

STAFF SUMMARY SHEET

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1	DFER	approve	<i>[Signature]</i> 20 Sept 13	6			
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SURNAME OF ACTION OFFICER AND GRADE Wettemann	SYMBOL DFH	PHONE 333-2878	TYPIST'S INITIALS rpw	SUSPENSE DATE Not Applicable
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SUBJECT Clearance for Material for Public Release	USAFA-DF-PA-462	DATE
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SUMMARY

- PURPOSE.** PA clearance for "Triumph Follows Tragedy: The U.S. Air Force Academy in the Waldo Canyon Fire" for publication/presentation at the 2013 Oral History Association annual Meeting, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 12 October 2013.
- BACKGROUND.**
 Authors: Dr. Robert Wettemann
 Title: Director, USAFA Center for Oral History
 Release Information: Unrestricted public release
- DISCUSSION.** Includes no discussion of classified material or of USAF, DOD, or US Govt policy.
- VIEWS OF OTHERS.** N/A
- RECOMMENDATION.** Approve for unrestricted public release and publication.

Robert Wettemann, Ph.D.
 Director, USAFA Center for Oral History

1 Tab
 Title of Paper/Presentation

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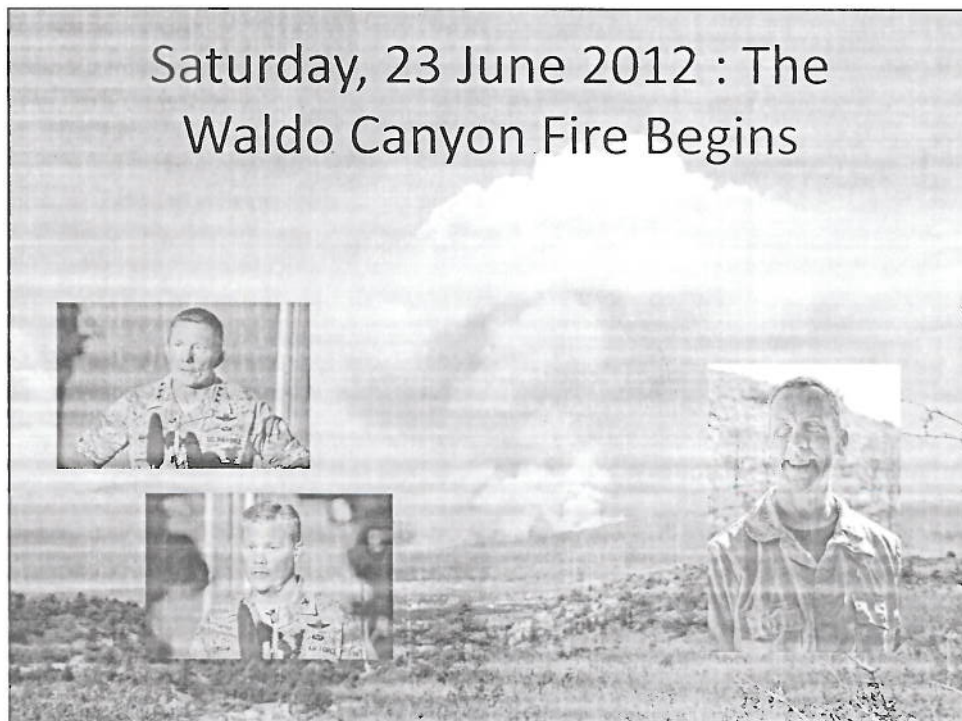
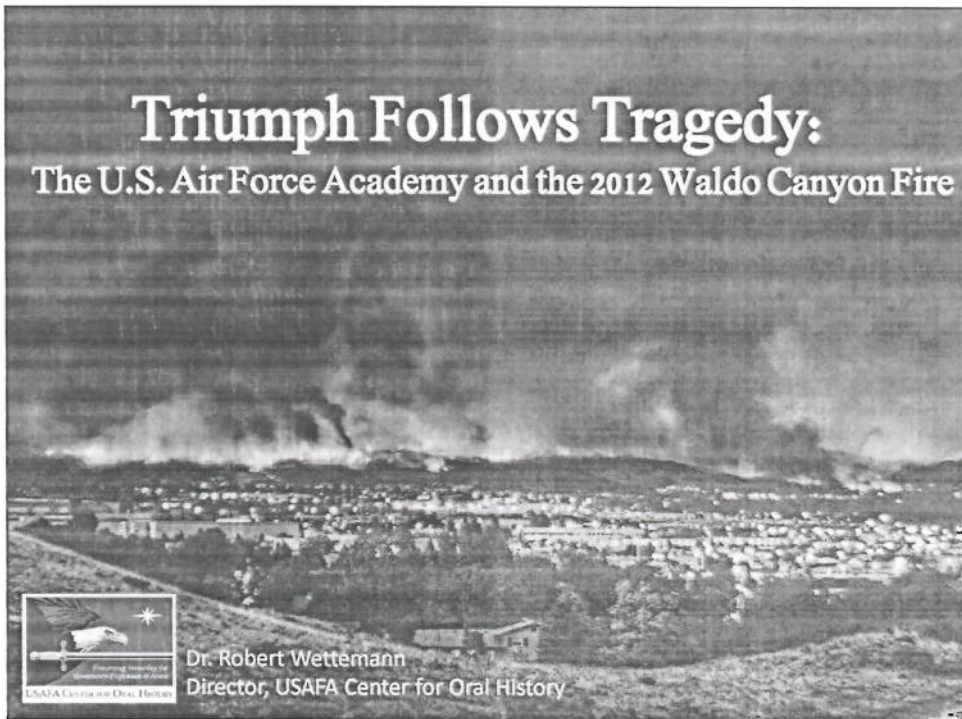
Triumph Follows Tragedy: The U.S. Air Force Academy in the Waldo Canyon Fire

Dr. Robert Wettemann

Director, USAFA Center for Oral History

On 26 June 2012, the Waldo Canyon Fire devastated the Mountain Shadows subdivision in Colorado Springs, Colorado, consuming 346 homes, killing two people, and costing more than \$16 million to bring under control. As a fire along the urban-wildland interface, the public “story” in Colorado Springs is one of tragedy and loss, as over one year later, the community is still struggling to recover from the effects of a conflagration that resulted in more than \$480 million in insurance claims. The Waldo Canyon Fire represented one of the first federal wildfire incidents with a military installation playing a significant role in the federal incident management system, as the U.S. Air Force Academy property comprised the northeast boundary of the fire. In stark contrast to the disheartening impact of the Waldo Canyon Fire in Colorado Springs, the U.S. Air Force Academy Center for Oral History has discovered a hidden tale of success in uncovering considering the military’s role in fighting the Waldo Canyon Fire on the southernmost portion of this national landmark.

The morning after fire razed the Mountain Shadows subdivision, flames threatened the U.S. Air Force Academy, specifically the Pine Valley housing subdivision, home of USAFA faculty, staff, as well as the institution’s superintendent, academic dean, and commandant of cadets. The members of the USAFA Fire Department, cooperating with members of the Redding Interagency Hotshot Crew, USAFA Airfield assets, and civilian contract helitack pilots had one chance to stop the fire. This portion of the panel chronicles how the USAFA Center for Oral History has chronicled this story of success in preventing the spread of what was, at the time, the most destructive fire in the history of the state of Colorado.

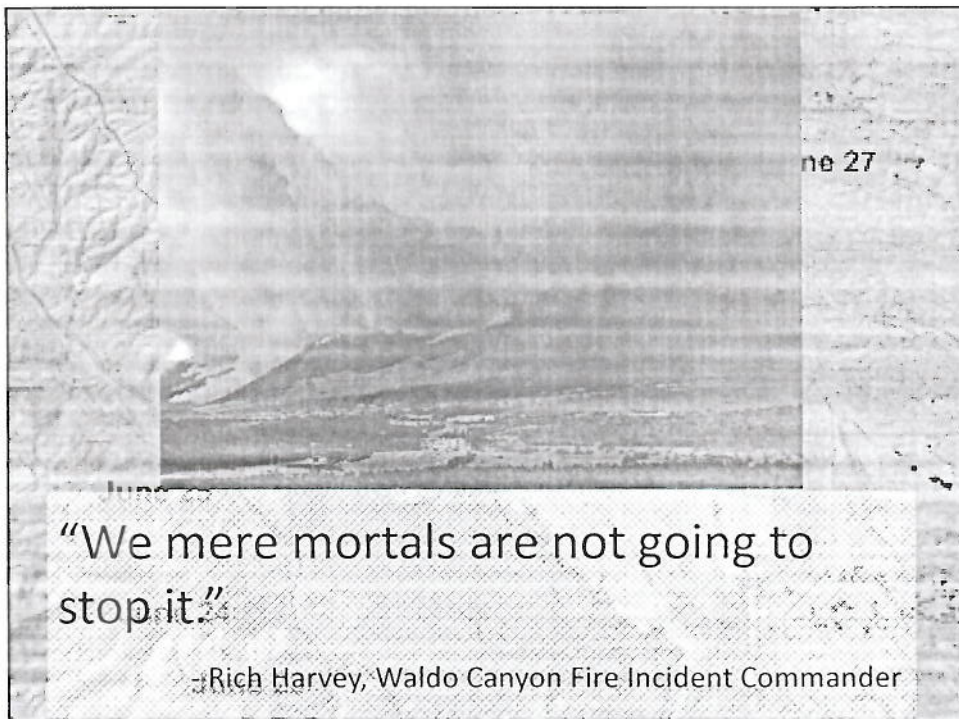


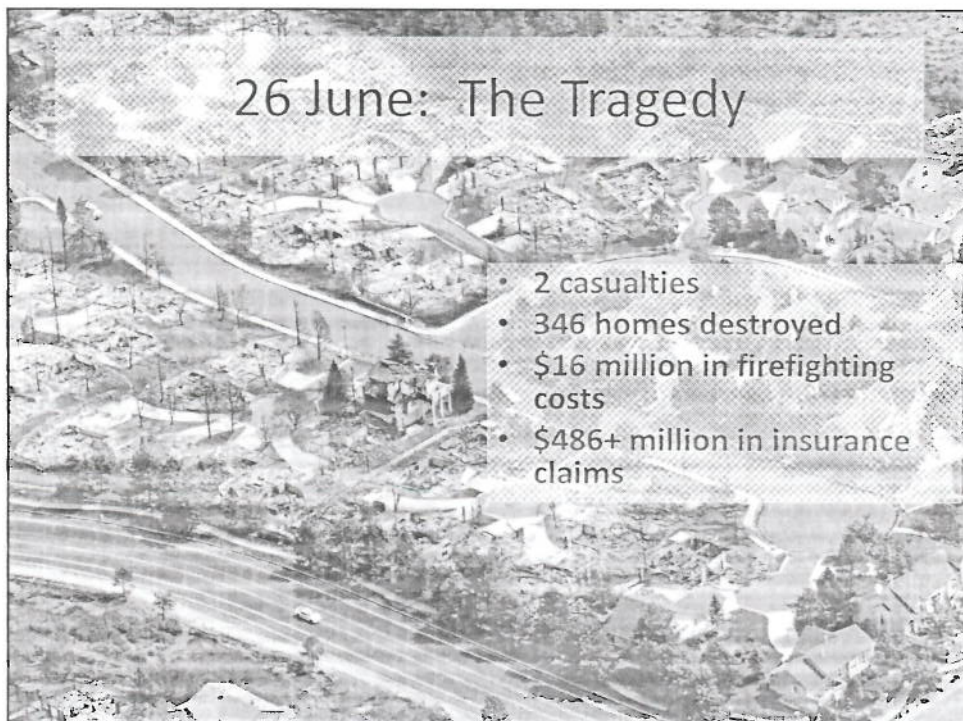
Monday, 25 June: Business as Usual?

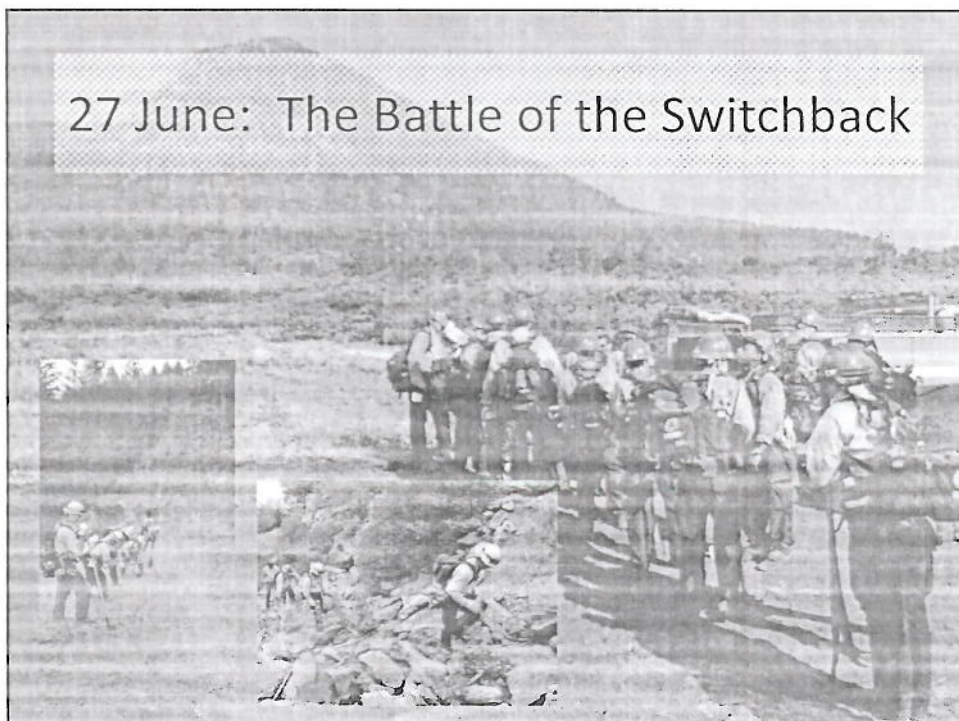


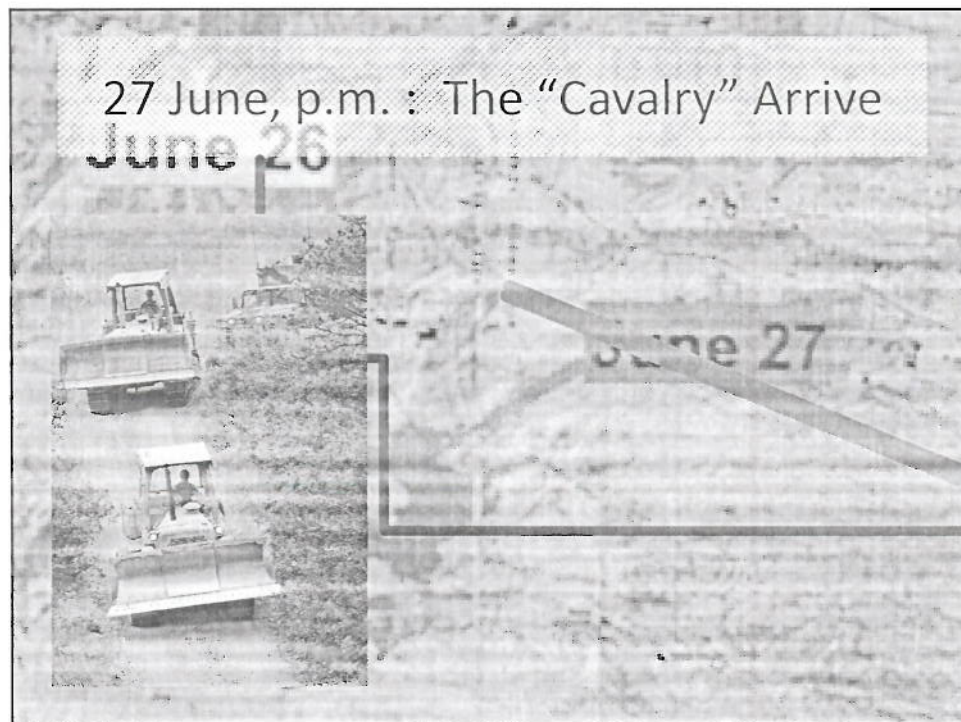
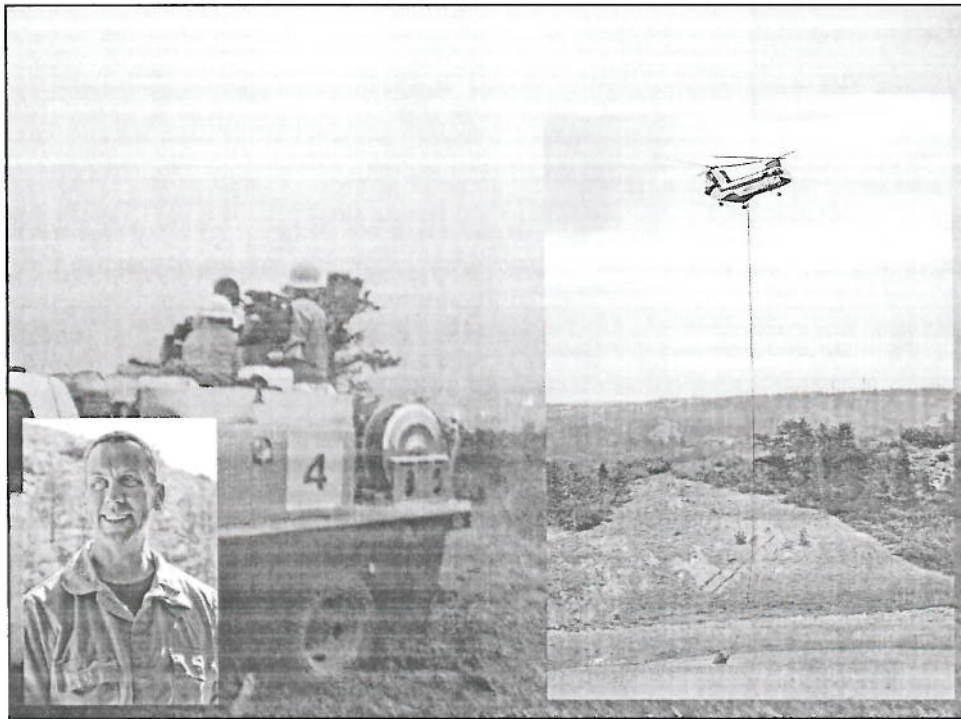
Tuesday, 26 June: A Day of Days



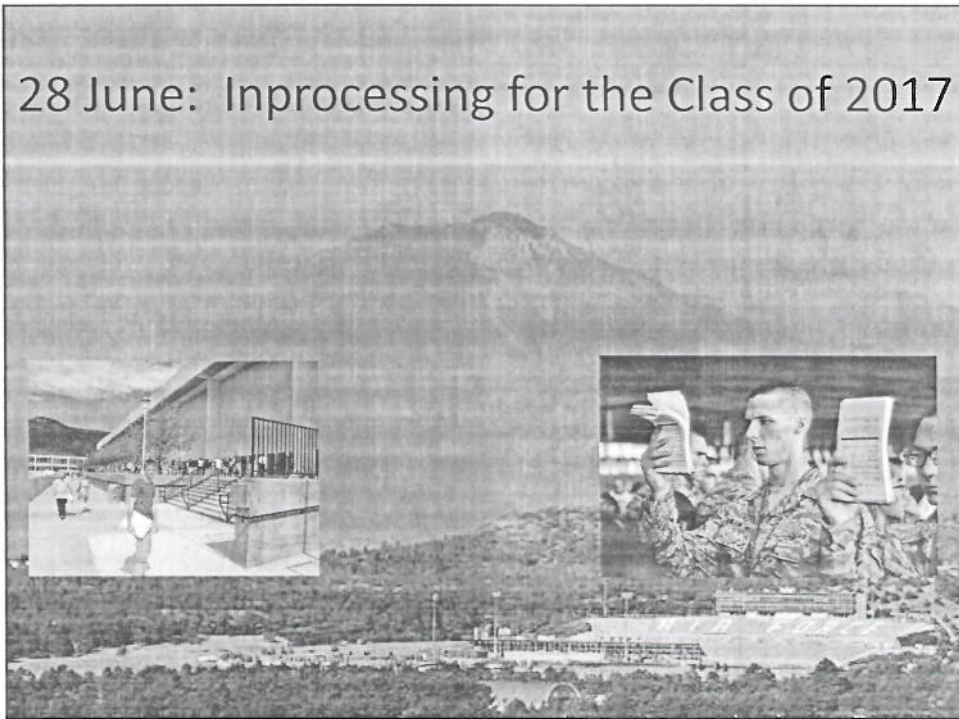








28 June: Inprocessing for the Class of 2017



USAFA's Triumph

- 146 acres of scrub oak consumed by fire
- Pine Valley Housing saved
- Historic structures saved: Otis House, Carleton House, Heritage House
- USAFA Stables saved
- 2017 Inprocessing proceeded as scheduled
- Mutual Assistance Agreements improved and updated



Slide 2:

Lt Gen Michael Gould: It was Saturday. We were playing golf, in the Superintendent's Cup, and this is an annual tournament that they have at Eisenhower, and we were at the turn between, turning from nine to ten tee, stopped and had a drink at the clubhouse, and I looked down over Blodgett Peak and saw the first puffs, literally it was just a small little chimney of smoke going up there. It was hot and dry, and we knew there was a fire danger, but that was, the guys I was with, I wasn't with Paula at the time, she was out on the course, but the guys I was with, I said, "This isn't going to be good."

Colonel (Brig Gen-select) Tim Gibson: Well, actually, I was driving on Southgate Boulevard, heading downtown with my daughter, my 17 year old, and driving along and saw a pillar of smoke. This would have been Saturday the 23rd. [And my first thoughts were] Where did you want to get lunch, honey? Seriously, there was nothing more to it at that time. Looking back now, that should have been different. And the reason I say that is not because at the time the fire started we should have started thinking about evacuation and what if it gets to the Air Force Academy, it was pretty unrealistic that it was going to get to the Academy, certainly at that time. But what I didn't know was that the El Paso emergency Operations Center had activated and gone to 24-hour ops and stood up an incident management team type three, which is a small contingency management team.

Helgerson: I was on a plane. I landed in Colorado Springs on Saturday, and as my texts populated, I got a picture of a smoke column coming from one of my favorite areas. Waldo Canyon is right across from the Incline, and I spend a lot of time on the Incline looking over at Waldo. We had just ridden Waldo, it has a mountain bike trail maybe a month before this, so while I was on the runway still in the plane I got the first smoke column text picture, and I thought, Well, this one could go places," because you know from Waldo

Canyon its almost impassible terrain. You certainly can't do it with any kind of wildfire suppression equipment. It was really a kind of sit and wait and watch where it went, and hopefully contain it at its boundary, as you couldn't really go up and chase it. I could tell by the size of the smoke column on that Saturday it really could grow in areas basically driven by the weather. That was the first time I saw it.

Slide 3

Gibson: We had a plan for the week, and it didn't include Waldo Canyon as the uninvited guest . . .

We've got to get routine stuff done like a change of command for the Commandant of Cadets. We've got to bring in 1079 class of 2016 folks and take care of their families while they are dropping off little Johnny and Little Sally. There is not one incident commander, one scenario that we had to address, there was a variety of scenarios, and they actually got more complex on Tuesday when we realized that we may not be able to conduct basic training on the Air Force Academy, that we may actually have to find an alternative, and we did.

Helgerson: I had to report down there [to the Incident Command Post] at 5:30. They started their briefings, a small piece at 5:45 and then the main briefing at 0600 . . . So I would attend those briefings, collect the information about the fire, the forecast, what they thought the footprint was going to look like, what their goals and objectives were for that day, then I would bring it back to the EOC and brief that whole crew, including some of the C[risis] A[ction] T[eam] members, usually between 7:30 and 8:00 each morning, so as we started to basically get into this week, I was attending a briefing downtown, I would come do the EOC/CAT brief, and then I would go out to the fire line and sit there for the day until

5:30 in the afternoon, and I would go back down and do the second half brief for the next operational period, and I would come back here and do the same briefing.

Slide 4:

Gould: I wanted to see for myself and without getting in the way of Deputy Chief Ken Helgerson, I said, "Ken, can I go up and just understand what kind of standoff we have and how much danger we're really in." And I think at the time, they had already put out a pre-evacuation notice for Douglas valley, err for Pine Valley, and eventually Doug, but I just needed to see it, because from a distance it was hard to tell. So we got in his truck and we drove up around the southwestern boundary, and I realized that we did have some standoff, and again really appreciated the work that our Fire Department has done over the years, but it became evident as Blodgett Peak was having more and more little hotspots that we were probably in danger, and that we would need to go ahead with this evacuation.

Gibson: And by about 1:00 in the afternoon, I just got that hair on the back of your neck, just feel doesn't right, I'm not getting an accurate picture of what is going on, and so I turned the CAT over to my deputy, Colonel Rich Fogg, and I went upstairs to general Gould's office, and I said "Boss, I just don't have a good vibe right now, and I'm going to grab the white top, and going to head down to the southwest perimeter, the corner down there, and just go see what we can see, because my wife and I had actually gone for a walk, that would be Sunday night, I guess, and you could kind of see down south to the west, a little bit of a glow, and you go "Hmm, I wonder if you got high enough up in Interior Drive if you could see flames," kind of a curiosity thing more than anything. So there really wasn't anything that visible until that afternoon. General Gould agreed that he wanted to go, and

I went out to my vehicle, which was parked out in front of Harmon Hall, and my vehicle is obviously government provided and is obviously a white top, a very traditional wing commander vehicle, and on the top was just black ash on the top of the vehicle. And I thought “Uh oh, that is clearly not good.” And of course it wasn’t.

Slide 5:

Gould: The term firestorm comes to mind. And we use that as a term just to describe chaos. But it is a real phenomenon, and the way that the heat of the fire actually changes the weather, and it affects the winds, and when it finally rolled right on down the hill into Mountain Shadows, of course we had no idea knowing the degree of the devastation, but you just had to feel for the families up there whose houses were in danger, and at the same time, you had to put the emotion behind and say “All right, we have to make sure that we are prepared at the Academy,” and that’s when shortly after that, or around the same time is when we said, “Let’s pack up and get our people to safe areas,” on the Academy.

Slide 6: In the midst of the afternoon briefing, a pyrocumulus cloud built over the ridgeline overlooking Colorado Springs, right along the urban-wildland interface.

Slide 9:

Helgerson: So, I went to the morning briefing, did the EOC/CAT briefing, went out to the fire line, and you could tell that we were going to get some activity if the wind was of a certain direction, so of course, we had downslope winds, and the fire was on Blodgett Peak, and

you could just see it spotting right down. So I don't remember the exact time, but between 10 and 11:00 am on Wednesday fire was on the Academy, the flame heights were between fifty and one hundred feet, we had right on the road that we decided not to choose as our defensive measure was overrun very quickly, we probably had sixty-five mph downslope winds, and it was certainly difficult to get ahead of it. So, as it rolled through those trees, and those trees were probably fifty to sixty feet high and had a lot of volume, and then it basically turns into scrub oak, which is between eight and ten feet high and dense, and had a lot of volume but was a lot smaller than the pine tree section, and we had done some chipper work with that contractor, we had a plateau to work from it burned right up to the edge of that, and we had some crews there to basically stop it from jumping the road, and then the section that we were really worried about, that if it gets here we are in big trouble, was where it went.

Slide 10: TSgt Jason Linta: Like every war, there is a battle that determines the ultimate outcome. This was that battle for us. The Battle of the Switchback. The switchback road goes very steep downhill and immediately switches back in the other direction and continues further downhill. There are a lot of fuels on the higher part of this switchback, so any spot fires that would jump over this area would run right into the base into housing, and our next line of defense would be Pine Drive.

Slide 11:

Helgerson: It got into that downslope section and got into the canyon and it started to generate its own heat, it pushed downhill, and one of the Hotshot team leads took a bulldozer crew that we had from the Air Force Academy, a contractor from our C[ivil] E[ngineering] contract,

asked him to come with him, he grabbed a drip torch, and one of my division supervisors, we called in the aircraft crash truck from the flight line, brought that thing up there, and between the crash truck, the bulldozer, and this hotshot kid with his drip torch creating new fires to help consume the fuel, we were probably 90% effective, and we were about to lose the fire, it was leaning over the road, catching the other side on fire, and we were able to get a bucket drop from a helicopter right on that spot, and that's what settled the whole thing. Once we got the bucket drop on that key section, the rest of it we were able to overcome using hand crews and bulldozer work. That was a point where I really wasn't sure that the Academy was going to not have houses lost and all that kind of business. Because if we had lost that section, it's really just a line of sight, huge dense fuel right into the Pine Valley Housing and the stables.

Slide 12:

Helgerson: The NORTHCOM Commander [General Charles Jacoby] was there, a commander from Fort Carson, I don't remember his position, but there were a lot of folks interested in helping at that point, because it was so tense, and it was such a close call if you will for that first piece, they did not want to do that again. So they basically offered up anything that we needed, including marching up army folks with shovels and axes to try and do some handline improvement . . . What we wanted to do was create fire breaks in areas that we did not have them, and no kidding, some of these were in environmentally sensitive areas, but at the time, when you consider the risk, they seem to be a good decision. So, the 4th ID came up here, I think they were requested at about 2:30 or so, maybe 3:00 and they were at our front gate by about 5:00. I think there were about twenty-three pieces

total of earth moving equipment, everything from dozers to graders to all kinds of acronyms of weird shapes and sizes that would move dirt and ruin grass and that kind of business . . . about 5:00, Lieutenant Colonel Ngo, from the Fifty-First, came up here, and she said “Chief, we’ve got some time to work tonite before sundown, is there anything we can do?” And we were standing over by the water treatment plant, and I said “Ma’am, this little section from the water treatment plant, down to Ice Lake . . . if you could put some blades on the ground and start right here until you hit the railroad tracks and then come back, this area could be used as a fire break in case we do that again. We’ll have some level of protection for housing.” I finished my conversation with her, she gave her folks some orders, and I went to do some other issues, and I turned around from another spot, and I saw eight dozers going down one side of this little track, and by the time I saw them they were halfway done, and it wasn’t 6:15 yet. And they went all the way down with eight blades and came back the other side and there was this huge runway of bare dirt that the only two things that they left were the signs that said “Stay Off Environmentally Sensitive Areas,” and a little doorway right in the middle, so they left a little door gate in what used to be a wide open expanse that used to be fences and all this other business.