

Leaders

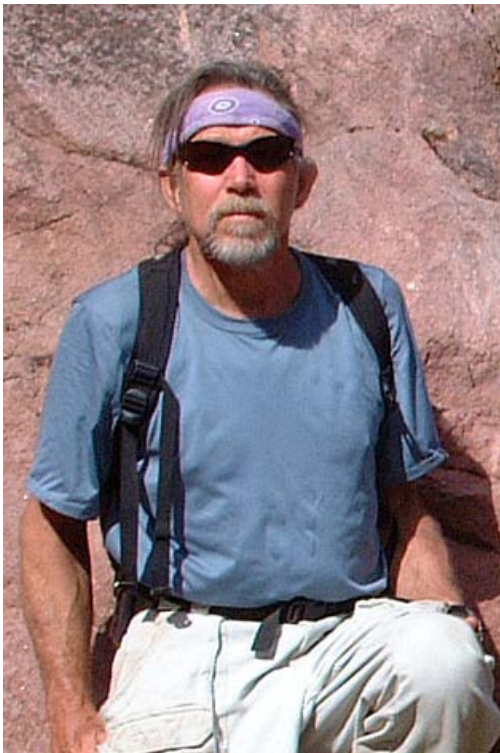
We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Interview with Paul Gleason

by Jim Cook and Angela Tom



Paul Gleason at the East Drainage of Storm King Mountain

Paul Gleason's career as a firefighter spanned parts of five decades, starting as an 18 year-old crew member on a Southern California hotshot crew and culminating as a college professor of wildland fire science.

Paul grew up in Southern California, the son of a traveling evangelist preacher. He became an accomplished rock climber in his teens and continued to climb through his entire life. In 1964 he got his first job as a firefighter on the Angeles National Forest. He continued to work there on the Dalton Hotshot Crew through 1970, with the exception of a one-year stint in the U.S. Army. From 1971 to 1973 he went to college and earned a degree in Mathematics.

During this time he also traveled and climbed extensively. He returned to work as a firefighter in 1974 as the Assistant Foreman for a 20-person Regional Reinforcement Crew on the Okanogan National Forest. Then in 1977 he took the job as the Assistant Superintendent of the Zig Zag Hotshot Crew on the Mount Hood

National Forest, moving up to Superintendent in 1979. He remained in that role until 1992. He then transferred to the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest as a District Fire Management Officer and eventually became the Forest Fire Ecologist. His next move was to another fire agency in 1999 as the Deputy Fire Management Officer for the Rocky Mountain Region of the National Park Service. Mandatory retirement at age 55 took Paul away from the federal fire service in 2001 and into academia. For the next two years Paul was adjunct professor for the Wildland Fire Science program at Colorado State University. He remained in this role until he lost his battle with cancer in 2003

Paul Gleason on Mindfulness

“That ability to take in your surroundings and sort out the important stuff, to be aware, to be vigilant. Then take all that information, put it together, and see if it makes sense to you.”

During his career Paul Gleason was front and center on three significant fires of the modern era - the Loop Fire in 1966, the Dude Fire in 1990, and the Cerro Grande Fire in 2000. His role on these three touchstone fires gave rise to his passion for firefighter safety and the "student of fire" philosophy that he crusaded for. He was a leader of firefighters



Paul Gleason, Hotshot 1965

and he was a leader for the wildland fire service. Paul's contributions are far reaching. He teamed up with D. Douglas Dent and pioneered the professional tree falling program for wildland firefighters. He developed the LCES (1991 document on LCES by Gleason) concept that has become the modern foundation of firefighter safety. He was very involved in the development of fire behavior training...with a focus on taking the scientific aspects of extreme fire behavior and making them understandable concepts for every firefighter. He reached outside the fire service and collaborated with experts, such as Dr. Karl Weick, who were doing research in the realm of decision-making and high reliability organizations.

In the final tally, as always, Paul was a role model "student of fire." To the very end of his life he was engaged in teaching and learning about fire. The opportunity to ask Paul these questions about leadership came the day before he died and at his insistence. Here is what he had to say:

What makes you want to follow someone?

Confidence, knowing for certain that the person making the call has your safety foremost in their mind. And knowing that the job you are about to take on is the right thing to do, that it makes sense.

Who do you think is a leadership role model and why?

Chuck Hartley, who was the Superintendent when I first went to work on the Dalton Hotshots. Why...because he instilled that confidence. When I worked for Chuck, I never doubted for a minute that our safety was always the first thing in his mind. Plus, Chuck ran the crew in a

way that allowed us to have a sense of confidence in ourselves and in our own capabilities as well.

If you were to pick the most important character trait for an effective leader, what would that be?

That's a hard one to answer. (Pause) But if there has to be one, it would be mindfulness. That ability to take in your surroundings and sort out the important stuff, to be aware, to be vigilant. Then take all that information, put it together, and see if it makes sense to you. Another part of that mindfulness concept is the ability to relate to all types of people and see what they can contribute.

Are leaders born or made...explain?

I think they are born, and I know we might disagree on this some. Certainly, many important leadership skills can be developed, but I feel that trait of mindfulness is an innate capability that someone either has or doesn't have.

Regarding leadership, what quote comes to mind?

"Those are my people, wherever they go I must follow for I am their leader."

Thinking back to your youth, what influences helped you become a leader?

My father traveled for his work, frequently with the whole family. In our travels we camped out a lot and I think that was a big part of why I have always been drawn to the outdoors. Growing up in Southern California, I remember many summers and falls where the hills around the Los Angeles area would be on fire and especially the memory of long strands of fire moving across the hills at night. I think I knew I wanted to be firefighter by the time I was in 5th grade. Climbing was another big influence on me. I remember one time my brother Phil and I did a climb late in the fall and we weren't able to finish the whole climb before dark. So we had to spend the night up there suspended in our slings with just the stuff we had on us, which wasn't much. Man it got cold when the sun went down, I think it was in November.

What do you consider your strengths to be?

Let me think about that for a minute. (Pause) Probably endurance, and more specifically enduring adversity and using that experience to make something good come out of it.

How about your weaknesses?

I didn't know I had any! (Laughs...Pause) My biggest weakness is patience, wanting to see things happen too quickly or get changes in place right away. Not having

the patience to let things develop. Sometimes I'm that way with the people I work closely with. My expectations of their time and commitment could be unrealistic on occasion.

Since you started in 1964, what are the biggest improvements you have witnessed in the wildland fire service?

I think that would have to be the increased focus on firefighter safety.

What do you consider the worst changes you have seen in the wildland fire service?

Lack of aggressiveness on the fireline. This might sound like a contradiction to the last answer, but I don't think so. What I mean here is that there seems to be a lot of indecisiveness on selecting a strategy and getting with it to make it happen.

Describe a few of the toughest decisions or dilemmas you have faced?

The first thing that comes to mind is the Dude Fire...and especially the decision to leave the subdivision and go down into Walk Moore Canyon. I passed a number of people coming up the line in a hurry as I was going down. I talked to a couple of the other Hotshot Superintendents. Everyone thought there was no way that anyone working in the bottom of that canyon could make it out alive. Even so, a few of us continued on down into the canyon. We met Hatch and then began to

find the others on the Perryville Crew...but that's a whole other story.

What helped to guide you in that decision?

(Pause) I don't know exactly why I did that, but it just seemed like the right thing to do. I just knew I would have to live with my decision. It's like the Cerro Grande thing. That was another tough situation. We made our decisions in good faith and using our best judgment based on what we knew. I remember how difficult it was to go to talk to the people in Los Alamos and tell them who I was, what we did, why we did it. But I have to live with those decisions because at that time it was my responsibility.

Do you think a legacy is important and if so, what do you want your legacy to be?

If you choose to lead others you will have a legacy. But that legacy will be determined by those that follow you. (Pause) I suppose I would want my legacy be that firefighters begin to realize the importance of being a student of fire and that I was able to help make that happen.

This interview with Paul Gleason was done by Jim Cook and Angela Tom in Denver, Colorado on February 26th, 2003.