

THE DYNAMICS OF A CATASTROPHY – THE DECKER WILDLAND FIRE OF 1959

By

Julian C. Lee

“Fires burning on the Elsinore Front, because of past history, are known to be treacherous and dangerous. Experienced firemen claim the Elsinore Front to be one of the toughest firefighting areas known in California.”

U.S. Forest Service Fatality Investigation, September 1, 1959

In 1959 Elsinore¹ was little more than a small, dusty southern California town located about 65 miles southeast of Los Angeles at the base of the Elsinore Mountains, part of the larger Santa Ana mountain range. In summer an unusual combination of topography, proximity to the Pacific Ocean 20 to 25 miles to the west, and to the hot, dry inland valleys and deserts to the east would cause marine air to flow eastward over the crest of the Santa Ana mountains and down through the northeast-facing canyons and drainages of the Elsinore Front. This phenomenon was familiar to southern California firefighters, so familiar that it had a name – the Elsinore effect. It meant that during the heat of summer, fires burning in the afternoon along the Elsinore Front would typically burn *down-slope*, contrary to most normal fire behavior. This down slope movement of air would generally abate around sundown as the areas to the east cooled, at which time fires would likely reverse direction and begin to burn *up-slope*.

In the first several decades of the 20th century, the town of Elsinore was a thriving community situated at the edge of the largest natural freshwater lake in southern California. The town, its lake, and the nearby mineral springs served as playground for the rich and glamorous from Los Angeles and Hollywood. But the last of Lake Elsinore’s water evaporated in the 1950’s, leaving a dry rectangular lake bed approximately five miles long and two miles wide. The year 1964 would see the refilling of the lake with water delivered by the Metropolitan Water District's Colorado River Aqueduct, but during the heat of day in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s the dry lake bed acted as a giant heat engine. From its surface warm air would rise to be replaced by cooler air flowing from the west, greatly intensifying the Elsinore effect.

The slopes of the Elsinore Front support a distinctive plant community of evergreen shrubs known collectively as chaparral.² Characteristic of the world’s Mediterranean climates, chaparral has the appearance of a smooth textured plant cover when seen from a distance. But this is deceptive; a closer look reveals a dense, nearly impenetrable tangle. In training, wildland fire fighters are taught that, “In dense chaparral, you can’t outrun the fire.” Today, the chaparral of the northeast-facing slopes of the Santa Ana Mountains consists predominantly of buckwheat, chamise, manzanita, California lilac, laurel-leaf sumac, and scrub oak. In 1959 the arroyos also supported stands of sycamore and knob cone pine.

California Highway 74, the Ortega Highway, connects Elsinore with the city of San Juan Capistrano, 29 miles to the west. The highway winds through the steep rocky terrain of the Elsinore Front as it ascends the northeast-facing escarpment of the Elsinore Mountains. A little more than a mile from the lake the highway makes a sharp hair-pin turn, a conspicuous landmark well-known to local residents. In the early 1960's, persons traveling the Ortega Highway in the vicinity of the hair-pin turn would likely notice the black, twisted skeletal branches of charred wood protruding from green patches of laurel-leaf sumac and chamise, a sure indication that the area had burned in recent years.

IGNITION

“It may have been small, but it was vicious.”

On a hot, dry summer day in 1959, a group of teenagers, members of a car club called the Highway Hoboes from Downey, California spent the afternoon partying and drinking beer at Upper San Juan Campground in the Cleveland National Forest. In late afternoon a fight broke out and two of the partiers, Michael Moore and Paul Mantz, both 19 years old, decided to leave. They placed an empty 30 gallon beer keg in the back of Moore's pickup truck and headed down the steep, twisting Ortega Highway toward Elsinore. Moore lost control of the vehicle. It plunged 200 feet over an embankment and burst into flames, igniting the tinder-dry brush. Moore died in the accident. Mantz was critically injured but survived. The ensuing fire would come to be known as the Decker Fire,³ named for the canyon in which it originated (Fig. 1).

The Decker Fire began at about 6:00 p.m. on Saturday, August 8, 1959. It was officially declared out at 6:00 p.m. the following Thursday, five days later. According to the Forest Service Individual Fire Report, the fire burned 1,391 acres, small by southern California standards, where fires in the tens of thousands of acres are commonplace, and those in excess of one hundred thousand acres are not infrequent. Nonetheless, within the first two hours firefighters suffered three burn-over events that eventually took the lives of six men and critically or seriously burned many others.⁴ Three of those killed were members of an inter-regional Forest Service firefighting crew⁵ called the El Cariso Hotshots.^{6,7} It was the first of two fires in which members of that crew would die fighting fires in the mountains of southern California.⁸ According to one local newspaper report of the Decker Fire, “All who had the misfortune to hear it will never forget the cries of the burned men pleading for water. And the few who saw flesh falling from their seared bodies will never be the same.” In the words of California Division of Forestry (CDF)⁹ firefighter John Ferguson, “It may have been small, but it was vicious.” How could this small, seemingly routine fire, fought by skilled, experienced firefighters inflict such devastation, suffering and loss?

At the time that Moore and Mantz were making their fateful plunge over the edge of the Ortega Highway, Robert Grant, a 42 year old Forest Service Fire Prevention Technician assigned to El Cariso Guard Station, was sitting down to dinner with his family and Fernando Perez, nurse tanker operator at El Cariso. Their meal was interrupted when the driver of the El Cariso tanker,

Frederick Carrick, rushed in to advise that a woman had just reported a vehicle burning in the brush below the highway on the Elsinore side. Within minutes three Forest Service units were speeding down the Ortega Highway toward the fire, 2.8 miles east of El Cariso station. En route Carrick radioed Estelle lookout, 10 miles to the NNW, to report the fire. This, the first official report of the fire received by the Forest Service, was logged in at 6:16 p.m. Grant was the first firefighter to arrive at the scene, driving his 110 gallon pumper, followed shortly thereafter by Frank Kelly, the 54 year old tanker foreman, with Carrick, Sabor Sandor, and one other crewman in the El Cariso tanker, a Mormon-Harrington with a 300 gallon capacity. Perez soon arrived with the 500 gallon El Cariso nurse tanker.

Although badly burned, Mantz had managed to make his way from the crash site up the steep slope to the highway, where Grant found him lying at the side of the road talking to a Riverside County Deputy Sheriff. Grant radioed Estelle lookout and requested an ambulance for the injured man. At the time of his arrival, 14 minutes after the initial report, the fire was burning in the vicinity of the crash site several hundred feet below the Ortega Highway. Grant estimated the size of the fire at approximately five acres.

INITIAL ATTACK

Forest Service units began their initial attack from the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway, working down slope toward the fire below them. Carrick took a live reel hose¹⁰ from the El Cariso tanker and scrambled down toward Moore's pickup truck, which was still in

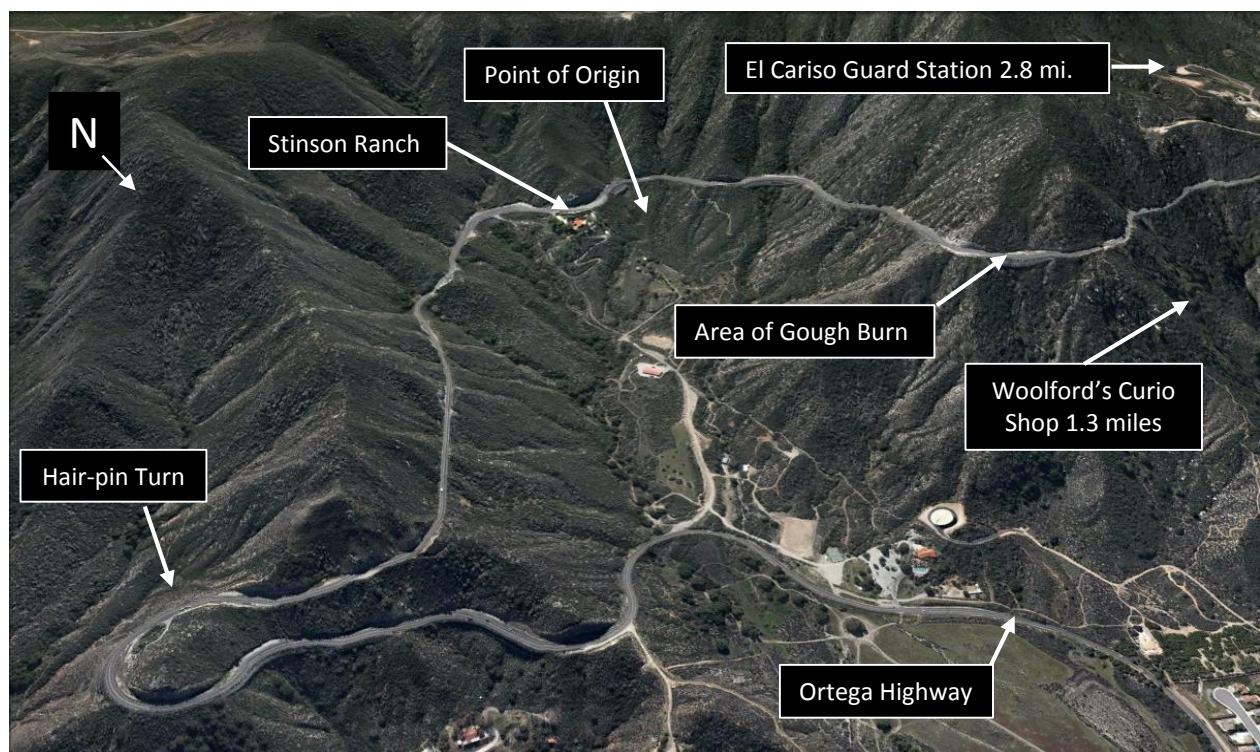


Figure 1. Google Earth satellite image of the mouth of Decker Canyon showing the fire's point of origin and the location of features mentioned in the text.

Flames. He was careful to wet the ground as his hose played out to prevent it from being burned through as he worked his way across a burned area, much of which was still smoldering. Grant joined him at the crash site, where they found Moore's body about 15 feet from the vehicle, on his hands and knees with his head resting on a large boulder. They briefly searched for other victims. Finding none, they turned their attention to the fire below them. The lower portion was burning down slope, driven by down-canyon winds estimated at 10 to 15 miles per hour, the normal condition for that time of day along the Elsinore Front. Carrick estimated that this lower portion of the fire was 500 to 800 feet below the crash site. The upper portion of the fire was "... lying back over the burn, but was still creeping up canyon." On Grant's recommendation, foreman Kelly and his two crewmen began another hose-lay, working their way down slope toward the slowly advancing flames. Although they were inside a burned area and an estimated 150 to 200 feet from the fire head, the fire flared up with tongues of flame that burned through their hose lay and forced all of the men to retreat back up to their trucks on the highway. Initial attack had failed to halt the spread of the fire.

The first CDF unit arrived at the fire at 6:35 p.m. Tanker foreman John Ferguson and his crew of volunteer fire fighters came from Lakeland Village, about five miles distant. They drove up the Ortega Highway to a point between the Stinson ranch and the hair-pin turn. There they initiated a hose lay, attacking the east flank of the fire where the flames had burned down into a deep draw, making the fire "very hazardous to control." Ferguson decided to withdraw his hose lay and to move his personnel back up onto the highway.

GUTHRIE BURN-OVER

"... the east flank near the head of the fire blew up, making a run up the east side of Decker Canyon and crossing the Ortega Highway like it wasn't there."

While Ferguson was moving his crew out of harm's way, Will Donaldson, a CDF Tank Truck Driver assigned to San Jacinto Station 26 miles to the northeast, was en route to the fire and listening to radio traffic. An early indication that something exceptional was unfolding on the steep slopes above Elsinore came when he heard a report of "... fire storms, and that *something was happening* on that fire." One of the things happening involved John D. Guthrie, a 25 year old CDF Tanker Foreman and his five man crew. They were one of two units dispatched to the Decker Fire from Old Temecula Station, about 18 miles southeast of the fire. Arriving at around 6:40 p.m., they headed up the Ortega Highway toward the fire, with Guthrie behind the wheel of an International tanker with a 500 gallon capacity. They pulled off at a turn-out at the hair-pin turn (Fig. 2).^{11, 12} Guthrie got out and started down the steep bank to get a better look at the fire burning below. Almost immediately he came scrambling back to the truck, yelling for the men on the back of the truck to get into the cab and to move the truck farther up the road to the protection of the high bank at a nearby road cut. There wasn't room for Guthrie in the cab; he remained outside, intending to use the tanker's hose to wet himself down for protection. But suddenly, before they could move the truck, the fire burst upon them. As the wall of flames engulfed the truck and its occupants, it burned through Guthrie's hose line, rendering it useless

and forcing him to dive under his truck for protection. As CDF tanker foreman Ferguson watched “... the east flank near the head of the fire blew up, making a run up the east side of Decker Canyon and crossing the Ortega Highway (near the hair-pin turn) like it wasn’t there.” He didn’t realize that Guthrie and his crew had been engulfed by the flames as the fire roared across the highway. This, the first of three burn-over events suffered by personnel fighting the Decker Fire, occurred at about 6:40 p.m.

Two of Guthrie’s crewmen, Art Shannon age 28, and Larry Mollers age 19, received serious burns to their arms and hands. Three others, Eugene Golden, Montie Campbell, and Jim Miller received lesser injuries, but Guthrie was burned over 85 percent of his body. He and his injured men were loaded into a CDF pick-up truck and driven to Lakeland Village at the base of the mountain. There Guthrie was transferred to a 1953 Pontiac ambulance belonging to the



Figure 2. Google Earth satellite image of the mouth of Decker Canyon showing approximate location and timing of the fire’s origin and the three burn-over events.

Sunnymead Volunteer Fire Department. The ambulance driver headed for Hemet Hospital, but within a few miles the engine threw a piston rod. Coasting to a stop, the driver rushed into a nearby bar, explained their situation and asked to use the telephone. Upon hearing of their plight, a patron pushed the keys to his car across the bar and said, “Take my station wagon and put him in.” Guthrie was treated at Hemet Hospital, stabilized, and then transferred to a hospital in Redlands. He was the first firefighter to be critically burned on the Decker Fire.

INITIAL USFS BACKFIRE OPERATION

“We’d better get started before it’s too late.”

CDF Tanker Foreman Ferguson returned to Grand Avenue to get a load of water. Near the bottom of Decker Canyon he could see that the fire had burned almost down to the lower portion of the Ortega Highway and was burning “very hot.” He watched as CDF units attempted to backfire¹³ between the highway and the burned area created by the Gough Fire¹⁴ three weeks previous. Later it would be suggested that this backfire was in part responsible for initiating the burn-over event that, within about an hour, would critically injure seven firefighters.

Thirty-nine year old District Fire Control Officer Theodore E. Schuler was assigned to the Forest Service office in Santa Ana, 30 miles to the northeast of the Decker Fire. Notified of the fire at approximately 6:35 p.m., he departed Santa Ana immediately and, approaching the fire from the Elsinore side at about 7:05 p.m., he estimated the size of the fire at between 100 and 200 acres. Schuler arrived at the fire at 7:15 p.m. and conferred with State Forest Ranger and Fire Boss, Truman Holland. They agreed to position the Forest Service personnel and equipment on the Ortega Highway in an effort to hold the fire below the road.

Forest Service units on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway were unaware of the burn-over involving Guthrie and his crew. While the El Cariso tanker and the nurse tanker returned to their station for water, Grant drove his pumper a short distance down the highway to the Stinson Ranch. He ran a hose lay out 250 feet and sprayed water, knocking the fire down along the southeast corner of the property. As Grant prepared to drive back to El Cariso for water, Ferguson and his crew arrived and took over the portion of fire in the vicinity of the Stinson Ranch. At about this time a Forest Service tanker arrived from San Juan Station, 12 miles to the west, with Andrew C. “Rusty” Brooks the 24 year old foreman, and Max M. Bradley, crewman. They conferred with Grant and decided to backfire a 200 foot segment of road near the Stinson Ranch, an area where they believed the fire might jump the highway. Grant discussed the plan with Ferguson who agreed, saying that “We’d better get started before it’s too late.” Their intent was to take advantage of the down-slope wind and to burn out the vegetation along the down-hill side of the road, using the highway as a control line. Grant began back-firing, supported by the San Juan Tanker, with Brooks and Bradley. The backfire operation was successfully concluded at about the time that Durward “Ben” Slater, the 31 year old District Ranger drove up in his Forest Service station wagon, having just arrived from his office in Santa Ana. With him was Assistant Ranger Donald Keesler age 29. Slater took charge of the Forest Service units working the fire on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway. He instructed Brooks to go back down the highway and establish a hose lay on the north side of the road, near the mouth of Decker Canyon.

Conrad Vargas was the “swamper” for a CDF D-7 bulldozer. It was his job to hike ahead of the dozer and find the safest and most effective way to construct a containment line along the flanks of the fire. When he and CDF dozer operator Burt Wirebaugh arrived from Perris, 13 miles to the northeast, the Decker Fire was burning above them and back down into a flat area close to the mouth of Decker Canyon, near Grand Avenue. They unloaded the dozer, switched

the blade from right angle to left angle so that burning debris would be pushed back into the burn, and started to construct line up-slope along the north flank of the fire. The terrain was steep, so steep that Vargas had to pull himself up the hill by grasping the branches and stems of bushes. It was all he could do to keep ahead of the dozer blade as Wirebaugh skillfully maneuvered his D-7, slipping and sliding, up the ridge. The smoke and dust were so thick that Wirebaugh could scarcely see Vargas in his khaki shirt and aluminum hard hat. They continued building line, working their way up the steep, rocky ridge along the fire's north flank, until they came to a huge outcrop of granite boulders. This stopped their progress completely, but not before they succeeded in preventing the fire from crossing over into the canyon to their immediate north. Wirebaugh widened the spot where they were situated, making a large safety zone. He turned off the dozer and awaited instructions from the fire boss. From their vantage point they had an unobstructed view of events unfolding above them on the Ortega Highway, which they estimated to be about a quarter of a mile distant.

At this point, Forest Service units continued to battle the fire from their position on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway. CDF personnel attacked the fire from the lower portions of the highway from the Stinson Ranch to the vicinity of Lakeland Village.

PUERTA LA CRUZ BURN-OVER

"You can get burned here."

Approaching the fire from the east and unaware of the burn-over that had left Guthrie critically burned and his crewmen injured, CDF Tank Truck Foremen Will Donaldson and his two crewmen could see the fire burning on the steep slopes above them and down into the mouth of Decker Canyon. They were instructed to go up the highway a half mile and join forces with the San Juan tanker crew that was making a hose lay to the north of the highway. Rusty Brooks, foreman of the San Juan tanker, was an acquaintance of Donaldson's. The two crews had been spraying water on the fire for about 20 minutes when Donaldson was ordered to drive back down the hill to an assembly area. He would never see Rusty Brooks again.

Donaldson and his crew pulled off at the assembly area (Fig. 2) and awaited their assignment. Parked immediately in front of them was the Puerta la Cruz¹⁵ inmate crew truck which had just arrived from Warner Springs in San Diego County, about 50 miles to the southeast. The truck was a 1956 Ford 2½ ton stake-side, with high wooden sides and a canvas cover over the top. Donaldson would later recount how "Suddenly we heard what sounded like a very loud freight train. It looked like a huge dust devil coming down slope straight towards us. It looked like it was 1,000 feet across at the base, and was moving fast, and it was all fire." As flames engulfed the Puerta la Cruz crew truck, men on the back of the truck began screaming and "... jumping over the sides of the truck and crawling underneath. The tarp on the top of the truck was burning ... all hell broke loose. Men were running through the field and tearing off their burning shirts and pants as they ran." Most of the hose was burned off of Donaldson's engine as the fire engulfed the vehicle. He and his two crewmen were trapped in the cab until the fire storm

passed. Neither Donaldson nor his crewmen were seriously injured, but they knew that there was nothing they could do to help the Puerta la Cruz crew.

Fire Control Officer Schuler witnessed the same event from his position on the Ortega Highway. He observed the arrival of the Puerta la Cruz crew, and then shortly after 8:00 p.m. according to Schuler, "... the whole lower side of the road became engulfed in flames, and the wind picked up to about 30 to 40 miles per hour, creating a minor fire storm." After the major portion of the fire had passed, Schuler saw members of the inmate crew walking some injured men to safety. Several inmates had suffered minor injuries, but a third man, an inmate named Wilson, had received critical burns to his chest, arms, and head. Schuler helped remove some of the critically burned man's clothing and then radioed for three ambulances, not knowing how many more men were injured. The burned men were transported to Chino Prison Hospital, the Puerta la Cruz crew truck was moved, but hand tools were left scattered at the side of the road, a reminder that "You can get burned here."

FOREST SERVICE BURN-OVER

"Due to their high levels of physical fitness, training, self-reliance and expertise, they [hotshot crews] are the Forest Service's elite firefighters, relied upon to fight the worst fires in the toughest terrain under the most dangerous circumstances."

Lincoln Bramwell, Historian, U.S. Forest Service

It was about 7:40 p.m. when the El Cariso Hotshots arrived at the Decker Fire. The crew of 15 men, the camp cook, and their 25 year old Foreman, Danny L. Street, came from the direction of Elsinore. They had just been released from a fire on Palomar Mountain, 36 miles to the southeast¹⁶. Schuler radioed the hotshots and instructed them to drive up the Ortega Highway and report to Slater on the upper reaches of the road. Rounding the hair-pin turn, the hotshots made their way through smoke and flames, unaware of the burn-over there that had injured Guthrie and his crew less than an hour before. From the back of their crew truck high on the highway the hotshots had a panoramic view of the town of Elsinore, the dry lake bed, the village of Lakeland, and the fire burning below them. They were excited about fighting the fire, which hotshot Austin Poor described as "... a beautiful thing to see." He mentioned that fellow hotshot Jon Sanford "... took out his camera to get a few shots."

Vargas and Wirebaugh watched from their safety zone about a quarter of a mile below the highway as the hotshots unloaded, tooled up, and then lined up on the road. The fire was 200 to 300 yards below them and was "laying down very well, having burned down canyon from the vehicle that started the fire" Slater instructed Street to take his crew and construct a fire line down-slope along the edge of the burn where the fire had crept up to the road and gone out. Vargas watched as the hotshots started cutting line down into the canyon, which, according to him, "... is just not done." He was alarmed by what he considered a highly risky maneuver. "Never attack a fire downhill ... you never know when the fire will start coming up to greet you." As they watched the hotshots work their way down the steep canyon above the fire, at

times only their helmets were visible in the thick chaparral. Vargas and Wirebaugh felt that things were not right.

The hotshots had been cutting line for about ten to fifteen minutes when the fire began to spread across the slopes beneath them and to flare up. Slater ordered them to move back up onto the road. He then radioed Schuler, who was directing the activities of Forest Service tankers from Silverado, Palomar, and Tenaja, and coordinating with the CDF units on the lower portions of the highway. Schuler suggested that they undertake backfiring operations along the upper reaches of the highway in an effort to tie in with the area burned by the Gough Fire 21 days previous (Fig.1). If successful the operation would give them control of more than a half mile of fire line. They agreed that all efforts should be committed to holding the fire at the highway. Aware that the wind might soon reverse direction and push the fire up-slope toward the men and equipment on the highway, the backfiring operation was conducted with a sense of urgency. Slater, together with hotshots Boyd Edwards, Nelson Harlan, Steven Johnson, Jon Sanford and Kenny Vann, worked rapidly up the highway toward the Gough burn, cutting brush at the edge of the highway and backfiring as they went. They were supported by the San Juan tanker driven by Tank Truck Operator Max Bradley, with Foreman Andrew Brooks manning the hose nozzle, and by Grant with his 110 gallon pick-up truck.

“... flame and embers licking at their heels.”

It was a few minutes before 8:00 p.m. when hotshot Foreman Danny Street paused to look down below the highway. What he saw gave him pause. It seemed to him that the fire was burning in a peculiar manner, “... as though it was in a forest, the flames twisting and turning, the flames were almost white.” He yelled to Robert Schmeeckle, hotshot crew boss, to look at what was happening below them, to be careful, and to watch out for fires spotting¹⁷ across the highway.

Street then instructed Schmeeckle and hotshots, Leroy Price, Franklin Yazzie and Herman Dickson, to join Assistant District Ranger Donald Keesler, who had been assigned to the hotshots as a crew boss. They were to initiate backfiring along the edge of the lower section of the highway in the vicinity of the hotshot crew truck. Street and the remaining hotshots began to backfire along the middle section of the highway. Schmeeckle watched as the head of the fire began to creep out of the valley below them, moving slowly up the hill against the wind. To him the backfires seemed to be working well. He thought that they might be able to hold the fire at the highway.

Out of water, Carrick turned the El Cariso tanker around, intending to return to the station to refill. Then, shortly after 8:00 p.m. and with the fire about half way up the slope toward the men on the highway, the wind abated. Hotshot James Priddy would later state that for a moment the fire appeared to be “burning in a vacuum.” It then reversed direction, pushing the flames up slope and picking up speed. Schmeeckle realized that the fire would probably jump the highway, but he thought that the men had plenty of time to move back down the road to safety. Carrick, too, thought that the backfires were working, but he kept “... thinking about up-canyon winds.”

As he and Kelly watched, a huge column of flame and smoke rose vertically, then began to lean toward the highway in the direction of the backfire, the flames of which suddenly rose to heights of 12 feet or more. Brooks and Grant sprayed water on the flames, but it seemed to have no effect. The head of the fire was now moving faster up-canyon toward the men on the highway, its wind uprooting brushes and causing them to roll up hill ahead of the flames. Within seconds the fire merged with their back fire and leaped across the highway as it "... exploded like gasoline." Carrick began backing the El Cariso tanker down the highway as the fire storm hit. Grant was able to get into the cab of his pick-up truck. Slater yelled for his men to run for it, then, shielding his eyes and face with his arms, attempted to run through a whirling mass of flame and large flying embers. According to Kelly the entire area was enveloped in flames "... in such proportions and density that I lost sight of everything in the distance." But then he saw Street and some of his men running toward them, following the tanker as it backed down the road with "... flame and embers licking at their heels."

"We've had it!"

As Vargas and Wirebaugh watched events unfolding high above them, they too felt the wind reverse direction from down-slope to up-slope, a very perceptible change. It was a little after 8:00 p.m., shortly after sundown, and just before an aerial tanker made the last retardant drop of the day. They watched as Street attempted to backfire down the highway in the opposite direction from Slater and his men, but he had difficulty lighting his fusee.¹⁸ He set the fusee in the edge of Slater's backfire to get it lit, then picked it up on his shovel and thrust it into a clump of unburned brush. Suddenly the chaparral ignited into a huge flame, driven by a powerful uphill wind. Priddy, standing next to Street shouted, "We've had it!" Street yelled a warning to his men to get out, then set out down the highway on a dead run. Austin Poor was some distance down the highway and didn't hear the order to "get the hell out of here." As Street ran toward him, Poor yelled, "What are you running for?" Street didn't answer, but as he went past, Poor saw the expression on Street's face and then he too started running for his life down the highway toward the hotshot crew truck.

CDF Tanker Foreman John Ferguson witnessed the blow-up from a distance of about a quarter of a mile. In a statement given three days after the event, he described how "... the fire had such a tremendous suction that sage brush in front of it was being torn from the ground and sucked into the fire, like lint into a vacuum cleaner. Everything ... on the west slope of Decker Canyon was involved [in fire] at once and was moving at an unbelievable speed up canyon."

Street and his crewmen struggled to run through the flames as the fire exploded across the highway with near-hurricane force winds estimated by Street to have reached 60 to 70 miles per hour.¹⁹ Men were blown off their feet, bushes with stems two inches in diameter were twisted off and blown across the highway, their surfaces sandblasted completely smooth. Rocks nearly the size of softballs became air borne. Street saw Grant struggling to open the door to his pickup truck. As he ran past him, Street yelled for him to make a run for it, but Grant acted as if he hadn't heard. Sparks and embers were blowing down on the men "... harder than rain, the

wind butting against us.” Street grabbed one of the hotshots by the arm and urged him not to give up, saying “Come on, you’ll be alright.”

Austin Poor ran through what he would later describe as a “... huge magnificent sheet” of flame, unbearably hot and blinding. Cinders and sparks pelted the back of his shirt, hands, and hair. As he struggled down the highway, he lost his hard hat and head lamp. He was terrified and ran even harder. After what seemed like a long time, he came to a partial clearing in the smoke and flames where he could see the El Cariso tanker backing down the highway away from the fire. Poor scrambled on board, joining Street, Schmeckle and several of the other hotshots, some of whom were hysterical.

Hotshot Robert “Red” Wilson heard the warning to “get out in a hurry,” followed immediately by a tremendous roar as the fire, half exploding, half rolling, crossed the highway. He was buffeted by a sudden gust of hot gases that blew his hardhat off. He threw down his tool and started running as hard as he could in the direction of the crew truck. Sparks and embers blew into his mouth and eyes, nearly blinding him. Wilson could hear the cries of men farther up the highway yelling for help, one of whom screamed, “... my ears are ashes!” Through the smoke, embers, and flying debris he glimpsed the El Cariso tanker with several of the hotshots on it yelling for him to climb aboard, which he did.

“Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!”

The El Cariso tanker continued to back down the highway, away from the flames. At a safe distance from the fire they stopped to assess their situation and to count heads. Five of the hotshots were unaccounted for: Edwards, Harlan, Johnson, Sanford, and Vann. All had been backfiring the upper portions of the highway with Slater, supported by Brooks and Bradley with the San Juan tanker, and Grant in his 110 gallon pumper. Street appeared dazed. He told Schmeckle that he thought that he had lost some men. Schmeckle responded, “Are you sure?” “I don’t know for sure, but I think so,” Street replied. At about 8:15 p.m. came the distress call over the radio: “*Mayday, Mayday, Mayday!*” Interviewed the following day, Street stated that he felt “just about nuts.”

While Street and the men with him had run down the highway, struggling to make their way to safety, those on the lower portion of the highway with Assistant District Ranger Keesler were able to walk down the highway to safety. The men farthest up on the highway experienced the full force of the fire storm. Of those, Grant was able to find shelter in the cab of his pick-up truck, and Bradley was behind the wheel of the San Juan Tanker. Slater, Brooks and the five hotshots were caught in the open, unprotected.

From the relative safety of the cab of his tanker, Bradley watched as the fire blew up, flashing over the truck and the men working along the side of the road. Despite having received critical burns, three of the hotshots managed to make their way down the highway through the smoke, flames, burning embers, and searing heat for a distance of nearly 300 yards, where they took shelter in Slater’s station wagon parked at the side of the road.

Brooks was outside the San Juan tanker, manning the hose nozzle when the fire hit. He too was critically burned. Bradley opened the cab door and helped him get inside. Suddenly, an injured hotshot, Kenny Vann, ran up to the truck, his clothing on fire, and began banging on the cab window. As Bradley opened the door, Nelson Harlan appeared, his clothes also ablaze. Both men climbed into the cab as Bradley beat the fire out on their backs and shoulders, suffering burns to his hands in the process. The four men remained in the cab of the truck for several minutes until the fire had passed over them. The hotshots then jumped out of the cab and ran down the highway in the direction of the hotshot crew truck.

Fearing that the gas tank of the tanker might explode, Bradley helped Brooks exit the vehicle. The two men struggled down the highway to the safety of a burned area, some 50 feet from the truck. Brooks appeared to be in shock. Bradley tried to make him as comfortable as possible, laying him down and removing his shirt, which he used as a pillow. He retrieved a canteen from the truck and poured water over him in an attempt to ease his suffering.

When the blow-up occurred, Grant was on the highway a short distance below the San Juan tanker, working the hose nozzle of his 110 gallon pick-up truck in support of the burnout operation. He was able to take shelter in his pick-up truck as a wall of flames passed over the highway. As the flames began to subside, he turned on his lights, intending to move up the road, when suddenly hotshots Vann and Harlan ran around behind his truck for protection. Grant yelled to them to grab the hose that was lying on the ground behind his truck. They did so, spraying themselves to cool down. Grant increased the engine speed to provide the men with more water, then instructed them to get into the back of the truck. At that point he saw Ranger Slater walking down the highway "... in a dazed-like condition." Grant opened the door and grabbed Slater, "... half throwing him over the steering wheel onto the seat." Before Grant could depart, Slater got out of the truck and walked back up the highway about 15 to 20 feet. Grant loaded him back in the truck and drove up the highway toward Woolford's Curio Shop,²⁰ a small business establishment situated at an overlook above the Elsinore lakebed, a little over a mile from the burn-over. In the back of Grant's truck the two injured hotshots continued to cool themselves with the fire hose.

Richard Kramer, a California Fish and Game warden, was on routine patrol on the Ortega Highway. Approaching the fire from the west, he stopped at Woolford's Curio Shop. From there he could see the fire burning on the steep slopes below. He watched as a TBM aerial tanker flew low over the fire, dropping a load of borate,²¹ the last retardant drop of the day. The time was a little after 8:00 p.m. Kramer continued down the highway and, rounding a bend, saw "... a large wall of flame coming up the canyon." He quickly turned around and drove back toward the curio shop. In his rear view mirror he saw Grant in his pickup truck rapidly approaching. As Grant passed him he saw two men in the back of the pickup spraying water on themselves. Kramer joined Grant at the curio shop, where the burned men were struggling to remove their clothing. Kramer volunteered to take the injured men to the hospital. He loaded Slater and the two hotshots into his sedan and drove down the highway in the direction of Elsinore. Passing through the area of the blow-up, he came upon Brooks sitting at the side of the road. Kramer told him to get into the car. When Brooks said that he couldn't get up, Kramer got

out and helped him into the vehicle. A short distance farther, Kramer picked up Max Bradley, who had suffered smoke inhalation and burns to his hands. Kramer drove the five men to Corona Hospital as fast as he could, with red lights flashing and siren blaring. At the hospital he helped the medical staff remove the injured men's clothing and get them settled.

From Woolford's Curio Shop, Grant contacted Forest Service dispatcher Wilton Lloyd in Escondido, telling him of the disaster and requesting more ambulances, men and equipment. He then returned to the scene of the burn-over, where he was joined by El Cariso nurse tanker operator Fernando Perez. Together they extinguished the flames burning on the San Juan tanker. Grant then contacted Schuler who instructed him to go to El Cariso station and help set up fire camp there. With the assistance of a Sheriff Officer he evacuated the campground at El Cariso, and then checked on the condition of the men at the hotshot camp. He was then taken to Laguna Hospital where he was treated for burns to his hands.

Slater, Brooks, Bradley, Grant and hotshots Vann and Harlan were now accounted for. Three of the hotshots who had been working with Slater on the upper portion of the highway were still missing.

"... he could do nothing but scream."

Carrick turned the El Cariso tanker around and backed up into the smoke in an effort to find the missing men. Together with Foreman Kelly and crewman Sabor Sandor, Carrick backed the tanker into the area where the fire had just crossed the road. It was "... scorching hot and hard to breathe," but through the smoke they glimpsed Ranger Slater's station wagon. Coarse gravel and grains of sand were embedded in the paint of the vehicle due to the heat and the high velocity winds associated with the blow-up. As the tanker drew alongside the station wagon, a door opened and a burned man staggered out. Kelly jumped out of the truck and helped hotshots Johnson, Sanford and Edwards into the tanker. Most of their clothes above the waist had been burned off, but the clothes of one of the hotshots were still burning. As Carrick drove back down the highway toward Elsinore, Kelly extinguished the fire on the burning man, who appeared to be "... in an extreme condition" and was so seriously burned that "... he could do nothing but scream."

Rounding a bend a short distance below the Stinson ranch, the men in the El Cariso tanker were met by a mass of whirling smoke and flame. Kelly carefully assessed the situation and decided to make a run through the blaze. They "... ducked low and breathed little," as they passed through the fire. They continued down the Ortega Highway to its junction with Grand Avenue, where the three injured men were transferred to a station wagon and taken to Elsinore. There they were given medication to help relieve their suffering and then taken by ambulance to Corona Hospital. They arrived to find Fish and Game Warden Kramer and his five injured firefighters in the emergency room, where he was working with the medical personnel, trying to make the men as comfortable as possible. Kramer then returned to the site of the burn-over, searching for other burn victims. Finding none, he departed for home.

By midnight all Forest Service personnel involved in the blow-up were accounted for. Ranger Slater, San Juan tanker Foreman Brooks, and hotshots Harlan, Edwards, Johnson, Vann, and Sanford were at hospitals undergoing treatment for critical burns. Robert Wilson and four other hotshots were taken by ambulance to a local hospital for treatment of minor injuries and released. They returned to the fire camp at El Cariso where they joined Keesler, Schmeeckle and most of the other hotshots who had survived the fire without serious injury.

The El Cariso tanker with Carrick, Kelly, Sandor and another crewman returned to fire camp where they remained briefly before being dispatched to the South Main Divide to begin back-firing operations.

With the clarity of hindsight, it is apparent that the attempt to hold the fire at the Ortega Highway was one of several possible approaches to controlling the spread of the fire in a westerly direction. The first involved a direct attack down slope on the flanks of the fire by tanker units. This attack failed when flames flared up and burned through the hose lays. Shortly thereafter an attempt was made by the hotshot crew to cut a fire line down slope along the edge of the burn where the fire had burned up to the road and gone out. This failed when the fire below the men flared up and began burning below them. At that point there was unanimity, or near unanimity, among the Forest Service overhead that once direct attack had failed to halt the spread of the fire, all efforts were to be directed at holding the fire at the Ortega Highway. Apparently little or no consideration was given to holding the fire at the South Main Divide, at that time a dirt road that roughly paralleled the crest of the Elsinore Mountains, approximately a third of a mile above the Ortega Highway. Yet was at the South Main Divide that firefighters eventually succeeded in stopping the southwestward advance of the fire.

AFTERMATH

By the time the Decker Fire had been officially declared out at 6:00 pm on Thursday, August 13, portions of Lakeland Village had been evacuated, nearly 1,400 acres of chaparral had been consumed, one home had been destroyed and several others damaged. But the cost was much greater in terms of human suffering. According to *The Long Beach Press-Telegram*, of the more than 500 firefighters involved in fighting the blaze, at least 50 were injured, an exceptionally high injury rate of ten percent. As Deputy State Forester James K. Mace put it, the Decker Fire was "... the worst in recent California history from the standpoint of injuries." State Forest Ranger (and Fire Boss on the Decker Fire) Truman Holland echoed that sentiment when he said that the Decker Fire "... was the most costly in terms of manpower and human suffering of any fire in the history of Riverside County."

Richard B. Kramer, California Fish and Game Warden, was awarded California's Medal of Valor, Special Act Award (Gold) for his activities on the Decker Fire. Sponsored by the California Department of Human Resources, the award is given for "An extraordinary act of heroism by a State employee extending far above and beyond the normal call of duty or service, performed at great risk to his own life in an effort to save human life."

Two of the hotshots, Kenny Vann and Jon Sanford, were critically burned, but survived. The following six firefighters died from burns suffered fighting the Decker Fire:

CDF Tanker Foreman John D. Guthrie, age 25, was the first firefighter to be critically burned on the Decker Fire, and he was the last to succumb to injuries sustained on the fire, passing away five weeks later on September 14. He was survived by his wife, Carlo, and their two children, Cheryl Lynn, age 4, and John D. Guthrie, Jr., age 3 of Riverside, California, and his parents, Mr. and Mrs. John E. Guthrie of Perris, California. Many years later, Carlo would remark that, “His body just gave up.” But Carlo never gave up. As a result of her tireless efforts over many years, in 2011 the California State Legislature enacted Assembly Concurrent Resolution 107 honoring John Guthrie for his heroism on the Decker Fire, and designating a portion of California state highway route 215 the “John D. Guthrie Memorial Highway.”²² Resolution 107 was well intentioned, but it contained serious errors of fact. These were corrected in 2014 when a substitute resolution, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 162, was enacted.

Durward “Ben” F. Slater, Forest Service, Trabuco District Ranger, age 31, died at Corona Hospital, Corona California on August 10, 1959, of delayed shock due to burns. He was buried at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, California. Ben Slater was survived by his wife, Marian, and their two daughters. He was a graduate of Oregon State University, and in his honor OSU established the Durward F. Slater Memorial Fellowship for junior and senior students majoring in forestry.

Andrew “Rusty” Brooks, Forest Service, San Juan Tanker Foreman, age 24, of Durham, California, died at Corona Hospital, Corona, California on August 10, 1959, of secondary shock due to second and third degree burns. He was buried at Cherokee Cemetery, Chico, California. He was survived by his parents, Roy and Elise Brooks.

Boyd M. Edwards, Forest Service, El Cariso Hotshot crewman, age 18, of Anaheim, California, died at Riverside Community Hospital, Riverside, California on August 16, 1959 of bronchopneumonia due to extensive burns. He was survived by his parents, Buryl and Betty Edwards.

Nelson D. Harlan, Forest Service, El Cariso Hotshot crewman, age 23, from Crown Point, New Mexico, died at Santa Margarita Naval Hospital, Oceanside, California, on the morning of August 16 1959. Cause of death was pulmonary thrombosis due to extensive second and third degree burns. He was survived by his mother Marie Harlan, and siblings Raymond, age 13, Laurie, age 11, and Harry, age 7.

Steven W. Johnson, Forest Service, El Cariso Hotshot crewman, age 18, died at Riverside Community Hospital on August 15, 1959, of bronchopneumonia due to extensive burns. He was a recent graduate of Huntington Beach Union High School, and was survived by his brother, Gary Johnson.

TEN STANDARD FIREFIGHTING ORDERS

“... almost as a sacred text.”

Slightly more than three years before the Decker Fire, and sixty miles to the southeast, the Inaja Fire claimed the lives of 11 firefighters in a blow-up on the Descanso District of the Cleveland National Forest. That fire came just three years after 15 firefighters were killed on the Rattlesnake Fire in the Mendocino National Forest in northern California, seven years after 13 smoke jumpers died fighting the Mann Gulch fire on the Helena National Forest in Montana, and 13 years after 11 firefighters died battling the Hauser Creek Fire, also on the Descanso District of the Cleveland National Forest. The Inaja fire was, “The straw that broke the camel’s back,” in the words of Jennifer Ziegler, Associate Professor of Communications at Valparaiso University, and an expert on the management and practice of safety in dangerous occupations, especially wildland firefighting. Out of the Inaja tragedy would emerge new rules of engagement for wildland firefighters.

In the aftermath of the Inaja Fire and as a result of public pressure, Chief of the Forest Service Richard McArdle assembled a task force in early 1957 to investigate the Inaja Fire and other fatal fires and to recommend ways to enhance firefighter safety. The task force examined 20 years of wildland fire fatalities in an effort to identify the factors that fatal fires had in common. Focusing on the five worst fires (those that killed ten or more firefighters), their analysis revealed that the suppression tactics employed on those fatal fires shared a set of characteristics in common. These the task force termed “sins of omission.” Associated with the fatal fires were individual firefighters who had committed these “sins of omission.” They were the “sinners,” whereas those who worked on comparable fires in which there were no fatalities – those who got it right – were the “heroes.” But what were the characteristics that differentiated “heroes” from the “sinners?” A tool of sorts was created to help firefighters remember and thus not commit the “sins of omission.” The task force took the “sins” of omission” and reformulated them to emphasize the positive things that “heroes” had done that contributed to a successful outcome. The result, slightly modified by McArdle, were the Ten Standard Firefighting Orders that have endured to this day, and which are a part of every wildland firefighter’s vocabulary.

The orders have persisted -- indeed they have been treated “almost as a sacred text” according to one veteran firefighter. But from their inception their use has been controversial, for they provide wildland fire investigators with a checklist for assigning blame. As Professor Ziegler puts it, “Citing the number of orders violated tends to distract attention to what the firefighters on the ground did, as opposed to organizational factors such as whether the safety training they receive is effective.” Nonetheless, investigations of wildland firefighter fatalities characteristically include an assessment of the extent to which the Standard Orders may have been violated. The investigative report of the Decker Fire was no exception.

FOREST SERVICE INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

“... the cyclonic fire storm made normally safe areas untenable.”

Based on the testimony of survivors, the analysis of burn patterns on the ground, topography, weather data, and fuel characteristics, the U.S. Forest Service Investigative Report attempted a reconstruction of the events leading to the entrapment of the men on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway. The fire had been burning for nearly two hours down canyon from the point of origin, driven by down-slope winds, normal for that time of day along the Elsinore Front. The main body of the fire was burning in a relatively flat area bounded on three sides by steep ridges, about half a mile below where the men were conducting their burn-out operation. Fuels throughout the area were flashy -- they ignited readily and were consumed quickly. Post-fire analysis of unburned islands of fuel revealed that roughly 75% of the fuel consisted of dead material, an unusually high proportion. At about 8:00 p.m. the down-slope winds subsided. Heat that had built up in the flat was suddenly released, causing the fire to move rapidly up-slope, generating several fire whirls, the largest of which became established in a deep drainage below the men and equipment on the highway. The whirls triggered several exceedingly fast, hot runs up-slope toward the highway. Those elements appear to have converged as the fire exploded across the highway at speeds estimated variously at 70-125 mile per hour.

Because the most experienced Forest Service personnel were preoccupied with burn-out operations or attending to the operation of their tankers, they may have been less alert to impending danger than they could have been. The authors of the Investigative Report suggested that one of the overhead personnel should have been designated as observer to keep track of what the fire was doing and to monitor the burn-out operations. According to the report, failure to do so was a violation of Standard Firefighting Order number 2: *Know what your fire is doing at all times.*

According to the report, neither a safety zone nor an escape route had been explicitly identified to the men, perhaps because it seemed obvious that the highway itself could provide both protection and a route to safety if circumstances made evacuation necessary. The section of the highway where the men were working averaged about 24 feet in width, with occasional turnouts of 35 feet. The road proved hopelessly inadequate as a safety zone. In a masterpiece of understatement, the report described how “Tremendous blasts of heat passed over the highway. In several places along the roadway, cut banks reflected heat back, turning the ‘safety zone’ into a very hostile environment ... as the cyclonic fire storm made normally safe areas untenable.” The report noted that failure to identify an escape route and a safety zone was a violation of Standard Firefighting Order number 4: Identify escape routes and safety zones and make them known.

None of the Forest Service, and few of the CDF personnel had knowledge of the burn-over involving Guthrie and his crew, which occurred approximately one hour before the blow-up that trapped the men on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway. Had they been aware of that event, the report conjectured, firefighters would likely have been more alert to the extreme burning conditions and unusual fire behavior, and they would probably have been more cautious

in their actions. The report was not explicit on this point, but it implied that there was a breakdown in communication between Forest Service and CDF units, a violation of Standard Firefighting Order number 7: *Maintain prompt communications with your forces, your supervisor, and adjoining forces.*

The Fire Behavior Report, appended to the Investigative Report, asked, “Could this sequence of fire behavior have been predicted?” The answer was yes, in theory. With competent meteorological expertise the extreme weather pattern that produced the blowup could have been predicted, and an alert fire behavior specialist could have foreseen the possibility of fire whirls moving up-slope from the flat area at the mouth of Decker Canyon. With that knowledge an experienced firefighter could have concluded that the highway would prove inadequate as a safety zone. But it would have required the concerted work of three such people to have recognized the potential for disaster. Thus in practice, “... the tragedy could not reasonably have been predicted by anyone connected with the operation.”

The authors of the report found that the backfire operation conducted by CDF units at the bottom of Decker Canyon in an attempt to burn out the vegetation between the Ortega Highway and the Gough Fire burn “... did not trigger the fast runs and fire storm that caused the casualties to Forest Service personnel.”

The report contained a series of recommendations designed to enhance firefighter safety. First, the report emphasized the importance of clearly designating escape routes. Specifically, the authors of the report recommended that “... avenues of escape be covered as item number one in all fire assignments irrespective of the stage of the suppression job ... and regardless of how or where the fire is burning.” Second, they noted that many fatal burns are a consequence of the easily flammable clothing worn by firefighters. They called for accelerated development of garments of heat-reflecting material that are light, easily carried, and easily put on. Third, they recommended an addition to the thirteen “Watch Out” fire situations: *You are working on a fire down-slope from you. Remember the slope is constant while the wind is variable and can change with little warning.* Fourth, the report recommended that the Bureau of Employees Compensation compile a state-wide list of those medical facilities and specialists best equipped to treat burn victims. That information would be made available to personnel of each National Forest so that they could identify those medical facilities and personnel closest to them. Finally, it was recommended that where inter-agency response to wildland fires is common, top priority be given to studying the feasibility of installing multi-frequency radios in key vehicles to facilitate inter-agency radio communication.

AREA IGNITION

“There’s something there ... something’s happening that’s catching people off guard.”

Wildland firefighters speak of “extreme fire behavior,” a term that describes a sudden

intensification in the violence and destructiveness of a fire, resulting in a rapid increase in the size of the fire and the rate of energy release, making direct attack impossible or nearly so. In recent years an increasing number of firefighters are witnessing fire behavior that is more intense than anything they have seen before. Students of wildland fire behavior have identified a particularly violent form of extreme fire behavior to which the name “area ignition” has been applied. Bob Kittridge, Chief of the El Paso County Wildland Fire Crew puts it this way: “There’s something there ... something’s happening that’s catching people off guard.” The physics of the phenomenon is not well understood and, as Brett Butler of the Missoula Fire Laboratory has put it, firefighters “... see a whole hillside seemingly explode or ignite all at once. It’s difficult to imagine how area ignition occurs.” Nonetheless, in the joint investigative report of the Esperanza Fire of 2006 issued by the Forest Service and CAL-FIRE, area ignition was identified as a “contributing factor” in the deaths of five Forest Service tanker crewmen. Apparently, circumstances can arise on a fire in which superheated gases, with temperatures that far exceed the combustion temperature of fuels, fail to ignite the fuels due to an insufficiency of oxygen. With a change in conditions, an injection of oxygen may trigger an explosive and nearly simultaneous ignition over a large area.

The Forest Service Investigative Report of the Decker Fire did not speak of an area ignition; in 1959 the term had not yet been applied to extreme wildland fire behavior. Instead, the report described how “... a cyclonic-like wind caused *the entire area to erupt in almost instantaneous flame, engulfing most of the men and equipment in flames.*”

The seven Forest Service overhead involved in the burn-over on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway (Brooks, Grant, Keesler, Kelly, Schuler, Slater, Street) were skilled wildland firefighters with 52 seasons of firefighting experience among them. In age they ranged from 24 (Brooks) to 54 (Kelly) years, with an average of 35 years. All had experience fighting wildland fires in chaparral, and all were familiar with the Elsinore effect, with its down-slope up-slope wind reversal. Many had witnessed that phenomenon on previous fires burning in the Santa Ana Mountains. For example, the Morrell Fire of 1950, which burned 4,970 acres and caused one fatality, burned down canyon in the late afternoon, then up canyon in the evening. The Cornwell Fire exhibited the same behavior as it consumed 2,970 acres of chaparral in 1956.

Seven weeks prior to the Decker Fire, all of the Forest Service overhead had received eight hours of training dealing with fire behavior, the Ten Standard Firefighting Orders, and the 13 “Watch Out” fire situations. Three weeks before the Decker Fire, all or nearly all of the Forest Service overhead had worked the Gough Fire, which burned across the Ortega Highway roughly a half a mile from where the Decker Fire originated, and which exhibited the reversal of wind direction characteristic of the Elsinore effect. It was the Gough Fire burn that firefighters were attempting to tie into with their backfires when the fire overran them. Clearly, the men were aware of the reversal of wind from down-slope to up-slope that would likely occur at about sunset, and they were conducting their backfire operation as quickly as possible in anticipation of that change in wind direction. They were not taken by surprise by the reversal in the direction of the wind;

they anticipated it. What caught them off guard was the extreme fire behavior that accompanied the reversal in wind direction.

That the burn-over events on the Decker Fire involved extreme fire behavior is beyond question. In their testimonies, given within a day or two after the fire, survivors described the burn-over that trapped Forest Service personnel on the highway as follows: “... *the fire blew up*” (Bradley); “... *a large wall of fire*” (Kramer); “... *the entire fire appeared to erupt with intense heat, strong winds with whirls*” (Grant); “... *moving at an unbelievable speed up canyon ... the fire blew up*” (Ferguson); “... *the fire exploded across the highway ... exploded like gasoline ... a whirling mass of flame*” (Kelly); “... *blowing with cyclonic effects*” (Keesler); “... *the fire was half exploding, half rolling*” (Schmeeckle); “... *the fire started to circle like a twister and then it increased its speed ... flames were above 50 feet in height*” (Dutra). Clearly something other than a simple reversal in wind direction was at play on the slopes of the Elsinore Front in the early evening hours of August 8, 1959. Firefighters encountered something unexpected, perhaps unprecedented in their experience, and it overwhelmed them.

Some have expressed an opposing view of the burn-over event on the upper reaches of the Ortega Highway, contending that the injured Forest Service men were in the chaparral below the highway and were attempting to reach the road when the flames overtook them. According to this view, the tragedy was due to the Elsinore effect rather than to any extraordinary or extreme fire behavior. Yet, all available evidence indicates otherwise. The late John Loop, who fought the Decker Fire, but was not present on the day of the burn-over events, rebuts the contention that the men were trapped in the chaparral below the highway. According to him “All of those men were injured on the highway. None of them died in the brush.”

RENEWAL

“There is pyromaniacal majesty and beauty in these elemental forces of nature, simultaneously destructive and restorative.”

By the following spring, winter storms had deposited their moisture along the Elsinore Front, bringing the cooler temperatures and higher humidity characteristic of winter in Mediterranean climates. Throughout the area burned by the Decker Fire, seedlings of manzanita and species of buckbrush had pushed up through the soil, their seeds having lain dormant for years until cued to germinate by the intense heat of the fire or from the combustion products from smoke and scorched wood. From the charred burls of laurel-leaf sumac and chamise, fresh green shoots had emerged, and dense clusters of purple-blue lupine cloaked portions of the hillsides.

Nine months after the Decker Fire, work began on El Cariso Memorial Park. Funded by an organization called the California Horsemen, the park was situated on the Ortega Highway

within a stone's throw of the El Cariso Hotshot camp. It included picnic tables, barbecues, camp sites and a stone drinking fountain with a bronze plaque (Fig. 3) proclaiming it the El Cariso Memorial, the purpose of which was to honor the "... men who gave their lives fighting forest fires in these mountains." Seven names appeared on the plaque: Durward F. Slater, Andrew Brooks, Steven Johnson, Boyd M. Edwards, Joe E. Adam, Nelson Harlan, and John D. Guthrie. Adam was not a casualty of the Decker Fire. He died in December of 1958 on the Stewart Fire which, like the Decker Fire, burned on the Trabuco District of the Cleveland National Forest. In the lower left-hand corner of the plaque are inscribed the words, "Decker Fire, August 8, 1959." Thus, the El Cariso Memorial came to be known, erroneously, as the Decker Fire Memorial, and the number of Decker firefighter fatalities was put incorrectly at seven. The drinking fountain no longer exists, but the plaque is on public display at the El Cariso Visitors' Center nearby.

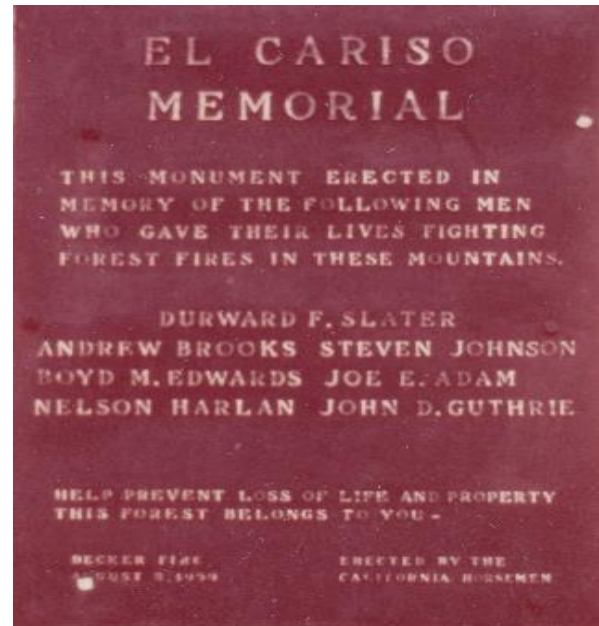


Figure 3. El Cariso Memorial Plaque

In 1995, a group of retired firefighters, concerned citizens, USFS employees, and CAL-FIRE personnel sought to refurbish the El Cariso Memorial Park. They conceived the idea of establishing a memorial that would honor all of the firefighters who have given their lives fighting wildland fires in California. The California Wildland Firefighter Memorial Committee was established, and in partnership with the Forest Service, CAL-FIRE, and the Orange County Fire Authority, it set about to raise the funds necessary to make the memorial a reality.

On April 7, 1998, members of the California Wildland Firefighter Memorial Committee, together with representatives from the Forest Service, CAL-FIRE, and the Orange County Fire Authority joined State Senator Raymond Haynes and Decker Fire survivors, Robert "Red" Wilson, and John Ferguson at the site for the California Wildland Firefighter Memorial (CWFm). Situated near the El Cariso guard station on the Ortega Highway, the memorial would be built on land donated by the U.S. Forest Service. Among others in attendance were Gary Johnson, brother of El Cariso Hotshot Steven Johnson who died of burns received fighting the Decker Fire, and Carlo Guthrie, wife of John Guthrie, a CDF tanker foreman who also was a casualty of the Decker Fire. In addition to dedicating the site for the CWFm, Senator Haynes read a proclamation designating the 29 mile section of the Ortega Highway from Elsinore to San Juan Capistrano as the California Wildland Firefighters Memorial Highway. The event marked the kick-off of fund-raising efforts in support of the CWFm. It would be a work in progress for the next 13 years.

On the morning of October 8, 2011, hundreds of firefighters, former firefighters, friends and family members gathered just off the Ortega Highway near El Cariso Guard Station for the final dedication of the CWFm. Among the dignitaries in attendance were representatives of the USFS, CAL-FIRE, the Los Angeles County Fire Department, the Orange County Fire Authority, and the California Wildland Firefighters Memorial Committee, represented by President Carlo Guthrie, among others. The ceremony began with an honor guard, followed by the invocation, the pledge of allegiance, and the singing of the national anthem. A series of VIPs, including county supervisors and other notables, addressed the crowd. Seated in the audience in the first row were members of the 1966 El Cariso Hotshots, including survivors of the Loop Fire, which took the lives of twelve members of the crew and seriously injured many others. They were asked to stand and be acknowledged. In their green jeans, khaki shirts and trade-mark green berets, they were a throw-back to an earlier time, before the advent of Nomex fire resistant clothing, air-conditioned crew carriers, and very large aerial tankers (VLATs). Members of a new generation of wildland firefighters – the young men and women of the present-day El Cariso Hotshot crew – were seated in the second and third rows behind them. Tom Tisdale, a retired CAL-FIRE Riverside unit chief, gave the benediction. He spoke for everyone when he expressed the hope that “... we would never have to add another name to this memorial.”

The California Wildland Firefighters Memorial consists of a semi-circular rock wall enclosing a bed of red brick pavers that form the arms of the Maltese cross of Saint Florian, patron saint of firefighters. Many of the pavers bear inscribed dedications to the more than 400 California wildland firefighters who have died in the line of duty. At the center of the cross stands a four-sided stone obelisk with historical images of California wildland firefighting and commemorative plaques of polished granite honoring the fallen. Affixed to the semi-circular wall are some 200 small rectangular plaques, many of which bear the name of a fire, the county in which the fire occurred, the year of the fire, and the number of firefighter fatalities. One of the plaques honors the six men who lost their lives fighting the Decker Fire. But some of the plaques have been left blank, waiting to be engraved ... a stark, poignant reminder of the ever present danger inherent in wildland firefighting. Gloria Nájera-Ayala, mother of Daniel Hoover-Nájera who died fighting the Esperanza Fire of 2006, attended the ceremony. She put it succinctly: “There are always going to be fires.”

EPILOGUE

In the early afternoon of May 16th, 1963, nearly four years after the Decker Fire, a Greyhound bus from El Centro pulled into the Elsinore bus station. A nineteen year-old boy disembarked, suitcase in hand, and asked the bus driver for directions to the nearby El Cariso Forest Service Guard Station, where he was to report for work as a rookie member of the El Cariso Hotshot crew. Following the driver’s instructions, he walked northwest along Lakeshore Drive, then southwest on Riverside Drive to Grand Avenue where the Ortega Highway turns southwestward and begins a steep, winding ascent of the escarpment of the Elsinore Mountains. There he began his uphill trek toward the Forest Service station, gradually gaining elevation. Within roughly a mile and a half the road made a sharp hair-pin turn. A short distance beyond

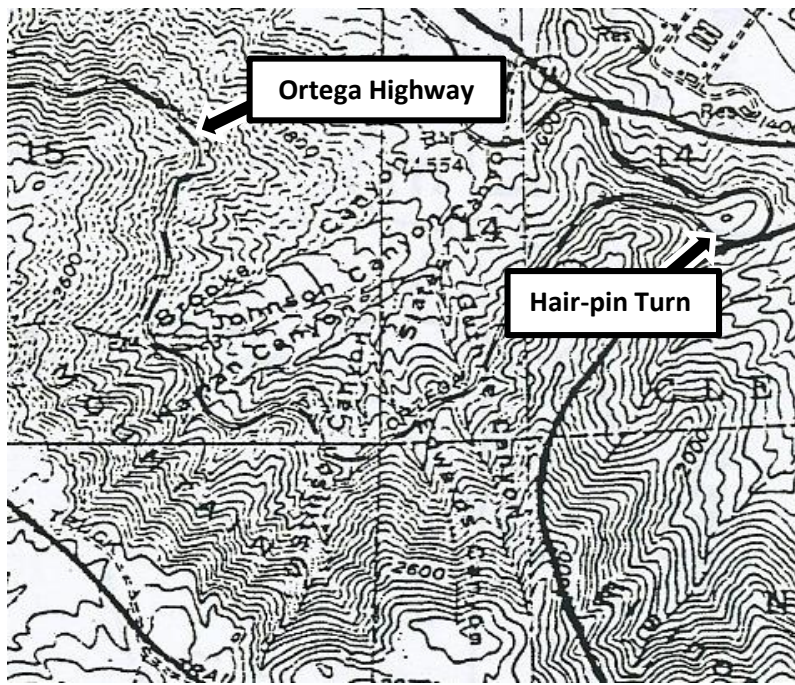


Figure 4. Topographic map showing location of canyons named for Decker Fire firefighter fatalities.

he paused to catch his breath and to study the northeast-facing slopes below. They were dissected by numerous ravines and drainages with nothing to distinguish them – except for the few, marked with white signs with neat black lettering, and bearing the names Brooks, Edwards, Guthrie, Harlan, Johnson, and Slater. (Fig. 4). What, he wondered, distinguished these non-descript gullies from the numerous other similar topographic features? Why were those names associated with those particular gullies? Was it an honor to have one's

name associated with such ordinary-looking landforms? If so, what must one do to earn such a distinction?

Julian Lee is Professor of Biology, Emeritus at The University of Miami. He lives with his wife, fellow biologist Dr. Lynn Haugen, in Silver City, New Mexico. He was a member of the El Cariso Hotshots in the summers of 1963, '64, '65, and '66. He can be contacted at: tzabcan@aol.com.

ENDNOTES

¹ The town was named Elsinore in 1883 by Margaret Collier Graham, one of the city founders. She took the name from Shakespeare's Hamlet, supposedly because she liked the sound of the name. In 1972 the name of the town was changed by popular vote to *Lake Elsinore*.

² The word chaparral is derived from the Spanish *chaparro*. The suffix "al," means "place of." The term was originally applied to the community of evergreen drought-resistant shrubs of the Mediterranean region. Chaparral-like vegetation is typically found on the west and southwest coasts of the continents, between latitudes 30 and 45 degrees north and south. Such regions have a "Mediterranean" climate, with cool moist winters, and hot dry summers.

³ Two other southern California fires bear the name Decker, at least in part. The 1930 Decker Canyon Fire threatened Malibu and the Palisades and was described as "... a worst case scenario involving fifty-year-old chaparral and a fierce Santa Ana" (Davis, M. *The Case for Letting Malibu Burn*). The arson-caused Decker fire of October 1985 burned 6,600 acres in the Malibu area. The names Decker Fire and Decker Canyon Fire have both been applied to the 1959 fire discussed here. Forest Service documents refer to this fire as the Decker Fire. I follow that usage.

⁴ There has been some confusion concerning the number of firefighters who died in the Decker Fire. A fragment of what is apparently a Forest Service training document states that there were five fatalities, though this may refer only to USFS personnel. The California Wildland Firefighters' Memorial originally put the number at seven, but this has since been corrected to six. The El Cariso memorial, which once stood in the El Cariso campground adjacent to the El Cariso Guard Station and near the El Cariso Hotshot camp, bore the names of seven firefighters who "... gave their lives fighting fires in these mountains." In the lower left corner of the plaque was inscribed: "Decker Fire, August 8, 1959." Thus, the El Cariso Memorial came to be known incorrectly as the Decker Fire Memorial, and the number of firefighters killed in the Decker Fire was assumed to be seven. However, only six of the seven whose names appear on the El Cariso Memorial died in the Decker Fire. The seventh, Joe E. Adam, a Forest Service employee from the Prescott National Forest in Arizona, died the previous year on the Cleveland National Forest in the Stewart Fire of December 1958.

⁵ There are nine Forest Service regions in the United States. Crews that are authorized to fight fires outside the region in which they reside are termed interregional crews.

⁶ The El Cariso Hotshot crew was formed in 1958, and its members were stationed on the Ortega Highway about 7 miles west of Elsinore on the Trabuco District, the northern-most of the three districts of the Cleveland National Forest. Initially it consisted of 15 crew members, with Danny L. Street in charge of the crew in 1958 and 1959, and Glen Kay serving as interim Superintendent in 1960, following by Doug Campbell in 1961 and 1962. Under Campbell the El Cariso Hotshots added an Assistant Superintendent, two Crew Bosses, and the size of the crew was increased to 30 members, divided into two crews of 15



Fig. 6. The Ruptured Duck Fighting Through a Cane Thicket.

each. During Campbell's tenure as Superintendent he envisioned a logo for the El Cariso Hotshots that would consist of a "daffy duck character that was beat up from fires: a splint on his neck, a blister on his heel, and a bolt of lightning hitting him in his tail feathers." Campbell's wife, Pat, designed the first logo of the "ruptured duck," thereby bringing to fruition Campbell's original vision (Fig.5). Today the El Cariso Hotshot Crew is stationed at 39251 Ortega Highway, about 8 miles west of Lake Elsinore.

⁷ The word *cariso* is presumably a corruption of the Spanish *carrizo*, which is variously translated as, "cane," "bamboo," "reed," or "water grass." One version of the El Cariso Hotshot logo shows the "ruptured duck," symbol of the El Cariso crew, fighting its way through a cane thicket (Fig. 6).

⁸ Twelve members of the El Cariso Hotshot crew died of burns received on the Loop Fire on 1 November 1966.



Figure 5. El Cariso Hotshot Logo, rendered by former El Cariso Hotshot Tom Sadowski.

⁹ The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) is the state agency responsible for fire protection and management of the state's private and public forests. At the time of the Decker Fire the agency was referred to as the California *Division* of Forestry (CDF).

¹⁰ Live reel hose. Typically a charged hard line hose stored on a reel attached to a tank truck.

¹¹ The precise location of the Guthrie burn-over is unclear. A rough draft Forest Service topographic map puts the location at the south side of the hair-pin turn on the Ortega Highway. In a letter dated July 15, 2012 to John Hunneman, a reporter for the *North County Times*, John Guthrie's widow, Carlo Guthrie, described the location as "... in the steep valley just after you complete that 360 degree turn going up the Ortega Highway."

¹² There are conflicting versions of what happened to John D. Guthrie and his crew. John A. Loop, a fire fighter with the California Division of Forestry (CDF) was present at the Decker Fire, though not at the actual burn-over events. According to him, two CDF fire trucks were dispatched to the Decker Fire from Temecula, one of which was driven by Guthrie. The trucks arrived from the Lake Elsinore side and proceeded up the Ortega Highway toward the fire. At a road cut, the vehicles pulled over, stopped, and Guthrie got out. He clambered down the side of the hill to get a better view of the fire burning below them. He soon came scrambling back to the road, yelling for his crew to get into the cab and to move the trucks up to the protection of the high bank of the upper cut in the road. As the fire overran the two vehicles and their crews, Guthrie slid beneath his truck. Both vehicles pulled forward toward the safety of the high bank of the upper cut, leaving Guthrie exposed to the onrushing flames. Several members of his crew were seriously burned, and Guthrie was burned critically. He would succumb as a result of his injuries eight weeks later.

John Hunneman published an account of the Guthrie burn-over incident in *The North County Times* dated October 27, 2011. According to Hunneman, Guthrie and his five-man crew were sent into a canyon off the main road (presumably the Ortega Highway), about a mile east of El Cariso Village, to start setting backfires. The winds shifted, pushing a wall of flames back up canyon toward their truck. Guthrie ordered his crew to get into the truck for protection. There wasn't enough room for Guthrie, who remained outside, intending to wet himself down with the fire hose. But the fire hose was burned through. Flames rushed over the truck, "... charring it and those inside and outside almost beyond recognition." This version of events is incorrect in several important respects. See endnote 22.

¹³ Backfire. A wildland firefighting tactic in which fuels are purposely ignited in order to consume fuels that lie in the path of a wildfire.

¹⁴ The Gough Fire burned 21 days previous to the Decker Fire. It crossed the upper portion of the Ortega Highway approximately 0.6 miles NNW of the point of origin of the Decker Fire, and it burned down slope toward the mouth of Decker Canyon to within about 0.1 of a mile of the lower portion of the Ortega Highway. It was the Gough burn that Forest Service units were attempting to tie into with their backfires when they were overrun

¹⁵ Puerta la Cruz is an inmate camp run by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, in conjunction with CAL-FIRE/LAC. It was established as an all-male camp in 1957. In 1986 it became an all-female inmate camp. It is located at 32363 Hwy 79, Warner Springs, San Diego County, California.

¹⁶ There is uncertainty concerning the whereabouts of the El Cariso Hotshot crew prior to their arrival at the Decker Fire. According to the statement of Frederick E. Carrick, El Cariso Tank Truck Driver, El Cariso Hotshot Kenny Van told him that the crew had just been released from a fire on the Descanso District. James M. Priddy, also an El Cariso Hotshot crewman, testified that they had been released from a fire on the Palomar District. Danny L. Street, Foreman of the El Cariso Hotshots (pers. comm.) is of the opinion that the crew arrived from the Palomar District. Regardless, it is certain that the crew arrived at the Decker Fire from the Elsinore side.

¹⁷ Spotting. The process by which spot fires are produced by firebrands outside the main body of a fire.

¹⁸ Fusee. A pyrotechnic device or flare used to ignite fuel, especially when engaged in backfiring operations.

¹⁹ The U.S. Forest Service Investigative Report states that winds "... undoubtedly reached 75 to 125 mph."

²⁰ Today the building that housed Woolford's Curio Shop is a restaurant called the Overlook Roadhouse.

²¹ Borate. An aqueous solution of sodium calcium borate used as a fire retardant in aerial wildland fire fighting. Borate salts are known to be toxic to animals and to sterilize the soil. The use of borate as a fire retardant was phased out by the U.S. Forest Service in the early 1960s and replaced with fertilizer-based retardants containing diammonium phosphate (DAP), ammonium phosphate, or ammonium sulfate.

²² Concurrent Assembly Resolution No. 107, co-sponsored by Senator James F. Battin, and Representative Paul Cook, was published in the Legislative Counsel's Digest dated 22 February 2008. That resolution was intended to honor John D. Guthrie by designating a portion of California State Highway Route 215 as the John D. Guthrie Memorial Highway. Included in the resolution was an account of the burn-over that involved Guthrie and his crew. Unfortunately, that account was based largely on the Hunneman article of 2011 which, while well-intentioned, contained a very serious error. In the article Hunneman asserted that all of Guthrie's crew died in the Decker Fire, when in fact every member of his crew survived. Rather than being responsible for the loss of his crew, Guthrie was instrumental in saving them.

Author's Note: This account of the Decker Fire is based on a variety of sources, including newspaper accounts, interviews and/or correspondence with the following persons who participated in fighting the Decker Fire: CDF Tank Truck Operator Will Donaldson, El Cariso Hotshot Foreman Danny L. Street, CDF firefighter Conrad Vargas, and El Cariso Hotshot crewman Robert "Red" Wilson. I am grateful to each of them for responding to my queries and

for clarifying certain points. I thank CAL-FIRE Senior Staff Council John Shipley for making copies of certain CDF documents available to me. Carlo Guthrie, widow of CDF Tanker Foreman John D. Guthrie, kindly provided details of the burn-over event that took the life of her husband. An unpublished account of the Decker Fire by the late John Loop, CDF firefighter, was useful in clarifying the activities of CDF personnel. Stephanie Regis, retired USFS Fire Prevention Officer, carefully read an early draft of this manuscript and many useful suggestions for its improvement. In addition she provided access to a large volume of documents pertaining to the Decker Fire, including official Forest Service reports, background and training records of USFS personnel involved in the fire, analyses of fire behavior, weather, and fuel characteristics at the time of the fire, and autopsy reports and coroner's inquisitions of firefighters who died as a result of burns suffered on the fire. Even such mundane documents as the billing records of the ambulance companies that conveyed the injured firefighters to hospital have been available to me. Especially useful were the verbatim transcripts of testimony given by surviving USFS personnel, recorded within a few days after the fire. I have quoted extensively from those transcripts, allowing the men who fought the fire to speak to us, as it were, more than half a century after the event. Their testimonies serve to illuminate and personalize the events that played out above Lake Elsinore in the early evening hours of August 8, 1959. I hope that they convey a sense of what it was like for the men who fought the Decker Fire.

Eyewitness accounts can be unreliable, and this is especially so under the physically demanding, stressful and sometimes dangerous circumstances of wildland firefighting, where events can unfold rapidly and unpredictably. Inevitably, some witness accounts are contradictory in varying degree. In most such cases I have chosen the version of events that seems most probable, given the preponderance of the evidence, but in such cases I provide an endnote where I present the alternative version (s). In a few cases I have combined elements of more than one version in an attempt to strike an accurate balance among competing accounts.

