

## **PART 1**

### **STANDARD FIREFIGHTING ORDERS**

The following is quoted from a February 25, 2003 memorandum from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group to the NWCG working teams.

The original ten Standard Firefighting Orders were developed in 1957 by a task force commissioned by the USDA-Forest Service Chief Richard E. McArdle. The task force reviewed the records of 16 tragedy fires that occurred from 1937 to 1956. The Standard Firefighting Orders were based in part on the successful “General Orders” used by the United States Armed Forces.

The Standard Firefighting Orders were organized in a deliberate and sequential way to be implemented systematically and applied to all fire situations. The reorganization of the Orders was undertaken in the late 1980’s to form an acronym (“FIREORDERS”), thus changing the original sequence and consequently, the intent of the orders as a program and logical hazard control system.

Upon joint recommendation of the NWCG Training, Safety & Health, and Incident Operations Standards Working Teams, NWCG approved the restoration of the original ten Standard Firefighting Orders, with minor wording changes, at the May 22-23, 2002 meeting in Whitefish, Montana.

We feel this change back to the original intent and format will improve firefighters’ understanding and implementation of the ten Standard Firefighting Orders. Please ensure this information is passed on to all your fire management personnel.

Many fire managers noted over the last several years that firefighters of all qualifications were taking actions on fires that did not apply their fire behavior training and experience based on observing wildland fires. The following letter from Jim Steele and John Krebs provided the motivation to return to the original Standard Firefighting Orders.

Over the past several years our attention to safety paradigms has become more a checklist tool to measure our failures than to successfully guide firefighters through a safe assignment. We are continually told to pay attention to the fundamentals, yet our understanding of many fundamental tasks is poor to nonexistent. Rarely do we check to be certain firefighters understand standards and application of our widely accepted safety paradigms. When we have an opportunity to embrace a series of safety paradigms that exist with order and purpose, it is truly important that we fully understand the reasons and purpose.

Each geographic area has benefited from individuals that grew up in the profession when it was young, and the workforce relied on stand-up common sense and lots of physical labor to be safe and successful. John Krebs, a Fire Behavior Analyst, and recently retired Fire Management Officer from the U.S. Forest Service, Clearwater National Forest, Idaho, is such a person in the Northern Rockies. He has for years helped us understand the application of the original Standard Firefighting Orders. I don't think many of us fully understand the reasons behind the sequence of these orders. John recently explained this process in a letter.

My interest in fire behavior, particularly in relation to fireline safety, has not diminished with time. I've had an opportunity to stay involved in fire with three fire assignments in 1996 and 1998, as well as participating in a couple of the National Fire Behavior workshops put on by the Region.

Having just finished reading Maclean's "Fire on the Mountain" I was again brought to tears at the tragic and senseless loss of those precious lives. The 1994 National FBA workshop included a visit to Mann Gulch. As we sat overlooking those 13 crosses our thoughts were that this kind of event would not happen again because our knowledge of fire behavior and our emphasis on training had greatly improved. How wrong we were! Where have we failed to make fire behavior the most important thought in the minds of our fire fighters when they are actually engaged in the suppression activity?

Looking back to my first guard school training in 1958, I recall that the “10 STANDARD ORDERS” formed the framework for much of the teaching. The people who developed those original orders were intimately acquainted with the dirt, grime, sweat and tears of actual fireline experience. Those orders were deliberately arranged according to their importance. They were logically grouped making them easy to remember.

First and foremost of the Orders dealt with what the firefighters are there to encounter “the fire.”

1. Keep informed on fire weather conditions and forecasts.
2. Know what your fire is doing at all times. Observe personally, use scouts.
3. Base all action on current and expected behavior of the fire.

Each of the ten Standard Orders are prefaced by the silent imperative “YOU,” meaning the on-the-ground firefighters the person who is putting her or his life on the line!!! My gut aches when I think of the lives that could have been spared, the injuries or close calls which could have been avoided, had these three Orders been routinely and regularly addressed prior to and during every fire assignment!

As instructors and fire behavior analysts have we become so enthralled with our computer knowledge and skills that we’ve failed to teach the basics? One does not have to be a full-blown ‘gee whiz’ to apply these Orders – they revolve around elementary fuels-weather-topography. These are things that are measurable and observable, even to the first year firefighter.

When we went out as a fire team and were ‘briefed,’ it was our responsibility to seek answers to basic questions – the first being, “What is the weather forecast?” Following that were questions concerning what the fire was doing, where it was expected to go and how was it to be confined, contained, and/or controlled. Every firefighter is entitled to ask and receive answers to these same inquiries. I should re-word that every firefighter should be “required” to ask....”

Logically following these three fire behavior related orders were three dealing with fireline safety:

4. Have escape routes and make them known.
5. Post a lookout when there is possible danger.
6. Stay alert. Keep calm. Think clearly. Act decisively.

One cannot know if an escape route or a safety zone is adequate until the Orders addressing fire behavior have been specifically evaluated.

One of the primary functions of a lookout is observing and monitoring the weather and fire behavior. How can it be that some of our most highly trained and experienced fire personnel can be on a fire such as South Canyon and not record even one, on-the-ground weather observation? Where did we as trainers go wrong? I have a nephew who jumped out of McCall. Shortly after the South Canyon tragedy, I asked him if he ever carried a belt weather kit. His answer shocked me, “Uncle John, we don’t have room for those things.” Please tell me that has changed . . . . If humidities (reference Fire on the Mountains) were as low as 11% at 2400 hours on July 5, just what were they doing on the afternoon of July 6 on the western drainage? How can a firefighter possibly “Keep informed on fire weather conditions...” without on site monitoring of relative humidities, wind, etc.

The next three 10 Standard Orders centered around organizational control:

7. Give clear instructions and be sure they are understood.
8. Maintain prompt communications with your men, your boss, and adjoining forces.
9. Maintain control of your forces at all times.

Again, if one hadn’t properly considered the first three fire behavior related orders, it would be impossible to think that Orders 7, 8 and 9 could be addressed with any validity.

The last of the 10 Standard Orders is “Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first.” This is the only Order, which I would change just slightly to “Fight fire aggressively having provided for safety first.”

Read Maclean’s account (pg 65) concerning what should be the last order “as they chanted the ten basic fire orders in training, the first order ‘Fight fire aggressively, provide for safety first’ becomes transformed into ‘fight fire aggressively, provide for overtime first.’” I can remember helping to teach some of the fire behavior (and related) courses in Missoula and asking the participants to write down all of the Fire Orders they could recall. There were students in S-390 (and higher) who could not recall more than 3 or 4 orders!! But, they always remembered, “Fight fire aggressively....”

It was encouraging for me to learn from some first year firemen that they were required to learn the FIRE ORDERS in guard school. My fear is that this was merely an exercise in rote memory, as Maclean’s account would indicate. It’s something to chant but it is an exercise without memory.

I urge you to re-establish the original 10 Standard Orders. They were developed in a very special order of importance, grouped to make practical sense and most importantly when considered prior to and during every shift they will save lives. The 18 Situations that Shout Watch Out; LCES; Look up, Look down, Look all around; etc. are merely tools to reinforce the thought processes initiated by the original 10 Standard Orders.

If we diligently read and believe the compendium of fatality and shelter deployment investigations, you will discover the commonality of failed tactics is, they were implemented without adequate attention to fire behavior and the effects of fire behavior.

FIRE ORDERS is the sequence that was devised to assist firefighters to remember the original Standard Firefighting Orders. As John points out, the revised edition becomes an “exercise in rote memory.” The original were designed as a decision process that guided tactics and firefighter attention to fireline safety. The focus was fire behavior.

Please take the time to reconsider how you plan and implement tactical deployments, and how you manage fireline safety through risk assessment and mitigation. Use the original 10 Standard Orders, in sequence, as a decision making process and verify the standards for each component: Is the weather forecast current and applicable to where you are? Do you have current information on the fire, and can you get it? Are weather and fire predictions accurate – this part is not rocket science! Are escape routes located, timed, and trigger points established allowing for the travel times you know your people can travel? Are you certain your safety zone locations are known, sizes verified, and of effective size? Are your lookouts able to see all of the area you want monitored during times you want? Are your lookouts safe? Can your lookouts communicate, and do they know to whom, what to report and when? Do you feel confident you have enough information to safely manage your resources against the fire? Is the radio your only means of communication? Do you have the background to handle a situation of this complexity; how comfortable do you feel right now?

I share this with you because this is one of the first times I have heard the often used war cry, “back to the basics,” where the basics were explained.

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