

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



### Interview with Ben Charley

by Jim Cook and Angela Tom

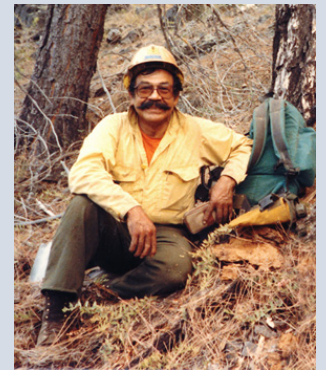
Ben Charley is unique among fire leaders. He may be the oldest Hotshot Crew Superintendent on record...he retired in that position at the age of 61 with 23 years of service with the U.S. Forest Service. Prior to that, he spent 20 years with the U.S. Marine Corps, retiring as a Gunnery Sergeant. Ben is also a tribal elder in the Mono Indian Tribe. And if that is not enough, Ben Charley has sons and grandsons who followed him into the military and into the wildland fire service. When we interviewed Ben, he didn't want to talk about himself, only about the questions we had regarding leadership. Later, he relented and provided the following first person biography to his son Shelby Charley and long-time co-worker Bob Bennett:

"I was born and raised in the small community of Dunlap, California in the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. My parents were American Indians from the Mono tribe. The town of Dunlap, at my childhood was about half Indians and half non-Indians. All of us were poor economically, but we grew up together. When I was 4 years old, I was placed in an Indian boarding school for approximately 2 years; I lost my fluency with the Mono language, although I can still understand and speak the Mono language. I went to Dunlap Elementary School with about 15 other kids, now the student population has grown to over 600 students. In 1940, I started attending Reedley High school, and then joined the U.S. Marine Corps in February, 1943."

"I went to boot camp at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, California; then on to an Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Elliot in Miramar, California; then to Rifle Range Camp Mathews in Torrey Pines, California. After training, I went aboard the ship USS Sea Ray, with the 3rd Marine Division. We shipped out for the South Pacific – stopping in Bouganville, the Solomon Islands, Okinawa, and Guam. The war ended and I came home, the ship docked at San Francisco late in 1945. After leave, I shipped out to Eagle Mountain Lake, near Fort Worth, Texas. This was a base for gliders. I did not want to fly in a glider, I lucked out...the base was disbanded, and I was promoted to Corporal. I reported to Camp Pendleton in California as a Rifleman."

"In October 1949, I was sent to Korea, went ashore at Wonsan, up to Koto-ri, in the north, almost to Chosin Reservoir, then turned around and went the other way back down the road. This was in November and it was very cold! Then we went to Hung Nam in North Korea, by way of an LST (landing ship transport), hard ride, especially through a typhoon. From Hung Nam we went to Massan in South Korea. After required R&R, we started back up again. The Commandant of the Marine Corps said no Marine will spend two Christmas' in Korea, so I came back home on December 21, 1950."

"After Korea, I was stationed at Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, California with Motor Transport, at the rank of Sergeant. Next, I went to Japan and Okinawa with the 3rd Marine Division. Then I returned state side, for cold weather training at Bridgeport, California. My next duty station was the Marine Corps Air Facility at Irvine, California. It was originally used as a blimp base, but I was assigned there to the 1st Marine Corps Air Wing working with helicopters." "I retired as a Gunnery Sergeant, with 20 years of military service."



Ben Charley on a lightning fire right before his retirement.

**"I always taught my guys to do what is right all the time."**

During my time spent in the military, I met and worked with a lot of senior Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs). These were good leaders, all were combat veterans... I learned a lot from them."

"I returned home to Dunlap and later began working with the U.S. Forest Service in 1966. I started working with the Hume Lake District of the Sequoia National Forest in a Recreation job. I then moved to a Fire Prevention job and then to an Engine Foreman job."

"In 1974, the Horseshoe Meadow Handcrew was established and I was assigned to run the crew. The crew was stationed at an old CCC site and that had also been a logging camp. In the beginning, the crew was 25 persons for seven day coverage. The program started with crewmembers as temporary Forest Service personnel. However, in 1976 funding was cut and to keep the crew going I started recruiting with various Human Resource Agencies, such as California Indian Manpower Consortium (CIMC), Youth Conservation Corps (YCC), and with various Indian Reservations to keep the crew staffing up and operational. The employees we hired stayed with the crew for one fire season to get training and experience. Then we tried to place them as temporaries within the Forest Service hiring system. I recruited American Indians throughout the western states. During the late 1970s the crew size was reduced to 20 persons. The crew received Hotshot status in 1980. Through most of this time, Bob Bennett was my Foreman. Sometimes, the only non-Indian on the crew, he had some rough times, but he toughed it out and is still there as the current Superintendent. He's the 2nd Superintendent since we started."

"I received an award from the Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service for the Supervisor of the year in 1988 and traveled to Washington D.C. to receive the honors.



Ben Charley and three of his sons on a fire in 1983 (left to right - Shelby, Dirk, Ben, and Rocco)

I was also awarded in 1988 from the California Indian Manpower Consortium for outstanding supervisor of the year, voting was by all Indian programs in United States. I traveled to Pensacola, Florida for that presentation."

"After retirement from the Forest Service, I drove fire crew vehicles for the Special Operations Company and for the California Department of Forestry until 2002. I'm completely retired since, well, not completely; I'm currently the elected Tribal Chairman for the Dunlap Band of Mono Indians. Life has treated me good during these 43 years in Public Service."

**You know a lot of people have followed you in a lot of different environments, as Chairman of the Mono Indian Tribe, as a Marine Corps Sergeant, and as a Hotshot Superintendent. What makes you want to follow somebody else?**

What makes me want to follow somebody else...well, when I first came to the Forest Service, Bill Sandborg kind of showed me the ropes. Billy was the kind of guy who if you done a good job he would let you know, and if you do a crappy job he would let you know. He is a guy that is hard to know. He was a good friend. When I came out of the Marine Corps, I didn't know anything about fire, and I already had twenty years in the military. A lot of times I was lucky to be put in with Bill. I learned a lot from him.

**Going back when you were Gunnery Sergeant or Superintendent, what did you look for in those people that you respected?**

Well, you see guys like Chesty Puller, I knew Puller. I served for a couple of officers when I first went into the Marine Corps, the way they acted and the way they talked, just their manner, something that told you this is the guy you want to follow. I tried to do the same when I became a Hotshot. I never would lead guys down into a hole unless it was safe, I would go down there first to see what it was doing, and then I come back and we all go back down together. I believe in that. Too many people sit in their vehicle. I got promoted to Sector Boss on a fire, by a guy named Bill Bowmen. He says "You've been leader of crews now for quite a while and I like how you do business. Right now I am making you one of my Sector Bosses." He is another guy I looked up to, just his mannerisms, just the way he talks. A lot of people will come up and tell you something and leave. He wouldn't, he would explain things to you and ask if you understand...that old feedback stuff.

**Do you think leaders are born or made?**

Both, if you have the aptitude and want to do it, you can do it. You can be a leader, anybody can. A few are just

born to it. They just stand out, you have an intuition about those guys.

**I know the Marine Corps believes strongly that certain individual traits are the basis for good leadership. What one or two characteristics of a leader are most important to you?**

I think the first thing is you have to have respect for your people. Don't be telling them things that you can't fulfill. You want your guys to know you and respect you. They have to respect you, don't do or promise anything you can't back up.

**If you were to look back at your whole life, what do you think was the key influence that helped you become a leader?**

Well, you know my Dad was a kind of a visionary. He was a guy that knew what he wanted. That is what made my family, kind of an outcast. The other Indians would say, you think you are too good for us. He would grow things. We had peach trees here, we sold peaches, we had potatoes and peanuts. He would do things. We grew hay, we would bail hay, we would sell it. This land here was completely covered in Oak trees, and I remember we used to come down and blast and burn and dig them out of the ground. We had to work, we learned how to work. There were three of us kids and he worked us hard.

**The older you get the more willing you are to look at yourself, what do you consider your biggest strengths and weaknesses?**

I think my biggest strength is treat your people like you want to be treated. Sure I would work them hard, but they would come through. After a hard assignment I'd say "Okay I will buy you guys ice cream." I bought them ice cream. A reward, you work for me I will treat you good.

**The harder question is what do you consider your weaknesses?**

I guess it is being too compassionate sometimes, that will ruin you. Some of these guys will pick up on that. I do have a lot of feelings for people. If they have hard times, I will do what I can to help them. They will burn you sometimes. You have to have some compassion, but you have to control that.

**Since you started in 1966 what do you think are the biggest improvements in firefighting?**

Safety has improved a lot. In the old days, they would say shut up and go out and do your job. The

mechanized equipment and other new stuff is a good thing. You will not get lost anymore, you have GPS, and that is pretty accurate. Safety has come a long ways though, and that is the best change.

**How about some of the changes that have not been so good?**

I don't know, when I started out in fire, you walked your piece of line at least three times during your shift. I believe in that very strongly. You don't go to leave until your relief comes on, you tell them about all the problems and you really know what you are talking about.

**Yesterday we were at a training session a bunch of young squad bosses. If you had an opportunity to stand in front of that class and talk to them what two or three lesson might you give?**

I have always tried to keep my kids informed, so that they know what is going on. I come from briefing, and before we hit the line, I say this is what we are looking at, so they know. I think if you keep your kids informed they will really want to follow you.

Also, see what you got. Really go out and look at the fire and figure out all the stuff that you have available to use. Think about what you are going to do, before you start doing it. Then you have to be out there with them, leading from out front.

And last thing, don't be ashamed of making mistakes, everybody does it. I have made a lot of mistakes. Yeah, it makes you feel crappy, but what is done is done. Learn from it. A lot of things happen on a fire that you can't do a thing about.

**If there was one thing that you would hope the firefighters that have worked for you would take away from their time with Ben Charley, what would you want your legacy to be?**

I always taught my guys to do what is right all the time. It is a good feeling to see guys that have worked for me move up in the system to higher positions than me. I hope that lesson was part of their success.

*This interview with Ben Charley was conducted by Jim Cook and Angela Tom in Dunlap, California on January 24, 2004.*