

Original Ten Standard Orders

by John Krebs

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 firefighters 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 fire fighters 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 fire behavior of the fire.

Each of the 10 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 fire fighter.

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. 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 McDall. 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 Mountain*) 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; "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 (p. 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 reestablish 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.