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**U.S. Department of Agriculture
Forest Service
Region Five History Project**

Interview with: [Charles] “Chuck” Mills
Interviewed by: [Robert] “Bob” Vanaiken
Location: near Culpepper, Virginia
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[Begin CD File 1.]

[There is a voice in the background at the beginning of the interview.]

BOB VANAIKEN: Good morning. My name is Bob Vanaiken, and today I am interviewing Chuck Mills, who has agreed to share his background and experiences in working in Region Five of the Forest Service. We are at Chuck’s residence near Culpepper, Virginia. It’s about nine thirty on Thursday, January 11th.

Chuck, could you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, where you were born and what it was like growing up?

CHUCK MILLS: Yes, I was born on a dairy farm in western Maryland. Finished school there. Left as soon as I could enlist in the military. I went into the United States Navy as a kiddy cruise, they were called at that time, four-year tour, and traveled in different schools around the United States with the Navy and was finally assigned to Southern California, in Miramar, California. I took two cruises out of there, but San Diego being my home base as far as where I came back to when I was land based. Attended some college during that period of time but did not get a degree.

However, I joined a volunteer fire department in Southern California, a place called Pine Valley, in 1957 as a firefighter and started my basic training. And the reason I went into fire—during my tour in the Navy, I was well trained in shipboard firefighting, and so I liked the firefighting service, so when I got out of the Navy I knew I wanted to be a firefighter. I wasn't sure I wanted to be a wildland or an urban firefighter. But because of my volunteer work in Pine Valley, which has a lot of vegetation fires, a lot of responses with the United States Forest Service and the Department of Forestry at that time, I kind of fell in love with that part of firefighting.

Another thing: The fire department had as a contract with the Cleveland National Forest for response. When a station was empty or they needed an additional engine, we were contracted to fill that void, so every time I had a chance, that I would take deployment through that process.

And then I got introduced to the Forest Service and met the Forest Service people, and they talked to me about employment, so I was employed in early 1959 as a temporary firefighter. I worked as a temporary for about a year and a half, [and] because of my veterans preference and my firefighting background and agriculture background, I was picked up on a permanent appointment.

And then I started working up through the ranks in the fire organization at that time, working in fire prevention, fire suppression, helitack, with the winters being spent in insect management, things of that nature, working in recreation, timber, wildlife, whatever, and also doing fire planning.

VANAIKEN: Which forest was that?

MILLS: It was on the Cleveland National Forest, predominantly at that time on the Descanso Ranger District, but we did work on two other districts, the Palomar and the Trabuco district, based on projects.

I worked up through the ranks, and then I transferred out, and I transferred into a new program as a work supervisor on what was called the Job Corps program, working young people and training them in firefighting and taking them on incidents. Also then I moved to the Toiyabe National Forest in 1966, I think it was. Spent a couple of years there and continued my firefighting career in red card assignments, working in planning, logistics and operations, or at that time on the line, as they would a line position.

Transferred back to Region Five, on the Sequoia National Forest in 1970. I think it was 1970, transferred back in. Was involved in project fires in Southern California, during the large siege in 1970.

VANAIKEN: Chuck, could you tell us a little bit about those 1970 fires?

MILLS: Yes. Like everybody else, you know, we were exhausting resources and everyone in fire at that time that was red carded was pretty well assigned, and you kind of went from fire to fire because there was not enough personnel to go around to fill all the positions. I spent quite a bit of time down on the San Bernardino and Angeles national forest in the 1970s, on the fire activity.

On the Sequoia National Forest, I was the fire management officer on the Greenhorn District, and I continued my fire experience, working up through the ranks. I'm thinking 1973 or '74, I went to generalship training. Became a Type 1 incident commander. I'll have to look the dates up for sure, but I became a Type 1 incident commander and led fire teams, Type 2 fire teams at that time.

And then about 1976 I was still on the Sequoia, and I was asked to apply for a job, a job called a task force representative in the FIRESCOPE [FIrefighting RESources of California Organized for Potential Emergencies] program in Southern California, at the Riverside Fire Lab. I submitted an application and was accepted for that job and transferred to the Riverside Fire Lab, and that's where my office initially was.

The project was growing, and I reported to the regional office. It was a regional assignment. I reported directly to the regional office, but I was satellite stationed at the Riverside Fire Lab. There was a pretty shortage of space requirement there, so working with the California Department of Forestry at that time, the regional fire chief volunteered to allow me to work in his facility at Region Six, the headquarters in Riverside, so I moved in with the California Department of Forestry, a place called the operation coordination center, and worked there for the next three years.

During my assignment with the FIRESCOPE program, I was a Type 1 operations section chief. Had the experience in planning, some in logistics. I was also a safety officer on numerous fires during that period of time. So I carried a red card pretty much from the time I was hired until I retired.

VANAICKEN: Okay.

MILLS: When I went into the FIRESCOPE program, I replaced a gentleman named Berry. Jerry Berry was from the Los Padres National Forest. He was the first one in the job; I was the second person in the job. I replaced him when he retired. I came in at the time, working with Systems Development Corporation, along with six other agencies. I represented the national forest and I assume the Park Service and the BLM [Bureau of Land Management] and just about

all the federal agencies in the wildland fire on the development of the FIRESCOPE program and the operational systems to support that.

During the period of time, a lot of my time was spent in development meetings, developing processes, protocols, procedures, forms, systems, whatever it took to put that massive system together. Also I had the responsibility to orientate the forest in Southern California on the processes that were being develop[ed] to solicit their support. It was kind of funny at that time. Some forests were very receptive to the ICS system, the incident command system, part of FIRESCOPE, which is the on-ground command system, and some were very resistant to make any change. So it was a different culture. It was a very difficult time as far as selling a new system to people that had been very successful on their own organic systems for the last twenty, thirty years. But as time went on and we kept on track, it became much more successful. More people came aboard, and there was less resistance.

Another big part of that, in the application part, is figuring out how to provide an overview orientation and training for the massive amount of resources in Southern California, to be able to get everybody on board, to be able to operate in this new system called ICS. So I was very instrumental in developing many of the training packages to kind of get people from the old system to the new system in an interagency form.

VANAICKEN: Did you go out and actually train?

MILLS: Yes, I did actually did training. I did orientation over Southern California and into Northern California and also was an instructor at the national training center in Marana, Arizona, for the 520, which is the generalship training for Type 1 command teams, and 620, which is area command. I attended both these courses and finished my career as an area commander, and

pretty well—most of my experience being in Southern California became very specialized in urban interface fires.

When I left the FIRESCOPE program and went to the field to help implementation, I was replaced by a gentleman named Mark [Ebaros?] [pronounced ed-BEAR-ohs]. He came off the San Bernardino, the San Jacinto District of the San Bernardino to take my place. I was then the assistant fire staff for the San Bernardino National Forest, working under a fellow by the name of George Robey, who was a very supportive member, helping to integrate ICS into our working systems.

In 1976, when I went into the program, I stayed in it three full years, working with the other six agencies in all phases of the development. There was an operations group we also prepared documents for, and there was also an oversight advisory committee that was involved into it. It was a well engineered process, well thought out, and I think one reason you could contribute to the success of it: it was a bottom-up system. If it had been developed in the Washington office, it probably would not have ever got off the ground, but it had practical experience built into it, and we took all the things that the seven agencies were doing and figured out how we could come out with a common way that we'd have one operating system, because when you went back and looked at what happened in the early seventies, the massive misuse of resources, the extra cost it was costing, the loss of natural resources and structures and the lack of coordination and communications was horrendous.

And the ICS system was geared to correcting and putting that on a different path. So I think it's done that. We had no vision at all, I think at that period of time, that we thought that that would be used on a national basis and an international basis. It was looked at to be put as an all-risk, all-hazard, but at that time, all-risk and –hazard to the wildland fire community was

normally basically around search and rescue, hazmat, firefighting and EMS was the predominant use at that period of time. And then it went into high-rises and developed and just broadened out and broadened out and had just unbelievable application potentials.

It was predominantly fire at that time, and I think probably if we look back and we made any mistake at all, we probably should have had probably a better mix of fire, law enforcement and EMS and probably a different resource mix in the development concept, because that's really where it needed to go.

But the proving grounds were in the wildland fire. I served as the safety officer on the first experimental fire on the Angeles National Forest and, to say the least, that probably wasn't the most successful mission we ever had. I think the reason, one of the primary reasons it wasn't successful, it wasn't properly implemented. We didn't have enough time to train. We were stovepipe training at that time; it wasn't interagency training, and we were trying to operate on our old system on a day-to-day basis and then go into the incident command, FIRESCOPE system when something had escalation potential [and? on?] large incident management.

That was a mistake. The founding fathers soon went back and says: Hey, if this is going to be successful, and we totally supported that, that we had to use it on a day-to-day basis. It couldn't be something you bring out of a box and implement when you needed, it had to be built into our organizational processes and structures.

Then it started to become much more successful when training started to become much more interagency. If you want to fight together, you got to work together and you got to rain together, so it started to really get traction. There still was resistance at that time to national application and the Forest Service and the park Service and the BLM had a dilemma: Having one system that was operating in California and then another, the old system, was operating in the

rest of the United States, and that couldn't stand over time. So then it was agreed that this would go to a national system, which really opened the doors to all-risk, all-hazard, at least within the wildland fire community within the wildland agencies.

VANAIKEN: About time was that?

MILLS: It was probably, I would say probably in the late seventies, early eighties it was realized that this thing has got to go broad in nature and it's got to become a national system, because we had fire teams that only could operate, ICS fire teams that could only operate in California, couldn't operate anywhere else and no other teams could come in. This was not very good.

Another thing—

VANAIKEN: Was research still playing a major role?

MILLS: Oh, yes, research—application part of research. And one thing—I've always looked at research as two types: one pure research for the sake of finding better ways of doing things, and then something more application. This was more of application research, which really, from this very conception, had the ability to be utilized on the ground immediately.

One of the things that we found—we had fire teams—in the old days we were stovepiped, that the fire teams were all green suits. They were all Forest Service. When we went into the FIRESCOPE program and the ICS common operating systems and things like that, you started to see the integration of county, state, Park Service, BLM, Fish and Wildlife, cities, everybody being integrated into teams. On my fire team, I think I had a mixture of a county, a city, and a BLM and Forest Service personnel involved in that team, so it really started the integration.

The real benefit of that were it really increased the resource base that we had available, because now we had access to other resources from all the other players, six other agencies. So

we started seeing immediately that that was a huge net gain. However, all this was not done without a lot of frustration, arguing, bickering, snipping about whose system was the best. Every one of the six other agencies, including the Forest Service, had a very effective operating system. When you put these together, they weren't effective, because we talked different, we responded different, we trained different, we exercised different and we fought fires different. So this was starting to bring all this [unintelligible] to the ground.

Slowly, then, as you saw fires creep up to where the ICS was starting to be used on a day-to-day basis, it started smoothing out, and you were dealing with new problems, not the same old problems. And the problems were how do you get a system this massive integrated into the large organizations in a short period of time? We had to be very patient with that.

I'm trying to think of the other—hang on a second here. We had to really get a lot into a lot of what I call ICS tools or FIRESCOPE tools. We had to develop a lot of tools that allowed people to understand how the system worked, and we're still doing this today.

I went back on the San Bernardino as the deputy fire management officer, and one of my main chores going back there, with a contract with my boss, is to implement ICS on the San Bernardino National Forest, which has a significant work force, along with all the cooperators in the two counties that we interacted with. And I had to deal with two chiefs association, one from the Riverside County, the other one from San Bernardino County, and also establish through those people, because in the FIRESCOPE program, the big six or the big seven did interagency work, interagency training, but that left out all our cooperators and smaller organizations, city fire departments, left them out of the process, so we had to figure out how can we bring them aboard? How can we all operate together? Because they co-responded to a lot of our incidents.

And we did this through the development of what was called the Crafton Hills Training Center. We made it an interagency training center there, with a high focus on ICS, and all the agencies could participate in that, attend training and conduct exercises and interagency meetings. So that's how we brought the local clients and our cooperators up to date on where we were so we could all get aboard with it.

Then we also had to look at support systems. Did we have enough support systems at the local level to support an incident? We're very much aggressive—we have a lot more aggressive behavior when we're sending response resources out. We're not aggressive enough when we send the support out to support those resources that are already in the field, taking tactical actions. So that started to really change. Communications became better. Coordination became better. Understanding became better. Training became better. Performance on incidents became better over time.

And then a strange thing happened that we had a response to Mexico City earthquake, another big factor in this. And in the international response to Mexico City, it was determined on an after-action report—and this was under the agency for international development—my boss at that time had transferred to Washington, George Robey, and he recommended to them that they bring an ICS specialist on board to help them overcome some of the coordination, communications and interagency problems they were having. I

I was asked to submit an application, and it was received, and I was detailed to the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. Well, I was actually transferred to the international forestry section in Washington, and detailed over to the Agency for International Development to help them develop international protocols using ICS to try to overcome some of these great difficulties we had when we responded to Mexico. We sent a lot of resources, fire resources to

Mexico, and the coordination of those assets, along with our international partners, was almost like going back to the 1970s.

I went in for ninety days and stayed three years. During that period of time, I helped them develop their operating systems. It was called the [DASK?] program. We developed an operating system, job descriptions, protocols, command center operations, field operations and started to develop response teams.

I spent three years in there, working on that with the U.N. and the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, and then—

H. What time was that?

MILLS: I went in there in '86, January of '86, stayed for three years and then retired from there. During that period of time I had an opportunity to work a lot with the United Nations, developing some of those ICS protocols into what's called now the on-site operation coordination center, which is very common to the MACS [Multi-Agency Coordination System] system that came out of the FIRESCOPE program. And then we started working on their teams.

I retired at that time and was replaced by a guy named [Thomas] "Tom" [Frye?]. He came from the BLM, and he was in Alaska, and Tom replaced me, and I retired and went to work for an organization that had a close network with the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, and that was NASAR [pronounced NAY-sahr], National Association for Search and Rescue. I was hired as a program director in the National Association for Search and Rescue, and responsibility was to work with the international community at that time, developing—finishing up protocols and response mechanisms to help them with their international response.

I had the opportunity to work in sixteen countries during my period with the NASAR and with the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance. I responded to disasters in operations, logistics,

about every function that you can imagine, and all in different continents, from typhoons to earthquakes to terrorism to whatever the opportunity was [where] humanitarian assistance had to be applied.

I retired and went to work for NASAR, as I stated, and then I picked up the responsibility of continuing to implement ICS not only in the disaster assistance program with the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance but we were contacted by FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], discussing our experience and my involvement working with the international community in developing protocols, ICS protocols into their response mechanisms. Could that same thing be done for developing a national capability for FEMA to respond to earthquakes and collapsed structure type of incidents?

At NASAR we negotiated a contract. I dealt very heavy with FEMA at that time, a gentleman by the name of Bruce [Bauman?] [pronounced BAHW-muhn], to assist FEMA in developing their national urban search and rescue response system. It's a huge system made up [of] about 5,000 people. It's done very well. The training was based on ICS principles and protocols, and the management structure to go with it, the command teams and everything were all developed around ICS practice and protocols.

I received some criticism at that time in my international work and my work with FEMA that everything was not exactly [pure fire?] ICS. And my point is: Does it have to be pure if 95 percent is all you can get? Is that better than not having any? So my point is I went with what I could get, and I figured that's as far as I can take it; that's better than not having a good operating system in place. And over the years, that's kind of been spread through the federal family outside the [unintelligible] fire community.

Another thing I worked with is the Public Health Service in helping them develop, using ICS, again, their practice and principles, protocols for their national disaster response teams, medical teams, for [D-MORTS, D-MATS and V-MATS?], and spent several years working with them on that, and that now is a very successful system, using ICS practice and principles.

And then I guess after about twelve years, I was starting to do maintenance work, and I didn't like that. I like to create [unintelligible]. I like developing and implementing ICS. Several of us that were working for NASAR formed our own company, and we wanted to specialize in ICS. We could see the need for it at the federal family. And we started a company called Emergency Management Services International, and we have been in business for seven years and we have been very actively involved in helping the United States Coast Guard implement ICS throughout the entire Coast Guard organization, which is about the same size as the Forest Service. I think there are about forty-some thousand people. And that's what I'm actively involved in, developing practice principles, protocols, training, exercises and conducting training throughout the United States and territories, at the different ports.

So ICS is alive. It's doing well. [The Department of] Homeland Security came along and developed it as their system, because over time, coming out of the FIRESCOPE program, there were several evolutions of ICS that were born. One was the Fireground Command that came out of Arizona, Phoenix, Arizona, with the fire chief there. Was very successful for what it was designed for, but it was not a strong supported system as the FIRESCOPE program originally designed.

And when Homeland Security adopted it, they looked at all the system[s] and selected the National Interagency Incident Management System as the prototype, and now the system is called NIMS (single "I"), National Incident Management System, and ICS is the operating

system, on-ground operating system within that structure. That's where we're spending most of our energy now, implementing that within Coast Guard and also all their port partners.

So that's kind of where it was and where we've taken it over the years.

[Recording interruption.]

VANAIKEN: You ready?

MILLS: Yes.

VANAIKEN: All right.

MILLS: One thing in the early days of the FIREScope program that probably made it successful is—I worked for the regional office. I worked for Kenton Clark. I worked for [Richard] “Dick” Millar and individuals like that that had an enormous amount of trust in me as an individual to be able to do what was right: what was right for the Forest Service, what was right for the interagency operation, things of that nature.

To operate in the FIREScope program, if you didn't have a strong focus on interagency cooperation, you probably would not have been able to successfully carry out your assignment. But the individuals that I worked for and my supervisors in the regional office—I've had linkage with them. I wasn't directly there every day, but I'd report to them about what was going on.

One thing that really made FIREScope successful—it was well engineered. The design committees were correctly put in place, the processes were laid out [unintelligible], and it had strong contractor support. And when I say “contractor support,” a contractor, which was named Systems Development Corporation, if I remember correctly, and a gentleman by the name of Terry Haney was the program director. Most of my time, development experience that I learned

from came from this individual. He had the patience of Job. He would work with all the organizations. Every time we found a point, we would work through it and try to come to some resolve. In most cases, I would say 95 percent of the things were resolved at the task force level; if not, they were bumped to the operations level, that [unintelligible] a higher level of input. But in general, it was a bottom-up organization that made it hugely successful. It had practitioner input at the right time, and it had oversight, the proper oversight at that time, so it was well balanced.

One thing that it's struggling with now when it comes out of the fire organization, there still is a very, very strong fire influence into the system on a national basis. Even though it's gone into DHS, Homeland Security, it doesn't really hit the all-risk, all-hazard targets with an interagency family that it could have, and there is always a struggle about pure ICS versus making that work without compromising the system.

And I guess one thing I always have taken away is you can make changes as long as you don't compromise the design intent and the system. I'll always remember that. And I think that came from Terry Haney and my bosses and [Robert L.] "Bob" Irwin and individuals like that. Changes are acceptable as long as it's not doing something that degrade the quality and the design intent of the system, whether that be with forms and everything else.

If you look at the current system that we're using right now through DHS and the Homeland Security, it's probably much better than we had when we started because we've learned over the last thirty, thirty-five years how to lay it down in more of an all-risk, all-hazard environment. But that's one thing we're still struggling with, is make that system work for you. Even though you don't get the 100 percent, the purity out of it, the 95 percent is a lot better than the other options that you could have.

[Recording interruption.]

VANAIKEN: When you're ready.

MILLS: Okay. In summary, even though I wasn't there in the first three years of the development, I replaced a very aggressive individual from the fire service side, Jerry Berry, and picked it up from there and was replaced by a well-capable person. I went back to the field, to kind of summarize, helped to implement the system on the national forest level and nationally, through training, exercises and the systems approach of integrating it into day-to-day operations.

I had a good shot at working in the international community as far as taking it overseas, what was appropriate, and implementing it there. And now that homeland security is adopted, that system pretty much the way it was in the design intent—we're currently operating that and implementing that within the United States Coast Guard, which is a military organization, which is unbelievable, so that they can work with all their port partners and their cooperators in carrying out their numerous missions that they have for homeland security and port security.

Okay.

VANAIKEN: Okay.

Chuck, thank you for sharing all that background information on FIREScope and your experiences in it. It's been very helpful.

[End of interview.]