

Uncle Stu's Meanderings Part 2(a)

Ol' Unc has always thought of WFU and regular suppression in terms of military lexicon – regular suppression is kinda like Patton's 3rd army –overwhelming force, traditional tactics, while WFU is kinda like Francis "The Swamp Fox" Marion's (or Stonewall Jackson's for that matter) guerilla warfare – limited resources, hit and run tactics, fluid approach.

So, when Ol' Unc was reading "The War Within" by Bob Woodward, and he came across these words (quotes from Retired General Jack Keane), the wheels started turnin'

"Recognize the limitations of good, conventional war commanders. Some do not make good counterinsurgency leaders – lack of intellectual flexibility, agility in dealing with a high degree of uncertainty... So every day you're dealing with a very high degree of uncertainty. And in my view, not everybody can deal with that if you're trained to deal with conventional fighting" (Page 134)

After seeing what Ol' Unc saw in California this year and readin' some of the missives that have been floating around from IC's, the NWCG puttin' off full implementation of AMR, he started thinkin' (which is admittedly a dangerous task).

Several things stand out in Ol' Unc's mind.

1- The "true believers" of the concept of managing fire on the landscape were/are unique in the Federal fire management program. Most of them were what Ol' Unc could refer to as "free thinkers". Folks such as Orville Daniels and Bob Mutch (Canyon Creek '88), Bill Clark and Tom Zimmerman (Howling '94) and the first round of FUMT IC's such as Gary Cones and Wayne Cook, all were highly trained firefighters in the traditional sense, but also "out of the box" thinkers. The teams that they assembled were folks on the fringe, highly skilled folks (with plenty of suppression experience and qualifications) but who did not fit comfortably in the suppression world – Parkies, Ops chiefs who moonlighted as FBANs, closet ecologists, etc.

2- The major difficulty in our ability to move forward in fire management is our diminishing skills as natural resource managers. As we have become increasingly specialized over the last few decades and have pigeonholed our abilities and lost the wide range of skills that created guys like Orville Daniels, Wayne Cook, Gary Cones and others. These guys know how and when to put fire out, light fire and let fire burn. They also have an understanding of all the things that are going on where fires occur (e.g. wilderness, range, WUI, wildlife, timber, etc.) and the ability and courage to step back and look at the overall benefit and then stand by those convictions while supporting those around them. There has been a significant loss of resource folks (i.e. the "militia") from the fire program as increasing fire budgets (and staffs) have led fire folks to perceive that they didn't need the help of the other folks in the agencies (an' on the flip side with downsizin' and limited budgets less resource folks can play).

3- Folks who work in natural resources are fairly conservative, and fire folks more so than many others. We've trained our fire folks in "traditional" suppression techniques

for decades (actually back to 1910) and these lessons are in our blood. When under stress we all revert back to our basic learned concepts and level of comfort, (an' ya can't tell me that bein' an Ops chief or IC ain't stressful) and many of us are stuck there forever.

4- There is a place for those traditional thinkers (anchor & flank) but without a diversity of thought I see de-evolution of fire management back to the primordial roots of fire control.

5- Centralization destroyed the Roman Empire. By the time you recognize the affect of lumping it will be a very difficult struggle to correct the error. Are the goals (from fire suppression in the WUI to managing a fire for resource benefit in the middle of a wilderness) diverse enough to justify separation or similar enough to be defensible if lumped together? Will it provide the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run or benefit only the loudest. Lumping may be the easier way to go. But Uncle Stu thinks that it may not be the correct way to go.

6- All teams operate under delegation of authority from Line. It's that authority and "leader's intent" that's the key. If Line doesn't have comfort level and understanding of WFU, AMR, or whatever you call it, then it'll be "keep the damn thing small 'cause I don't want the exposure nor will accept the risk of wrath if things go belly-up" same 'ole - same 'ole. A paradigm shift in thinking is slowing happening, but much of this must come down from Line and our Leadership. After all, one would think that if the line officer's delegation says "...protect this, this, and this, but fire can do what it wants out here..." then should be that no matter if you're the hardcore suppression or the freest thinker the end result should be the same – unfortunately it still don't work that way.

This brings Ol' Unc back to this year and California in particular. A member of the underground who lived the "dream" (or was it a nightmare?), came up with some bullets that we should all look at an' think about.

"This season stands out as an example of reverting back to our roots when we became overwhelmed by the situation. There were some moments that stick out where people did something different and the outcomes provided both positive and negative feedback that we can learn from. Some of the bullets are:

- Policy creates process.
- Is the value of the process (e.g. WFDSS) deemed greater than the product (actual change)? **Are we creating another colored map?**
- There is ease in maintaining the status quo.
- Zero risk bias is easy.
- Do teams have experience in resource management?
- What is the experience of the Line Officer?
- Do we have thorough understanding of land management plan, fire management plan and are these expectations clearly defined to incident management teams?
- Are there knowledgeable Resource Advisors assigned to teams?
- Decision support – what is it?
- Need to learn to make decisions that move beyond the individual (14 day outlook) to a process that looks into the future (next three teams)."

Folks tried to do long term plans (Strategic Implementation Plans in CA terminology). And many of the outcomes and tactics ended up bein' right out of the 1960-90's – miles of dozer line, many of them within a ¼ mile of roads (gotta keep the fire in the wilderness), Fuel breaks that took 6 years to do were clearcut and 6 blade wide dozer lines put in to "improve" the fuel break, Ops chiefs doin' unnecessary firin' out just 'cause they could, hiking folks in 10 miles to put a line around a wilderness fire that posed no risk of escape, little input from fire behavior folks and lots of line officers sayin' do whatever you need to do – talk about an open invitation. Without a doubt there were lots of folks that did the right thing from a safety, risk management and ecological view, but all in all they were a minority.

So now, back to the present. We've been hearing from folks havin' second thoughts about getting' rid of WFU and afraid that AMR is gonna turn into this generation's anchor and flank. The AMR Taskgroup (FEC Briefing Paper) is recommending that a phased approach is needed and still thinking (hoping) that WFDSS will be the cure all.

Many of the folks leading the "fire is fire" drive and workin' on WFDSS are those "free thinkers". Ol' Unc kinda thinks that it's easy for them, since they see and work on both sides of the fence, and their opinion is that any one can do it with the right (WFDSS) tools. What they don't realize is that most of the fire folks aren't like them and don't see things the same way (See Gen, Keane's quotes above).

Maybe what we need to do is look at our folks in the field, and using behavioral science figure out, like Gen. Keane did, that not all folks are capable of doing it all – suppression and resource benefit, long term and short term fires. After all the military still maintains two radically different fighting forces – the traditional Army and Marines and the Special Ops folks for different tasks. Not every IC or Ops chief can be a Gen. Petraeus or Col. H.R. McMaster, (out-of-the-box thinkers), many will continue to be like Gen. George Casey, a good traditionally trained soldier, but unable to deal with the added complexities of non-traditional actions.

So how do we cultivate the skills and leadership necessary to manage natural ignitions where they will provide ecological and other benefits? For that matter how do we develop these needs to manage any wildfire?

The answer may be in developing an assortment of teams of different shapes and sizes, a team made up of fire "fighters" may be appropriate for a WUI fire where the primary objective was to minimize growth to protect life and property. A fire in Late Successional Reserve with scattered infrastructure that has a 30-90 day lifespan would get a team with both fire and natural resource "manager" skills.

Inter-agency use of fire personnel is a positive for the resources and taxpayers, but assigning a battalion chief from a station on an LA freeway as a Branch Director in the wilderness may not be the best fit for the mission. Likewise assigning Ol' Unc to a wind driven structure fire in Oakland would not be a good choice

Folks tend to be more comfortable workin' with people similar to them. We've seen this when we had two types of teams – the WFU folks kinda self-selected themselves and the suppression oriented folks went to the traditional IMTs.

With the push to combine and make all teams the same – IC's and their Command & General staffs will choose their staffs and trainees with those most similar to themselves. And since most of the teams are predisposed to the "traditional" suppression viewpoints it's gonna be kinda hard to integrate. Ol' Unc's seen suppression folks come out with FUMTs and only last one assignment and he's sure seen (and been the recipient of) a WFU person tryin' to make it on a traditional IMT. A big question, if it's answerable, is how to meld the two types of folks into one IMT.

One line of thought is: We need to employ the Swamp Fox and Stonewall Jackson's, tactics to infiltrate our own ranks so we're not tossed aside. It may be better to have existing suppression teams morph into FUMTs and IHCs morph into fire use modules instead of the other way around.

Another line of thought is (an' Ol' Unc's leanin' this way): Maybe instead of trying to say that fire is fire and trying getting all our folks (and teams) to be able to think both inside and outside of the box – one size fits all, we need to maintain some distinction between the types of fires and the folks who are best suited to manage them.

Ol' Unc'll end with a couple of pertinent quotes:

There's a quote credited to Jerry Williams that our current policy makers who are sayin' fire is fire and any fire manager can do the whole enchilada:

"We usually fail to adequately define the problem needing solution, or perhaps more frequently, we fail to anticipate the problems that our solutions will bring."

An' to end – there's quote from Teddy Roosevelt that we should all remember (from the most hardcore suppression to the freest thinker –

"It is not the critic who counts: not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself for a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat."