



This Day in History is a brief summary of a powerful learning opportunity and is not intended to second guess or be judgmental of decisions and actions. Put yourself in the following situation as if you do not know what the outcome will be. What are the conditions? What are you thinking? What are YOU doing?

## Sadler Fire Entrapment – August 9<sup>th</sup> 1999 - Nevada

On August 5, 1999, a dry lightning storm passes through northern Nevada that ignites numerous fires. Due to a wet winter and spring, the fuels are abnormally heavy. Now, deep into summer, these fuels are measuring less than 80% live fuel moisture. Normal fire suppression tactics have not been effective on previous fires, particularly direct attack and burning operations during the heat of the day. The weather and fire behavior forecasts predict extreme burning conditions. This same day as the lightning storm, a Type 2 crew—the GNP3—is assembled in California. This crew consists of 21 members (17 FFT2s) from fuels and suppression modules as well as non-fire and overhead positions from various home units. The following day, they are dispatched to the Sadler Complex south of Elko, Nevada. During the next two days, they work on the fireline. The next day, August 9, while conducting a burnout operation, six firefighters from the GNP3 crew are entrapped by wildfire.

**0600** Briefing starts unannounced and several crews and overhead miss some or all of it. Briefing places little emphasis on a red flag warning that has been issued for high winds, low RH, and unstable atmospheric conditions. The IAP forecast calls for extreme fire behavior with high rates of spread, south winds increasing in afternoon, minimum RH 6-12%, Haines Index of 6, max temp 85-91, and FDFM of 3%. However, there are not enough IAPs for everyone—including the GNP3 crew boss and a DIVS. Extreme fire behavior is discussed at the GNP3 crew briefing and is characterized as “normal”.

**0900** GNP3 is assigned to support 2 Interagency Hotshot Crews asked to burnout from Big Safety Zone to the NW and the dozer line to Black Safety Zone. The dozer line is about ½ mile north of the head of the fire.

**1100** After a recon, the hotshot superintendents refuse to accept burnout assignment until the line south of Big Safety Zone is secure. The DIVS and the 2 IHCs leave to do the other burnout. GNP3 waits.

**1300** GNP3 accepts assignment to burn out across the head of the fire from Black Safety Zone going east to the “Y”.

**1400** Ignition is delayed due to unfavorable winds. Overhead feels if they “didn’t attempt a burn, the fire would get away”. Plan is changed to burnout from the east to the west instead—the very plan that the hotshots had refused.

**1430** Due to concerns regarding GPN3 crew’s lack of experience and fitness, only 3 members and the crew boss are used for the firing operation.

**1500** This squad begins firing from the “Y”—without an anchor point—supported by an engine. The fireline behind them is unsecured. Due to hills, no one on the burnout squad can see the main fire. There are no aircraft to assist as lookout. Because of occasional wind shifts, the igniters must walk very fast and occasionally trot to keep ahead of their fire. They are unable to use

the black as a safety zone. For these burning conditions, safety zones along the dozer line are too small and too far apart.

**1515** Back behind the firing squad, the engine is very busy picking up multiple spot fires and slopovers. The engine captain radios to stop ignition. There is no response. The same tactical channel is also being used by the other burnout and is overloaded with traffic.

**1530** Half way through the 1.3 mile burnout, two more GNP3 members join the firing squad.

**1540** Overhead watching the burnout sees the main fire become visible and take off down the hill toward the squad. They attempt to warn the squad but are unable to make radio contact. Shortly after, the main fire becomes visible to the squad as it crests the ridge to the south. It is described as a “river of fire” as it makes a run at the dozer line and the crew at speeds in excess of 300 chains per hour with 15 ft. flame lengths.

The engine is cut off from the squad and retreats to a safety zone. The order to “run” is given to the firing squad. Tools and gear are dropped on the way to the safety zone, almost 600 ft. away. Several crewmembers unsuccessfully attempt to deploy their fire shelters.

Crew members receive 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> degree burns and smoke inhalation. An injured crewmember, an EMT, suffering from smoke inhalation, is asked to provide first aid for the others.

- *What are your responsibilities if you are asking another resource to take an assignment that has previously been turned down?*
- *The burnout was a potentially dangerous assignment. What will you do to size up your resource’s capabilities and experience and assign them to appropriate tasks?*
- *As a crew/crewmember, you have a responsibility to look after your own safety—which includes the right to accept or reject an assignment. Using the IRPG page 19, have everyone discuss how to properly refuse risk.*
- *Discuss how you and your crew would apply LCES throughout the day on this incident.*

**Have an idea? Have feedback? Share it.**