

# Staff Ride

## Resources



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

## Mann Gulch Fire – Letter to Facilitators

Dear Mann Gulch Staff Ride Facilitators:

Those of you who have lead or participated in Staff Rides before know what a great learning experience lays ahead, and we encourage all of you – veterans and newcomers alike – to prepare by opening your minds and allowing yourselves as much as possible to put your feet in the boots of the Mann Gulch fire fighters and managers on August 5th, 1949. This letter will provide you some information for better understanding how we have organized the following Facilitator Instruction Material, and also include some of our own lessons learned for making this Mann Gulch Staff Ride work well.

We have attempted to provide support and flexibility in the materials provided here. By all means, make it your own. You should find a great deal of support in the Facilitators Support and Maps Tabs of the Mann Gulch Staff Ride Website. We have included several photos that might benefit participants at each stand. We recommend printing and laminating TDG plans and supporting documents, photos and maps to include in a notebook with your Facilitator Instructional Materials. If you are planning your Staff Ride for a large group of people, we have found the Incident Command System to be a helpful organizing tool. The sample Incident Action Plan found in the Facilitator Support Tab may be a helpful tool as well. If using the IAP, please remember to update/validate that the important information is current.

Make sure you review the Wildland Fire Staff Ride Guide and remember that it is only a Staff Ride if it has these three elements: Preliminary Study, Field Study, and Integration. We also suggest that during your Field Study portion you include these three components at each stand:

- 1) Orient the Ground: Point out the terrain features important to the historical events at that stand. Make sure to explain what would have looked different during the historical event than it does now.
- 2) Present the Background Information: What was planned, what really happened and any other issues significant to your objectives. One way to have participants themselves present some of this information is to have them do the “Person of Interest” (POI) assignment described below. (See POI sample letter in Facilitator Support Tab)
- 3) Analyze: What can we learn from this historical event to make ourselves better firefighters and managers today? This analysis can be achieved through Tactical Decision Games, through pre-planned Discussion Questions, or simply by letting the group talk about what they are learning after each stand.

Part of our instructions includes a “Person of Interest” (POI) assignment for participants to prepare for while doing their Preliminary Study. We assign each participant a POI who seems

like someone they might relate to. For instance, we might ask a current Ranger or FMO participant to study Ranger Jansson; a crew leader to focus on Dodge or Hellman; or a crew member to learn about one of the Mann Gulch smokejumpers - maybe someone who grew up in the same part of the country, is the same age, or has something else in common with them.

We ask participants to learn everything they can about who that person was and what his life was like. Lots of these details can be found under the Information Sources Tab on the website. Personal profiles were compiled for Mann Gulch participants in a document developed by Helena High School students -- High School X-CEL Class Mann Gulch Remembered, 50th Anniversary. This PDF document can be found as well under the Information Sources Tab on the Mann Gulch Staff Ride website.

After studying the assigned Person of Interest (POI), Staff Ride participants are asked to come prepared to tell that person's story, as best they can, to their Staff Ride group while we stand on the terrain where the historic fire occurred. This assignment has helped to make the Mann Gulch Staff Ride a personal enough experience for our participants that the lessons learned stay with them as they make their own fire line decisions.

As you and your students study the Preliminary materials, you will notice that the survivors' testimonies and Mann Gulch's various authors sometimes contradict each other. It is not the goal of a Staff Ride to present a "united front," or any kind of a "party line." The interesting complexities and truths lie somewhere among all the story lines. We have striven to be as accurate as possible in our Staff Ride materials, but there are some things that we can never know for sure. As a facilitator, be careful not to let the group get too sidetracked in trying to figure out those unknowns; keep in mind that you are trying to help folks get better at fighting their next fire, not re-fighting the old one.

One technique that will help your participants better understand what happened at Mann Gulch on August 5th, 1949 is to not allow yourself as facilitators, or your Staff Ride participants, to mention anything that happened ahead of the unfolding narrative at each stand. Design your Staff Ride to move like a story, complete with the tension of not knowing what lies around the next corner. If they did their pre-reading they will know many things already about the outcome, but ask them to suspend that knowledge until the Integration. I've seen some good humor used by facilitators to cut forward speculation off, and there is no need to be subtle about it! If they goof (and we all do), say something like, "Hey, that's a good questions to save for the Integration."

You may also have to cut discussions off at each stand simply because at the end of the day you will have to catch a boat out of Mann Gulch at a certain time. So, make sure as you plan that you divide the time among the stands in a thoughtful way. In our experience Stand 1 is long on background information as it's important to do a good job of setting the stage, and then the amount of time you spend at each following stand can decrease, just as the number of options remaining to the historic firefighters decreased as the day wore on. Stands 5 and 6 will probably need to be longer again, as they address the whole rescue operation and the aftermath of the Mann Gulch Fire.

If you are managing several groups at once, you may find it necessary logistically, to provide fill-in material for occasions when one group has to wait for another to clear an area before you can move to the next stand. "Person of Interest" stories can help make this time productive.

It is your job as facilitators to keep track of your Staff Ride objectives, keep participants moving both physically and mentally, and don't let the same one or two individuals monopolize the conversations. Otherwise, let those discussions percolate how they will, and don't try to draw participants towards any grand conclusions or consensus; we want people's minds to be clicking and/or spinning, and we are not troubled if they have more questions at the end of the day than they did at the beginning.

There needs to be space for disagreement and a whole range of emotion (anger, sadness, etc.). We want participants to frankly discuss where possible mistakes were made, but to remain respectful of the human beings who may have made those mistakes. Suspension of disbelief is important, and we need to remember that they did the best they could with the information and awareness they had that day. If we can get the participants to keep their minds open, and take the events of August 5th, 1949 one hour and minute at a time, you might be surprised by how many of their decisions seem rational to you, given what those firefighters knew at the time.

It is good for participants to get a little sweaty and winded as they traverse this historic route; we all tend to think sharper with a bit of exertion. But don't let them get moving so fast that they get injured. The terrain is rough and the goal is not to re-run the same race that Sallee and Rumsey did.

Remember, we will be walking on ground where people died and that many consider sacred. It is also a governed as Wilderness Area and appropriate considerations should be taken as such. Please refrain from removing artifacts or damaging natural areas. Photographs should be taken in a professional manner and kept to a reasonable number. Please be sensitive in words and action to the people and places that are included in the Staff Ride, and come prepared to engage honestly in discussions designed for us to continue learning to do our jobs better, and to keep our people alive on future fire grounds.

Best Wishes,

Mann Gulch Staff Ride Development Crew