

Leaders

We Would Like to Meet

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Interview with Lynn Biddison

by Jim Cook and Mark Linane

Lynn Biddison looks at the wildland fire service through eyes that have seen 60 fire seasons, starting as a 16 year old firefighter with the U.S. Forest Service and carrying through to his current job, representing the fire retardant company Fire-Trol. The Biddison family can trace it's association with firefighting and the Forest Service back three generations to the infancy of the agency. His grandfather, Jim Biddison, was the first Forest Guard at Bouquet Canyon on the Angeles National Forest in the years prior to World War I. He patrolled an area on horseback that is now crisscrossed with freeways. His father, T.L. Biddison, was a suppression crew foreman in the Civilian Conservation Corps program during the 1930's and eventually worked up to be the Assistant Fire Control Officer on the Angeles National Forest.

Biddison started as a firefighter in 1943 on the Angeles National Forest. He volunteered for the Marine Corps and the Navy, but colorblindness kept him out of both services. He was drafted in early 1945. At the induction station he volunteered for the paratroops, but was assigned to the Navy Seabees and served in the Philippines until the end of the war in the Pacific. Once out of the Navy, he went back to work for the Angeles National Forest in 1946 as the TTO (Tank Truck Operator) at Oak Flats. In 1947, he became the Tanker Foreman at the District Ranger Station in what is now downtown Newhall. That job also included spending two days a week as the district dispatcher. During that fire season he witnessed the first time a helicopter was used on a fire, it was the Bryant Fire in Big Tujunga Canyon. In order to keep working in 1948, he had to join the engineering crew building water tanks on the Arroyo Seco Ranger District. He began college that same year at Berkeley studying forestry and spent much of the summer in 1949 at forestry camp on the Plumas National Forest.

In 1950, Biddison was assigned to the newly formed Chilao Hotshots as one of the Crew Foremen. That was the second year of the crew and he was in charge of a 10-man crew, one of three that made up the full 30-man hotshot crew. His crew was made up of Navajo and Hopi Indians from the Sherman Institute at Riverside, California. Then in 1951, the Superintendent left and he was promoted into that position. During his stint running the Chilao Hotshots, Biddison graduated from forestry school in 1951. He took the Forest Service Junior Forester (JF) exam and flunked, but had passed the State Assistant Ranger exam with a score of 95. All through 1952 and part of 1953 he couldn't get a JF appointment, but was getting offers from the California Department of Forestry. However, being third generation Forest Service, he had his sights set on a professional career with the Forest Service, so he took the JF exam again and with his Veteran Preference he passed. Finally, he got a Junior Forester appointment in 1953. Leaving the hotshots, he became the Assistant Ranger on the Arroyo Seco District and also spent a year as the acting District FCO (Fire Control Officer). In 1956, Biddison went to the Cajon District on the San Bernardino National Forest as the District Ranger.



Lynn Biddison and Smokey Bear

- 1947 – Tanker Foreman
- 1950 – Chilao Hotshots
- 1953 – Assistant Ranger
- 1956 – District Ranger
- 1960 – Fire Control Officer
- 1968 – Chief of Fire Protection
- 1970 – Assistant Regional Forester for Fire
- 1982 – Retired after 40 years in fire

He kept active in the fire world as a District Ranger and was selected as one of the Region 5 representatives to the first national fire behavior training course (a five week session) held at Missoula, Montana in 1958.

Lynn Biddison, Helijumper, 1953



During the Spring of 1960, Biddison moved to the Cleveland National Forest to take the Fire Control Officer position. Again, he remained very active on the national fire scene, attending the first Fire Generalship and Command course held at Marana, Arizona in 1962. Biddison came back to the San Bernardino as the Fire Control Officer in 1964. This job was graded as a GS-13 and along with the Angeles FCO, these were the first GS-13 Forest FCOs in the Forest Service (it wasn't until the 1970s that Fire Control Officers became Fire Management Officers). During his tenure as a Forest FCO, Biddison was instrumental in establishing the first standing forest overhead teams. By this time in his career, he was being sent as a Fire Boss to large fires all over the country, including a Zone Fire Boss assignment on the infamous Sundance Fire in 1967.

Then in 1968, Biddison went to Region 3 as the Chief of Fire Protection and after 2 years he was promoted to the Assistant Regional Forester for Fire (a position now called the Regional Fire Director). When he arrived in Region 3 they had a fire budget of \$2 million and no hotshot crew program. When he left 12 years later, the fire budget was \$30 million and there were 13 hotshot crews in the region. Biddison's last posting for the U.S. Forest Service was back to Region 5 as the Regional Fire Director where he pushed for a back-to-the-basics firefighting ethic ([1982 letter by Biddison](#)). He retired from that position in 1982, nearly 40 years after he started with the Forest Service.

Who were your role models?

My Dad would be the first one. My father was the first Assistant Forest FCO on any forest in the country. He was tough, very detailed oriented, and fair to all. There

are two other guys I'd have to say I also modeled myself after. One is Harry Grace, who was the Fire Control Officer on the Angeles. He worked under the Forest Supervisor Bill Mendenhall, who was already legend then...one of the peaks on the forest is now named after him. But back to Harry, the reason I mention him is that he was tough and fair. The other guy was Howard Evans who was the Protective Assistant (a position that later became known as the District Fire Control Officer) on the Saugus District of the Angeles National Forest. He was a big influence on me when I first went to work for the Forest Service. He was the kind of guy that when he pulled up to a fire wasn't one to say "What do you think we oughta do?" No, he would say "Do this, do this, and then do that." and things started to happen immediately.

Later in his career Howard became a District FCO on the San Bernardino National Forest. That forest had one of the first central dispatch offices and Vern Anderson grabbed that and ran it with an iron hand. He had a radio in his house and even had the barber come up to the dispatch office for a haircut when things were busy. Everything had to go through Vern. One night there was a lot of lightning fires on the San Jacinto District and Howard was sending people to all the fires...and they were just small lightning fires. Pretty soon Vern comes on the radio and says "All dispatching on this Forest is done from this office and if you want to dispatch come on in here to Del Rosa." There was just a slight pause...and Howard came back on the air and said "Move over, I'm on my way."

What made you want to follow these individuals?

Because they were firm, they were fair, they knew what they wanted, and they knew their limitations. Their style was "This is the way we're going to do it, we will do it right, and do it now." They made their expectations known and led by example. The first year I worked for the Forest Service, that would be 1943, we did a prescribed burn of a railroad right-of-way from Newhall to Lancaster. This was to prevent fire starts in the grass from trains and it had never been done before. We put in catline or handline or hoselays on every section we burned, it was a summer long job. Howard just loved this, because there was always a big patch of brush or a place where the railroad crews stashed a bunch of oil and other stuff and he would go in there and set that on fire and then tell you "Go put it out." It was fabulous training and he was right there with you pushing you and showing you the right way to do it. He was a hell of a guy, a true bull of the woods, and a great fireman.

What is the most important characteristic for a leader?

To be a good leader you need to be out in front. Don't ever ask anyone to do something you won't do yourself. I'll give you an example from a fire in 1958 on the Sierra National Forest. I was called up as a Line Boss. The fire was in the Kings River Canyon and was giving them fits. We had a bunch of Indian crews from New Mexico and Arizona and they didn't want to go down in that canyon at night. I couldn't really blame them as nobody really knew what the fire was doing down there. So I went ahead on down over the rim to check it out. After I came back up we had no problem getting the crews to go down there and tie the line into the river.

Are leaders born or made?

A little of both. You have to have the desire. You may be born with a natural presence that others will follow, but if you don't care, you won't be a good leader. You have got to want to be one. I also think that you can always learn to be a better leader. For example, in 1953 the Fish Fork Fire burned in the very rugged upper part of San Gabriel Canyon. It eventually burned to the area of Mount Hawkins Lookout. They had been trying for several days to build a handline off the top of Mount Hawkins down to the San Gabriel River and had not been successful. They took me off the hotshot crew and sent me over there as the Sector Boss and we got the line done. One day, afterward, I was sitting there with Ed Engstrom, an old-time ranger from Taos (New Mexico). And he said to me "We were really happy when you came to work with us because the guy before never got a damn thing done for so many days. But you know, you don't have to do this like an Army drill sergeant either." I learned from that (laughs).

Why do you think people follow you?

In 1952, the second year I was Superintendent at Chilao, the program changed from regular hires to having state inmates firefighters being supervised by Forest Service overhead as a year-round hotshot crew. I found this to be a real education for a young man...they weren't in prison because they liked to work. But once you set a standard and they knew you would accept nothing less, they met it. One time, we were sitting up on a mountain someplace, having lunch at midnight, they said "You make us work harder than anyone we have ever seen, but we do it willingly because we're convinced you really think it needs to be done. If we thought you were telling us to do it because we're inmates, we wouldn't do shit for you."

How did you go about developing people?

When I first became a District Ranger in 1956, I had an outstanding Fire Control Officer, Frank Watson, who had been on the District for some time. After I had been there a few months, he said "Let's go for a ride." So we were driving along and he said "Is this my job?" I said "Yes." And he said "Is this my job?" I said "Yes." And again "Is this my job?" Again I said "Yes." Finally, he says "Well, damn it, keep your hands out of it, because we both can't do it." He trained me well and I would always tell anyone on my staff that story. I would say to them "This is your job and you do it. If I mess in it, you tell me because I want you to do that job. You have only one obligation, you have to keep me informed of what you're doing." That way other people knew, without question, that my staff spoke for me. And the people that worked for me took full ownership in their job. Dick Cox once told me "You only want us to work half-time, the other 12 hours of the day we can do what we want."

But you know the thing I am most proud of is the people who I had the opportunity to work with on my staff and that we were able to help develop. Gary Cargill became a Regional Forester, John Hafterson became the Director of Fire and Aviation, Dick Cox became a Regional Fire Director, Kenton Clark became a Regional Fire Director, Jim Mann also became a Regional Fire Director, Ken Otten went on to be the National Aviation Officer, Dave Aldrich became the National Fire Safety Officer, Ned Jackson became the Assistant Director at the Fire Center in Boise, Bob Tippeconic went on to the Washington Office. The opportunity to bring in and work with people like this is something for which I will always be grateful.

As a young professional Assistant Ranger how did you manage your role leading the older, salty dogs on the District such as the FCO?

I don't know really (laughs). I was respectful of them and when I needed help I would tell them "I need your help." The first time I was a Zone Fire Boss on a large fire was when I was still an Assistant Ranger on the Arroyo Seco. That fire was in December 1953 and burned all the way up Mount Wilson and over to the back side. I wanted to set up the fire camp in some certain place. One of the old timers I had with me, from the Klamath, wasn't so sure about my choice and all he said was "In my experience, the closer you can be to the fire with your fire camp, the better off you are." That caused me to reconsider my choice and I said "Good idea, good idea" and we moved fire camp as close to the fire as we could. That's how I learned those kind of things.

What do consider your strengths as a leader?

My commitment...to get the job done. I have always known that I am not a creative or imaginative kind of individual. So that for my staff I wanted people who didn't always agree with me. Take Shag (Dave Aldrich) for example, I knew him a long time before we recruited him for Region 3. Shag and I disagreed totally on prescribed fire and letting fires burn. But that was the reason I brought him to Region 3, I knew we needed to change the way we did some things. The way I operated with my staff, was that they dragged me into a lot of things I would have never done, which were good. I wasn't imaginative enough to make a lot of changes, but I believed in my staff and trusted their commitment and away we would go. I guess that probably answers two questions in one, both my strength and weakness.

What are your most memorable fires?

The Wellman Fire on the Los Padres in 1966 because everything went right. We didn't have regional overhead teams then, but the San Bernardino had their own team. We were gone all the time. We got on that fire and took a helicopter ride to see it and it was already 10,000 acres! I asked Stubb Mansfield, the FCO, "Who is on the fire?" He said "You guys and the smokejumpers." We were able to call in just enough of the right crews and overhead and pull off a huge backfire operation with just a small amount of people and pick up that fire. One of those overhead was Howard Evans, who I name requested to oversee that backfire. But because of the people we had on that fire team everything clicked and went right.

There's another one, the Meadows Fire in 1952 on the San Gregornio on a 10,000 foot ridge in gale force Santa Ana winds in October. We (the Chilao Hotshots) walked in there at night and the first guy we met was the District Ranger. He pointed down to the fire and said "There it is." And then he took off. We were up there for 11 days, never took off a stitch of clothes; never had a hot meal because it was too windy to drop anything. A pack string would bring us some water and rations every once in a while. I remember not having much to eat the first two nights. But way down at the bottom of that fire was a big fire camp and they had stuff galore in that camp. I walked all the way down there one day, but there wasn't anything I could do about it, I couldn't get any of it back up (laughs). We had one wool blanket for every two guys, so we dug pits...two guys, sometime three guys to a pit and light a big fire to keep warm. It was over 10,000 feet and it was late October, it was cold, cold, cold!

A third would be the Coyote Fire on the Los Padres in 1964 where I was the Line Boss on the front-country behind Santa Barbara. One of the jobs that had to be done was fire out the San Marcos Pass Highway to

Camino Cielo road. There was a subdivision in the path of the burn and no way to protect the homes. The last thing I did before we started the burn was call the Forest Supervisor to be sure he wanted us to do the burn. He said yes and we started. Fortunately before we reached the point where the subdivision would be burned, the weather changed and we were able to save the homes.

Since you started in 1943, what are the biggest improvements you have witnessed in the wildland fire service?

Oh, I don't know, probably the equipment...better air tankers, helicopters, and engines. I can remember when I was at Chilao...the folks at San Dimas were working on chainsaws for handcrews. We went over to Dalton, at the experiment station there, and we would build line with the hotshot crew using our brush hooks to compare the rate of line construction by hand tools with the chainsaw. The crew with the brush hooks would out work the chainsaws every time (laughs). Since it was something new, they couldn't keep them running, couldn't keep the chains on...but look at what they can do now with chainsaws.

How about the worst changes?

(Pause) Let's see, a couple come to mind. First, not setting high standards and holding everyone accountable to those standards. Second, the lack of involvement in fire by line officers such as District Rangers and Forest Supervisors. And third, I can remember when people didn't look forward to retirement. Now it's number one on everybody's list. It's not because of firefighter retirement, it's because of the work atmosphere. I hear it in other government agencies as well. There are so many rules and regulations and social oriented programs that it's not fun anymore.

What handful of "lessons learned" would you give to leaders today?

Establish a rigorous training plan for your people. When I went to the Cleveland National Forest I was doing engine station inspections and I asked Doug Campbell where his engine crew's training plan was. He didn't have one. Next, I went to Chuck Mills' station...same thing. After that, I put those two together and they built the first formal engine crew training package.

Next, encourage people to have pride in themselves, their equipment, and their facilities. I know some people make fun of the San Bernardino (National Forest) for their shiny engines, but that is a long standing tradition there and I think it encourages those crews to take pride in what they do. For a period of time there, Forest Service crews looked so sloppy. But this last year (2002) on the Indian Fire up near Prescott I was looking for fire

camp. I saw the Prescott Hotshot Crew ahead of me and figured I'd follow them since they ought to know where they were going. When we arrived at fire camp I watched those two truckloads of young people get out and they looked sharp! I had to go look up the Superintendent and tell him how impressed I was. You could tell they had pride in themselves and their organization.

The last thing I would say is to work hard to become the very best you can be at what you do...and it only takes only another 2 or 3% of effort to be your best. And remember, no matter how high you go, don't forget how you felt as an on-the-ground dirt firefighter looking up at management.

This interview with Lynn Biddison was conducted by Jim Cook and Mark Linane in Tucson, Arizona on May 29,2003.