

# The National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop

Sponsored by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group Leadership Committee  
Co-Hosted by the Angeles National Forest and the Los Angeles County Fire Department

January 25-27, 2005



*Workshop participants engage in tactical decision exercises above the fatality site during the Staff Ride to the 1966 Loop Fire.*

*"We are revolutionizing how we teach our wildland fire service leaders."*  
Tom Boatner, Workshop Keynote Speaker

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*“After South Canyon, we realized we needed to teach leadership. We knew we needed to do this in a low-stress and low-risk environment. To better enable people to perform in high-risk situations, we started looking for ways to emulate our [wildland fire] decision-making environment in a low-risk way. To maximize this, we’re now using Staff Rides and Tactical Decision Games.”*

**Tom Boatner, National Fire Operations Manager  
Bureau of Land Management**

**Keynote Speaker, National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop**

*“We [the wildland fire agencies] need to keep doing Staff Rides. I think Staff Rides are a very valuable tool. This has been an excellent workshop—an outstanding learning opportunity for me. We need to keep reaching out to people and spreading the word about this.”*

**Participant**

**National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop**

The National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop, sponsored by the NWCG Leadership Committee and hosted at the Don Biedebach Regional Training Center, united a variety of interagency personnel who support wildland fire training activities, including: Fire Staff Officers, Safety Officers, Training Officers, District FMOs and AFMOs, Engine Captains, Helicopter Managers, Fire Use Module leads, Hotshot Crew overhead, Smokejumper trainers, as well as staff from the National Outdoor Leadership School.

The workshop’s special guest speakers included: Dr. Michael Useem, Director of the Wharton Business School’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, who discussed how Staff Rides are effective learning tools for business and academia; Lt. Colonel Eric Carlson (USMC retired), former Director of Operations for the Marine Corps University, who explained how the Marines implement Staff Rides; General Keith Holcomb (USMC retired), who presented an introduction to military Tactical Decision Games; and Dr. William G. “Glenn” Robertson, Deputy Director of the U.S. Army’s Combat Studies Institute, the Army’s Staff Ride expert and author of *“The Staff Ride”*—considered *the* handbook on this valuable learning process.



*This report summarizes the insights and lessons learned experienced at the 2005 National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop. This report is also intended to provide key workshop information about Staff Rides—including how to develop and implement this significant training concept—to the entire wildland fire management community. The creation of this report was funded by the NWCG Leadership Committee and the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.*

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## National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop Purpose

- ❖ Encourage and support an increase in the use of Staff Rides—excellent learning events with a focus on the professional development of leaders—within the wildland fire community.
- ❖ Examine a variety of techniques for designing and conducting Staff Rides.
- ❖ Help facilitate the full integration of the Staff Ride technique into wildland fire training on an interagency basis.
- ❖ Develop a core of wildland fire service representatives who will work within their home units and geographic areas to help initiate, develop and implement the Staff Ride concept as a leadership development technique.
- ❖ Redeem “*Action Item 1, Task 13 of the Cramer Fire Accident Prevention Plan*” for the U.S. Forest Service to identify a Staff Ride implementation lead in each Region; and meet the intent of “*Task G1B, Item 4 of the National Fire Plan*” to integrate Staff Rides into the wildland fire service training toolbox.

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Stand 1 of the Loop Fire Staff Ride at El Cariso Regional Park

A Staff Ride of the Angeles National Forest’s 1966 fatality Loop Fire served as one of the workshop’s teaching elements. This exercise demonstrated—up close and personal—how the unique Staff Ride process can be a valuable learning tool. This on-site experience provided workshop participants with a basic Staff Ride model and illustrated fundamental Staff Ride facilitation techniques—including Tactical Decision Games.

*“Staff Rides provide a high level of learning and of teaching. They are affordable. Local Staff Rides can have equal value to national Staff Rides.”*

*“. . . The wildland fire service does a poor job developing new firefighters in regard to our history. By better honoring our history, we can learn for our future.”*

**Jim Cook, U.S. Forest Service Training Projects Coordinator  
National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop Coordinator**

## 1. What is a Staff Ride?

The Staff Ride—a planned learning event that occurs at the site of an actual incident—is a proven, widely recognized technique for conveying the lessons of the past to the present.

Various branches of this country’s military services have been utilizing this learning method for the past century. Military Staff Rides typically discuss leadership, decision-making, tactics and strategy. Wildland fire Staff Rides can discuss—within a different context—these same crucial subject areas.

All Staff Rides have three phases: the Preliminary Study, the Field Study, and the, final, Integration Phase. The Staff Ride is *not* a field trip or purely historical tour. It always involves systematic study and specific learning objectives.

All Staff Rides place participants on an actual piece of terrain, confront them with an actual operational situation, and stimulate them to reach conclusions or derive lessons from the overall experience.

### Staff Rides and Wildland Fire Service

In the aftermath of the 1994 South Canyon fire fatalities, the first *Wildland Firefighting Human Factors Workshop* in 1995 included a Staff Ride to the site of the 1949 fatality Mann Gulch Fire.

Phase Three of the 1998 *TriData Interagency Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study* confirmed that a key recommendation from firefighters across all agency boundaries was a need to enhance training—including the use of case studies (Staff Rides).

The 1999 Dude Fire Staff Ride, under the guidance of the U.S. Army’s Staff Ride expert Dr. William G. “Glenn” Robertson, was the first formal wildland fire adoption of this technique. Some of the same interagency organizers of this national-scope Staff Ride also developed the 2004 Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Staff Ride.

Recently, other non-fire Staff Ride specialists have worked in conjunction with the wildland fire services, including: Lt. Col. Eric H. Carlson, Director of Operations, Marine Corps University; and Dr. Michael Useem of the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton Business School.

*“Because Staff Rides involve a high level of personal commitment and involvement from all participants, the learning that occurs on these events can be deeper and more meaningful than classroom lectures.”*

## **Wildland Fire Staff Ride Guide**

## **2. Staff Ride Success Stories**

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### **Lessons Learned from the Dude Fire and Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Staff Rides**

*“When properly designed and facilitated, a Staff Ride is a powerful tool of organizational learning in which students learn but are not ‘taught.’ In my experience, students have told me that Staff Rides have been one of the most profound training experiences of their careers.”*

**Dave Thomas**  
**National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop Speaker**

*Dave Thomas, Regional Fuels Specialist for the Forest Service’s Intermountain Region, was a key organizer for both the 1999 Dude Fire and 2004 Cerro Grande national-level Staff Rides. The following are summary points from his presentation at the National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop.*

Key Premise: Firefighters like to learn but they don’t like to be lectured to.

Staff Rides, therefore, are a superb tool of organizational learning where students learn *without* being lectured to. Students don’t feel patronized. This is an important component of adult learning.

Field Trip or Staff Ride? There is a distinct difference. You must decide at the very beginning which approach you are going to take.

Each stand (individual presentation site) of a Staff Ride should tell the next chapter of the overall event’s “story.”

On the Staff Ride’s Integration Phase: “I have never been at a Staff Ride where deep emotion and healing did not arise at this portion of the event,” Thomas says. “It is extremely important that this section be properly facilitated.”

After his talk, Thomas showed the workshop participants the 30-minute video of the Dude Fire Staff Ride. A video/DVD production of the Cerro Grande Staff Ride will soon be available through the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center ([www.wildfirelessons.net](http://www.wildfirelessons.net)).

## **‘Can Do’ Spirit Helps Craft U.S. Forest Service Region One’s Thirtymile Fire Staff Ride into an Ongoing Learning Opportunity**

*“You need to base your [Staff Ride] objectives on the needs of your own participants. We have completed [Thirtymile Fire] Staff Rides with people from a variety of fire and agency backgrounds and also with single crews. Both can work, but lead to different kinds of discussions. I’d also like to include a sociologist who studies human behavior during crisis situations, or other outside experts who might have interesting perspectives.”*

**Lori Messenger, Missoula Smokejumper  
Region One Thirtymile Staff Ride Organizer  
National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop Speaker**

The wildland firefighter’s “*Can Do*” credo can apply to training initiative too. Case-in-point: Lori Messenger and Region One’s Thirtymile Staff Ride.

On a wildfire once, Messenger overheard some chatter about a local “Staff Ride” of the 2001 Thirtymile fatality wildfire. This triggered her curiosity and a desire to learn more about this potential training and learning opportunity. End outcome: on her own initiative, this Missoula Smokejumper has developed a successful, ongoing Region One Staff Ride of this incident.

She first secured regional-level support for the project from safety and training staff representing a variety of agencies. “You need support from leadership in all the agencies that you want to involve. It’s important to educate everyone on what a Staff Ride is and what their people will gain from participating in this experience,” she points out.

Messenger also found funding for a Staff Ride project coordinator to complete the arduous tasks of developing the pre-work packet, creating a Staff Ride plan, and organizing the myriad logistical details. In addition, she coordinated these

### **Region One Thirtymile Fire Staff Ride Learning Objectives**

- ❖ Provide attendees a personal learning experience at the site of the Thirtymile Fire that instills lessons and enhances firefighter wisdom and prescience/foresight.
- ❖ Encourage potential fire managers and leaders to study their profession through the use of fire history.
- ❖ While standing in the actual terrain where wildfire demonstrated extreme behavior, allow participants to see:
  - ✓ The complex and dynamic nature of firefighting.
  - ✓ The need for constant and well-informed engagement.
- ❖ *We need to be paying attention to everything always.*

efforts with Region Six’s locally-designated Thirtymile Fire Staff Ride Coordinator.

Messenger then helped spearhead the effort to round-up a committee to serve in an advisory capacity for this undertaking. Committee members include: the Regional Safety Officer, the Northern Rockies Training Center Coordinator, a Fire Behavior Analyst, the Missoula Smokejumper Base Manager, the pilot responsible for the flights to the incident site, and various individuals who could serve as future Staff Ride organizers.

“We wanted a team of us who know how to do the logistics and lead the Staff Ride. In this way, different people are available to take over—according to their work schedules,” Messenger explains.

#### **Lori Messenger’s tips on how to plan a successful Staff Ride:**

**Preliminary Study Phase** – This reading packet needs to be distributed well in advance—at least two weeks. It’s important to include some kind of thoughtful piece about firefighting or safety—information beyond the investigative report and newspaper articles. She recommends Karl Weick’s essays and his co-authored book *“Managing the Unexpected – Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity.”*

**Field Study Phase** – Facilitators must be careful not to let this turn into solely a “fact hunt.” While getting correct information is an important component, “one of the important lessons,” Messenger assures, “is how different ‘facts’ look according to



*Lori Messenger shares the story of how she created and implemented an ongoing Regional Staff Ride.*

whose shoes you’re standing in. In each Staff Ride trip we’ve done, the discussion has been different.”

Thirtymile Fire veterans have also participated in these Staff Rides.

“We have found that some of the presentations by people who were involved with the Thirtymile Fire to be emotional,” Messenger says.

“This is an important aspect of the experience. The more [Thirtymile Fire veteran]

participants who speak, the richer the experience for all.”

## South Canyon Staff Ride Provides a Rich Legacy of Learning Rewards for Young Firefighters

*“Our Staff Ride’s secondary benefits include the emotional impact, reinforcement of pride in the profession, and strengthening of crew cohesion. ...Sharing an emotional experience like South Canyon bonds a crew together. It reminds and reinforces that we do a dangerous job and without each member of the crew working together, it can lead to disastrous results. Every crewmember now realizes that he or she is not only responsible for themselves, but that their actions can also affect everyone around them.”*

*“There was nothing in the books that could have completely prepared them for this experience. No picture can show how close 21 seconds to safety actually is (121 feet). Or how far Tyler and Browning, the helitack, actually ran (1,841 feet) trying to find a way out. The frustration of being so close cannot be fully expressed. The feeling from all Staff Ride participants was that this is a powerful and positive learning experience.”*

**From the introduction to the Redding Hotshot Crew’s  
May 2003 South Canyon Fire Staff Ride Report**

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It all started with a couple suggestions.

Robert Holt, Superintendent of the Redding Interagency Hotshot Crew, says that recommendations from Jim Cook and others on the NWCG Leadership Committee convinced him to change the focus of his crew’s training program from “Fire Management” to “Leadership Development.”

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***Tactical Decision Games  
are included  
in the actual on-site field visit.***

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“One of the main focuses of our new program became instilling more tools to promote intuitive—rather than analytical—thinking,” Holt explains. “It was suggested that one way to

achieve this would be to take the crew on a Staff Ride of the 1994 South Canyon Fire.”

After much preparation and planning, he and Crew Captain Patrick Lookabaugh, have now conducted two extremely successful South Canyon Staff Rides in 2003 and 2004. Another is planned for 2005. After each Staff Ride, the Redding Hotshots also perform site and trail maintenance work at South Canyon.

Superintendent Holt says that—while demand to join this unique teaching experience is high—they try to limit the total number of Staff Ride participants to 42. Besides the 17 members of the Redding IHC, this includes: an emcee, a facilitator, four conference group leaders, three group coaches, three Redding Smokejumpers, and from 11 to 13 invited participants (often times people interested in conducting their own Staff Rides).

## Participant Comments

### **Staff Ride Experience Imprints Powerful Learning Impressions**

*“As we climbed, periodically stopping to discuss events as they had unfolded back in 1994, we recognized logistical dilemmas. We proposed alternative tactics that could have been used. And with each discussion, we began to see and understand how this tragic chain-of-events unfolded.”*

*“I came away realizing the importance of situational awareness and LCES. I now find myself more alert and aware of my surroundings in the fire environment.”*

*“I know the lessons that were learned through the numerous hours of studying, countless discussions, and the physical visit to the site will benefit me through the rest of my fire career.”*

*“Stepping on the ground of the South Canyon Fire was without a doubt the most beneficial training and learning experience of my fire career. It is our responsibility to study and learn the lessons from this event so there will never again be a ‘chain-of-errors’ that leads to loss of human life.”*

*“Without blame and any previous biases about what we might have thought happened here, I realized that this training probably had the most impact on me than any other training I have ever received.”*

*“I have never had any training that relayed messages as vividly as this did. I have never had training that left me both excited about what I learned—as well as awestruck by what I learned.”*

*“This experience is something that cannot be replicated or performed in a lecture or a classroom with similar long-lasting results.”*

Tactical Decision Games are included in the actual on-site field visit. U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Col. Eric H. Carlson and Major Bob Baird of the Marine Corps University have served as facilitators. “Because these two have such a long history of conducting Staff Rides, they can provide a more complete learning experience for us,” Holt says.

His crew’s trip out to Colorado is no joy ride. Everyone is too busy studying the South Canyon Fire—absorbing their extensive and mandatory Staff Ride homework.

Preliminary Reading requirements (mailed to the Redding Hotshot Crew members one month before their seasonal appointments even begin) include: the South Canyon Fire Investigation official report, Ted Putnam’s *“Findings from the Wildland Firefighters Human Factors Workshop,”* *“Fire Behavior Associated with the 1994 South Canyon Fire on Storm King Mountain, Colorado”* by Bret Butler et al, and *“Fire on the Mountain”* by John McClean.

Additional reading assignments include everything from the Wharton University South Canyon Staff Ride to the TriData Interagency Wildland Firefighter Safety Awareness Study: *Phase 1 and Phase 2.*

“On our drive out to Colorado in our crew buggies,” says Captain Lookabaugh, “the crew isn’t listening to satellite radio. They’re too busy watching South Canyon video documentaries from the History Channel, A&E, and PBS.”

## The Pierce Park Staff Ride: Designing a Local Type 3 Fire Staff Ride for S-300 Students

*“The intent of our Staff Ride is to ensure that S-300 students are given a more realistic picture of the Type 3 Incident Commander’s position. As currently written, the S-300 course portrays this position through a process list of agency expectations. While valid, we felt this didn’t adequately address the dynamic and stressful environment in which this IC must truly function. Therefore, through this Staff Ride, students are given a better appreciation of the challenges involved in actually applying the principles discussed in class.”*

**Scott Anderson, NWCG Training Project Leader**  
**From his presentation at the National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop**

Staff Rides don’t always have to explore and examine fatality or failed incidents. They can be tailored to any audience to reflect any learning objective. Case in point: Scott Anderson’s Pierce Park Staff Ride. He chose to develop a wildland fire Staff Ride that analyzed a suppression success story.

NIFC-based Anderson, NWCG Training Project Leader, needed a wildfire that he could use to help teach—and better ground-truth—the *Extended Attack Incident Commander S-300* course. His primary considerations in selecting an incident for this special Staff Ride: 1) amount of existing documentation on the incident; 2) availability of firefighters who had actually been on the incident; 3) physical access; 4) the fire had to be a Type 3 incident. The former smokejumper found a nearby perfect candidate: the Pierce Park Fire.

“As it turns out,” Anderson informs, “The Pierce Park Fire had a successful outcome. This deviates from most wildland fire Staff Rides.” But, as Anderson was to soon discover, for his

S-300 teaching/learning goals, this was not a problem. Along the way—in planning and designing the Staff Ride and its Tactical Decision Games—this did, however, present some minor challenges.

“Because this fire was a ‘success story,’ there wasn’t an abundance of documentation on it,” Anderson explains. “While the existing information was adequate, it wasn’t necessarily as much as you’d want for planning a Staff Ride. It therefore became even more important for us to have access to the firefighters who had been involved in this incident so they could fill in any information gaps.”

Says Anderson on this Staff Ride’s success: “Our participants’ course evaluations clearly reflected the success of integrating a Staff Ride and Tactical Decision Games. This in-the-field experience provided the students a real picture of the challenges faced by a Type 3 Incident Commander.”

**Preliminary Study** – The NWCG classroom portion of this course, along with a Pierce Park Fire briefing was used for the preliminary study phase.  
**Field Study** – The field study portion followed the conventional Staff Ride model as closely as possible.  
**Integration Phase** – Sand Table Exercises served as the platform to help the students “bring it all together.”

### 3. The Loop Fire Staff Ride

Facilitated by Dan Kleinman

*Loop Fire Staff Ride Stand 1 provides vista of Loop Fire canyon site. Stand 3 (below) is on top of this ridge where the fire occurred, looking down into the fatality chimney where 12 fire fighters perished in 1966.*

*Workshop participants proceeded through five stands in small groups—discussing and interacting in Tactical Decision Games throughout the Staff Ride.*



*You are the Superintendent of a southern California hotshot crew. It is 0900 on Nov. 1st.*

*It has been a long fire season. It began early—in late May—with the 10,000-acre Wellman Fire on the Los Padres NF. Your crew has been fighting fire non-stop ever since.*

*Fuel conditions are exceptionally dry. The past four days, a Santa Ana wind has been blowing from the northeast. This is the sixth Santa Ana wind event this fall.*

*You have just received a dispatch for a fire in the Angeles National Forest's front country near Pacoima Canyon.*

*What information and instructions do you convey to your crew?*

**Tactical Decision Game  
Information  
Discussed at Loop Fire  
Staff Ride  
Stand 2**

## 4. How You Can Develop Your Own Staff Ride: Tips, Hints, and Food for Thought



On the workshop's last day, attendees participated in three separate roundtable discussion sessions designed to provide insights and specific "how to" advice for building and implementing Staff Rides.

*Session A Group Leader Larry Sutton outlines Staff Ride methodology objectives.*

### Session A – Objectives for Staff Ride Methodologies to Stimulate Group Interaction

**Leader:** Larry Sutton, Workshop Coordinator – Fire Training Unit Leader for the Bureau of Land Management

**Panel:** General Keith Holcomb, U.S. Marine Corp (retired); Dr. William G. "Glenn" Robertson and Lt. Col. Steven Clay, U.S. Army

- Determine who your target audience is: what are its members needs, learning objectives (for Tactical Decision Game incorporation, too) etc.
- As you build your Staff Ride, have a coherent order, follow a chronological time line in your stand development. Every stand should have a purpose, a learning objective.
- The use of visual aids at stands is extremely important, such as 20" by 30" photos or maps. We are "visual" learners.
- The stand presenter/facilitator: must stay neutral, stay focused on stand topic—without being too restrictive.
- "If you are creating a true Staff Ride, you are recreating an historical event. Due to different biases, you will need to get as many and as diverse resources as you can find—to end up with the proper narrative of your story line." Dr. William G. "Glen" Robertson.
- Regarding the "human-emotional factor" on Staff Rides: "I believe this is very important. You don't want to discount this—but you need to be careful how you use it." Dr. William G. "Glen" Robertson.

## Session B – Planning and Logistical Considerations for Staff Rides

**Leader:** Dan Kleinman    **Panel:** Robert Holt, Dave Thomas, Lori Messinger

- Your primary mission/objective is to get the word out about the Staff Ride to your target audience.
- Timing and transportation to and from Staff Ride stands is crucial.
- You need to have inclement weather contingencies incorporated into your initial Staff Ride planning.
- You don't have to do Staff Rides in large groups.
- The group facilitators need to be properly oriented—including on learning objectives and group interaction techniques.
- If using incident veterans, you need to know what to expect. (You don't want to be surprised or blind-sided.)

## Session C – Orientation to the National Staff Ride Library Website    <http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/staffride>

**Leaders:** Jim Cook and Carlton Joseph

The national Staff Ride Library website provides a myriad of information on Staff Rides, from background material and information sources for building Staff Rides and sample Tactical Decision Games, to actual Staff Ride templates.

### **National Staff Ride Library Website has Wealth of Helpful Information**

All Staff Rides require pre-reading and study. The National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop participants were required to absorb this information on the Loop Fire. Workshop participants were notified well in advance on how the necessary information is available on the NWCG Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program's website. This literature includes *The Wildland Fire Staff Ride Guide* ([www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/documents/Staff\\_Ride\\_Workbook.pdf](http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/documents/Staff_Ride_Workbook.pdf)) and the U.S. Army publication *The Staff Ride*, authored by workshop guest speaker/participant Dr. William G. Robertson ([www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/staffride/downloads/the\\_staff\\_ride.pdf](http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/staffride/downloads/the_staff_ride.pdf)). The Loop Fire Staff Ride is just one of the "Case Study" Staff Rides that has also been documented and made available in the *Staff Ride Library* on this website. This resource helps people who are planning or conducting Staff Rides. The site includes various tools and references to assist in developing all three Staff Ride phases. The NWCG Leadership Committee hopes to have 10 to 12 significant historical fires cataloged in the library by 2006. Fires will be added to the *Staff Ride Library* based on their historical significance and accessibility to wildland firefighters. "We need to be judicious about what we put up on this site," says Jim Cook. "We want to ensure that the information is truly helpful to the potential instructor/facilitator/student."

In addition, David Christenson, the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Asst. Manager, informed workshop participants how his center's on-line "Wildland Fire Community Center" ([www.MyFireCommunity.net](http://www.MyFireCommunity.net)) can be utilized as a potential resource for sharing information, knowledge, and learning opportunities about Staff Rides and Staff Ride development.

## **National Wildland Fire Staff Ride Workshop Participant Comments**

*“We [the wildland fire agencies] need to keep doing Staff Rides. I think Staff Rides are a very valuable tool. This has been an excellent workshop—an outstanding learning opportunity for me. We need to keep reaching out to people and spreading the word about this.”*

*“The Staff Ride concept is here to stay. I intend to perpetuate this concept on my home unit.”*

*“This is an excellent way of training and learning.”*

*“The Staff Ride is a really great informative tool. It is a tremendously useful and flexible technique that can touch multiple levels of experience and training with various purposes and learning points.”*

*“This was an eye-opener into a new training technique and useful learning tool.”*

*“I think that this is a dynamic tool for wildland fire. I was also happy to learn of the flexibility that Staff Rides allow you.”*

*“I plan to use the Staff Ride technique on annual fireline refreshers, for interagency cooperation, getting the troops out of the classroom, and the development of our firefighter training.”*

*“We need to keep this Staff Ride momentum rolling.”*