

STORM KING TRAGEDY

# Effective fire-fighting calls for bending rules sometimes

By QUENTIN RHOADES

The government investigative team and the news media have concluded that "fatal errors" made by firefighters on the ground contributed significantly to the Storm King Mountain disaster that killed 14 people in Colorado last month. If what are known as the Standard Orders and Situations had been adhered to, everyone would have survived, federal investigators said in their report. However, the official investigation and media reports fail to reflect the context in which wildland firefighters do our jobs.



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Every summer we are assigned to extinguish forest fires. We take great pride in doing that difficult job well. Doing that job well not only means putting fires out, but also keeping them small. The larger the fire, the more costly and, more important, the more dangerous. We take a lot of risks: we fly in small planes and helicopters through

turbulent winds to get to the fires; we dig fire breaks within feet of burning trees and brush; we saw down huge trees that are burning in the tops, starting spot fires across our line; we dodge large rocks and burned-off trees that roll out of the fire and fall all around us.

And sometimes, even often, the risks we take in doing our jobs include violating the "10 Standard Fire Fighting Orders" or ignoring the "18 Situations that Shout Watch-Out."

These 28 directives are designed to minimize dangers wildland firefighters face. And they work when strictly observed. But strict adherence also allows the fire to grow. That's why, in my 10 seasons of fighting fire with "hotshot" crews and smokejumpers, I've never been on a crew that viewed these orders as anything other than guidelines — a safety checklist, not to be adhered to mindlessly, but to remind us of the dangers we must consider and attempt to mitigate before fighting a fire.

Many times a season, and this is true for all smokejumpers and hotshots, we are unable to comply with the "Standard Orders." Nonetheless, very seldom does our inability to comply with the orders cause us to abandon our tasks, because, most of the time, to abandon our tasks would be to allow the fire to grow even more dangerous and life-threatening. That can be a terrible dilemma to face. Resolving it successfully depends on critical judgments made under high-stress situations by people on the scene, based on their experience and the volatile conditions at hand. But sometimes knowledge of local conditions is limited, predictions wrong, human judgments faulty, or luck just plain bad. These are risks we have to take to keep a fire small and relatively safe.

So, we often violate the "Standard Orders" to push the envelope when our judgment and experience tells us that we can. That willingness is calculated. We do it to protect lives and conserve resources to effectively complete our task — to put out forest fires.

Some call this a "can-do" attitude. Others term it overzealousness. Nonetheless, the attitude

## 10 STANDARD FIRE-FIGHTING ORDERS

1. Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first.
2. Initiate all action based on current and expected fire behavior.
3. Recognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts.
4. Ensure instructions are given and understood.
5. Obtain current information on fire status.
6. Remain in communication with crew members, your supervisor and adjoining forces.
7. Determine safety zones and escape routes.
8. Establish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations.
9. Retain control at all times.
10. Stay alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively.

## SITUATIONS THAT SHOUT WATCH-OUT

1. Fire not scouted and sized-up.
2. In country not seen in daylight.
3. Safety zones and escape routes not identified.
4. Unfamiliar with weather and local factors influencing fire behavior.
5. Uninformed on strategy, tactics and hazards.
6. Instructions and assignments not clear.
7. No communication link with crew members, supervisors.
8. Constructing line without safe anchor point.
9. Building fire line downhill with fire below.
10. Attempting frontal assault on fire.
11. Unburned fuel between you and the fire.
12. Cannot see main fire, not in contact with anyone who can.
13. On a hillside where rolling material can ignite fuel below.
14. Weather is getting hotter and drier.
15. Wind increases and/or changes direction.
16. Getting frequent spot fires across line.
17. Terrain and fuels make escape to safety zones difficult.
18. Taking a nap near the fire line.

prevails among hotshots and smokejumpers. As long as firefighters continue to be effective at keeping forest fires as small as possible, and at putting them out, those of us on the ground are going to continue to violate the "Standard Orders" on occasion when conditions dictate.

To do otherwise would prevent us from putting out many small fires before they become larger. That would, in turn, increase the dangers we face.

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