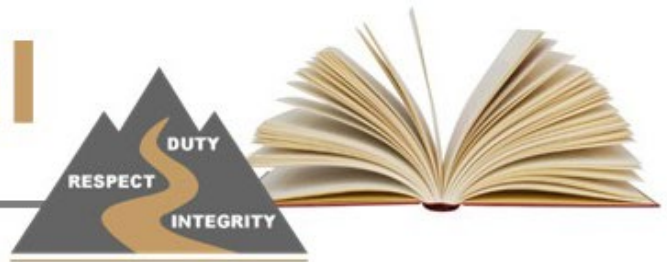


Professional Reading Program

Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program



Young Men and Fire by Norman Maclean

Best Wildland Fire Leadership Level to read this book:

- All leadership levels

Why Read *Young Men and Fire*?

“Several times in this story of the Mann Gulch fire I have tried to find places where it would be permissible to say that the story of finding the tragedy of the Mann Gulch fire has been different from the tragedy of the Mann Gulch fire.” – Norman Maclean

“Maclean’s search for the truth, which becomes an exploration of his own mortality, is more compelling even than his journey into the heart of the fire. His description of the conflagration terrifies, but it is his battle with words, his effort to turn the story of the 13 men into tragedy that makes this book a classic.” – from the New York Times Book Review, Editor’s Choice, Best Books of 1992

Young Men and Fire is a book that every fire leader should read at some point in their career. The 1949 Mann Gulch tragedy and the lessons learned from it are worth the read even 75 plus years after the event. It’s also one of the rare books about wildland fire to have been written by a literary master and is worth reading for that reason alone. This book is as much about the author’s search for meaning in life’s tragedy as it is an exploration of the Mann Gulch fire itself, and most readers will be able to relate to that exploration in their own experiences. The Mann Gulch fire is an event that shocked the mid-century Forest Service fire community, and interest in the event led to many changes and advances in training, safety procedures, and fire science that have benefitted the entire wildland fire service in the years since the fire.

A few short videos about the Mann Gulch fire can be found at the links below:

- **Mann Gulch: The Wrath of Nature (10 minutes):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wbs1Ugc-y4c>
- **70th Anniversary of Mann Gulch Fire (4 minutes):**
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAUV2BoHeR4>

For more leadership ideas and to dig deeper, check out the Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program (WFLDP) blog, Facebook page, Professional Reading Program, and more at the links below:

Blog: <http://wildlandfireleadership.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/WFLDP>

Professional Reading Program: <https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/prp>

Main WFLDP page: <https://www.fireleadership.gov>

Young Men and Fire Discussion Questions

Part One:

What do you think about the idea that “*not much about fighting big fires can be learned by fighting small ones*” presented by the author early in this section? How can that concept, and the idea of training like you fight, be applied in your organization, crew, or module? Are we seeing “new” things in the fire environment, where what we’ve learned in the “old” environment don’t fit as well as it used to? How might you adapt to those kinds of changes in operating environments? What are some ways you can train and prepare yourself and those around you for things you haven’t experienced yet?

How do the descriptions of Wag Dodge as foreman/training manager, Hellman as second in command, and Janssen as Ranger sound to you, when compared to current ideas about leaderships skills, traits, and values?

How much team cohesion and shared situational awareness of the fire, and of Dodge’s decisions, do you think there was? What are some ways to rapidly increase crew cohesion and/or shared situational awareness in this kind of setting? How might you get rapid buy-in when trying a new tactic, or working with a new team that might not be familiar with established tactics? How do you make sure everyone knows the “why” behind the “way we do things” with new people on your team?

Part Two:

In the aftermath of a tragedy things can get complex, as individuals have to navigate situations they might not have trained for or experienced. How might leadership skills learned in the fire environment be valuable to practice in the aftermath of a critical incident? Have you ever used leadership skills learned in fire in other situations? Outside of work? Outside of fire? What about skills learned outside of fire? Have you ever used skills from outside of fire in your job?

What can we learn about situational awareness (and how that relates to leadership) from Rumsey’s comment/quote “*you just can’t believe anything that happens in a forest fire*” in this section? How can you, as a leader and follower, deal with the fact that you will never have perfect or complete situational awareness or memory, and that you will at times be wrong in your perception and memory of events?

Part Three:

How can/do you integrate case studies into your leadership development plan/journey? Why is it important to do things like case studies, staff rides, or other experiential learning? In this section, the early history of the Ten Standard Fire Orders is mentioned, including how the idea was borrowed from the military. What outside sources do you go to for ideas or to learn from? Why could it be a good idea to push your professional development into areas outside of your “normal” or “usual” knowledge, skills, or functional area (for example, review fire science studies, military case studies, or mindfulness/mental health practices)?

Throughout the book, the author deliberately takes steps to learn new things (weather, fire science, mathematics, etc.) so he can better understand what he’s writing about. What are some things you’ve learned about, or are interested in learning about, that are outside of the “scope” of what you need to know for traditional professional development in your position?

Young Men and Fire Other Resources

Staff Ride

It's highly recommended that fire leaders also review materials found at the NWCG Mann Gulch Staff Ride page (<https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/staff-ride/library/mann-gulch-fire>) while reading the book.

From the Mann Gulch Staff Ride page:

Much controversy surrounded the incident with investigation into training, standard procedures, and safety practices. It received attention in the national media at the time and has continued to be of interest into current times:

- *The incident created interest in scientific study of extreme fire behavior and better methods of predicting potential blow-up fire situations. This interest resulted in the development of the Missoula Fire Sciences Laboratory.*
- *It was one of the fires studied in the development of the Ten Standard Firefighting Orders.*
- *There was speculation by some that the escape fire the foreman lit was the cause of the fatalities.*
- *The incident received national attention and inspired a feature-length movie released in 1952 – Red Skies of Montana as well as an article in Life Magazine.*
- *The story was researched and written about by Norman Maclean in Young Men and Fire.*