

# Leaders

## We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



### Interview with Tom Boatner

by Ted Mason and Ken Frederick

Tom Boatner is one of the most influential and articulate leaders in fire - experienced, unassuming, and possessing an incredible big-picture grasp of wildland fire management in the United States. He was born at Fort Campbell, Kentucky and, since his father was an Army officer, he was raised at Army installations all over the country. In 1975, between terms at Virginia Tech's forestry school, Boatner applied for a seasonal job with the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The next winter, he got a phone call asking if he wanted a job on the BLM helitack crew in Tanacross, Alaska. He accepted and ended up working the next 23 years in Alaska - with 17 of those years with the Alaska Smokejumpers. He spent two years as the Alaska state aviation manager, and four years as the BLM State Fire Management Officer for Montana and the Dakotas. Over the last several years of his career, in addition to serving as the Division Chief of Fire Operations for the BLM, Boatner served as chairman of the National Multi-Agency Coordination group. In these roles, he has been at the forefront of wildland fire management at the national and international level.

### You have achieved some substantial accomplishments outside of fire. What are some of those you are most proud of?

One of the reasons I stuck with firefighting was because it gave me the opportunity to have some time off in the winters. I'd always had huge wander lust and always wanted to travel; so I spent quite a few years traveling. So if you ask me what I've done that I'm most proud of, I would say it's some of the places I have traveled to and some of the things I've done there. I've hiked hundreds of miles in the Himalayas, traveled across the Gobi Desert, hitchhiked on Army trucks on the Tibetan Plateau, climbed Mount Kilimanjaro and Mount McKinley, and I've hiked hundreds of miles in the Grand Canyon. Pursuing my dreams and going to far-flung places that I wanted to see - I'm pretty proud of that in retrospect. So those are the things I've done away from fire that keep me going on hard days, working year round.

### Who was your most significant mentor or role model in fire?

I would say that I can name lots of different people that I either worked for, or worked with, or worked around that taught me good lessons about how to be a good leader. I can also say that I worked around people that taught me lessons about the kind of leader I definitely didn't want to be. But I can't think of one overarching, single mentor.

However, I would mention my father and my grandfather. They were career Army officers who had an incredible sense of personal duty and responsibility and believed that their positions as leaders in the Army required them to meet an extremely high standard of integrity, ethics, and performance. So that was something that I saw from these important men in my life from the time I was an infant. They never really talked about it, they just did it.



Boatner received a 2006 Lead by Example award.

**"Look at the people you work for, and ask yourself what kind of leader do I want to be?"**

I think that was how I learned that leaders are supposed to set an example and meet a high standard; take care of the people who are working for them; and tell the truth, and be honest. All this is really basic leadership stuff that's easy to talk about but harder to demonstrate.

In the fire business, I can think of a lot of really strong leaders that I worked for. I was lucky enough on that first helitack crew at Tanacross to work for some men who, in retrospect, I realize were incredibly strong leaders. My first suppression foreman was a guy named Bob Burritt - very calm, competent guy who demonstrated really strong leadership skills. I learned a lot of really valuable lessons from him.

You know at a higher level of organizational leadership, the guy I look back on, who I think was impressive, was a guy named Al Dunton who took over the Alaska smokejumper base at a time when it was not a particularly impressive organization - in fact, it was getting ready to go away. He somehow taught that group of people how to raise their standards; go out and prove that they had a place there and they belonged there. He was the beginning, I think, of a long tradition of that particular unit being an extremely strong group of firefighters and fireline leaders.

### **Can you describe one of the toughest decisions or dilemmas you have had to deal with?**

I guess the one that comes to my mind was the fire season of 2000 in Montana when we had many fires burning, many communities threatened, and it was clear that we didn't have the resources and the capability to chink around every fire, contain them 100%, then move on to the next one. We had to focus the resources we had on protecting communities and once we had done that, move those resources to the next critical place. Trying to convince a couple dozen incident management teams, dozens of line officers, and multiple area commands that we needed to do it a different way - trying to convince them of that in the heat of the battle - was a huge challenge. But I was convinced then it was the right thing to do, and the years since then have shown us that it's the model we need to figure out for this period of huge fire seasons we're in. We can't possibly stack up enough resources to contain every fire out there in these incredibly hot and dry summers.

### **What has surprised you the most over your career?**

I think probably like most people I wouldn't have expected the dramatic changes we've seen in this business. When I began fighting fire, we usually worked out of public view in the back country. I wouldn't have expected the job to become such a huge public story, and that so many Americans and so much of the media

would know what's going on in the fire world. I don't think I ever would have imagined how dramatically homes and climate would change the nature of this business. When I started, being on a fire where you were protecting homes was rare, and now being on a fire where you're not protecting homes is rare. It's a remarkable change in one 30-year span. When you look at the stats, the last four fire seasons are the four biggest fire seasons in terms of acres burned going back to 1960. Seven of the ten biggest fire seasons have occurred since 1999. So the scale of the fire seasons - I don't think anybody would have predicted 15-20 years ago.

The other really interesting thing pertains to young firefighters. If you started firefighting in 1998, you've amassed an amount of fire experience that in my days would have taken 20 years. So the young firefighters and fireline leaders today are amassing a scale of experience that's beyond anything that any of their predecessors have ever seen in America. That's a pretty amazing thing to think about.

### **What particular life experiences have you had that helped prepare you for a leadership role in fire?**

When I started fighting fires in 1976, in Alaska, you were given an awful lot of responsibility and thrown out in the bush by yourself as the leader with not very much preparation. You either figured it out or you went down. At the age of 18 and 19, I spent a huge amount of time out on fires as the fire boss with native crews and other firefighters, in charge, without much help, and without much training. I think you kind of learned through the "school of hard knocks." Also in those early days, I worked for some really good leaders; and I was young enough to watch the people who impressed me and tried to emulate them.

### **Are leaders born or made?**

I think some people have stronger natural skills to be leaders, but I believe, really strongly, that most people can be taught how to be good leaders and developed into good leaders. I think with regard to a lot of our leadership curriculum and the tools that we're using in fire these days, the whole goal is to teach people how to be good leaders. I think a lot of people have that capability if they're trained and get realistic experience.

Successful leadership comes in a broad variety of styles and personalities.

### **What makes you want to follow someone?**

I want to follow leaders I respect and admire. I respect and admire leaders who are technically competent, clear communicators, highly ethical, decisive, supportive of their followers, and who set and meet high standards.

The best leaders set a strong example, and do the right thing instead of the easy thing, regardless of the personal price they may pay.

### **When did you become comfortable with the thought that, as a leader on fires, you were responsible for people's lives?**

The easy answer is never. If you're in a position where you're making decisions that could decide whether people live or die, you better never be comfortable with it. And it better just hang on your shoulders like a 1,000 pound weight. You better be constantly asking yourself "Have I done everything I can do? Have I missed anything? Do I need to ask somebody else any more questions?" I think that's a responsibility that should always feel heavy. It shouldn't be something that you become comfortable with.

### **Regarding leadership, what quotation comes to mind?**

"I would follow that man through the gates of hell." That quote was spoken about Robert E. Lee at the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864. To me, that comment epitomizes the kind of commitment and loyalty to the team effort that a good leader should be striving to instill in his or her followers.

### **How can we help younger leaders acquire and assimilate experience in firefighting when we are currently seeing fire behavior that surpasses what even experts have never run into in 20 and 30 years of fire experience?**

Well, I think one of the ways you do it is by teaching a lot of these basic leadership skills that we've been focusing on - maintaining Situational Awareness, basic safety guidelines that are in the Incident Response Pocket Guide, how to communicate effectively, how to make a plan and communicate the plan, and how to decide when your plan is going south and you better do something different. I think we just need to be really careful about teaching people not to overextend themselves -to look at the risks and, manage and mitigate the risks. Don't be bashful about retreating and starting over again the next day.

We have to keep reminding people over and over again that killing firefighters is not where we want to be; we're not protecting anything that's that important. When we are in extreme fire behavior and the terrain is so complex that we can't fight a fire without risking peoples' lives, we have to pull back and figure it out.

I think the other key is we have to make sure that new, inexperienced firefighters are going out on the fireline cocooned by older, experienced firefighters. We have to

make sure in all of our fire crews and all of our organizations newer, less experienced people are being mentored, and protected and taught by people who have more experience and are more capable of anticipating the bad stuff that could happen.



Boatner at the Castle Rock fire in 2007.

### **How do you motivate people?**

I think if you're in a leadership position and you're passionate about your job, you tell people who work for you the truth, you make it clear that taking care of their welfare and giving them what they need to do their job well is one of your priorities, and you try to help them with their issues and problems. That motivates people to want to do a good job and want to work for you. In this business, in general, I don't think motivation is a problem because you don't end up in fire unless there's something about the job that really motivates you. There's too much discomfort and hard work with fire to do it unless there's something about the job that really appeals to you.

I also think that people in an organization – regardless of whether it's a hotshot crew or a smokejumper base, or a regional office or whatever – like a boss who's willing to say, "This is who I think we are, this is what I think we stand for, and this is how we're going to get the job done. Now you tell me what you think." And the organization arrives at a common goal of who they are and what they stand for, and what their standards are for getting the job done. If you can get people to agree on that set of criteria, then I think you will have a group of people that will work really hard to meet the standards that you've set.

## What do you think is the most important personality trait for a leader?

I can think of two or three that I think are really important, but to me the single most important one is what I would describe as character or integrity. If you can't trust a leader to speak the truth, to set a good example, to follow the rules that they expect everybody else to follow, to match their actions to their words, then no other technical skills or background that leader has is going to make him or her successful. Leaders have to be able to set an example as a person of integrity, character, and ethics to succeed at anything else involving strong leadership.

## Is there anything on leadership you'd like to add?

One of the things I would say that concerns me leaving the fire organization is that I see a decrease in leaders in our fire organization who have a strong background in authentic fireline experience. In order for our fire organizations to stay strong, we need people who have put in a fair amount of time, with sweat dripping off the end of their nose while bent over a pulaski, willing to move up and take that experience and try to lead with it. We need leaders coming from the fireline all the time to help us run things at a higher level. That authentic fireline experience is critical to us maintaining the health of our organizations.

## Pulaskis, McLeods, and Council tools are all named for their inventors. If you were to invent "the Boatner" - a firefighting tool or process - what would that be? In other words, what kind of tool or process is needed in fire these days?

I can't come up with some tool. If I could identify one area that I think we are not doing well in, we have established a fairly rigid training and task book system. We call it a performance-based system, but it's not. It is a task book bureaucratic system. The analogy I use is that if you want to be an Operations Section Chief in our system, it takes Alexander the Great and Beetle Bailey exactly the same amount of time to get there. We are not good at looking at a variety of human beings and saying that one is way above average in a certain set of skills. We'll make the very talented, skilled person take as long to become a Type 3 Incident Commander as somebody who doesn't have the basic skills. If I could change anything, it would be creating an ability to recognize excellence and advance it more quickly.

We tend to have this attitude that you can't get there faster than me; and you can't get there faster than a certain age. None of that has anything to do with the person's ability or the experience they've accumulated.

You can come up with a billion examples from history: At age 41, Ulysses S. Grant was commanding the Union army, and he led it to victory. If he'd had to go through our task book system, he wouldn't have been able to be the commander until 30 years after the war was over. In the world we're operating in right now, we need to be able to differentiate between extremely talented people and people who aren't extremely talented and move the talented people forward into the leadership positions where we need their excellence.

## What are the keys to success for Fire Operations today?

I think keys to success in future fire operations...Number One is recognizing that our world has changed dramatically and will continue to change. We need to figure out how to change our standard way of doing business and adapt to that. Everybody likes to say Albert Einstein's quote, "The definition of insanity is doing the same things, the same way, over and over again, and expecting different results." Well, that's kind of where we're at in fire. We have traditionally been really good at what we do, which is going out and catching fires. We want to keep doing it the way we did it in the '70s and the '80s and the '90s, and it's not working as well any more. So recognizing that our environment and our work environment is changing, we have to change our strategies and our tactics to be successful - that's key to the world we're working in right now.

## What advice would you give your son or daughter if they decided to start a career in fire?

I would tell them that physical fitness is incredibly important. I would tell them they are going to see and work for a variety of people and some of them will be really good leaders, and some of them will be really bad leaders. Look at the people you work for, and ask yourself what kind of leader do I want to be? What kind of skills and traits when I see them demonstrated do I want to emulate? What kinds of skills and traits when I see them make me shake my head in disgust? Make a decision that you're going to strive to be good at what you do. You're going to take positive lessons and negative lessons and try to be the best leader you can be. I'd also tell them if your gut is telling you something ain't working, doesn't look right, and doesn't feel right, speak up; and do something about it.

Ted Mason and Ken Frederick interviewed Tom Boatner at the National Interagency Fire Center on October 19, 2007.