

Leaders

We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Interview with James "JP" Mattingly

by Mike McMillan

At a young age, James "JP" Mattingly knew he wanted to work outdoors. Family trips to Yosemite National Park were JP's introduction to a different world, not too far from his suburban home in Fullerton, California. "The woods were my outlet," said JP, the oldest of four children.

The wildfires inherent to southern California provided JP a glimpse of his career in the fire service - one that would span more than 30 years. "Every time the hills caught fire, I'd see all the fire crews going off to the fight," JP recalled. "I remember being 14 when we heard about the Loop Fire tragedy. We were driving over Tehachapi Pass when the news came over the radio. That was a real impact event."

JP first worked as a range aid on the Tonto National Forest in 1976. He joined the National Park Service in 1982 and became a hotshot with the Alpine Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC). In 1983 and 1984, he worked as a squadleader on the Bison IHC during the crew's final seasons. He served as a foreman on the Arrowhead IHC in 1986 and 1987. From 1988-1997, JP served as the Alpine IHC Superintendent. From 1997-2003 he served as the fire management officer for Buffalo National River in Arkansas. From 2003-2010, he served as the wildland fire operations specialist at the NPS Midwest Regional Office in Omaha, Nebraska. JP retired from that position in July 2010. Throughout his post-hotshot years, JP has served as a safety officer and operations section chief on incident management teams (IMTs).

JP was awarded the National Park Service Valor Award in 1990 for his actions at the Dude Fire in Arizona, where six members of the Perryville Correctional Crew perished in a burnover. Despite the tragedy, JP and his crew, among others, are credited with performing a life-saving medical response and patient extraction on scene.

For his commitment to NPS and interagency wildland fire, JP received a National Park Service Fire & Aviation Management Lifetime Achievement Award in 2010.

"JP has a quiet confidence," said Jim Cook, USFS Fire Management Training Specialist at NIFC. "The first year he worked for me as a foreman with the Arrowhead Hotshots, I thought, this guy's got it. I knew he'd be a hotshot superintendent someday. Plus, up until then he was the only foreman that came back for a second season," Cook added, laughing. "I immediately sensed that people wanted to work for him. He's got a great sense of humor. And JP is able to deal with both sides of the equation - maintaining a good rapport with the crew while meeting the objectives of fire managers at the same time.



James JP Mattingly

"Humor goes a long way in this job -as a learning tool and stress reducer."



JP Mattingly, Alpine Hotshot Superintendent, 1994

The following interview was conducted by telephone from JP's home in Blair, Nebraska. JP was enjoying his first two months of retirement and preparing for a kayak trip in Yellowstone National Park. JP said he hopes his insights and comments will provide people with leadership tools they can use.

What influences in your youth led you to a career in the fire service?

The summer before my father passed away we took a trip to a blackened fire area, walking around a bit. That was really our last outing together. My father grew up in Bass Lake, Yosemite, and the outdoors were always important to our family.

What or who in your fire service career helped shape you as a leader?

My own desire to be perceived as a professional, to put on a good show and not have folks ever question the quality of my work. As far as who influenced me the most, that would be Jim Cook. When Jim hired me as a foreman on Arrowhead in 1986, I had only been a squadleader up to that point, and I'd just met Jim a couple of years before. He was known as a hard taskmaster, which some people may find difficult to believe because of Jim's mellow disposition now. But he demanded a lot from me, he pulled me up whereas others may have given me a pass. He expected more from me. And Jim didn't back down from any challenge.

What are the most important attributes of a good leader? What are yours?

Integrity. Being decisive. Being a good listener. Demonstrating a good attitude, even when you don't feel like it. A good leader has a strong sense of cooperation. There's no getting around all of the different personalities and styles out there. A good leader can cooperate without losing their integrity. A sense of humor

and humility help too. As far as my leadership attributes go, I have a strong work ethic and sense of humor. Humor goes a long way in this job - as a learning tool and stress reducer, especially when I was an FMO of five parks in Arkansas.

What do you see as characteristics or mistakes of an ineffective leader?

A bad attitude comes right to the front for all to see. So does impatience and intolerance. Self-importance and aloofness are not good qualities in a leader - a leader should be accessible.

What do you see as key improvements or advances in fire suppression in the past 30 years that make our job safer or more effective?

Today there is a better understanding and awareness of fire behavior - especially extreme fire behavior. Finally there's an emphasis on all of the good research that's being done. There have also been incredible advances in the development and refinement of computer programs in the past ten years - particularly in fire mapping and Infrared (IR) imagery.

It's amazing what they can produce for us on the fireline now. The use of fire suppression foams and gels have very effective applications today. Another improvement, which can also be a negative, is the acceptance of multiple management strategies on incidents today.

Have there been changes in the past 30 years that have made fire suppression more difficult or dangerous?

Picking up on the last question, the acceptance of multiple management strategies can be confusing to ground forces hearing mixed messages. And today there is an overuse and over-dependence on aircraft, namely tankers, helicopters, and crew transports. This is the result of conflicting management goals - on the one hand we hear people talking about curtailing aircraft use and saving money, but operationally we're at historic levels.

And urban interface is now the norm rather than the exception.

What was the toughest decision you've had to make as a leader?

I had to fire three crewmembers who refused a legitimate, however controversial work assignment. It involved the use of an approved herbicide on a fuels reduction project. That was a difficult call that demanded leadership mettle. I felt like an outcast on the crew for a while after that, but it was the right call to make.



JP Mattingly (left) on the Ute Creek Fire in Utah, 1994

Can you share any lessons learned from your experience as a leader?

I've learned a lot from observing the management styles of others, learning as much from bad examples as good ones. Operationally, my experience on the Dude Fire in 1990 emphasized the importance of having multiple escape routes. We had briefed on two escape routes, preventing us from running back into the main fire. Our crew hiked uphill into a subdivision, and the crew below us was caught going the other way. Six crewmen from the Perryville Correctional Crew were killed. At that time there wasn't an emphasis on having multiple escape routes.

Are there things we're doing now in fire suppression that you'd like to see us doing differently?

We're still trying to protect a lot of structures that aren't worth the effort, time or money. There are still many homeowners that have little sense of urgency about fuel reduction and taking responsibility for their homes and property, but when wildfires strike, supervisors and firefighters are expected to have a sense of urgency.

What helped you get through difficult situations/events on the job?

Having a good network of fire managers and supervisors to consult with. That's so important. I also have my family and friends for moral support. Lastly, I rely on the faith I have in myself and knowing I gave it 100%.

Are leaders born, made, or both?

Some are born, but most are made through hard work, initiative, and fortune of circumstances. Self-confidence must be developed. That doesn't come from being a winner every time, but rather learning how to turn negatives into positives. Being at the right place at the right time to meet the right opportunity helps. Some potentially great leaders never get the chance to prove it.

Is there a quote regarding leadership that stands out in your mind?

Vince Lombardi said: "Leaders are made, they are not born. They are made by hard effort, which is the price which all of us must pay to achieve any goal that is worthwhile."

What do you regard as your most rewarding accomplishment/experience as a leader in fire suppression?

Seeing peers and subordinates perform with distinction in their own careers, and seeing those with the "right stuff" show what they can do.

What do you regard as your most rewarding accomplishment in your personal life?

Successfully raising four children into adulthood.

What do you want your professional legacy to be? How would you like to be remembered regarding your career?

I'd like to be remembered as a firefighter of high integrity, willing to do any job that I asked my crew to do. I also want to be remembered as a team player with agency management and the incident management teams.

Do you enjoy being retired, and what projects are you working on?

The first two months have been great. As far as the long term goes, we'll have to see how long I can stay retired in today's economy. For now, I'm 75% finished installing hardwood floors in my house, and I'm looking forward to spending the next week at Lewis Lake and Shoshone Lake in Yellowstone.

This interview with JP Mattingly was conducted by Mike McMillan on September 2, 2010.