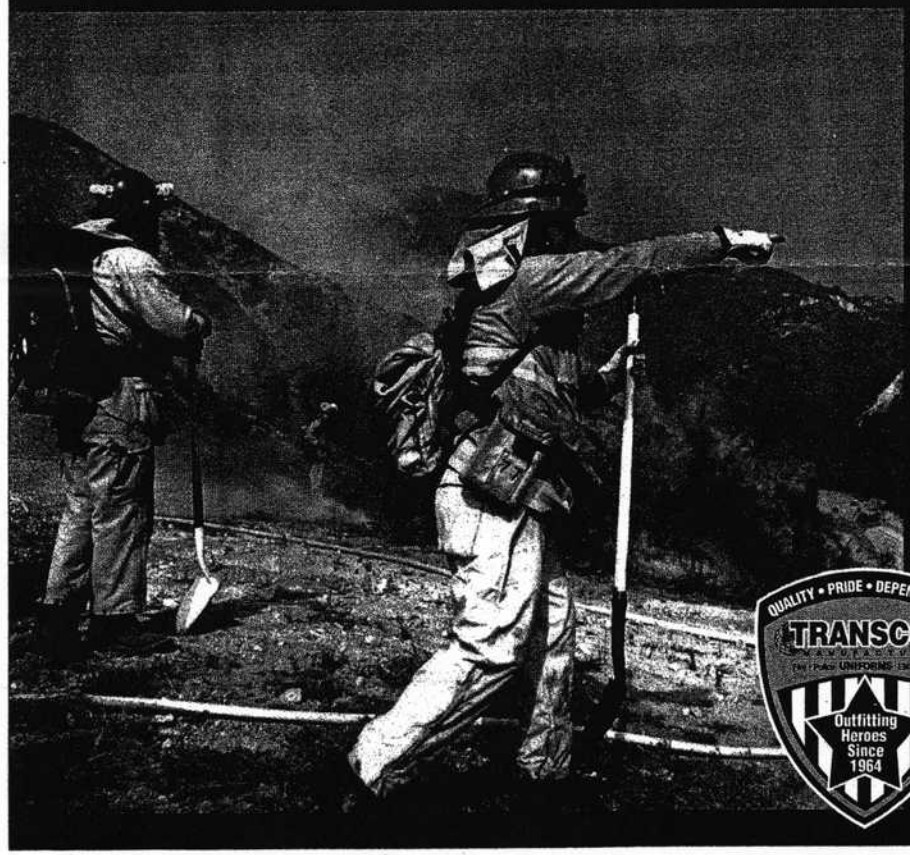


Gear-Up for the Demands of Nature



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to offer. In 2001 the Leadership Task Group submitted recommendations to NWCG and the new Leadership program was off and running.

In the spring of 2004 CDF Siskiyou Unit Chief Doug Blangsted and I were invited to the MCU in Quantico Virginia for training on sand table exercises, tactical decision games and staff rides. Doug was one of the original CDF cadre members that put together CDF's Firefighter Safety and Survival course and has a passion for training. Jim Cook, USFS Training Projects Coordinator and Larry Sutton, BLM Training Specialist, were the cadre leaders hosting firefighters from all over the Unites States in this new curriculum.

The first two days at the MCU were spent on the Leadership curriculum overview, sand table exercises and tactical decision games. Marine lieutenant's skills were put to the test while a Marine captain facilitated discussion from other students on their decisions. It's a powerful way to build experience and confidence without taking any risk. The marines also broke us up into groups of four and ran us through their Leadership Reaction Course. This is a test of your mental abilities to quickly solve problems and physical endurance. It is also an excellent way to build teams quickly. None of us knew each other when we started the course, but by the end of two hours we had figured out each other's strengths and weaknesses, used that information to solve problems, and got to know each other fairly well. When I asked the Marine Captain leading us how we did after our first problem he said, "Well I've never seen it done that way before, but you passed." Hey, we picked up Adapt, Improvise and Overcome right away.

The next two days were filled with learning how to do staff rides by bicycling around the Gettysburg battle field with Marine captains as students and majors as instructors. Each group of 10 to 12 Marines was given a few firefighters to be observers. The tension was extremely high for the captains as each student was given a specific Stand as his or her responsibility to explain what happened and why. The students were able to explain the environmental conditions; terrain (macro and micro); the physical condition of the troops; identify the commanders and their abilities and weaknesses; strategic decisions (the commander's intent or objectives); tactical decisions (how things were to be done); what human factors were involved; communications; and why things turned out the way they did. The walk across the field where Pickett's charge took place was a learning and memorable experience. We would have been under cannon fire from the beginning. It really made you think about the micro terrain and how far bullets travel.

Since our training at the MCU, CDF management has adopted the Staff Ride program. Several more CDF chief officers have been through the training and led Staff Rides of the Spanish Ranch and Rattlesnake fire fatality sites.

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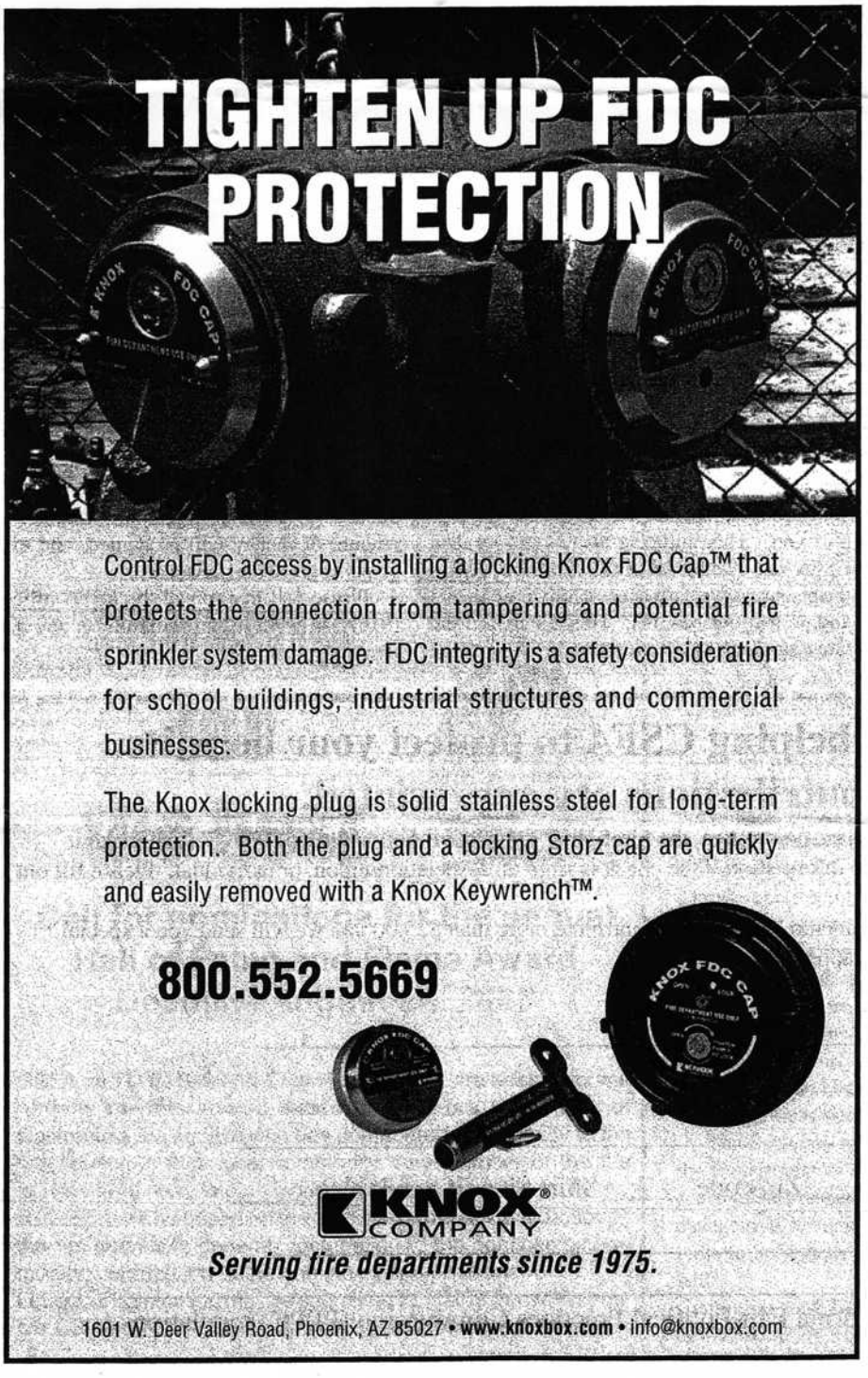
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