

Mann Gulch fire in 1949 took the lives of 13 Smokejumpers in Montana. It was a pivotal point in the development of the US Forest Service in its approach to fire management.

I fought forest fires across the Pacific Northwest during the fire seasons of 1972-74. The training we had was anchored in the learning from Mann Gulch. So as a Red Card crew boss and sawyer I learned my craft on the basis of fire control techniques shaped by Mann Gulch.

I was part of a 4-man Helitack squad based in McCall, Idaho. We dealt mainly with lightning strikes in the back country, dropped in by chopper and told we'd be collected when we put the fire out. When the fires got out of control, and they became what were called 'project' fires, then we formed into larger teams, called Hotshot squads.

It was such a Hotshot squad that met with disaster in Arizona this week. It's easy to reflect that it could have been me. Our training was nothing like those guys. We didn't have fire blankets – the manual at that time said to get yourself into the burned out area. We didn't think too much about how to do that, though I've had a few comfortable nights hunkered down among the charred remains of a forest.

There have been other disasters since Mann Gulch, but none on the scale of Yarnell, which will cause a rethink of the heroic nature of firefighting. We thought nothing of walking to face the fire, pulaski (combined axe and hoe) at the ready. The scary times were when the fire was in front of me and the heat caused a tree behind me to 'crown', to light up like a match. Or the wind to shift and for the flames to outrun you, which happened at both Mann Gulch and Yarnell, but never to me.

Yet there will be a queue a mile long to become a Smokejumper, or to be part of a Helitack or Hotshot squad. Even the names evoke romance, which was captured by Norman Maclean in his seminal 1992 book about Mann Gulch, *Young Men and Fire*. Bob Segar also captured the idealistic and opportunistic approach of youth in *Like a Rock*: "I stood arrow straight, unencumbered by the weight of all these hustlers and their schemes; I stood proud, I stood tall, high above it all, I still believed in my dreams".

In Academy leadership programmes and masterclasses, we've had managers and nurses early in their career who show this idealism. They've had occasion to turn to their more learned, though weathered, seniors and question their leadership. Which is similar to what Oddball said to Moriarty in the film *Kelly's Heroes*: "Why don't you knock it off with them negative waves? Why don't you dig how beautiful it is out here? Why don't you say something righteous and hopeful for a change?"

Youth, romanticism, idealism, impervious to disasters that can strike. This is what Karl Weick addressed when he used the setting of Mann Gulch to write about sensemaking in organisations in a 1993 article. He set out to answer Maclean's question: "What the structure of a small outfit should be when its business is to meet sudden danger and prevent disaster?" What Weick postulated on the basis of Mann Gulch was that there are four things that can make organisations more resilient:

Improvisation and Bricolage – the collapse of role systems need not lead to disaster if people develop skills in improvisation and bricolage

Virtual Role Systems – social construction of reality is difficult while facing an event like a fire, but it can occur inside a person's head, where it can be reconstituted and run

Attitude of Wisdom – wisdom should not be seen as a set of facts, but as an attitude towards beliefs and knowledge, a tendency to doubt that these are necessarily true

Respectful Interaction – if a role system collapses among people where trust, honesty and self-respect are more fully developed, then new options emerge

NHS leaders often talk about fighting fires. Metaphorically maybe, but obviously not the real thing. The NHS is not Mann Gulch or Yarnell. It's usually the patient that dies, rather than the firefighter.

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