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William (Billy) Shott
November 14, 2018

Interview conducted by LuAnn Jones
Transcribed by Teresa Bergen
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Harpers Ferry Center
PO Box 50
Harpers Ferry, WV 25425
HFC_Archivist@nps.gov

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Interview conducted by
Lu Ann Jones

National Park Service Oral History Project
Operational Leadership

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Audiofile: SHOTT BILLY [November 14, 2018]

Narrator – Billy Shott
Interviewer – Lu Ann Jones

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Lu Ann Jones: So, I usually begin the interviews just with an introduction to say this is Lu Ann Jones. I'm here in Page, Arizona, Glen Canyon National Recreational Area, for Operational Leadership 10th Anniversary Summit. I work with the park history program. And today I'm interviewing—

Billy Shott: Billy Shott.

Lu Ann Jones: And you are?

Billy Shott: Superintendent of Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, and Rainbow Bridge National Monument.

Lu Ann Jones: Great. And do I have your permission to record this interview?

Billy Shott: Yes.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay. Let's see. There we go. It's working now. So, like I said, I do have, I'd like to just kind of give me some background, please, on when you were born, where you were born. A little bit about your personal background before you get to the National Park Service.

Billy Shott: Oh, sure. Yeah. I'll bring you right up to how I got started with the Park Service.

Lu Ann Jones: That would be great.

Billy Shott: I grew up in Colorado. Woodland Park, Colorado. Small town west of Colorado Springs, that used to be kind of a small mountain town. Now it's a bedroom community of Colorado Springs. Grew up there. Outdoorsy. All the recreation there was outdoors. And involved in sports. So fast forward, I go to school. I could slow down, but I'm going to jump way ahead.

Lu Ann Jones: Okay.

Billy Shott: End up going to college. Upon graduating with allied health degree, with a degree in practicing occupational therapy and healthcare administration,

well, I'll back up a little. Through school I worked for a number of different guiding companies, right? So, taking what I had done for recreation, and it was easy to kind of transfer that into working for different outdoor groups. Groups like Outward Bound, experiential learning program. I taught college students in general guiding. And it was a great lifestyle. Helped get me through college as well. But honestly, it's probably more for recreation than anything else.

Lu Ann Jones: Where were you in school?

Billy Shott: I went to school at, initially at Western State College. I transferred to Purdue and then came back and finished up at Colorado State University at Fort Collins. The big reason for coming back west was that that was really an eye opener to me, that I was that attached to the recreation. The outdoors. That part, especially Colorado and the west. So that was the reason for the big move there, to come back.

Billy Shott: Upon graduation, I was kind of pulled in two different directions. One, I just studied. Which if you think about it was in a sterile environment. Very structured in healthcare. And then what I really enjoyed doing, which was outdoor, unstructured, and working really closely with people. And so, I did both. I took different contract jobs working in different hospitals and starting at different clinics around the West again. But also started guiding. And instead of working for someone else, I started my own guiding company.

Lu Ann Jones: Was this river guiding?

Billy Shott: No. Mostly mountain guiding. So, we did rock climbing, ice climbing, everything from orienteering, mountaineering, throughout North America and South America. What I would do is I would work for several months at a contract job, and then when that contract was completed, sometimes I extended, but usually I did that, and I would take off and do some guiding trips. So, it was a pretty great lifestyle, especially for a young guy. And the best part, the genius behind it, if there was any, is when I would go to say Salt Lake City at a clinic there, I might be there for anywhere from three to six months I would get connected with their community colleges. I wouldn't make any money, but I'd offer different classes for adult learning through these community colleges. Of course, I had insurance in having a business. But after hours, on weekends, I would just do a beginning climbing class for adults, or beginning ice climbing class, or maybe a backpacking trip or mountaineering. And every time I did that, it got me outdoors and a lot of people, but I generated this enormous mailing list of folks that liked that type of activity. I could even organize that mailing list of those that wanted to do more or repeat students that had an interest in pursuing this as more recreation. So, I could put out really focused

advertisements for, say, a trip to climb a peak, Aconcagua in South America. So, I could set up maybe two or three trips for that particular climb in the seasons between working at a contract. So, it worked out pretty well. And I also consistently went to Alaska for that as well.

Billy Shott: I also had a friend that I worked and lived with in college, Dale Miller, who had gone to work for the Park Service in Talkeetna, Alaska. So, in my travels up there, we stayed in contact. He was a dear friend and, in many ways, a mentor. And he and the staff there that I got to know had jobs open up. At one point they said, "Oh, you should come work for the National Park Service." The first time I thought yeah, that sounds like fun, but probably not as much fun as I'm having now, you know, freewheeling around the West. But the second time I thought yeah, maybe that would be exciting and a little more consistent and perhaps even a little less stress at work. Plus, it's a beautiful place. Talkeetna, Alaska, you get to climb Mount McKinley. What's now known as Denali is part of the job. Very exciting. And of course, from the outside looking in, looking at the National Park Service, it's a great brand. It's a great reputation, and it seemed very professional. It's like that seems like a great organization. So, it's pretty easy to recruit.

Billy Shott: So, I was lucky enough to apply and get that position there. And that's how I started with the National Park Service.

Lu Ann Jones: What was that position?

Billy Shott: It was a mountaineering ranger for Denali National Park on Mount McKinley. Stationed out of the Talkeetna Ranger Station. It was a law enforcement position as well. And so, though I got started because of the climbing and the familiarity, there weren't too many people that would be able to do that, unbeknownst to me at the time, it opened up this whole career field as well. To be very honest with you, what I knew about the Park Service then was what I knew from working in and recreating in national parks. And what I knew they did at Talkeetna, which was manage a mountain program. So about one fraction of one one-hundredth of what the National Park Service does. But it was a great start and met great people. And I think that was your question. That's how I got started with the National Park Service.

Lu Ann Jones: Both in your business, and starting right off the bat in Denali, you must have been confronted with safety issues all the time, risk issues.

Billy Shott: Right. Right.

Lu Ann Jones: First, how did you handle that in your private business?

Billy Shott: Well, so in the private business, it was interesting. At the time, climbing was still a growing sport. It probably is today, but at the time, it was booming. It was also professionalizing itself. So, prior to that, there were no standards for mountain guiding. This was about the time when, I want to make sure I get my acronym right, I can double check it, United States, AMGA, American Mountain Guiding Association, it was kind of, it existed, but kind of in the fringes. But it all of a sudden started to play a major role in professional guiding in the United States. Europe, for example, has had that standard for decades prior to this. To where if you were going to guide in France, if you were to guide even in portions of Germany, you were going to have to A, work for an established guiding company there. Very different from what you might be able to do freelancing in the United States. And you were going to have to have their European standard for mountaineering. Which was super competitive, though not completely standardized at the time, but much more than anything we had in the United States.

Billy Shott: AMGA comes along and starts standardizing what guiding practices should be. So, you could get certified now through an accredited training program through basic rock-climbing instruction. Or alpine rock-climbing instruction. Designating the difference between the two. Mountaineering, ice climbing, river rafting, all the different sorts of guiding activities that you'd have. And that was all kind of happening at the same time. So, it forced those of us who were doing that, especially small guys like me that were really doing it for fun, as part of a lifestyle and something that we could do to keep in that realm, it forced us to up our game on that as well, which was great. In doing, in going through and practicing those standards did help quite a bit. But in retrospect, we had a long way to go. And personally, I did as well.

Billy Shott: So fast forward, now I'm working for the Park Service and working these standards. So, I'm learning a whole new set of standards for mountain safety and operations. I found that's evolving as well. And in the National Park Service, fast forward now, that's always been a challenge. For, to hire someone to perform technical mountain rescue let's say at Grand Tetons, you're probably not going to just pick someone off the street or in an existing position in the National Park Service and train them up to full competence. Just the other way around. Typically, you find someone that already has that skillset, and then you try to put them into the role of a ranger, right? And you think that might be easy, but it can be difficult. But I think the reason for that is it's just really difficult to, I think you have to love that, and able to get a lot of experience. And unfortunately, it's some of those gravity sports you learn through experience. Sometimes failures. And it's tough to substitute that. Especially at the time, when we didn't really have really firm standards for safety practices. So, you really wanted to get someone that apparently had these skillsets.

Billy Shott: In Denali, just knowing not everyone can go to 17 or 20,000 feet without getting sick. So, you wanted to make sure you got folks that had – and I remember my application, it was like how many times have you been above these different altitudes? That was a big deal, and I'm sure it still is today.

Billy Shott: So, the problem with that is you've got folks coming into the National Park Service, and into those positions, that have a different tolerance of risk. So, if you've been climbing for years independently, you've probably grown a pretty large tolerance to taking personal risks. For right or wrong. That's a philosophical discussion whether that's appropriate or not. But it's a fact. Then all of a sudden, you've hired this person. And to do that same activity, it's easy for them to transfer their own personal tolerance into what the agency's tolerance is, which is completely different. That's been something I had to learn myself, and have told team members for my entire career, once I got a hold of that in my own mind. It's like look, whatever you think is acceptable, I can guarantee you isn't acceptable. Our level for doing professional work is going to be much lower than that tolerance. And we've had some great discussions this week about that.

Billy Shott: So that was even a learning curve for me, and I'll be the first one to admit it. I mean, I won't speak for the others that I worked with, that would be unfair. But definitely myself. I was much more comfortable accepting my own personal risk. I literally remember thinking well, they're paying me to do this. I know what I'm doing. So, I'll just do it. So, to fast forward to what I've learned since then, I just shudder at some of my personal practices. And I know that that operation today is just like any operation, just continue to improve. And I know, I'm positive that's not happening today.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, can you give me an example of that? Of where you took a risk that you probably shouldn't have? Particularly compared to – well, where the standards differed even at the time, and you maybe ignored the standards of safety because of your own tolerance for personal risk?

Billy Shott: Yeah. And it's all, you know, for fear on commenting on an operation that I'm not familiar with anymore, I never want to pretend that I'm still familiar and an expert in that particular operation. But an example would be, I used to love to snowboard when I was there. So, I would find time. There's a lot of down time when you're at a base camp on a mountain. I would find time to go do a lot of that on my own and had this whole great place to do it. Some of it was – well, I'll put it this way, if I was supervising that operation today, I wouldn't allow an employee to do what I did then. It wouldn't be acceptable. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night. And are there ways to do it safely? Probably so. That's probably what's

occurring today. But that's just one example. You know, we at the time, I never thought about, well, I'll give you another example. Our patrols at the time, going on the high mountain, were over 20 days. And some of them, because of the season, would border on 30 days. That's a long time. Now your typical expedition on West Buttress might be 18 to 20 days. But that's an expedition doing their own thing if we're working professionally. And we're not there just to take care of ourselves; we're there to perform a job. That's a really long time. So, you get weaker. There's a benefit of being acclimatized. If you're living at 14,000 feet, once you get acclimatized, you're good. Our practice there was to get acclimatized and keep someone there as long as possible because they are acclimatized, and familiar. But what we didn't consider was how tired you get, right? We didn't consider what happens to someone when they're living on that diet for that length of time. And what the emotional stress is, especially if they're up there during a busy time of season where you see some disasters. You see some sad stories occur. You're treating a number of people that are ill.

Billy Shott: I know for a fact now they've shortened up those patrols to be more in line with what the particular employees are going through. So, there's an example I know they've made an improvement on. We had four rangers that did four different patrols at high elevation. I think they got more rangers doing that same work, so they would do it in smaller increments. And that speaks directly to work-rest ratios, and what stress does to human performance. I could give you a ton of other examples, but I really don't want to. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: Well so from Denali, where did you go? I guess at some point you decided I want this Park Service gig. Maybe I'll make this a career.

Billy Shott: Right, right. So yeah, you know, and honestly, when I first took that job, I told my friend that had helped recruit me in, I'll do this probably for a year or two, right? But next thing you know, a couple of years and I learned much more. I really became invested in that operation and finally felt like I could contribute to it just through some additional training and kind of looking, it was before this kind of started grass roots. But I had an interest in it even then.

Lu Ann Jones: You're talking about safe—

Billy Shott: Just safety in general. And safety training, organization. I think we can, I really felt part of a team and thought I could contribute, and we could be even better than we are now. So that was the first step.

Billy Shott: And second step, I got some great opportunities. I learned through formal training so much more. And I really felt like the park in that particular

unit, in [unclear] invested in me, and what I've learned since then is I'm a real sucker for recruitment. You know what I mean? If someone says they want me, I'm pretty sure that I want them. So, I really got that sense.

Billy Shott: Also learned about what the Park Service is all about. So, everything as basic as what our mission was, associated with the Organic Act. Some of the different land matters with issues we were having, everything from human waste to population. You know, at the time we were wrestling with snowmobiles and traditional use and all these different things. So, I love those issues and I found them to be incredibly complicated and complex and really fascinating. So, I love that as well.

Billy Shott: I also became a commissioned ranger as the job required. And I didn't know if I'd like that or not, but I really enjoyed my experience and training to become commissioned and a federal law enforcement officer. And that experience also opened me up to the rest of the Park Service. Up to that point, I knew everything about Denali. And then I'm in a situation for several months in a very controlled training environment, which I ate up? But also met some of my best friends today. I met the best man at my wedding. I met my wife there. And I still keep in touch with the folks from that. I learned what it's like to learn at the Smokies. I learned what it's like to work in Yosemite. And what it's like to work on the east coast, and all these different stories. And all of a sudden, I realized there's a whole other world within the franchise that I work in. So, it became fascinating.

Billy Shott: It wasn't long after I returned back to Talkeetna, worked a couple more seasons. But I think I knew there's a shift. Because I kept in contact with those folks, I think I knew at that point there was no hurry to do it, that I'd probably be moving on. And so that's what I ultimately did. Coincidentally from there I moved to here, to Glen Canyon, as a ranger. So huge change, right? Especially for me thinking I had the best job in the world, I was getting paid to climb and do what I liked to do. But I made this big shift. And it was not just a job shift or even a career shift, but it was a giant lifestyle change for me as well. And one that I struggled with a little bit, because I really got separated from this climbing community. It didn't just exist in the park service but existed worldwide. I was all of a sudden separated from that a little bit. But it was a valuable experience because I also learned that where I was very small work group and being able to contribute, like I said before, just based off of the experience and the skills and what we were working with, found myself here in a completely different environment, and having to learn a whole lot of other stuff. So, kind of starting in a way over again to learn a whole different skill set there as well.

Lu Ann Jones: When did you come here? What position did you come—

Billy Shott: As a field ranger. Yeah. It was a field ranger. It was a lateral, so I didn't make a grade change in coming over at all. After a short time, I gained some responsibilities. What I found was, what I learned in Alaska in this tight knit group of reacting to short term emergencies on a regular basis, I was able to take, I found a way to contribute. I was able to take those principles, whether it was in [intimate] command structure, search and rescue, team response, all those things that I'd been living in, I applied here. And it helped enormously. Because I just felt like now, I know what I can contribute.

Billy Shott: So, it's really funny to come back here now in a completely different role. We still have some employees that are working here that was working here when I was here before. So, some great friendships. But they've told me, oh, yeah, like they still have the map cases that I put together. And some of the SARs cache materials, things like that. So that was the stuff that I was able to do. I wasn't an expert in structural fire. I'd learned that from scratch. But I could provide some of the other services that the rangers here do on a regular basis. So that was fun.

Billy Shott: From here, I moved on and promoted to Lake Mead, where I became a supervisor there. And a just slightly larger and different type of complex operation. And that was a great experience. We stayed there for several years. Got married there. And again, applied some of those same principles. What I was finding was my niche was probably not so much on the technical aspect, but more of the organizational and planning. I think that's where I found I could be, maybe it was a vacuum that I found in most places that I went to, so it was something that I could contribute, a way I could contribute.

Lu Ann Jones: So how did you begin to get, I guess the question would be more involved in safety issues and eventually find your way to Operational Leadership, or begin to contribute to that idea?

Billy Shott: So, go back to Talkeetna. I had this idea of proportional risk and responsibility and a sense of what that responsibility was in the outdoors as well, by working for the guiding companies on my own. So, I do know there were some different standards there, although we had a standard that we worked with at Talkeetna. We had a couple of different events occur. We were surrounded by fatalities at Denali. And some of those could be pretty personal. Sometimes you knew the folks, because it's a rather small climbing community. And so, I'll tell you, that's a different experience all together. A lot of this is just face to face. It's just the environment that you're working in. And so that has an impact on you as well. It definitely had an impact on me. It changed the way I looked at what I'd loved doing recreationally for years. And probably led to me leaving. There's probably a factor somewhere in my sinew.

Billy Shott: But there was an event that occurred there where we lost a volunteer climbing ranger. Quick background. You would be as a ranger, one of the four high-altitude mountaineering rangers, you would be assigned to patrol about a month. Which you would be responsible to get your volunteers to work with you. So heavily dependent on a volunteer program, we typically get volunteers from the Air Force 210, that's a para-rescue jumper that worked out of Anchorage. There was a training opportunity for them. So, we could count on them. Most of us had generated relationships with physicians that liked to do mountain medicine, or they had a research project that required time at elevation. They were a great asset. To have a physician, a medical doctor, on site was a huge benefit for us and increased our capabilities for applying emergency medicine. But you'd fill in the rest of the blanks with other climbers that we would trust. And folks would apply for that. The reality is, most of us had relationships with the climbers and we'd ask them, say, "You want to join me for three months to do it?" And folks were pretty honored to do it, so we got some good people to do that.

Billy Shott: Mike Vanderbeek was one that came as a volunteer to do that. He had actually applied for a job in this station. And had been given a job offer just prior to this patrol. But he wasn't on the books yet, but he was going to come on this patrol. Well, we had a party go missing. They fell off of the ridge between 16,000 and 17,000 feet on the Peter's Glacier side in the middle of a storm. And Mike and another climbing ranger were descending in that same area, so we dispatched them to do a quick search to see if there was any sign of what might have occurred. Probably knowing that it was not a good outcome, just based off the trail up there. There's really nowhere to go but way, way far down. But during that incident, Mike fell. And we never found him. So, we lost – So we lost Mike. And I was there at 14,000 feet. My friend Darrell, who was there as well, and we were transitioning teams—

[End Track 1. Begin Track 2.]

Billy Shott: —Darrell was there, we were coming in, and there was just a couple of days overlap. It was during that window while we were all there that this occurred. So that was a big deal. So, we lost Mike. And there's just no escaping that. So, we dealt with it, some of the other complications that it brings back is you know, when you communicate there, everyone hears you, right? So even when you do, you have a radio phone, you can call to your IC, which is our ranger station below. So, you've got this huge event. You can imagine how big the search became now, all of a sudden, we just lost two people. One of them, one of ours. So, it's a pretty big response. But every bit of communication's being listened to. You are in a fishbowl. So, every action you take is not only being heard, but being scrutinized as

well. So, we did our very best to do everything. But not only could every ranger, every camp up there hear us on the radio, but everyone could, if they cared to listen to the radiophone conversations, they could hear that, as well as the media out of Anchorage. Right? This is just fair game. So, everyone could listen to that. Of course, we also investigated that as well. So, everything was scrutinized. So that was tremendously difficult. Losing a friend and a colleague. On your watch. And then having every action that takes place afterwards scrutinized, right? With huge emotions. And then of course the investigation or review that occurs afterwards looks at every action prior to that. So, you're really put under a microscope.

Billy Shott: You know, I think despite that and the emotions that occurred kind of in the time that were short-lived, the overall product didn't show any malfeasance or anything. But what it did show, at least to us, I'm not sure who the audience was for those reports, I think it was a report that [unclear] like okay, let's not do that again. But for us that was involved, I think we all thought we had to do something, you know? Maybe everyone else thinks we're okay, but I think amongst our cadre, I think we questioned ourselves. It's like, how did that happen? That should never happen. So that's tough. I know that my friend Darrell's carried that with him for a long time. You know, I have. And it's always been something that I've remembered. That's my greatest nightmare, is to have to experience that again. Whether it's something as personal as this, or if it's an employee here that's layers of supervision away, that would destroy me.

Billy Shott: So that's where my commitment, I think, has come from. Even at the time, I probably didn't synthesize it well enough to know that. But when I first saw some of the principles that the Coast Guard was using, the materials that Craig Geis had developed, before I knew who owned it, and having discussions now with other Park Service colleagues, like Scott Wanek, close friends, that's where I started to see the real values. Like this is what we needed. This is what that question mark was that was left over all of us. This is what we needed. And so, it was just easy to do everything and anything that I could do personally. And as Scott says, within our sphere of influence to promote that. So that's where my drive has come from. I think that's what you're asking. Sorry.

Lu Ann Jones: It is, and it's very interesting. I mean, I'm really interested in these moments. But maybe at the time you didn't realize this was the starting point, but in hindsight you see that as a place where these concerns are really born. So, I think they're kind of fascinating stories. And clearly, as you say, you carry it with you for a lifetime.

Billy Shott: Right. Right.

Lu Ann Jones: So where were you when you intersected with people like Scott and David and began to get part of a critical mass that's talking about this kind of philosophy?

Billy Shott: Right.

Lu Ann Jones: Is that the right question to ask you at this point?

Billy Shott: Yeah, that's fine.

Lu Ann Jones: Or were there other steps? Take me through the steps I need.

Billy Shott: (laughs) No, no, I think you got it. So, Dave was, that incident that I just told you about, I'd asked Dave to come along to assist me with that particular patrol, so he was there with me as well. So, it's something, an experience, anyways, not a good one. I think it meant different things to each of us, but it was an experience that we shared. And we had our own experience in performing our own search now for Mike after that. Yeah. So anyways, so he was a good friend of mine even at that point. I'd gone to FLETC with him, so he was one of the individuals that I met when I was back in that training facility. And we just remained good friends up to that point and to this day. And so, we'd also, in addition to being great friends, have been great colleagues, as well, as far as just sharing ideas. I can't tell you how many times he's passed something on. It's like, "Hey, check this out," and was able to try that same thing out and has success with it, and vice versa. So even to this day I'll send him something and he'll send me something. It's like hey, what do you think? And we'll try this out in different areas. So, we've been kind of on parallel career paths. So, there is a story there in itself. And so, Dave came to work for me as well in Intermountain Region, where we got to work on some of this together, and that was some great synergy.

Billy Shott: But before that, when this was popping up, Dave had gone to Lake Mead. It was after I'd left, but we had that connection in working in the same park with some of the same employees at the same time. And he had done a lot to promote the safety program there. And this regional chief ranger at the time was Scott. I think their connection was through park medic, I believe. They'd gone to park medic class together. My wife was also in that class. Just a weird set of circumstances, wasn't it, for a small service. Scott and I had both been climbing rangers in our careers. So, we had a connection as well. And though we'd never worked together in the same unit, had found ourselves in the same place, working on the same things together. And so, had a good relationship. Plus, he had trained with Beth, my wife. So, we had this kind of triad relationship already.

Billy Shott: When Scott had discovered Craig's material, working in central office, I'm projecting here, but I think he needed a place to try this out operationally as well. And of course, Dave in Lake Mead, being a big operation, was a great place to test it. And of course, that transferred over, he shared information with me, so I was able to take that Intermountain Region.

Lu Ann Jones: And what was your position at Intermountain?

Billy Shott: So, my first position there was branch chief of law enforcement. And then while there after a couple of years, I was promoted to the regional chief ranger position. It was at that point where I was able to hire Dave into the branch chief position. So, we were sharing this information. At the same time, about that same time, I was faced with these really unique challenges that I'd never seen before. And also trying to figure out how do I work in a regional office, right? I'd been hands on, working in a field unit or a training environment. So, you know, I didn't get a lot of guidance coming into that job. And it's like, what do people do in regional offices? I'm still asking that question today, in some ways. But I've got a regional director that I really appreciate it and that he said, work on this. I was thrilled to have a direct assignment. But then I was just at a loss. How do I address this? I need a compass bearing. Fortunately, that's about the time we started having, it was shortly after we started having conversations about operational risk management, the Coast Guard model and what ultimately has become Operational Leadership.

Billy Shott: So, I glommed on to those principles and studied those principles as much as possible. There were days where, perhaps Dave and I or Scott and I were on the phone together in a row. Just like experimenting with these concepts, what that meant, what it looked like. Then this PowerPoint started to generate as well, and grow, just willing to explain the concepts. We all took that, added to it, added our own personal stories to it. And like Scott said in his reading yesterday, we brought that everywhere. Anyone that we could get to sit down and listen to it, we'd give them that presentation and ask them to look at their operations.

Billy Shott: I took the principles, and I didn't have a park or field employees to practice it. But by that time, I had these projects from the regional director, and I realized, that's not the work you do at a regional office, anyways. You just try to raise the bar. And I started to use it to apply programmatically.

Billy Shott: So, the border was an exploding issue at the time, like I'd mentioned. And there was, at the time we had what I call mission creep. Which I talk about in Operational Leadership, so it's something I can attach onto. We had a lot of our law enforcement rangers spending a majority of their time, if not

all of it, working on drug interdiction on the border. Which is absolutely a crime that falls within the realm of what they need to investigate and enforce, but we weren't really prepared for it, training-wise. And a lot of these different units, I'll call them now, that's what they call themselves, on the park, got their own training. So, they felt very competent in doing it. But you know one ranger was murdered. And so, it was very clear that we weren't fully prepared for this. So, we used Operational Leadership or the [unclear] principles to do a programmatic review of the law enforcement operation at Organ Pipe.

Lu Ann Jones: Can you explain how those principles applied to that kind of review? A specific kind of case study? Because I think it would be very helpful.

Billy Shott: Yeah. Well, I'll give you, there were two elements here. One was the risk assessment, and one was the development of the border strategy. That's a little bit more complicated. But the first one was like how do we address what we're doing down there? And the question was, is this what we should be doing?

Lu Ann Jones: You're talking about intervening in the drug trade.

Billy Shott: Right. Exactly. Is it what we should be doing? And, if it is, are we doing it right? And then, what's the basic working conditions down there? Is it safe for anybody out there? At the time, it's fascinating, but the thought process there was like, well, we need to close the parks. And Organ Pipe actually closed off public lands to visitors for years based off of, I don't want to edit this, but based off of really weak authorities that probably weren't being used appropriately. But they did. And so alarmist? Absolutely. Appropriate? Maybe. But how do we know? So that was the challenge. And of course, the last thing we wanted to do was have another ranger shot, killed, whatever. And at the same time, we're hearing from the rangers in the parks about how dangerous it is. This was right when, oh, what's the publication? Not *National Parks,* I can't remember now, it was to do with [reporters?], Organ Pipe was identified as the most dangerous park in the national park system. It was because of this activity. So, all this attention. Now the Department of Interior is getting involved. The Border Patrol. So, it's just like, ugh.

Billy Shott: So, we went in. We had to do a risk assessment. At that time, we took the most basic tool, the most basic concept from operational risk management, and shooting from the hip went down and did I called a programmatic review. And we did a GAR. So, you've heard [unclear]. Now the GAR originally intended to be used just before you and I go out on a hike, something very situational, right? We can evaluate the weather right now, etcetera. This is where we used it to evaluate a whole program. So, we took a chance. We tried it a few times a few different places. So, I invited

Scott to join me to go to, from his region, to come to some of the parks within my region to try this. I really wanted some backup. And we struggled through it, developed the first report, and it was rough, for sure, but a complete success. Because what we're able to do is confront, with the rangers, right, and you'd think, right, you have a bunch of rangers working with the regional chief ranger at this point. You'd think we would be on the same side. This was what was so difficult, is that it was completely contentious, right? They were adamant that what they were doing was what they had to do. And by this time, [I?] was starting to take the position that this was probably something we shouldn't do. Well, no, it's probably something we're not doing right, and it's probably something that we should be doing anyways. So, the chief ranger down there [unclear] probably still curses me, right? But it was very, it was a make-or-break moment for my career, there's no doubt about it.

Billy Shott: But we went down there. And going through that exercise, what it did, so figure that we're going to talk about tracking, right? This is man tracking, out in the desert, camouflaged, with high powered rifles, sneaking up on folks carrying bundles of marijuana across the border, right? So, we evaluated probably 15 different activities that they were doing. This was one of them, and probably the most contentious, so it's the best example for evaluating that.

Billy Shott: Now all along they're saying how dangerous it is down there. So, we go through, we rate each one of the components on a GAR list on that. And as you might expect, 8, 9, 10, 9, 8. It turns out to be super risky, just as they'd been telling us. And then [unclear] how do you mitigate that, then? If you're going to continue this, if that's going to be a continued activity, how do you make this safe? Well once you'd added the safety components that we know from this program into that particular activity, it became pretty obvious. It's like there's no way to really make this activity acceptable, right?

Lu Ann Jones: So, you're talking about people with the high-powered rifles tracking stuff—

Billy Shott: Yeah. Yeah. So, is the environment safe? Oh, no, it's the middle of the desert. And are there any contingency resources? Well, no, absolutely not. No one knows where we are. Were there hazards [with these other bad guys?] So, it turned out to be really obvious. And the rangers at the park had to confront that. It's like yeah, this is really unsafe. But they wanted to justify it. And so that happened over and over and over again. And I'll never forget this, I'll credit it to Scott Wanek, because he was there, because I remember talking about it as we were writing the report. It's like, he said, "It seems like the only way that these rangers can justify these particular activities is because they all have Spidey sense, right?" So,

he was referencing Spider Man and the superpowers that Spider Man has to sense all these different things. And that always stuck with me, right? And it became code for justifying something that you probably know you should be doing, anyways. Like that's completely unsafe, but I can do it because well, I'm special. So that became the line in the sand that for years – years – we worked on overcoming. We ended up finally changing that operation and getting those principles in their planning documents. That took years. We developed a border strategy based on those same principles which required all the parks that had any sort of border traffic influence to perform those same type of programmatic risk assessment and redo them over time. We did those personally with each of the parks and the superintendents. That turned into a document that almost reluctantly, everyone signed off on, and it stands today. It's based off the four tenets of OL that we completely stole at the time. (laughs) But it's now recognized as Operational Leadership. So that was the first time that I'm aware of using that particular simple risk assessment tool.

Billy Shott: I'll be honest. I didn't understand, none of us understood the totality of Operational Leadership at the time, what all the different components were. And what really sold the program initially was that risk assessment. Because folks could understand it and use it the next day. So, we used it at a big programmatic level. And so that was the genesis of that. But it identified things like the strategy should be not to do those functions, but to make Border Patrol's job easier so that they can do that stuff, right? They've got the manpower. And by the way, for like tracking, we talked to Border Patrol. They were like, "Oh, we'd never do that." So that was telling as well. But you know, so instead of spending money on putting fences around our housing units in border parks, it's like no, why don't we spend money building houses that we can house Border Patrol agents there, so that they've got a presence as well. Helping them do the job, so we don't have to do it. We identified that putting up – this is controversial today – but putting up fences or walls was actually really beneficial. So, the biggest risks that our rangers down there were encountering was when there was cross-border traffic in a vehicle. There was more resource damage because they were driving off road. And when they got on a road, there was a high-speed pursuit, usually ended in a crash, almost every time. And they're using spike strips and everything else. And then potential for showdowns, because those vehicles were usually armed. Once they're at the Normandy type barriers, you can climb over them, but you can't drive over them. And at once that shut down vehicles. But that was very controversial even then, putting any sort of wall up on the border. But what the strategy identified was like no, that's an okay strategy. Even though it's in proposed wilderness. We understand that, the risk of the resource degradation was worth the gain of the huge safety.

Billy Shott: That transferred on to working with the superintendents and putting up these temporary towers to use. You've heard the term, instead of a solid wall, it's a virtual wall. With this new technology, it's basically these giant, super sensitive motion sensors. You know, initially our park superintendents were like we can't, they would fight the Border Patrol, say we can't allow you to put these towers in because it's in proposed wilderness, right? But we got to the point it's like, you know what? The small sacrifice of that platform is probably worth it. It's probably worth the gain that we'll get in keeping our employees safe, and our visitors at this point as well. And yeah, it will require an access road that has to be cherry stemmed in, but you know, we got there, right? And it was those principles, talking about risk and gain, it turned a black and white issue into one like oh, well maybe this is something that's worthwhile doing. And there were tons of other unintended benefits. Our relationship with Border Patrol improved. We said yeah, I think it's a success story. A tenuous one, though. I think that could, I'm pretty certain that same issue could spring up again in the next decade. So, it takes a lot of diligence. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: So how have you seen Operational Leadership become operational throughout the service? How do you account for that, I guess would be one question.

Billy Shott: Yeah. Well, I think we heard a lot of great examples today. We had two different sessions yesterday and today from different experts on how they've seen it implemented. I think those are all really good examples. From my perspective, I think it, again, [unclear] this steady pressure just relentlessly applies. A relatively small cadre of people just kept pushing it and pushing it. To get it established, it finally took us getting Craig Geis, and identifying that this is the term we want, but we certainly can't use it until we have a means of owning it. So that was a big portion of it that was logistical. But we also had to convince our own organization. If you think about it, National Park Service was working on NPS Safe at the time. I'll never forget our director doing webinars wearing the NPS Safe shirt before that and during. And you know, it was struggling. I don't think that meant a whole lot to field staff. It was like NPS Safe, what is that? And safety was safety. And at least in my experience, anything that was safe, anything that really had a direct impact on my safety or my team's safety, was done locally. Whether it was done in Talkeetna, it was done here in a ranger station, it was done at Lake Mead on Boulder Beach or in the headquarters building, I'd never seen any sort of negative or positive influence from any sort of broad safety program, so I just didn't see it.

Billy Shott: And that PowerPoint I was talking about that generated, there was a couple of things in that that I think really grabbed people's attention. One was it showed the picture of every single NPS employee that's ever died

on duty. Super impactful. And then the other was, and it asked the question and it really pissed people off, you'd ask the question how many can name what the National Park Service safety program is? And we'd ask people in a class to raise their hand. And as you might expect, it would be like maybe half the class would say oh, I've heard of NPS Safe. And then the next question was like, okay, good, NPS Safe. Tell me what NPS Safe is. And it was just telling. It was unfair, but it was just telling. Because it was like, uh, I don't know. No one knew. It had no relevance at all with anyone [unclear]. And it was probably a mixed blessing. Because it got the attention of our safety office because I believe they were upset, right? And I would be, too. If I'm trying to get a program started and then I see another program that's coming out of nowhere that's admittedly probably half-baked, and it's dissing the program I'm trying to get started, I'd be upset, too, right? Professionally. I'd be like hey, you're part of the problem. I need your help to get this started. But that discussion occurred. But it caused that discussion to occur.

Billy Shott: I remember sitting down with Scott and with Dave, together or independently, and talking to Louis Rowe, who was our risk officer back in Washington at the time. And you know, he was like, "We have a safety program." I remember those discussions. But I think unless, I'm completely guessing here. But if we hadn't upset him and others, our safety community, so to speak, by using that tactic, I don't know if the discussion would have ever occurred. If the discussion never occurred, we wouldn't have gotten the national attention, and it wouldn't have gotten the eyes. And I remember the day I was in my office in Denver. I wish I remembered the date. When we were in the midst of our frustration and trying to get, it was like, this needs to be something that the National Park Service supports on a formal basis. And Louis Rowe, who's also a dear friend, was in the office. He came by and he asked some questions about it. And I remember, I'll never forget this, he was sitting in the chair. He's like, "What do we need to do to get this started, then?" So, he became a huge ally, supporter, and big element for us to get national attention. At the same time, there's stuff occurring that I'm not even aware of. There's discussions occurring on the National Safety Leadership Council that got stood up, and this was a big focal point. Cicely Muldoon now, we've got superintendents and other leaders in the Park Service that are having discussions at higher levels that we're not aware of. And it gathered enthusiasm. So that's not implementing the principles of OL, but I think it's the genesis of the program actually standing up.

Billy Shott: Then within a couple of years, we have a fulltime, dedicated position. And that's when Mark enters the picture, right? And he'd been practicing in his own realm, I believe at Minuteman, I think that's where he—

[End Track 2. Begin Track 3.]

Billy Shott: —he came from. And I was able to be on the panel and interviewing for that. I think we interviewed three or four people. And Mark ultimately was obviously the right guy at the right time for the right job. And then we felt like well, we got it. And we took the advice from Craig. Craig's advice was like don't, he was adamant, don't put it in safety. Have it be a standalone program. So, I think that's the genesis of the position that works in risk management. Yeah, it was really exciting. It was really exciting just to have it get started. And the classes starting. And then it just, I mean, it really is such a great program that you don't need an implementation plan. You just need to get people familiar with it, and there's people just almost literally dying to use it, there are so many people that were in the same boat that I was. Looking for a compass bearing. Looking for some system that I could apply to these things that we'd been living in. We know there's a better way to do it. That's the same experience that Dave had, and Scott had. What we found is like there's a thousand people that were looking for the same thing. And we did initially look at this as rangers. But that was just our own comfort level. But then we realized that there were folks in Facilities that were thinking yeah, I've been thinking about this, too. And here's a way I can apply it. and it gave a way to communicate these concerns that we had that really, you know, leadership, superintendents, regional directors, you just can't ignore. Because you can look at them and say those are sound principles. So, I think the implementation was easy.

Lu Ann Jones: Interesting.

Billy Shott: You just had to get it in front of people that understood it and would use it. The hard part was just getting enough people to understand it. And again, that internal battle of like, please recognize this.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, how long have you been here at, when did you become a superintendent?

Billy Shott: So, I came here in October 2015. From, I was working a chief ranger position. And that's when I came back to Glen Canyon.

Lu Ann Jones: So, was the Safety Committee already here then at that point?

Billy Shott: The Employee Safety Committee?

Lu Ann Jones: Yes.

Billy Shott: Yeah, it was. It was functioning at the time. And I think in different degrees of participation. And I remember having a discussion, Betsy's been the common thread in that. It just tickles me. You have to know

Betsy. But when I learned that she was chairing that committee, I was like, really? It just didn't make sense to me, based off of the little framework that I had at the time. But it just tickles me that she's taken that on, and she's really committed to it and that's grown. So, I think they wanted more life. They wanted, that group is super powerful. So, we've listened and supported, shown up, allowed time. And that's easy, too. It hasn't taken anything special to get that group, there's people now putting requests in to be on that committee. It's really just about recognizing it. and we have had a strong message here for safety. And that's, yeah, you know, I think honestly, I don't think that's a difficult lift. Just genuinely letting folks know that that is a real priority, and then acting like it's a real priority, and then following up as if it's a real priority. We all respond to that. We all respond to that. We want that. And so, I think, I'd rather not share this with folks, because I think it will offend some people, but whatever you want to do with, I mean, you can – but folks talk about safety cultures all the time like it's the holy grail that's impossible to find. And I've never understood that. I believe them. (laughs) But it's just not been an experience of mine. Or whether it's a safety culture or whether it's a civil culture, you know, that's a big thing now. I just don't – there's no silver bullet for it. It's just, you just have to do it. If you fake it, you'll fail miserably. (laughs) Right? But I don't know, that's just a personal experience of mine. I just don't think, it's just something to do. So, I don't know what the challenges are. But I know that would probably really turn some people off.

Lu Ann Jones: Well, are there questions you wish I had asked you that you'd like to—

Billy Shott: No, that piece of work was a landmark as well. That was pre-Craig Geis, but it was a later stage of understanding these principles. But we also, you'll recognize that I worked with a representative from the Coast Guard. And this was interesting for me. I'll just mention this, and you can follow up if you need to. All of this, the border work, was focused on the field, where it's meant to be. But what this showed us, and showed me personally, is that there's a real management component to this as well.

Lu Ann Jones: We're talking about Sylvan Pass?

Billy Shott: Yes. So, the heart of that is evaluating using a Howitzer. The genesis is using a Howitzer, a World War Two Howitzer cannon to control avalanches on Sylvan Pass. But it's part of this huge planning effort that Yellowstone had and EIS and trying to get a record decision based off of their [unclear] plan. They're super controversial.

Billy Shott: So, this is where Mike Snyder again came and said, can you do this? And of course, naively said, oh, yeah. (laughter) So find myself knee deep in it. But that was interesting because we did the risk analysis at the field level.

Just so you know, you'll see we evaluated dozens of methods to keep snow off of people at the Sylvan Pass area. So, everything from closing it to building a tunnel, and everything in between. So, all these different methods. And we brought in a panel of experts from around the state on avalanche control, risk management and everything. So, it was very risk-based. But I realized that we were applying these principles to management to make decisions. And they may never know, or need to know, what the actual risk is of firing a cannon at ten below zero. But that was the data and the principles needed to make a decision. And that was a huge, I think it was valuable to the agency, it was a huge eye opener to me. and I got to refine those thoughts as I was asked to present this at Environmental Conflict Resolution, ECR, out of Tucson. It's a nonprofit subsidized conflict resolution group. You can contract with them; they can help you with some of these complicated issues. And so, they held a conference every year, so I got invited to go down as a speaker and present. And first it was like oh, what do I present? But I worked with a facilitator that helped me with this. Could not get the Coast Guard guy to come back, which was fine. But we developed a presentation. That, in the course of putting a presentation together, I realized wow, this is valuable. This is something that someone could use and apply to developing a [unclear] [SEA?], which we're working on now, or an ORV-EIS plan. The same principles apply. And you know, as you know, we've got Operational Leadership for managers now. I don't think this was the genesis of that, but it's proven to be the case. But personally, I realized, wow, this isn't just a compass bearing to me to solve a problem or to run a high-risk operation. It's actually a great tool for me to use in my NPS career. And I've depended upon that countless, every week I use something in addressing a management issue, whether it's a risk to employ, maybe it's a risk to publicity, getting bad publicity. Maybe it's a risk in natural resources or physical resources, or how we work with the county and a tribe. So, yeah, obviously I'm a fan boy. But it's versatile. And that's what that proved. And it's pretty polished project. So that's the only thing I'd add, so you have a little more context to see that.

Lu Ann Jones: Good. Well thank you so much. Thank you very much for doing this.

Billy Shott: Yeah. I feel ridiculous now, but that was a lot of fun. (laughter)

Lu Ann Jones: Well, good.

[End Track 3.]

[END OF INTERVIEW]