

# Fatalities and Information

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A few days ago, Donna Nemeth asked me some questions about the experiences I've had this year with fatalities on the Yarnell Hill Fire and the Big Windy Fire. Donna is helping to develop curriculum for a course called *You Will Not Stand Alone*, which is designed to assist Agency Administrators in the event they have a fatality on their unit. It includes a chapter on helping the Agency Administrator understand how to best support the assigned PIO. Donna's probing got me in a mindset to write all this down.

This is not a comprehensive treatment of the subject, but rather, a few items that seem important to me to convey to PIOs who are fortunate enough to have not had such an experience. And it should be noted that my experiences are not all experiences. I'm sure that even the PIOs working the Yarnell Hill Fire with me had different experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Also, as we have seen this year, a fatality on a local unit creates a different dynamic than one on an incident where you have the support of an IMT and peers. This is just a personal accounting written in what I hope comes across as a conversational style.

On the Yarnell Hill Fire, I worked under the able leadership of Karen Takai, Michelle Fidler, and Brad Pitassi on the SW IMT with Clay Templin as IC and was assigned to media with Suzanne Flory. On Big Windy, I was working with my regular team, Chris Schulte's Pacific Northwest IMT #2, with my Co-Lead Virginia Gibbons, Sarah Saarloos, Juanita Wright, and a number of other solid PIOs. Much credit is due to all these folks for the job they did under trying circumstances. In ICS, we do not operate on an island, and anything worthwhile I offer here comes more from the PIOs who helped me through these incidents than myself. In particular, Suzanne offered numerous insights on these topics throughout our assignment. Of course, anything about this sensitive subject that sounds tone-deaf or seems like a questionable decision belongs to me alone.

## The Yarnell Hill Fire

### **The Emotion of Coordination**

There were two places media could go for a story: Yarnell, which is where the fire was, and Prescott, which was where the crew was based. We knew there were stories coming out of the Prescott Fire Department but they were so inundated from media and other demands that it was difficult to reach folks. When you did, you could not help but register what they were going through and you felt guilty demanding even the smallest bit of time. Not having a comfortable level of coordination required more than the usual approach to monitoring related media coverage as one had to be dialed in to what was coming out of Prescott so that nothing contradictory was said. In retrospect, after meeting the members of the Prescott Fire Department during the preparation for the memorial service, I probably should have tried harder to connect and coordinate more. Fortunately, there were no major issues that arose and the minor ones were few.

Coordination between the fire and the home unit is always tough during a response to fatalities and the emotions of the moment become part of the incident environment. There is no escaping those emotions and they are expressed individually, including the ones you experience, while also enveloping the incident as a whole. The question of how much to contact the home unit does not have a right answer. Instead, the best judgment at the time must suffice. When you feel that uncertainty, make sure to talk it over with your Lead PIO or your IC.

A related concern is the physical space between the incident and the home unit. There is still a fire with major suppression efforts taking place yet the affected families and community are somewhere else. Just from being in camp and attending the briefings, you can come to focus too much on the incident and lapse too much into the comfort zone of regular fires, particularly when giving media briefings or interviews. I tried to mention Granite Mountain and Prescott FD as much as possible to remind myself and others that the fire influenced many people miles away.

That said, there was still an evacuated town with people suffering from the uncertainty and economic hardship that comes with being out of your home and not knowing whether it was damaged. On top of that, they had the knowledge that firefighters died trying to fight the fire that went through their town. You have to respect and honor the evacuation emotions while also being wary of questions that might seem to equate the hardships faced by residents and the families of the fallen.

### **Media Briefings and Interview Questions (and Assumptions)**

Two days after the fatalities, Suzanne and I began morning and evening media briefings for the crews assembled at the roadblock leading into the Yarnell Hill Fire area. If you have some experience with briefings and interviews on other fires, you find you naturally get more confident the more times you stand in front of a gaggle of reporters and answer questions. After a few stints, your “slide sorter” becomes bigger and faster, allowing you to quickly dial up the best answers to particular questions.

On a multiple fatality fire like Yarnell Hill, where you know investigations will take place and there are many unanswered and probably unanswerable questions, there are no automatic answers and your confidence in front of media is greatly diminished. For example, a question about how many radios a Hot Shot crew carries would normally be an easy answer but when 19 Hot Shots die, it is not. A question about weather briefings is normally a softball question but when 19 Hot Shots die, it is not. Just about every answer had to have a qualifier attached: *In my experience... Crews usually... Generally...*

You do not want to definitively answer any question that relates to the fatalities and you do not want to say something that the investigation might later refute. In this regard, the slides you would usually turn to are no longer valid, your knowledge base is no longer secure, and you have to think each answer out from the beginning. Similarly, words you might usually use can sound odd or out of place after fatalities. Think through your “go-to” phrases and soundbites to make sure everything sounds appropriate. Be thinking about these things immediately because you don’t want to first realize you can’t use an answer or a word when you’re on camera.

Some reporters will try to lead you down a path by asking simple questions without mention of the fatality and then try to get you to say something about the fatality. For example, I had a series of questions about how thunderstorms affect fires and how firefighters prepare for thunderstorms. You know they are asking about the Yarnell Hill Fire, but the questions are general. When you have given a few general answers (with qualifiers), they will come back with something like: *Is this what happened here? Did the crew take those actions?* You cannot answer those questions because you do not know and you do not want to speculate. One can only hope that the investigation will be able to provide answers.

Regarding soundbites, even though we are trained to use them, in situations like this it might be better to give extensive and expansive answers. The reporters are going to parrot what you say to deliver their story anyway and the soundbites that we give are, I think, not nearly as important as helping the reporter get the larger story correct. Additionally, when you are live, you have a direct relationship with the viewer or listener and can expound on issues.

### **Our Culture**

Suzanne and I also spent a lot of time off camera just talking to individual reporters, trying to convey how important this was to the entire fire community and describing the idea of the fire community itself. Some of our most important work was helping reporters understand those concepts and I believe it made for better coverage of the incident.

When fatalities occur, perhaps the biggest assistance to anyone involved is our culture. When you act, you are acting with the support of many and the traditions that have evolved around line of duty deaths can offer support as well. At Yarnell, it seemed that everything that happened afterwards, including the suppression effort, came to be part of the memorial for the fallen. Dirty, tough mop-up was done with an attitude I have never quite seen on a fire. There was a feeling that the best way to honor the fallen was to do the best job possible on the fire. That spirit infused the entire incident.

In our culture, we honor, we remember, and we support the families and loved ones. All that we do and say after fatalities occur should be based on that tradition. Figuratively, we wrap our arms around the families until the memorial service, where it becomes literal as firefighters surround the families. By doing this, we reaffirm that we are a community and that through their sacrifice, the families of the fallen are now part of that community for the rest of their lives. It is convenient and probably necessary to divide it all into discrete parts: incident, incident-within-an-incident, family support, and memorial service. However, the lines blur and the overlap is substantial. As a PIO, try to look at the whole and communicate the tradition, the emotion, the community and not just the part you for which you may be responsible. The post-fatality process we have can also help you organize your thoughts and cope with the challenges.

### **The Conspiracy**

Because there were few known facts about the last moments of the crew and we were one of the few official sources for the media, we received numerous questions that we obviously could not answer. This led to a small undercurrent among some reporters that we were covering up or hiding something. The best way to deal with this “conspiracy” idea is to ignore it and be honest and consistent. Honest in what you can and cannot answer (because of unknown facts, not because someone told you not to answer) and consistent in the answers you give. And by ignore, I mean don’t directly answer a question with a conspiracy subtext. Understand what they are asking yet answer the question you want to answer. There is always a talking point about 24 and 72 hour reports and in cases like Yarnell, a much more in depth investigation that will eventually provide some answers. Getting reporters to move from conspiracy thinking to accepting the fact that you and others don’t know much about the events and everyone needs to honor the investigative process may take some time.

### **The Site**

We received lots of questions about the “site” as media tried to find out where it was to fly over for a video or map it for a graphics sidebar. Remember, even if you have a TFR in place, aircraft can enter the TFR if no Air Attack is present. In a big media market like Phoenix where every station has a helicopter, this can be an issue.

The location does not fall into the same category as names, but it was highly sensitive to many people involved in the incident and the families of the deceased. The protocol for releasing (or confirming) the location of the deployment was lacking and as long as Prescott FD and the Sheriff were not talking about it, I thought it would be problematic for that information to come from the IMT. I intentionally avoided finding out the exact location so I could answer truthfully that I did not know and could not confirm. I gave a general description, noted the area was highly restricted even to members of the IMT and firefighters, and that it was secured for the investigation. For the most part, the reporters on scene were sympathetic and the pressure came from those working out of the offices back in New York or Los Angeles. Only after the confirmation of the location came from other sources did we talk about it specifically. Again, the emotions of the incident came into play here and a judgment call was made to not discuss the location. I am not sure if that is the textbook or legal approach, but it seemed right in that time and place.

### **The Battle Between Emotion and Professionalism**

The TV folks are looking for emotion to show on camera: *How does this make you feel? What are you feeling? Can you describe your feelings when you think about the 19?* We pride ourselves on our professionalism, our calmness in the face of adversity. However, I think it is more than acceptable to show some emotion and to answer these questions from the heart. To be too professional in this situation can easily come across as removed and that would not serve anyone well.

Of course, there were many emotions running through my mind. While I focused on sorrow and resilience and remembrance with the media, it was difficult at times to keep anger and confusion from bubbling to the surface. But those are selfish emotions and when you’re speaking for others, you cannot allow yourself to let those thoughts come out. If you’re in the position Suzanne and I were in, you just have to put yourself out there and trust you’ll be able to do right by everyone you’re speaking for. It is a tough line to walk and I sometimes felt myself getting dangerously close to breaking down. I never quite did, but it was definitely a struggle.

### **The Big Windy Complex**

The fatality on the Big Windy Complex was a result of a water tender rollover. This was the first fatality that happened on an incident to which I was assigned, so it was quite different than getting to Yarnell a day after the fact.

### **Social Media and Social Responsibility**

Our team has drilled on the Dutch Creek protocols and gamed out incident-within-an-incident scenarios on a regular basis. When word of the fatality reached Virginia and I shortly after 0800, we knew what the team process was and followed it while coordinating with the Oregon Department of Forestry, who had responsibility for the fire. By 0845, we had a press release ready, a media strategy, and a plan for devoting PIO resources to the fatality. However, we had to wait until the County Sheriff investigated the

scene, notified the family members, and officially released the information. The sheriff released the information around 1500.

During the interim, we fielded numerous media calls asking for confirmation on the fatality. We also saw numerous social media postings that started soon after the accident took place. However, because the official release had not occurred, we could not confirm or talk about the fatality. By noon, there was an evident level of frustration among media, who had started calling wrecker companies and funeral homes in search of confirmation. We discussed the option of a brief statement that would acknowledge the fatality in general with more information, including the name, to come later, but decided against this as it would cause everyone who had a family member or loved one working on the fire emotional duress and we did not want to be in the position of confirming a negative. The delay was stressful on many, but ultimately, we had no choice but to follow the established process.

As far as we could tell, the name of the fallen was not widely posted on social media. If it had been, that might have forced us to confirm or take other actions. This was the case in Yarnell when it was well known within a couple of hours that the Granite Mountain Hot Shots had perished. Each case will be different and the key is communicating with your team, the agencies, and the authorities.

Before an incident-within-an-incident happens, talk to all the decision makers and come to agreement on what the response will be if names or details get out before the official release. Regarding fatalities, we operate on a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century model for official release when now, the flow of information is much, much faster and access to that information is much, much greater. On Big Windy, the stress of the delay was worth it because the family was officially notified before the name was widely known. However, on the Yarnell Hill Fire, some family members learned from social and traditional media. I believe we all need to have an agreed upon strategy should word get out. If not, we lose credibility and we do not do the families any service by clamming up until the official release and leaving them wondering if what they are hearing is true. This will take some work and it may take time to bring everyone around, including local officials who may not have experienced a fire fatality before. Even so, I think the discussion is worth having.

### **Get in Front**

Part of the strategy Virginia and I developed was a media briefing as soon as the official notification had taken place. We were able to get the Sheriff to agree and at 1600 we held a briefing. During the briefing, the Sheriff spoke first and discussed the accident. I then acknowledged the fatality on behalf of the team and the agencies and talked about the immediate response by firefighters to the accident. (Note: Do not list all the agencies involved. Just say something like “wildland fire community.” If you list, it looks like you’re covering the bureaucratic bases and it comes off as detached.)

The briefing served two major purposes: It showed that we were affected by the fatality and it allowed the media to ask questions soon after the official release. The second was important in the days to follow because there ended up being little media interest in the specifics of the fatality after the briefing. If there had not been that opportunity, there would have been many more follow-up questions the next day.

We also tried to come up with questions that might be asked about the accident and the policies for contract water tender drivers. Help was provided by Don Ferguson, who was managing the local Joint

Information Center, and his staff. They came up with a great group of tough questions that we set about trying to answer as soon as we could. Many of the questions did not come, in part because of the briefing and also because the Medford, OR media market is not as sophisticated as others. Wherever you are though, I recommend going through this exercise to be prepared just in case.

### **Team Process**

As stated above, follow your team process. You may get agency people or others trying to find out the details. Be strong enough to say no or ignore them if they are not within the chain of command or have no identifiable role in the process. They will get the information soon enough and if you give them the information, it could easily boomerang back to you in a bad way. If you feel you are getting unduly pressured, let your IC or lead PIO know.

All IMTs should have a protocol for an incident-within-an-incident. Make sure you know what that is and then make sure it is complete for the incident you are working. For instance, if you have to scramble for hospital contacts and other information, the team process is not being honored even if you know it front to back. Take time at the beginning of each incident and validate that plan. Make sure you contact hospital and law enforcement PAOs early in the incident and discuss likely scenarios. Identify PIOs near those hospitals that can represent the IMT and agencies if you are out on the back 40 and cannot catch up to the Lifelight. Know the local media. Look at your plan as an actuality and not a theoretical.

All that said, one of the challenges when working fatalities is that nothing goes according to plan and there are so many variables that you are constantly adjusting your strategy. And as stated earlier, the conflict between the required process and the speed of information delivery and distribution can be great. A plan, even if it is not directly applicable, should provide a structure for you to look at the issues and give you an anchor point when the uncertainty seems overwhelming.

### **The Personal**

When I took S-203 back in the day, one of my instructors said there were two kinds of PIOs: those that had dealt with a fatality and those that will. This has some truth in it, but the reality is much more complex than just “dealing” with a fatality. We have too few good PIOs as it is and I do not think we can afford to burn people out by creating a culture where the duty is paramount. Our well-being is just as important.

Fatalities are tough and stressful and the stress is much different than even the most mega of Type I incidents. On *regular* incidents (as if there is such a thing), no matter how stressful, you settle into a routine and your stress level evens out, though it may remain at a high level. Not to mention, any group of PIOs tends to be both high energy and fun which helps alleviate the stress. On fatalities like Yarnell, the stress level keeps rising, there is no routine, and the fun of an assignment is greatly diminished. It is different and can be quite a shock if you are not prepared for it or have gone through it before.

If a fatality happens on your assignment or you get asked to respond to one, the first thing to do is to be honest with yourself and ask if you are in the right place to effectively work. There are times in my life, like after my grandmother died or even when I had to put my dog down, where I would have declined an assignment like Yarnell. Where fatalities are concerned, there is no honor in staying and no shame in asking to leave. It's tough, emotionally exhausting work that does not end on the 15<sup>th</sup> day. If you are

not in the right place, make the right call for yourself. Any seasoned PIO will not hold your decision to disengage against you and all the ones I know will enthusiastically support it. As my 203 instructor implied, there will, unfortunately, be a next time.

If you do go through with the incident, it is difficult to turn it off when you get home. Try to do a critical stress debrief before you leave. It is amazing what a 30 minute conversation can do. Before leaving Arizona, I spoke with a rep from the Los Angeles County Critical Incident Stress Management Team. I initially went in telling myself there was nothing to it and I just wanted to go through the process to talk about it in classes or with trainees. However, I was fooling myself and quickly recognized my self-deception within a minute or two after the session started. I needed it and it did make a difference. Please be open to that possibility.

The first thing to do when you get home is to talk to your spouse or significant other about your experiences because you do not want to hold it in and have that wall develop between the two of you. The next thing to do is to talk to your supervisor and explain that after working fatalities, the routine of your everyday job can sometimes seem inconsequential and you need to communicate well with each other if something seems askew. Also, change your routine: take some extra time off, do something different on the weekends, do anything to keep your mind from settling into a (for lack of a better word) *blah* state. And never be afraid to take advantage of the services you have access to through your job. Don't compound the tragedy by wrecking your personal and professional relationships.

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Finally, I again want to acknowledge the PIOs and the IMTs I served with on these two assignments. Both groups did a tremendous job and a mere thanks seems vastly inadequate. I also want to praise the PIOs working on the Granite Mountain Hot Shots Memorial Service. Mary Rasmussen, David Eaker, Steve Berube, Sean Johnson, Brie Magee, Arlene Perea and many others carried a tough load and helped everyone honor the 19. There's probably another note on PIO work for memorial services and family support waiting to be written.