

Written Transcript On The Line Episode 3.1 “Transitions”

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Charlie Palmer: Welcome back to on the line, a podcast for today's the wild land firefighters. This is our first episode of season three and we are really stoked to be back in the rattlesnake studios for another run. Mike Matthews continues to be our lead sound engineer. Joey Moore is our post production editor and I'm the host Charlie Palmer. Transitions are defined as the process or a period of changing from one state or condition to another and so transitions are really huge in wild land fire primarily because they can be a very dangerous time for those on the ground. A study by John Driessen for instance in 2002 looking at fire fatalities from fires in the 1990s indicated that nearly three fourths of those fatalities occurred when fires were making the transition from a relatively small to a relatively large fire or just shortly after they had become a large fire.

Charlie Palmer: So since they are such a dynamic period, we tend to talk about transitions, a great deal in the world of wildland fire. But there are some other types of transitions we don't seem to talk nearly as much about. And one of those transitions is the transition out of the fire services. So in a job where the mandatory retirement age for firefighters is 57, that means that people are oftentimes retiring at a relatively young age. And I know the DUI now has a waiver in place, apparently that allows folks to perhaps retire at 60 if they want to. But for now, let's just say that the retirement age is 57 and some can retire right as early as 50 guys. Is that accurate? (Yeah. Yeah.) Okay. So, um, what that means is that if and when a person retires that early, they theoretically have many years left of their work life, whatever that might be.

Charlie Palmer: So what do they do with that time? How well prepared are they for this transition? What would they do differently if given the chance to better prepare for this transition that it came at a relatively young a period in their life. So our two guests today are in a great position to help us answer some of those questions. Hopefully both had long and storied fire careers. Each has retired from the Missoula smoke jumper base in the last few months. Keith, you are first, correct? (That's correct) And Mitch, you were more recent. (Yup.) Okay. So our guests today are Mitch Kearns and Keith Wolferman. Most people know Keith by the nickname of Skid, so we'll probably just stick with that one and be calling you Skid for the rest of the show. So guys, welcome to the podcast. (Thanks. Thanks. Good to be here.) All right, so as I just mentioned, you both have recently retired after lengthy fire careers.

Charlie Palmer: Tell me about what it has been like for you so far in this new phase, this new stage?

Keith Wolferman: Yeah, I think, uh, you know, when Charlie asked us to come in and, and share some of my thoughts with this. I jumped back further than the transition of what it was like once I retired to transitioning psychologically and just trying to get your head wrapped around the thought of retirement and you kind of wonder about it throughout your career. How long are you going to last? Whether you want to try to retire early, to have more time with your family because of the commitment they make to our jobs or whether you would like to go to mandatory and try to finish strong. And there's some pride there I think to to say, yeah, I did it till the very end, but once I made that decision that I was going to retire, I was really surprised because I thought there'd be some second guessing going on.

Keith Wolferman: And for me it was a, we have a big end of the year crew meeting and I told the crew that if I'm not much in the rumor mill, I'm always the last to know. So if I hear a rumor, get back to me, I figure everybody's probably heard it. So when I started hearing rumors that people were saying that I was thinking about retiring, I thought, well, you know, I'm just going to get it out there. So once I laid it all out on the table at that crew meeting and said that that was my intent and that I was retiring and the wouldn't be returning for another season, I thought there'd be a lot of trepidation with that actually coming out and saying it kind of thing. What a surprise me was the sense of peace. I felt. I was like, yeah, this is the right thing.

Keith Wolferman: You know, the old saying lead follow or get the hell out of the way. And that's kind of where I was. I was taking a lot of pride in the fact that I was able to still do the job into my fifties and then I just hit a certain point where it was almost like a psychologically I was doing okay to handling the day to day stresses, but physically my body just started to fall apart. And I just said, yeah, it's not right. I've gotten a lot of opportunities with this job and I just wouldn't have felt good about trying to coast, you know, the last couple of years. And my son and I talked about it and he said, you know, you've done a lot for those guys and you could probably just, you know, kind of cruise off into the sunset. And I'm like, yeah, it's not that kind of job.

Keith Wolferman: You're either doing it or you're not. So I made the decision to get out.

Charlie Palmer: and to set the stage. I guess, I know you worked on the Lolo shots.

Keith Wolferman: Yep. A couple of years on the Lolo shots 89 and 90.

Charlie Palmer: And were you in fire before that or?

Keith Wolferman: Yeah.

Charlie Palmer: Okay. Um, so what did your full career look like as a seasonal and then through the shots and then into the jumpers?

Keith Wolferman: I, uh, I was 16 years old and we were jumping off of McClays bridge and swimming and a big power line arc fire started up Patty Canyon and they had planes coming in, dropping retardant from Missoula base & Kalispell base. And friend of mine's dad had been a smoke jumper in the late forties, early fifties. And he said, you know, we can go up there and they'll sign you on and we'll get paid. We'll go fight fire and make a lot of money. And we said, oh, that's great. So we grabbed, I had an old green air force shirt that my dad had and a canteen of water and a square nose shovel that we found all covered with concrete. You sound really old, right? Yeah, yeah. We got my mom to drop us off up there on the hill and she's bye bye kids have fun, you know, and we hiked up into the fire and poked around at some smoldering cow turds and stuff and uh, we were kind of surprised. We never did find that guy to sign us up. But we, uh, we ran into some firefighters and first thing they did is they said, hey, you guys got any water? Or they took my quart and just gunned it so that we're up there in the black and about 80 a hundred degrees staggered around and we'd say, let's get the heck out of here.

Keith Wolferman: That sucks. So that was my first exposure to fire. But, um, after high school, I went into the young adult conservation corps, which was a residential camp and we did a lot of solid work and some pile burning and things of that nature. And that was supposed to be a year long program. But when Reagan came into office, they made some major budget cuts and they just tried to find places to farm us out when the program was cut and I was placed on the Lolo, um, Missoula Ranger district as a recreation guy doing trails. But when we had big fire bus, they'd grab us and put us on helicopters and flies into the wilderness and we'd, we'd put small fires out. So that was my first exposure there. Then the next year they wanted to hire me back on trails again as a permanent seasonal and that didn't happen. They went to contracting. And so I went on a brush disposal crew and we did a lot of prescribed fire burning and saw work and lighting unit, stuff like that. And then after that I went on a district crew and I worked out a Bonita work center other than the engine and in Missoula Ranger district as well. And then went in the military for three years. When I got back I was just trying to get my foot in the door and I was willing to do trail work or pretty much anything district or hot shots. And uh, I was, had the first world problem of being offered two jobs and I had to do some soul search and I knew eventually I would like to get into smoke jumping, but I didn't know what kind of chance I had. So when they offered me a squad leader position on the district versus a crewman on the hot shots, I took the hot shot crew, I talked to some old rugby buddies of mine that had jumped and Jimmy Beck was like, yeah, you know, it's probably better. See more fire behavior and fuel types moving around the country as a hot shot than you would on a district.

Charlie Palmer: Okay. And then jumped for how long?

Keith Wolferman: I'm 28 years. I left in my 28th year jumping out of Missoula all out of Missoula.

Charlie Palmer: Gotcha. Through some canopy changes though.

Keith Wolferman: Yeah. I was on a two different round parachutes and then my last 11 seasons I, I jumped on the ram air.

Charlie Palmer: Okay, nice. Mitch, how about you trace us through your history. I know it includes some district work. You're a Bitterroot Kid right?

Mitch Kearns: Yeah. Grew up in the bitterroot Corvallis, uh, ended up getting on the west fork and that was just by chance. I had a couple buddies from high school and college that, uh, working up West Fork an, they came home one day and said, hey, they need more people. Are you interested? I was tired of being broke and needed the job, so I gave him a call on I think a Wednesday and talk to the FMO down there. And uh, he told me he needed some people on the brush crew and uh, went down the unemployment office to fill out the paperwork and showed up on Monday and worked that season and didn't go back to school and kept working and it got in my blood and I was there for a long time.

Charlie Palmer: Okay. How many years on the district then?

Mitch Kearns: Four on district.

Charlie Palmer: And then you got into, into jumping from there?

Mitch Kearns: Jumping in from there in 89. Okay. Hired on in Grangeville.

Charlie Palmer: Okay. And so how many years of that is jumping?

Mitch Kearns: 30 seasons.

Charlie Palmer: 30 seasons. Good Heavens. He's got you beat skid.

Keith Wolferman: Oh yeah. By jumps and overtime and everything!

Charlie Palmer: How about for you Mitch? How's the process been? What's, what sticks out for you?

Mitch Kearns: Well, I was listening to skid, talking about a psychologically he was there physically, he wasn't, and I was kind of the opposite physically. I was still doing fine. You know, I had meniscus surgery five years ago and that took care of the, the major ailment I had up until then. I was feeling good feeling in my twenties again. But psychologically I think I'd just had enough.

Charlie Palmer: Yeah. So what, what goes on psychologically than what's what sticks out? Let you know that, you know what, it's probably time.

Mitch Kearns: I think when you're starting to lose your passion for it a little bit and you look out the window or you know, you want to enjoy your summer, like be with the wife or the kids or something. And instead of being with the boys and the girls and jumping fires and being gone all the time and being on the road, I think when you get tired of that, I'd had enough time to go do something else.

Charlie Palmer: That was a sign that you were ready?

Mitch Kearns: Yep So I left early. I left, uh, at 53.

Charlie Palmer: Okay. Because you could have stayed longer.

Mitch Kearns: I could've stayed till 57. I actually could have retired at 48 earlier when you asked about 50 it's you know, 25 years or 50. 20 years at 50 and I had 25 at 48 but that was way too early. Yeah. I didn't know what I wanted to do.

Charlie Palmer: So what do you know now that you wish you'd known 20 or 25 years ago or you pick the time, what have you learned that would have been super helpful for you that many years ago? Or projecting this forward, what do you know now that might be of benefit to that young firefighter who maybe just got an appointment or who again is maybe a seasonal thinking this as a career I want to chase what career advice do you have? Former transition advice?

Keith Wolferman: Well in some ways I was really lucky in that I had more opportunities than difficulties trying to find what I wanted to do and they say, you know, the old saying, find something you love, you'll never work a day in your life. And I liked working in the parachute loft and that's the reason he got into smoke jumping was, you know, background in aviation, um, interest.

Keith Wolferman: I think as a young person in this kind of line of work, there's so much riding on it physically that you should have a plan B. Try to be as eclectic a person as you can, have as many other skills as possible besides just, you know, the one skill set that you really enjoy. There's nothing wrong with that and developing yourself and challenging yourself is great. But I think if a person has a varied skill set, if something were to happen to where he can no longer do what you want to be doing, then maybe you can find something else that you'd like to be doing instead of feeling like, now I gotta go do something I have to be doing because I can no longer do what I want to be doing. Y

Mitch Kearns: Yeah, I'd agree with that too. I mean, you need to start as young as you can. Figuring out what else you want to do because like skid said, physically you may get hurt or something might happen or you can't continue on. Not even just wait until retirement. It could happen in any day, but you need to find something else you want to do, you know, another skillset and other career. I mean if you want to continue fighting fire, then you know, make those contacts and, and develop that. But if you have a hobby that you want to turn into a business or whatever else, don't give up on it now and then have to get shift

from zero to 60 when you're put in that position, you have to learn it again. Try and keep up on stuff and be willing to have contingency plan all the time. Or look at what you want to do when you retire. If you make it that long and it's something you're going to enjoy.

Charlie Palmer: Yeah. That's one of many things that has always struck me working with firefighters is they just always seem to be good at something else too. You know, obviously they're good at putting fires out, but they almost always have some other skill set or skill sets. I mean, it might be musical or, or building or plumbing or something that they are just really, really good at. And so it sounds like that's kind of what you guys are referencing, which is just to enhance those other skillsets you have so that if you have to put them into play because your fire career ended for whatever reason, right. You can pretty seamlessly go and do those things.

Keith Wolferman: And there's, there's other aspects just within the fire organization where you don't have to be a pipe hater out on the line every day and you can bring skills to the table. So that's kind of what I was getting at too, is, is take as many opportunities as possible to take very details and temporary assignments wherever you can to learn those other skill. Diversify your skill set. Yeah. Within fire. Right.

Charlie Palmer: So now for you guys, what, what is that look like? Skid, you've got all these skill sets. I know Mitch, same for you. What's, what's next?

Keith Wolferman: I Dunno. I, I, uh, I really like arborist work. I like climbing. I like doing tree trimming and take downs, but I always thought it'd be fun to get a little piece of land and maybe a light tractor or four wheeler or something in skid, usable wood off of it. Maybe a portable saw mill, something like that. Just take a place, it's kind of a diamond in the rough and park it up a little bit. Make it look nice tool.

Charlie Palmer: Mitch, how about you? I know you're working on some things and yeah, got some big plans.

Mitch Kearns: Uh, uh, I got some plans on it. You know, there's a lot of things to do when you're retired and you still gotta have fun and still make money and still keep yourself busy. So somebody asked me the other day when I was doing, and I'm like, I'm busy all the time. I am, I mean, I don't know how I had time to work before, so, but, um, I'm going to enjoy this summer. I think if I see a fire in the woods, I'm gonna turn my car around and go the other way. Yeah, I don't have any interest in being at right now. And I think I may eventually, you know, even go back in a year or two and do some id in and stuff, but I'm going to enjoy the summer on, I'm going to start, uh, helping a friend of ours built some houses. Yeah. Um, and hopefully we can do one or two, three houses a year and not get too busy but still make some profit and keep my mind and body busy. So

Charlie Palmer: yeah, I remember you and I were fishing one time and the Sherpa flew over. You were still working? I was, yeah, I was, I had transitioned out already and just that simple act of that plane flying over the top and no one that there was bros and sisters on board. I mean you could just tell by where it was headed and what was going on, but you know, there was a fire call somewhere and it was like, man, that just set me in my tracks and you were too busy catching fish, but I was just staring skyward thinking, you know, there's that other life. Right. That's so funny that you say that because right after I retired last summer I was taken out the raft at one of the local river spots and the twin otter flew overhead and towards eastern Montana. And I, I knew that drones soon as I heard it and I looked up and I was like, that's going to be the auditor. And it was, and I was really shocked at how I wasn't just, oh no, I didn't. Yeah, I didn't get all weepy or it just like, well they're hitting hidden there and I'm here and this isn't a bad place to be put a little more air in the raft to go.

Mitch Kearns: And that's, that's kind of what I was touching on earlier when I was talking about psychologically or not there. You know, 20 years ago if a plane went overhead, I had jumped out of the RAF and got my truck and gone to work. Cause something's going on you and there's a Pico de discharge things. Do you think you're missing out? You want to go get, get in there and be on it. And last year, same thing, you know, we're out fishing or sitting in the yard and it was my day off and planes are flying lake skid said and going somewhere and you have no interest in going in and being part of it I guess. So cause there's probably another one around the road and you don't have to stop what you're doing and go do it. So

Charlie Palmer: you've got 30 years of doing that behind Ya. So yeah is, we kinda did our pre production meeting as well and I figured, okay, transitions is going to be a great topic and you know, we'll, we'll have that discussion and we're having that discussion with that. Well, you know, let's add some more meat to the bone if we can. And, and the mentoring piece came then, as I told both of you guys, I mean I came in, I rookied as an older person, I rarely do and I was 30 and there were a couple folks in, in our class. My class was large, so there were a few folks in there that were a little older than I was. But most of the people in my rookie class were in their twenties and so I was a little different age wise and so I come in through and rookie training.

Charlie Palmer: It was just very difficult for me in a lot of ways because a part of it's because I really under-prepared so I wasn't as ready as I needed to be physically and mentally. But coming through that process then I really felt like I got some powerful guidance and mentoring from both of you cause you were both guys that I just kind of connected with by age because we're similar age wise and I really benefited. I felt from the support of knowing that you guys were there and they were on my side and super supportive but we never really had a formal mentoring program at the jump base is all at best informal. But you know you look at the data and the research and companies and businesses and how they benefit at times from really formalized mentoring programs and helping steer young people along with them. Pretty distinct processes. And I mean, is is

fire missing out or do we, do we need a more formal process of mentoring or is it okay as an informal or, or is even the informal, not enough at this point? Or where do you guys thoughts on that of how do we steer young folks along to help them and their development by passing on some knowledge and things that we have?

Mitch Kearns: I think it's informal and I think we meant by committee, you know, cause every day it's different. You know, you're working with so many people, you don't know who you're going to be working with or who you're going to be working for as a supervisor or anything else. So you gotta be willing to take advice and pay attention to what's going on to different leaders. Uh, you can pick and choose the good aspects are bad aspects and learn from them from each person you're working with or supervisors and kind of do it that way. And I don't think they're missing out. I just, it's never anything formal that it's a one to one that you're doing this because you might be in, you know, training one year and an operations and next with the loft and neck. So it's a, as a group effort for training and mentoring young folks, it's just nothing formal one to one. Yeah. And, and, and not just the base too, it's in the whole wildfire arena. You know, whether you're on a large fire or whatever else, you're always working with somebody different and you've got to kind of learn from those guys and get the advice and pay attention to what's going on and go from there. Yeah.

Keith Wolferman: Yeah. It's funny because at the risk is sounding like the chromogenic, the old man, you know, he's like the old age kids nowadays just don't want to listen, you know? But if the kids, the young people, they have to be willing to approach someone that they respect or that, that has a skill set that they admire and don't be scared to approach them and talk to them about that and say, you know, I'm really interested in this and I'd really like to learn more. And I think you'd be pleasantly surprised at how many people are like, oh wow, I never really thought about it. But yeah, I'd be happy to show you. And that once again gets back to that non formalized process. But uh, the oral traditions of the smoke jumper program are fairly storied. So that, that was a big, big thing for me.

Keith Wolferman: And the other big part of that was I was so fascinated in that because long, long before I ever jumped, a friend of mine's uncle had jumped in. He was the youngest smoke jumper ever. He lied about his age doctor, his birth certificate and jump to fire when he was like 17. Just turned 17 years old. And, um, then he was one of the first guys that went and worked and did a lot of the CIA work in Southeast Asia. And by the time he was 19 years old, he was pushing cloud desk Dang cargo out over to bet at night. And, uh, I was just like in awe of that kind of stuff. So in that being the case, I, I really listened around those campfires at night on fires because those old guys had just troves of, of knowledge and stories and their stories, you know, we're Guffanti and slapping her leg and laughing.

Keith Wolferman: But those kernels of, you know, this could happen now that this job hasn't changed in 40, 50, 70 years to where that exact thing can happen again. In her

case in point, my training foreman when I was a rookie, told a story of a guy yelling at him on a fire because they were using too much water and they had plumbed is fire using stab and sprinklers, like the little ch rainbird sprinklers. And it was all fed off a canvas gravity sock, just catching stream flow. And it funnels it down in this collapsible canvas sock into a fire hose and they had 24 seven sprinklers going on this fire and this guy was screaming at him about using all this water and they're like, it's a gravity sock. And the guy, it just, it was over his head, he couldn't get it. But I add that in the back of my mind.

Keith Wolferman: I'm one of the last fires. I jumped in my last year of jumping. We put 1500 feet of inch and a half hose on a fire with the gravity sock that just barely was trickling out of the little elk wallow and the holes was slack halfway down the hill. But it gained enough hydraulics going downhill that it ran those rain birds and we went in. It was a really dangerous fire. They didn't want to put a shot crew in there, no shot crews available. And we went in with eight jumpers, six days. It pounded it with helicopters and bucket's got that line cut out and then put that sprinkler system in and then they put a Webcam on it. And then we left and I got a text from the fire management officer. Six weeks to the day in the sprinklers were still running. So

Mitch Kearns: that was in the back of my mind for 30 years, you know? And then all of a sudden I was so excited. I was like a little kid. I just told these guys I had been waiting to do this my entire career boys and now we're going to do it. And I guarantee you that those young guys that were on that fire with me, they're going to remember that. Yeah. So it's pretty cool when you can take that oral history and just tuck those things away in the back of your mind and then you never know when you're going to need them.

Charlie Palmer: Yeah. And I get what you're saying. Where were new people or newer people, if they have that awareness, they're able to say, hey, that might be a good, valuable mentor for me to be in a position to be able to go ask them about doing just that. But at the same time, I think also recognizing that for new people, what a key period that is for them, whether it's their first year in fire or their first year as a new resource of just how much learning happens during that first year of whatever they're in and just recognizing as a older, more experienced person, hey, this person is really impressionable at this time period in their development. So maybe there are some things I can do to help her or help him in their development because they're so impressionable at that period of time. I mean, I remember my very first year in fires crew boss, I'm Steve Gillman.

Charlie Palmer: Me, right? Why do I remember that name? That was a long time ago in a very right, but just one time he grabbed me and said, have your shit together. Right? We're demoing this fire. Have all your shit together. Be Ready. And I didn't understand, didn't know what he meant. I was still so young. I hadn't, I wasn't able to put that together, but he was just like, every time we demo, you need to be fire ready. I was like, well, you know what, I can do that. I can do that back at the base. Right. We're going to fly back. Yeah. And I'm going to have plenty of

time. And, and he was like, that was a rule of engagement for him. And one time we're flying back and sure enough, right. We find, uh, an initial attack and so we land and sure enough, we're fire ready on the ground. And being that light went off for me and he just looked at me and smiled and I was like, oh, makes sense. That totally makes sense now. Right. But if I hadn't, right, I'd been that guy with no water and adult tool and nothing in my PG bag and, and not ready to go. So just, uh, and that's 30 plus years ago in that still sticks with me.

Mitch Kearns: Yeah. And that's goes along with that too is just lead by example. You know, even just skid and I had been around 25 years or whatever else, people are paying attention those one or two year, first year people or whatever, and they're, they're paying attention to what you're doing or how you're thinking or what your tactic is on fire or how you're doing what you're doing in your off time or everything else. Just kind of don't do something that they may pick up and it's not a good attribute to have. So yeah. And I'm not saying we're perfect because we're always doing something stupid. That, and also, you know, if you're doing something dumb admitted,

Charlie Palmer: you know? Yeah. Yeah. Don't try and cover it up, pulling up to it a little bit and laugh at it and try and make self better. Yeah. That generates a question for me. It's like, okay, how do you lead jumpers of the knocks on jumpers of they're independent and they're tough to manage and they're sharp and experienced and all those things, but drift towards independence. Her cats, the herding cats. Right. So how do you, cause you guys were, were forming when, when you were done, when you finished, you are at the highest level in the organization next to the base manager. So you're in a leadership role, a huge leadership role where you could have a whole bunch of folks under your command on an incident. How did you lead jumpers?

Keith Wolferman: For me, a lot of it was, I did two things that really stand out in my mind. One was I told the younger jumpers at the stuff that I was doing was the way I was taught and it was taught to me by people. I respected a lot and it accomplished a lot and that's why I had glommed onto it. And I made it part of how I did business. And I think that gives them more buy in. It's not just skid telling me what to do. A lot of people came before us and they had systems that worked and, and I, I took things I, I claim I've never had an original idea in my head ever. It's just been new takes on other ideas I had gotten from other people. And the second thing is I always tell them I'm not quoting and stuff chapter and verse from the Manual. The reason we're doing this is this, and that would explain why it's important. You don't tell people don't do this, you know, or do do that. You say we do it this way because if you don't, this could happen. We don't do that. Because if you do it that way, then something bad could happen and then they're like, Ooh, they then you've got their attention and they, and once again I think he had a little bit more buy in that way.

Mitch Kearns: Yeah, I'd agree. Yet, you know, whether it's on a fire or something else, I would typically say, you know, this is the way I want to do it or this way. I think we should do it, but I'm open to any suggestions. If you guys get something else I'm

not seeing or whatever else he can. Even after we get Gillen, if, if something's not working, let me know. We'll look from that. You know, part of being a leader is telling them what you want to do from experience and knowledge of everybody else you've gained or the years is being able to adjust and be flexible and look at it from somebody else's point of view too.

Charlie Palmer: Yeah. Because one of the other challenges that then is that you're leading peers at times. I mean it's one thing to lead some younger folks because you've got them in experience in years and, and all those things, but at least in the jump world, you've got guys your age or older that they might be six is still and you're the foreman. And so this even added leadership challenge of trying to get peers to do what you need and want them to do.

Keith Wolferman: Um, I'm really, really glad that Mitch brought that point up because I just had a total flashback. You know, as a young squad leader, my first year is overhead and, um, we should have a forum and on the load, that's the way we used to do it. And we jumped a whole plane load on a really ugly fire, high elevation thing. And, uh, I had exactly like Mitch describing, I had some very experienced individuals on that load and I had some new people, some rookies. And um, I went around and I explained to everybody, you know, what we're doing all the time. And I took everybody's feedback and I tried to do it through the democratic process and I just got spanked. It was horrible. And I, I was like, take what they have for feedback into account. But I think the smoke jumpers respect a leader that's willing to say, this rests on my shoulders and mine alone because I happened to be in charge this time.

Keith Wolferman: Next time. If you guys want to do it differently than then it'll be your turn. But right now I'm taking everything into account that other people are giving me. Feedback wise, you gotta be a good listener again. A lot of times you're overwhelmed and they're seeing things that you're not seeing. So you dang well better listen. But that being said, at the end of the day, somebody's name has to go on that fireman's report, calling that fire out or handing it off to whoever. And I think that you gained some respect by being able to do that, step up and say, yeah, that was my fault, I made that mistake. So it sounds like one of the strategies then skid is some intent, some leader's intent, which is this is generally what the plan is and why. And then also to be able to recognize, hey this is what I'm thinking. Please let me know if there's some things that I'm missing or some things that you think that I should take into consideration. So kind of an open door type of deal.

Mitch Kearns: But like skid said, you know, you still need to not take too many suggestions in and, and be too flexible. You do have to make a decision and be the boss that time and it all comes out of mutual respect. You know, whether you're working with your peers and whatever else, they may do it different, but they also realize that they're going to be in the same situation you are next time or at some other time and they don't want feedback from you. Vice versa. You don't give it to them, you let them do it their way and, and hopefully they'll give you the same latitude and when they're in charge. So yeah, you learn a lot more

when you make your own mistakes and those lessons stick with you and yeah, it's just the way of it. Yeah. And there's many ways to skin a cat or however you wanna phrase it. But, uh, my way may work and skids way may work just as easy. I mean it's might be totally different, but it's still get the job done. And I think jumpers are, most firefighters realize that there's different ways to do it. Let's learn this way and not be so intent on doing it my way. Yeah.

Keith Wolferman: And when you're that newly blossoming leader, let's say, it's just being given a first responsibilities, getting back to that brand new firefighter that Charlie was talking about a minute ago, give them the credit that they're going to figure it out. Because if you're hammering them over the head all the time. And it's funny cause I walked out of works some days saying, man, you were a total jerk to everybody around you today. And now I'm seeing people in my position and they're just like, yeah. And the other day I had this moment that I'm like, yeah, it, you know, we all, we all deal with stress differently and don't hold a grudge and know that those guys as they learn, they're gonna figure it out. Yeah. Yeah. Don't beat him over the head with it. How about final thoughts on, on the transition piece? What kind of closing thoughts might you have to say on that one?

Keith Wolferman: Oh, you thought about what you led with, which was, what do you know now that you wish you'd known earlier and comes to mind? A friend of mine whose wife also works for the Forest Service, and they sat down with, I think it was one of her uncles who's a financial advisor. And he said, listen to me very carefully because you're not gonna like this, but give till it hurts. You know? And basically they made a decision to try to live off of one of their incomes and put all the rest of their income from the other spouse into whether it's thrift savings plan or Roth Iras or whatever investment products you want. You will be really amazed. I mean, when you're young and you're living on a shoestring, you can always give more than you think because you know, you put that extra money away, you're not going to miss it. And I think by and large, most firefighters are pretty smart that way. They don't think that every season is going to be a thousand hours overtime. But yeah, just just say, cause our retirement, you know, we've got good benefits and it's, it's a, it's a federal retirement system, but it's not like the old system. The one Mitch and I retired under, you know, you're looking at w 25 to 35% of your base salary. That's not a lot of money every month. So I would say be thrifty and safe.

Mitch Kearns: Gotcha. Well, I agree with Skid on that because we'll say save more, but I'm not doing too bad. I guess I'm, yeah, you adjust. It's part of the transition. I think the biggest thing I could say is it's not just transitioning out of your job into a retirement or whatever else, um, your spouse, that transition, you know, from going from being home all the time to not be in around forever, you know, during summer, everything else. And then all of a sudden you're together all the time. And that is a huge transition. And I'll tell you the biggest thing that Toby and I have done is that we're still doing our own things. You know, we spend two or three hours together a day, but we don't rely on each other to entertain

and be with each other all day long because we get really tired of each other real quick.

Mitch Kearns: And I know she'd get tired of me, so she goes her way in the morning and I go my way and, and we meet back up in the afternoon or night or whatever else and do fun things together and keep some things separate. Yeah. Whether it's your hobbies or your friend group or whatever else, just try not to think that you're going to get all the support from your spouse because you're probably not. And if you are, it'll get old and hurry. Yeah, that's, that's a great point. There's so many different transitions that we face transition out of a full time career

Charlie Palmer: and the transitions obviously in fire from one size to another. And, and now you're talking about a transition in a sense of relationship, relationship front. What's it look like from workers whose job was all about transition home for awhile? Gone for a long time, maybe transitioned back home for awhile. So it am I on point with you there?

Mitch Kearns: You're right on point. I mean, when you transition was happening all the time, whether it's at work with new people, new fires, or are coming home for a day or two or beyond for three weeks, and your constant transition. Okay. You know, adjusting your outlook. You come home for a couple of days and you've been gone for two weeks, you're not going to be the respected authority figure in anymore. So yeah. Yeah. You gotta check your status and your authority at the door cause your kids and wife will beat it out of the ids are like, yeah, but you're going to have a tough transition there. So.

Charlie Palmer: So how did you guys navigate that transition? I know you both married both with kids and clearly live in the firefighter life for a long period of time. So multiple occasions where you're on a detail or a long hard fire season, you're transitioning and it might be a long period of time before you transitioned back home. What did that look like? What are, what are your takeaways from those home front transitions?

Keith Wolferman: Well I think for me it was always the worst time of year was at the end of fire season cause everybody's kind of burned out on you being gone, your burnout on working so much, you know, in that amount of time during the fire season and the kids are getting ready to go back to school. My wife was a teacher and she's a little bit tense because she's getting ready to go back to work after summer break. And um, it's, it's just hard. I remember in 2000 they had epic fire season. We're down in the bitterroot doing rehab work clear into October, and we said, hey, we're going to run down into town and have a beer. We've got a designated driver. We're going to go out of camp and run into this little town and get a beer. We're all standing around nursing our first beer and water and whole, and somebody says, yeah, I, it was Mitch I think. And he says, yeah, I called home tonight. And I said, oh, how'd that go? And he says, ah, my wife started crying. I said, really? Me Too. And then next guy says, yeah, me too. There was five of us standing there and all five of us had called home before we

went into town and all five of us are wives were crying, you know? And it's just, they're, they're strong, amazing, resilient women to stay with guys that do what we do. But that being said, everybody has their limits. You know, it's tough.

Mitch Kearns: Yeah. There are 100% why we're still together. Our kids are the way they are.

Charlie Palmer: Yeah. Yeah. They're the super heroes. They're the strong ones. Yeah.

Keith Wolferman: There's no way you could do we, I, I could never accomplish what I was able to accomplish. Careerwise without the support network I had with my wife.

Mitch Kearns: Right. Yeah. She owes all the Crawdad. I mean I just went off and made the money and came home and messed it up a little bit and then again, and

Keith Wolferman: that was it. You know, you come home for a day or two or whatever else and they've got a system already established, they get to work in fine without you. There usually are. Generally it is, they're used to each other or they get a routine and all of a sudden you come in and you want to be the lead dog in it doesn't work anymore. Yeah. So after two days you're ready to go back to work cause you're getting in there ready for you to get ready for you to go to. And then when it like skid set, when fire season's over, you don't have that option anymore. You got to kind of be patient. And you know, it took me many years to figure it out that there's a disconnect here for a little while. We get an ease back into it. Right, right. Yeah.

Keith Wolferman: Hopefully the relationship is strong enough to weather that. That tough spot change gears on you a little bit. I, there's one thought that I did want to share is when the transition was made aware to me in the retirement, cause you have all these preconceived notions, there are certain events in life, marriage going in the military and everybody that's done it tries to tell you how it's going to be for you. And there's these universals but then everybody's experiences their own and it's different for everyone. But I did something, I told somebody I did something one day and I spent a lot of days, you know, away from home out in the field, some beautiful places that I worked in. But there was also some of the most glorious fall and spring days you've ever seen in your life. And I'm working 10 12 hour days in the parachute loft, just trying to keep shoots on the shelter and training and you look outside and just say, man, it's nice out there.

Keith Wolferman: I sure wish I could go outside today. And um, you do something and you stop and take a deep breath and he'd go, that was pretty cool. I've wanted to do that chore for 28 Years. And it just never had the time. And I just did it and that felt good. And then all of a sudden you're like, you know, today was a good day. I did a lot of really fun stuff today. And then you're like, wow, this has been a good week. And I've been just starting, you know, to try to build on that because raising kids and doing our job, you're wired so tight that you don't have the luxury of that mindfulness of being in the moment. A lot of times it's like you're just checked the box and move on. And that sad to say, but it's just, it's a

reality, you know? And they tell you all those kids are going to be gone before you know it and you're like, yeah, yeah, right.

Keith Wolferman: And then all of a sudden they are, and that's, that's how your job is. And one of the last things I wanted to share was, I remember having a real moment at work one day and I was like, I worked my butt off to gain this skill and to get good at it. And you're like, I thought to myself, do you want to retire and have somebody say, you know, I knew a guy that could do that once. Or do you want to retire and have a guy say that's pretty cool, where'd you learn that? Well this guy taught me this once and I, and I thought knowledge is power and it's pretty cool to be the guy with the cool skill or whatever it happens to be. But sharing that is so much more powerful, I think than, than to hold it on your own.

Charlie Palmer: Just say, this is, this is my thing. You know, cause though that person's getting it and chances are they're going to give it to somebody else too. Yeah. And in your legacy gets to live on a little bit because of that I think. Right. So skid, you've got some kind of cool coming up. Let's close out with that. You've been in this process of, uh, getting ready to go overseas for the d day. Jump into Normandy. June 6th is the June 6th was the beach landing and as the beach, the airborne operations jumped occurred the night of the fifth. Okay. So tell us about that process. If you're in Missoula or know what's going on around here, you'll know that for months now, the ADC three, Miss Montana has been worked on trying to get it airworthy. It was by happenstance, the same plane that delivered the smoke jumpers to man Gulch. Yep. And the Museum of Mountain flying has been working tirelessly to get that thing flying again, which it is now. And that plane is gonna leave tomorrow, I think. And join up eventually with a bunch of other aircraft and they're going to simulate this, uh, airborne operation that happened nearly 75 years ago. So bring us up to speed on what you've got going on.

Keith Wolferman: Brought to my attention that they were gonna have a pretty big event for the 75th anniversary of the invasion in Normandy. And so I got online and checked out this website called Dax over Normandy, short for Dakota Sky Trains to see 47 military version of the DC three. And they said you had to have so many static line jumps on a steerable round canopy and all this different stuff. So I just wrote a little application out of what, what skill set I had a parachute experience wise. And then all of a sudden they said, you know, you're in, so you have to, you know, pay him 850 bucks and then you, that covers you for a couple of nights, lodging in a practice, jumping England the night before on the fourth. And then we re rig in England. And then, uh, we're gonna go over and, and jump into the original drops on that one of the original drops ones they used in Normandy 75 years ago.

Keith Wolferman: And um, you know, there's still stone fences and fence posts and hedge rows and so the guys got to have his head on straight, but they call it now. Um, we had to get period correct uniforms. We had to get their steerable round military type parachutes. And uh, yeah, there's just a lot of stuff like that going on. And we're unique in that it's generated so much interest because of the history of

that airplane in this community that we have about 10 to 50 people on our crew alone. So we're going to show up with the plane and the paratroopers to fill it the other night that a big sendoff gala dinner and big band and everything, and it was 1940s tire. It was really fun. I go out to that airplane hangar, it just blows my mind. Those people had been working seven days a week, 10 to 12 hours a day.

Keith Wolferman: They have put so much into that aircraft, brand new engines, brand new avionics, brand new fuel tanks, propellers, everything. It's caused a ton of money. But uh, the community's really gotten behind it. And uh, they, they didn't want to call it the Miss Missoula. They wanted to call it the Miss Montana cause it's a, it's a grassroots effort statewide. It's not just this community. So you know, they, they're ready to head over there. They're going to go and fly to the east coast land, meet up with a bunch of other DC threes and then go and flights are four or five and they go to Newfoundland, Greenland, Iceland, and then Scotland and down England.

Charlie Palmer: So you're cracking silk over England is on the practice jump. Right. And then crack in Silico over France. Yup. As the, the reenactment

Keith Wolferman: and it's been really tight maintenance wife trying to get that aircraft ready. So the other day we were lucky enough to jump up and plains Montana and it was amazing. The school kids got out and watch the jump. They had fire engines and the JumpSport spot with American flags on top. And then the whole town went over to the airport and a plane landed and they crawled all over that thing. Looking at it. It was great. Just seeing the excitement and those kids.

Charlie Palmer: Was that your first a static line round jump in 11 years? Mm. Yep. Since 2007 how was that? I started breathing really hard at about a hundred feet because they could see how fast I was going over. Yeah, it did. Yeah. Your PLF was uh, it was adequate. It was good role. It had to have a good role cause I hit hard and as McClain would say so you could distribute the pain throughout your body. Yeah.

Keith Wolferman: And you're one of the younger ones jumping to, right.

Mitch Kearns: Um, yeah, there's, there's actually I'm a mixed bag of military and smoke jumpers on our crew and um, some of the military folks, we've got a couple of gals that jumped on active duty and in 25 years ago

Charlie Palmer: Well guys, they had been trying to pull this off to get both of you in here for a long time, and it's awesome on the feelings that I have to finally be able to pull it off and to have two guys that I really, really respect in here to chat about their perspectives. So thanks to both of you.

Mitch Kearns: Thank you. Thanks for having us.

Keith Wolferman: Careful what you wish for. And that is it for episode one of season three. We will catch you next time on the line.

Charlie Palmer: You've been listening to you on the line, a podcast for today's wild land firefighter, our audio engineer is, Mike Matthews, production assistant Joey Moore. And I'm the host Charlie Palmer. Thanks for listening. We hope to connect with you again in the future On the Line.