

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Battlement Creek Fire	Incident Date & Time: 07/11/1976 @ 14:30
Incident Location: Battlement Mesa, southeast of Parachute, Colorado	Incident Size: 880 acres
Type of resource involved: US Forest Service Hotshot Crew	# of Fatalities/injuries: 3 fatalities / 1 injury
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire made a notable impact within the wildland fire service ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>On July 11, 1976 a fire was reported near Battlement Mesa in western Colorado. The local fire department initial attacked the fire and worked the fire for several days but was unable to fully control it. By July 15, a Class II Overhead Team (now known as a Type 2 Incident Management Team) was ordered, overseen by the Grand Junction District of the Bureau of Land Management. The Mormon Lake Hotshots, hosted by the Coconino National Forest, were ordered along with 12 additional crews and 20 fire overhead personnel.</p> <p>Though precipitation and temperature were within normal ranges, the fire area had experienced a late-season freeze a month earlier which killed a majority of the Gambel oak leaves (the dominate vegetation type), resulting in much higher than normal available dry fine fuels.</p> <p>The fire burned entirely on the east side of Battlement Creek, which is 8 miles long and flows northwest. Values at risk included pipelines, gas wells, and two above-ground holding tanks containing explosive vapors, located south and uphill of the fire. Due to those features, fire overhead determined it was critical to stop southerly progression. A plan was developed to box in the south end of the fire using a mix of ridgetop handline, dozer line, and Battlement Creek Road, which ran parallel on the east side of Battlement Creek.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>On Friday July 16, dozer line was constructed from the top of the southern ridge to the bottom where the ridge intersected with the road (see map below, A-C). The Mormon Lake Hotshots burned out the dozer line before handing the reigns to the night shift, who continue bringing fire north along the road. The burn operation on Friday was considered generally successful, with good fuel consumption and 60 to 100 feet of depth achieved. Night shift crews also constructed handline along the ridgetop to the east of the fire (E-G) which connected to the rock bluffs that were being used as a natural holding feature (E-A).</p> <p>On Saturday July 17, two concurrent plans were put into place: The Happy Jack Hotshots were assigned to burn interior of what Mormon Lake Hotshots had burned the day before, in an attempt to create more depth. At the same time, the Mormon Lake Hotshots were shuttled via helicopter to the ridgetop above the Happy Jack Hotshots and instructed to begin ignitions along the handline that night shift had constructed (E-G). Neither crew knew the specific location or assignment of the other.</p> <p>Once on scene, it was determined that the ridgetop fireline needed to be improved and the bulk of the Mormon Lake crew was assigned to this task at around 11:00. Meanwhile, Happy Jack had begun their burning operations downslope of Mormon Lake at approximately 09:00. It was reported that the fire picked up in intensity as it began to burn through the draws that ran upslope to the ridgetop and several fire whirls were observed.</p> <p>As the Mormon Lake line improvement squad worked their way to the northwest, two crewmembers, one Squad Boss, and the Crew Boss began firing operations behind them, working in the same direction. Fuel was sparse near the rock bluffs and a solid black line was difficult to achieve.</p> <p>Around 14:00, the Sector Boss, concerned about the increase in fire activity below Mormon Lake, instructed the Crew Boss to speed up the burn so that they could return to the safety zone. He then ordered up an airtanker load of retardant to reinforce the ridgetop fireline and advised the Crew Boss to move the line improvement squad to the safety zone to make way for the retardant drops. The line improvement squad entered the safety zone just before the fire hit the top of the ridge. While the Sector Boss assumed the entire crew was at the safety zone, the firing squad was in fact on the ridgetop, about 100 to 200 yards south.</p> <p>At approximately 14:30, the Crew Boss radioed the Sector Boss to inform him that the firing squad had been cut off from the safety zone due to intense fire hitting the ridgetop and that they would be making their way south and uphill towards the rock bluffs. At</p>	

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14:40, the firing squad was also cut off from reaching the rock bluffs due to smoke and flames and the Crew Boss instructed the men to place their canvas vests over their face and heads and lay prone in the fireline.

At that point, radio contact between the Crew Boss and Sector Boss ceased. Once fire activity subsided, the Sector Boss worked his way to the firing squad's location and found the Crew Boss Tony Czak and Scott Nelson deceased. Steve Fury died shortly after, still on the fireline. The fourth man, badly burned, was transported to the hospital and made a full recovery.

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

Higher than normal fine fuel load.

Unstable atmospheric conditions...fire whirls observed on the day of the incident as well as the day before.

Prevailing winds and slope were in alignment.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Ensure all adjacent resources are informed of all other assignments that have the potential to affect their operations. A line of communication between adjacent resources is imperative to stay up-to-date of any changes made to the plan, tactics, or timeline.

Fire-resistant clothing and fire shelters save lives.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

While this fire was not the specific reason for the adoption of national standards regarding training, physical fitness, Red Card qualifications, nomex use and fire shelter use; it is one in a string of multi-fatality fires* that occurred across the country in the late 1970s that drove home the need for such standards.

**1976 Battlement Creek Fire in Colorado; 1977 Cart Creek Fire in Utah; 1977 Bass River Fire in New Jersey; 1977 Honda Canyon Fire in California; and 1979 Spanish Ranch Fire in California.*

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/staff-ride/library/battlement-creek-fire>

<https://www.nwcg.gov/committee/6mfs/battlement-creek-fire>

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1976/07/17/battlement-creek-burnover/>

https://wildfiretoday.com/?s=battlement+creek&monthnum=&year=&states_provinces=&countries=&topics=

<https://coloradofirecamp.com/battlement-creek/index.htm>

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents.

[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](https://www.wildfire.gov/wildfire-lessons-learned-center/incident-review-database)

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Mormon Lake Hotshots - Morgane Rigney

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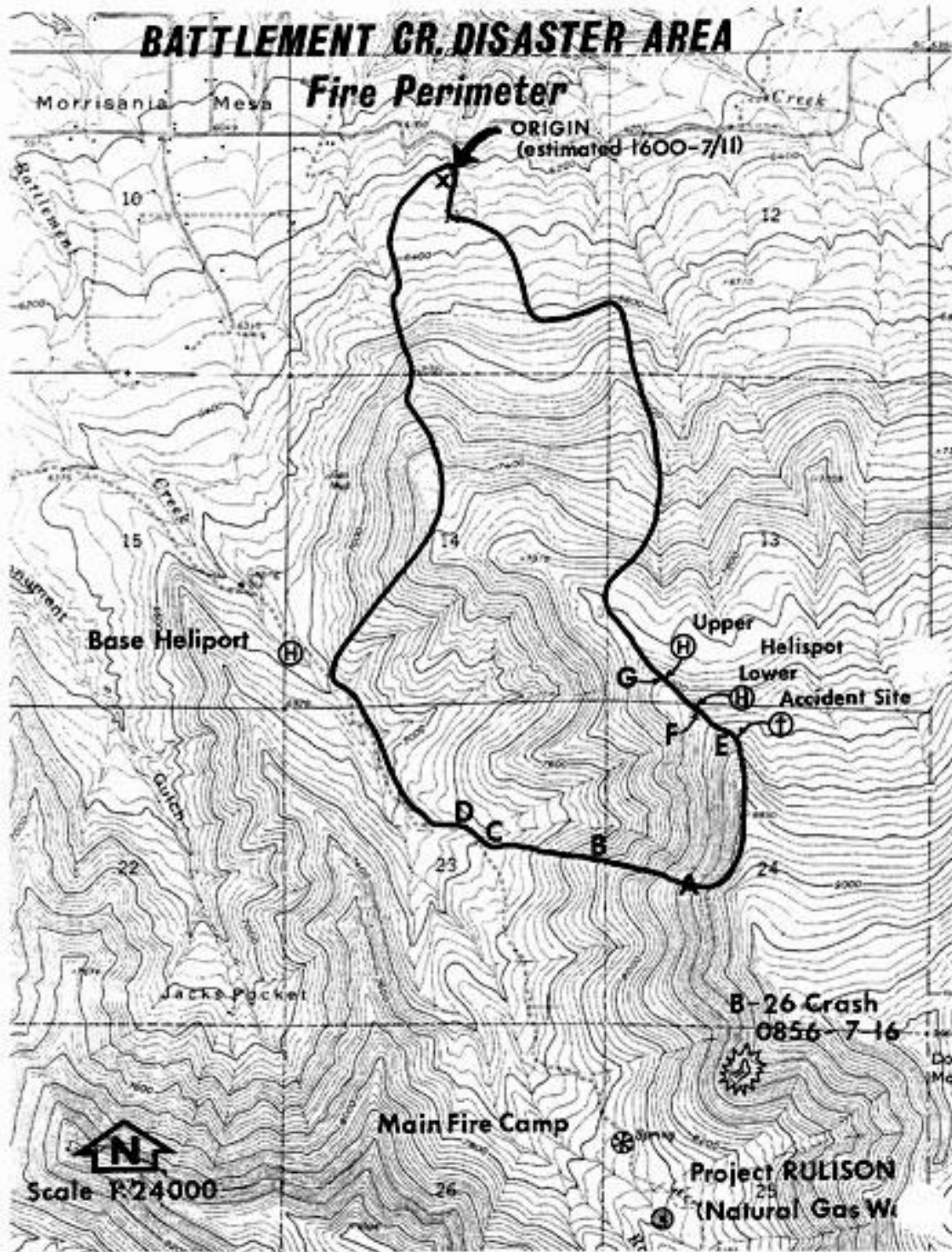


Figure 3a. Fire Perimeter and Topography