

VALUING A FIREFIGHTER'S LIFE NO ONE SHOULD EVER DIE TO SAVE A HOUSE

By Ray Ford

At the 6a.m. briefing on Wednesday morning May 6, engine crews, hotshots, dozer crews, water tenders and other firefighting resources assemble at Earl Warren Showground for the day's assignments on the Jesusita Fire which began the afternoon before.

Incident strategy for the day is to begin establishing perimeter control, including direct attack by the hotshots, use of water dropping helicopters on the San Roque side of the fire to cool things down while the crews cut containment line and the addition of both large and small fixed wing aircraft to begin laying down lines of retardant on the east and south end of the fire. Their goal is to slow down the advance of the fire perimeter, which is expected to pick up later in the day, allowing hand crews on that end to begin building containment line.

An Air of Confidence

Despite the strong push the fire made on Tuesday afternoon to the top of Inspiration Point, as the evening winds died down so did the fire. Wednesday morning seemed like a day in which firefighters might be able to get things under control. "I think we were all pretty confident that morning," Santa Barbara City Fire Chief Pat McElroy remembers.

At this point the fire is still burning but it appears firefighters will have a good shot at containing it. In a report by CAL FIRE that reviewed reports of serious Injuries, accidents and near-miss incidents titled the "Jesusita Fire Burn Over," the fire was described as "punking around" that morning, thus providing the critical time to prepare for what might come later.

Despite the air of optimism, fire resources are beginning to pour into the Santa Barbara area. Given our recent fire history — including the Tea Fire, which consumed more than 200 homes just eight months earlier — no one worries about how many engine crews to order, how many air attack resources to request or what it will cost to bring them here. When Santa Barbara wildfires break out along the urban-wildland interface, billions of dollars of property are at risk.

NOAA weather reports indicate warmer temperatures and winds later in the day. Sundowner conditions are a possibility but hopefully not until later in the evening, towards dusk. Despite the promise of good firefighting conditions, in the back of their minds those on the fire line know these could change at any time.

Firefighting Orders and Watch Outs

In 1957, after several decades of tragic fires in which numerous firefighters were killed, the Forest Service commissioned a task force to review 16 fires between 1937-1956, assess causes for the loss of lives and to recommend safety guidelines to help prevent future tragedies.

Out of the task force effort came what are known as the ten “Standing Firefighting Orders” and “18 Watch Out Situations.” Among these is Order #2, which is to know what the fire is doing at all times and Order #3, to base all actions on current and expected behavior of the fire.

Three specific scenarios play in the firefighters’ minds as the assignments are being handed out. One of these reflects what might be called typical fire behavior, by which the fire front moves uphill following the steep topography to the crest of the Santa Ynez Mountains, with the radiant heat and flames preheating the brush up above, creating firestorm conditions. It is also possible the fire could continue in an eastward direction across Mission Canyon and following the base of the mountains into the Montecito area.

But what worries the Incident Command Team the most is the potential for sundowner conditions, strong downhill winds and the searing heat that comes with them. This would mean a direct hit on the homes immediately below Inspiration Point. Squeezed between there and Foothill Road are more than 2,000 homes from Northridge Road east to the far side of Mission Canyon, many of them packed like sardines in the Mission Canyon Heights area.

Structure Triage

While hot shot crews are busy making their way towards the upper east and west flanks of the fire line to begin building containment line and air resources are working to slow down the movement of the fire line, scores of Type 1 and Type 3 strike teams have been assigned to protect the areas considered to be the most threatened, including Spyglass Ridge, Holly Road, and Mission and Tunnel Roads. Typically a Type 1 strike team consists of five engines, each with a crew of from 3-4 fire fighters and a Battalion Chief — meaning that from 50-60 engine crews are moving into the neighborhoods with more on the way.

By 9a.m. most of the strike teams are up on the ridge conducting safety briefings, assessing locations for safety zones — an area large enough to which they can retreat should the fire approach their positions — and evacuation routes.

With relatively mild fire behavior above them, the engine crews are able to spend the morning performing what is known as “structure triage,” including moving combustible items away from the homes and outbuildings; cutting out vegetation near the homes; cleaning out rain gutters; and applying aluminum foil to vent openings. At the same time they begin positioning their engines in defensive positions and begin laying down hose lines that will allow them to spray water on advancing flames from multiple spots around the structures.

Fighting a wildfire in the midst of such conditions is difficult at best and exposes the firefighters to potentially lethal conditions should the fire front head their way. The streets are narrow, winding and overgrown with brush, with little room for the engine crews to pass one another should they need to. The private driveways in areas like Spyglass Ridge, Owl Ridge, Holly Road and Palomino Road are even steeper and narrower.

Making things even more difficult is the fact that almost all of the engine crews are from out of town, don’t know the territory and don’t know how a fire behaves on the Santa Barbara

front when a sundowner is in play. In a nutshell we are asking firefighters from out of the area to risk their lives for people they don't know, in an area most of them have never been before and most likely may not ever be again.

"Every year all of the firefighters go through what is called 'Critical 24' training to prepare us for wildland interface fires," Mike Mingee, the Fire Chief for the Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Protection District tells me. "The Standing Orders and Shout Outs, along with the training should allow us to be prepared for fighting a fire safely wherever we go."

Unfortunately, when conditions change as rapidly as they did the afternoon of May 6, the firefighters discover they are not prepared for what comes next.

Fire Blows Up

At one of the houses considered particularly vulnerable, 1495 Spyglass Ridge Road, Ventura County Engine Crew E-54 begins pre-positioning resources should they be needed, including hose lines around the main house and driveway and three self-contained breathing apparatus (SCBA) inside the living room of the main house. By noon, much of the preparation has been completed and the crews are completing final preparations.

Then, almost like a switch has been turned on, the winds begin to blow, directly downhill and directly at the engine crews throughout the Mission Canyon area. Just after two p.m. fire activity begins to increase on the ridge above their position and to move down slope toward Spyglass Ridge Road.

By 3p.m. spot fires are beginning to take hold throughout the canyon as the 30-40mph winds push red-hot embers high into the area and out in front of the advancing flames. By 3:30p.m. several spot fires are reported near 1495 Spyglass Ridge causing the E-54 crew to request backup support. An additional engine crew, E-30, quickly responds, backing into position next to E-54, their goal to use their water supply to slow down the fire, which is now almost directly upon them.

Within minutes, realizing these efforts are futile against what is described as a 100' wall of flames, the E-30 crew drop their hose lines, don their SCBA's, and take refuge in the cab. At this point E-30 is out of water. Frantically, they attempt to drive down the driveway to safety but are halted by a wall of flames. Then, when there is a break in the flaming front they scramble down the driveway dragging all their hose and nozzles.

Firefighters in Danger

With the majority of the main house now burning, E-54 crew members at the house had to fend for themselves. The fire captain, Ron Topolinski, and one of the E-54 crew members, Robert Lopez, retreat into the main house for protection. Lopez crouches down and removes a fire shelter and prepares to use it as a heat shield while exiting the structure. Before the fire shelter can be fully opened, the sliding glass door shatters, and a rush of heat enters the room, forcing both to scramble outside and towards their engine.

Out in the open, Lopez described the situation later to Ventura County Star reporter Kathleen Wilson. "I felt my shoulders on fire and my arms on fire," Lopez said, adding that he rolled on the ground to try to stop the fire from burning his skin.

While Lopez is on the ground, Topolinski continues up the driveway towards the E-54 engine. He yells back at Lopez to continue to the fire engine, and then climbs into the back seat on the passenger side with the help of Captain Brian Bulger, who assists him inside. At that point Topolinski is still wearing his SCBA, with barely enough air left and the low-air warning device is sounding on it. Thankfully Lopez arrives not too long after, jumps into the cab, and Bulger is able to move them to a safer location on Spyglass Ridge where a paramedic crew is able to treat Topolinski and Lopez.

Conditions in other parts of Mission Canyon are as poor as they were on Spyglass. Near the Botanic Gardens another crew is facing a similar situation with 100' flames advancing in their direction. They are a bit more fortunate in that they are able to retreat to an open area measuring 123' by 126'. Though far short of the recommended 400' separation for flames of that length, they are able to survive with minor heat exhaustion and smoke inhalation injuries.

On Holly Road, almost directly below the homes on Spyglass Ridge, conditions are almost as severe. Multiple spot fires were starting and then blowing uphill towards Holly Road from both the east and west sides of the ridge, resulting in extreme fire behavior within a short period of time. Compounding this, the fire hydrant system in the area loses pressure and then fails.

Immediately the strike team leader there orders the crews and a number of residents who have not evacuated to seek refuge. Five of the firefighters and five civilians take refuge in the residence at 2910 Holly Road, with several other firefighters retreating into the home at 2911 Holly Road after their escape route down Holly Road is blocked by flames and several more at 2931 Holly Road. Those at 2931 Holly are eventually forced to flee from there to 2921 Holly when it becomes evident that the house will not survive the fire.

Complicating the immediate danger created by the advancing flames has to deal with residents who are now trying to evacuate. One of the firefighters relates a story in which one of the residents, after being told to take refuge with him, announced he is going to leave.

"No you're not, the fireman tells the resident. "Yes I am, get out of the way" the resident replies.

"You cannot leave," I reply back, "you've had two days to evacuate. You're staying." And he said, "No, we can make it. We're leaving now." I said, "No, you're not. Then the man says 'get out of the way' and he tells his wife to drive. He says, 'drive' and so she does."

As he watches the couple drive away, not knowing if they'll make it or not, the fireman takes a few minutes to reflect on the confrontation. "That was a sick feeling. Uh, we started to realize, uh, you know, what? We might not make it out of here. I mean....we're in a bad spot."

Firefighters Recover

On a morning in July, several months after the Jesusita Fire is over, Lopez, Topolinski and Bulger were honored for their dedication and their bravery by the Santa Barbara and Ventura County Boards of Supervisors. By then, Bulger, who is reported to have lost 20% of his lung capacity and Topolinski are back at work, a bit overwhelmed by the honors. Lopez, the most seriously injured of the three with second- and third-degree burns, plans on returning as well if he can. As reported by Wilson, the experience was 25 minutes of pure hell for Topolinski, one in which “we didn’t know whether we would get out alive or not.”

“We had a ten minute period where we totally lost communication with these guys,” Santa Barbara City Fire Chief Pat McElroy remembered. “We feared the worst given what we’d been hearing on the radios before that. Those were ten of the longest minutes of my life.”

A Shift in Attitude

Over the past several years, there has been a noticeable shift in attitudes regarding the dangers in which we place wildland firefighters. In 2008, the Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics (fseee.org) initiated a lawsuit designed to push for wildland firefighting reform. “Firefighters should not be asked to defend a home that is indefensible,” says former FSEEE field director Bob Dale. “No home is worth a firefighter’s life.”

As is the case in Santa Barbara, the primary concern is not the backcountry wildland fires like the 240,000 acre Zaca Fire in 2007 that burns for two months but consumes no houses. It is the homes that have been built in the past 20-30 years along the base of the Santa Ynez Mountains that worry firefighters. This is the point at which the wildland meets an encroaching urban community. What is different here is that you are asking Forest Service employees trained to fight wildland fires to respond to the urban interface and you are asking city firefighters trained in defending structures to do so in a wildland environment.

“In a house fire the dynamics are the same every time,” Chief Mingee explains. “I know exactly how it will progress and what the fire behavior will be like. But on the wildland interface conditions can, and often are, totally unpredictable.”

What is also different is the impact that vegetation surrounding the house and the susceptibility of the house to ignition are factors until recently that firefighters have had little control over. The primary issue to firefighters is whether there is enough space around the homes and enough fire resistance to the homes themselves to allow the crews to defend them safely.

What FSEEE and others now argue for is a paradigm shift whereby it is the homeowner and community’s responsibility to make conditions safe for them to fight fires in rather than the firefighter’s responsibility to defend homes no matter what the conditions.

While the near misses are often forgotten quickly by the public, the firefighters do not. “We tend to lose focus on the near misses like on the Jesusita when we are faced with losses like the 5 Forest Service Firefighters killed on the Esperanza Fire or the tragedy with the Granite Mountain Hotshots,” says Chief McElroy. But those near misses are just as critical.

Sometimes it is just fate that stops them from being fatalities. Some mistakes were made that put those folks in a terrible situation and we need to question how that happens. We owe it to them and we need to evaluate whether what we are asking them to protect is worth the risks they will take, because they will take those risks.”

Red Dot, Green Dot

In his book, “The Esperanza Fire” John Maclean describes a defensible structure strategy one might call “red dot, green dot” — whereby firefighters have informally labeled which houses they’ll be willing to defend and which one’s they won’t.

“Here we call them ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ “says Mingee. “It’s probably not politically correct to use terms like that anymore,” he says with a laugh but the point is we are always pre-planning so we know ahead of time what we can defend and what we can’t.

“The Granite Mountain incident made me take a hard look at some of the issues involved in defending structures where nobody was at home,” Mingee added. “I’m not an expert in the kind of fire they were defending against but I am a guy that has a responsibility for the lives of a certain number of people. The vegetation will ultimately grow back, the houses can be rebuilt, but the lives of my firefighters and their families can’t.”

Mingee sits and thinks for a bit. “We have a basic philosophy,” he says. “We’ll risk a lot to save a lot. I don’t think there is a firefighter out there, man or woman, who wouldn’t go into a building with the proper gear to rescue a person who’s trapped inside. That’s what we do and that’s what we’re called to do. That’s risking a lot to save a life.”

Roughly speaking that means his firefighters will put everything on the line to protect lives but many are now thinking that the same shouldn’t apply to risking lives to save things that can be replaced.

Then he continues, “During the Tea Fire I looked in the face of Kevin Wallace, then Fire Chief for the Montecito Fire Protection District,” Mingee remembers. “He told me ‘this is my worst nightmare’ and I saw it on his face. I don’t want to ever go through that but I’d much rather go through that than knock on the door of someone’s wife and say ‘I’m sorry to tell you what happened today. No fire chief wants to have to do that. That versus a home being lost, vegetation being lost, I’ll go for the lost home every time over risking one of my firefighter’s lives.”

Like Mingee, many other chiefs are facing similar situations. Given his druthers he’d come down on the side of his firefighters every time. But that is not realistic. “When there’s a fire,” he says, “we are continually doing triage – balancing the resources out there we are committed to protecting against the conditions relating to the structures you want to protect.

“The first thing we look for is defensible space,” he continues. “Is this a place we can go and ID a safety zone as well as an escape route if things turn bad. If we don’t have that we’ll turn to a strategy we call ‘fire following’ whereby we’ll wait until the front has passed through and then go in and do what we can to protect the structures.

“Given the economics today, there is no fire department that can jump on every single thing that can happen,” Mingee adds. “The Santa Barbara area has a potential disaster waiting to happen every few years. There’s no way my fire department or any of the others can protect every home when we have a fire in sundowner conditions so it’s time people have to start taking care of things themselves.”

A Final Message

So I ask Mingee, “When you go out and visit those homeowners are you being that blunt? When you know in your mind that someone’s house is a loser, are you able to be upfront enough to say to them, ‘Hey, if you don’t make these changes we won’t be able to protect your home?’”

The chief pauses for a bit then he responds this way. “Should I tell them that if they don’t do their jobs [meaning defensible space and home hardening retrofitting] we can’t do ours?” He says. “No it doesn’t, but it might be time to reconsider that. I don’t want to be the Fire Chief or parent that loses a twenty-one year old son because the homeowner didn’t do their job.”

So what’s the message that Chief Mingee wants every homeowner who lives in high fire severity areas to hear loud and clear? “Prepare now while you have plenty of time,” he says, “because when, not if, the wildfire comes, your local Fire Department and firefighters will do their very best and bravely provide those vital services you pay for with your hard-earned tax money. But we are going to avoid sending any more men and women to their deaths.”