



This Day in History is a brief summary of a powerful learning opportunity and is not intended to second guess or be judgmental of decisions and actions. Put yourself in the following situation as if you do not know what the outcome will be. What are the conditions? What are you thinking? What are YOU doing?

Battlement Creek Fire, Colorado – July 17th, 1976

Incident Summary: It's 1976 and western Colorado is experiencing an unusually severe fire season caused partly by unusual fuel conditions and heavy lightning activity during dry weather. A severe frost in June kills a high percentage of the leaves on Gambel oak which remain on the branches and is considered one of Colorado's most flammable fuels. 10 hour fuels are at 3-5%. A large scale high pressure weather pattern sits over western Colorado allowing for local weather to be influenced by terrain and diurnal winds averaging 10-15 mph in the afternoon with higher gusts. The weather is fair and hot with the temperatures at Grand Junction and Rifle reaching into the mid and upper 90's. A fire is reported 40 miles northeast of Grand Junction, in the Battlement Creek drainage. The fire is burning over an elevation range of 6200-8400 ft on a steep west-facing slope.

Friday July 16, 0630, two hotshot crews from the Coconino NF Arizona arrive at the Battlement Creek fire. This is the seventeenth fire of the first season for the newly formed Mormon Lake Hotshot Crew. The strategy is to prevent western and southern spread. The crews begin a major burnout of the catline (dozer line) from the rocky bluffs (Point A) at about 1615, downhill along the catline toward the Battlement Creek road at the bottom (Point C) ending about 2030. The fire makes an uphill run in oak brush burning out a large portion of the drainage (from the road east to the ridgetop) in about 20 minutes. Two "impressive" fire whirls are observed between 1600-1700. The night shift continues the burn out (Point C-D and beyond along the road) but is spotty with considerable unburned fuel remaining. Other night shift crews construct line along the ridgetop (Point E to G). Based on Friday's fire behavior, the E-G line is a crucial spot on the fire. Saturday July 17th, 0700, at morning briefing the Mormon Lake crew is assigned to burn out this section of line.

Saturday morning, July 17th - Due to a delay with the helicopter, the Mormon Lake crew does not get to the base of the rock bluff (Point E) until 1100. They are instructed to improve and burn out the line from the rocky bluff to the helispot (Point E-G). The burnout squad consisted of the crew boss, squad boss and 2 crewmembers. The rest of the crew is improving the handline down the ridgetop.

At this same time another crew is burning out in the bottom of the draw (Point C-D). The draw burns readily, uphill toward the ridge and the Mormon Lake crew. Neither crew knew of the specific location or assignment of the other.

1400 - 1/3 the way from the rock bluff to the upper helispot, there is a noticeable increase in smoke from the draw below (where the other crew had been burning). The crew boss is instructed to speed up the line improvement squad on toward the safety zone (Point G) and to narrow down and speed up his burnout on down the ridgeline to join the remainder of the crew in the safety zone when his burnout was done. Upslope winds have increased to 25-35 mph.

1425-1440 – The line improvement squad just makes it into the safety zone when the flame front hits the ridge. 200 yards back, the burnout squad radios that they are "trapped". Their escape is blocked by heavy smoke and flames.

1440 – 1445 – The squad removes their canvas vests to cover their head and face, moistened the vests and their clothes with water from their canteens, and lays face down in the mineral soil of the fireline.

1448 – All four firefighters are very badly burned. Three will lose their lives.

Discussion Points

The day prior to the burnover, an airtanker crashed during a retardant dropping mission on the Battlement Creek fire killing the pilot.

Resources [Staff Ride to the Battlement Creek Fire](#)
[Google Earth Fly Around of Battlement Creek Fire](#)
[Sequence of Events PowerPoint](#)
[Battlement Creek Fire Investigation Report](#)

- ✓ Discuss how incidents and distractions can affect our judgment and situational awareness.

The crew all wore aluminum hardhats, canvas vests, Nomex shirts and non-fire-resistant work pants. Fire shelters were not used. Fire shelters may have prevented serious burns and death at this incident. Policy on issuing and carrying shelters had not been established yet. This incident became the catalyst for the mandatory use of fire shelters and fire resistant clothing.

- ✓ **Take this opportunity to inspect, repair or replace your PPE and fire shelter if needed to ensure that it protects you as well as possible.**

