



Chairman's Conference Report

Introduction

There was considerable professional satisfaction for many in seeing the messages from the first Tangent Link Aerial Firefighting Conference, held in Athens in October 2008, carried forward to this second in the series in Anaheim, California. We live in a world of huge environmental contrasts and seasonal variation, and while we were meeting in Greece last year, the firefighters of California were hard at work combating over 2000 fires burning at the same time. The Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, paid tribute to their courage, example and sacrifice (13 firefighters lost their lives). At the time of our meeting in February 2009, colleagues from Canada were experiencing heavy snowfalls, while South Eastern Australia had endured temperatures in the high 40 degrees centigrade with strong winds fanning huge wildfires in the urban interface leading to catastrophic loss of life, the figure of over 200 killed. According to the database of the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) this is a sad record of people recently killed by wildfires. However, the database shows that after 78 people had been killed by wildfires in Greece in 2007, nearly two hundred fatalities had been recorded in China and Mongolia in 2008, and unprecedented losses in Chile, Honduras, Mozambique, South Africa and Viet Nam.

The finest tribute we can pay to all these fine people is to redouble our efforts to ensure the most effective Management of Wildfires, to promote the closest cooperation between those in a position to lend mutual support and to improve the liaison between aerial and ground firefighting. It was my privilege as Chairman - with help from many experts in the field - to steer delegates through the Conference days. While the presentations formed the skeleton of the event, and we are indebted to the speakers for the evident time and effort which had gone into these, the flesh on the bones comes from the open discussions in the hall and the excellent Networking opportunities presented. With some 14 nations represented and 28 Exhibitors displaying a variety of innovative fire fighting equipment, all agreed that the exchange of views though networking was the greatest value. This is much in keeping with Tangent Link's mission statement 'Connecting Business' and it is hoped, that if at all possible, you might join us at the next Conference in Rome in November of this year.

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Keynote

Chief Del Walters, the newly appointed Director of CAL FIRE provided the Keynote. A lifelong firefighter and advocate, he has been a servant of the State of California for almost 40 years, and was able to convey the fresh news that the State budget problems had been resolved and with it the resource threat which would have challenged the ability to protect the State against wildfires. An enduring threat however, is one of drought.

International Co-operation

Johann G Goldammer, Director of the Global Fire Monitoring Center (GFMC) in Germany, "Ambassador" for the UN International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) Global Wildland Fire Network and coordinator of the Athens Report, was able to reinforce the proposal to create a Fire Aviation Working Group to act as an advisory committee with the objectives of:

- Sharing information – especially safety related
- Agreeing and setting consistent operating practices and standards to assist in improving safety and with the sharing of resources
- Providing advice on fire aviation.

A steering group is being formed with the objective of taking this forward at the UN in Geneva later in the year.

In parallel with this initiative is growing support for an Aerial Fire Fighters Association. In practical terms this would be most effective as a 'virtual community' with the opportunity to meet at these Aerial Firefighting Conferences with access to an appropriate Web Site for the exchange of views, and importantly to inform those not able to attend all the Conferences.

Future US Wildland Fire Management

An important regional theme for this conference was the future of wildland fire management with the speaker Tom Harbour, Director of the Fire and Aviation Management program for the U.S. Forest Service. He articulated the growth in complex Wildland fires, the effective use of limited resources and retaining the confidence of the public. He was joined in an interactive panel session by experts in the field, including the Deputy Chief of CAL FIRE, William Payne, who had spoken earlier of the overriding importance of Initial Attack to contain fires, the 5% that are not so contained causing some 80% of the damage in financial terms. Data supporting the cost of NOT fighting fires effectively from the outset, is essential to support the case for appropriate resource allocation and I would commend the presentation of Robert Cavage (President of the Wildfire Research Network) on this important aspect.

Tom Harbour highlighted key future issues: Air Tankers vs. Helos vs. Boots on the ground; he saw Enhanced Visual Systems to aid Initial Attack, monitor hot spots and generally compensate for the present limited availability of Air Tankers at night; UAVs have a further role to play. Attracting the necessary Research and Development funding depends upon the same data to justify the expenditure. In his Panel Session, the Director set out his four *Core Mission Strategies* for the future:

- Move to Strategic Management Response within Asymmetric Fires
- Reshape Emergency Response within Fire Leadership to Total Force Concept
- Building a new National Intergovernmental Wildfire Policy Framework – Fire Governance
- Achieving Fire-Adaptive Communications

Providing the right assets is a "spend to save". While a new political leadership is required to balance, inter alia, the management of Large Air Tankers, the public need to be part of the overall solution to the control of Wildfires.

Military Contribution

Californian experience with support from the USN and USMC had been mixed owing to the roulement of Service personnel removing those trained in firefighting to other duties. Meanwhile, Lt General Steven Blum, Deputy Commander USNORTHCOM, in the course of a hugely interactive presentation, declared the US Army to be trained and equipped to contribute effective aerial firefighting assets.

Indeed these had been pre-positioned during the 2008 fires and could be made available for deployment to other areas, such as Europe.

The Wider World Perspective

Two presentations from Canada, highlighted what can be achieved by effective internal cooperation between Provinces with presentations by David Bokovay, Aviation Manager for the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre, Steve Roberts, Executive Director – Fire Management and Forest Protection and Benoit Carrier, Director of Aerial Operations for Quebec. Provinces agreed a long time ago the need to share assets and while there is very little Federal land compared with the US, the Federal Government matches Provincial expenditure on firefighting aircraft. The National Air Tanker Fleet is undergoing renewal with different assets to match the different topography across the country. Quebec is larger than California, has very tight targets for Pre-suppression and Initial Attack and is trialing advanced Vision Systems.

Russia on the other hand, represented by Andrey Eritsov, Deputy Chief of the Aerial Forest Fire Centre, has extensive assets and has a significant part to play in cross border operations in Europe. Internally however, there is poor management across its 80 Regions. Dr Humberto Cavalcanti meanwhile, Director of the Forest Institute of Minas Gerais State in Brazil, has created an Aerial firefighting force, which, while in many ways still embryonic, is making great strides in combating the combined forces of nature and of man. The great range of these presentations highlighted how much nations have to learn from one another.

Technical

For ease of reporting, I group together a number of presentations: the CL-415 given by John Gonsalves of Bombardier Aerospace and the Air Crane by Kenny Chapman, Senior Firefighting pilot for Erickson Air-Crane Inc USA, both hugely effective aerial firefighting vehicles. Both companies provided significant sponsorship (vital in keeping delegate rates at their present competitive level) and Kenny Chapman was able to report most favourably on his experiences in Greece, highlighting that we all have something of benefit to learn from other operators.

Vincent Ambrosia, with the lead for the USA Western States and Tom Zajkowski for the US Forest Service, both research scientists with a focus on UAVs, presented on Remote Sensing and specifically the Ikhana Unmanned Air System. Professor Uzeu, Director of R&D for Fire and Environmental Safety in Japan described a Soap-Based firefighting foam which is cheaper, more effective, uses less water and is environmentally friendly – a win/win by all accounts. The importance of not contaminating the sources of drinking water has a public safety importance.

Safety

Again this topic considers many aspects from the Tactics of Aerial Firefighting, so ably demonstrated by Ray Chaney, Battalion Chief Special Operations in CAL FIRE, to the technical safety of Single Engine Air Tankers (Mark Bickham) and the Sustainability of Aging Fleets (David Wardell). Ivan Pupulidy, Human Factors Specialist with the US Forest Service gave a thought provoking presentation on the impact of Accident Investigation and the 'blame culture' – recommended reading. Charles Bushy, President of the International Association of Wildland Fire spoke on the detailed accounting for Aerial firefighting accidents which chimed with the most illuminating historical perspective by James Hall LLC, former member of the 2002 Blue Ribbon Panel of the US National Transportation Safety Board. The significance of this report remains valid, at least in part, to this day as evidenced by the key findings:

- The Safety Record of fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters used in wildland fire management is unacceptable
- Because the Wildland environment has changed significantly, controlling Wildland fires cannot be considered an auxiliary mission secondary to land management
- The variety of missions, philosophies and unclear standards of Federal land management agencies creates a 'mission muddle' that seriously compromises the safety and effectiveness of aviation in wildland fire management
- The culture, organisational structure and management of wildland fire management agencies are ill suited to conduct safe and effective aviation operations in the current environment.

The reaction of the conference was that a new audit of a Blue Ribbon Panel nature was desirable today. This was given additional focus by the announcement by Richard Alder, General Manager of the National Aerial Firefighting Centre of Australia, of a Royal Commission into the recent fires in South East Australia. An early report is expected in August 2009 and there will inevitably be lessons to be learned for our entire community.

At the opening of the Conference, Richard gave an update of the events leading to “Black Saturday” 7 February 2009. The urbanisation of the Wildland, the element of choice in the evacuation process, forest housekeeping and effectiveness of firefighting will all come under the microscope as will associated concerns over water quality and yield.

In the final Panel Session, Richard chaired an interactive session on the Media impact on Aerial Firefighting which prompted many contributions from the floor. All could articulate negative cases of Press reporting with pressure to expend resources unnecessarily and to send aircraft in harms way when unjustified. A cynical remark summed up the negative view of the press “Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer!” The answer lies however in education to overcome the inherent laziness in sensational reporting and an overriding need to be proactive and involve the press agencies.

Panel Session – the Future US Wildland Fire Management

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In Conclusion

As Winston Churchill was inclined to observe, I am too busy to make this report any shorter! Even at this length however, I have glossed over much detail and many nuances which were only available to those who attended this excellent Conference. The interpretation of the presentations and the linking discussions is entirely mine and I apologise in advance for any errors and to those whose contributions I have only been able to touch upon. I would commend to you the Presentations on the dedicated Tangent Link Web Site and I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible, if not in Rome this November, in Canada in the Spring.

Terry Loughran
Rear Admiral CB FRAeS
23 February 2009

Preliminary Web Addresses of the International Aerial Firefighting Conferences:

At Tangent Link (<http://www.tangentlink.com>)

Anaheim Conference: <http://www.tangentlink.com/event.php?ekey=AFF%20California>
Athens Conference (2008): <http://www.tangentlink.com/event.php?ekey=AFF%20Greece>

At GFMC Portal (<http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/>)

Anaheim Conference: http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/course/meeting/2009/meet2009_09.htm
Athens Conference (2008): http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/course/meeting/2008/meet2008_09.htm
Athens speakers booklet direct: <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/course/meeting/2008/AFFC-Athens-2008-Speaker-Booklet.pdf>
Athens report direct: <http://www.fire.uni-freiburg.de/course/meeting/2008/AFFC-Europe-2008-Summary.pdf>

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