

The Paint Fire 1990

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June 27-July 2, 1990

“An afternoon sun beats down uncomfortably on Santa Barbara’s red-tile roofs that day, sending tourists and residents scurrying into the shade or to the beach in search of relief.

Mothers tried to sooth cranky children. On Highway 101, car radiators boiled over. Editors at the Santa Barbara News-Press sent photographers out to shoot routine hot weather photos for the next morning’s edition.

At 9 pm the thermometer stood stubbornly at 84 degrees, and by midnight it was still hot. People threw off their blankets and slept under just the sheets.

On Tuesday the sun was even more brutal, the heat more stifling—103 degrees after sunset. Wind gusts whipped the trees and stirred up dust from the drought-parched ground. Yet as midnight passed, the night calmed and cooled, giving way to a comforting quiet.

Wednesday dawned much like the previous day, but by early afternoon there was a sense of foreboding hanging in the air.”

Keith Dalton/Joan Rigdon

Santa Barbara News-Press

BY NOON ON THE afternoon of Wednesday, June 27, the thermometer has broken the 100 degree mark for the third day in a row. It is intensely hot, sweltering even in the shade. There is no cooling breeze, no air movement to soften the day—at least not then. Near San Marcos Pass, Mark and Julie Kummel pack a cooler full of lunch, gather boogie boards for their two boys, Ewan and Ryan, ages 8 and 10, and prepare to head for East Beach in search of relief. It has been that kind of day.

A Red Flag Alert is in effect and Fire departments, Forest Service, and law enforcement agencies meet daily to coordinate strategy. Fire personnel patrol the foothills, searching diligently for any sign of a fire. A burning ban is also in effect, and every effort is made to make the public aware of the extreme fire danger.

“It was like a blast furnace,” says National Weather Service meteorologist Gary Ryan. Firefighters take hourly readings of the temperature and humidity. At 11 am it is 98 degrees with a humidity of 18 per cent. By noon the temperature has risen to 100 degrees and the humidity has dropped to 15 per cent. Inexorably the temperature rises even further—to 102 degrees at 1 pm and 106 degrees at 2 pm. By then the humidity is an incredibly low 8 per cent.

Despite the alert, and the need for more firemen on duty here, many of Santa Barbara’s firefighting forces are in Ventura County fighting a 600 acre blaze that breaks out there on Tuesday evening.

In Riverside at the Fire Lab tensions begin to mount. More fires continue to break out. On Wednesday morning in Orange County a fire is spotted in Carbon Canyon which burns 6,600 acres and causes a loss of 14 structures. It takes 17 strike teams—a total of 85 engines—and 4 air tankers to control it. At 3:30 pm in Glendale, more than 200 firefighters, 40 engines, and 4 helicopters respond to a 75 acre arson-

caused fire there. Though it is contained in less than five hours, 66 homes are destroyed, with damages in excess of \$50 million. Worse for Santa Barbarans, when the Painted Cave Fire starts, there are no air tankers available because they have all been diverted to the Glendale area.

The worst week of wildfire in California's history is about to begin.

THE LOS PRIETOS HOT SHOTS don't realize how busy their week will be, or how harrowing, when they awaken early on Monday morning on June 25 and begin the day's ritual with a strenuous 5-mile run.

The 20-member Hot Shot crew, which is under the supervision of 28-year Los Padres veteran Mark Linane, is one of the best in the nation. "In their minds, they are," says Linane, a soft-spoken but tough firefighter who has been in charge of the team since the mid-1970s. "They're human, they're people," he adds with a laugh, "they have their high days, and days when they aren't worth a sh—, but I think the consistency and quality of the crew over the years rates with the top 2-3 teams in the nation."

The Los Prietos Hot Shots date back to 1949 and are patterned after infantry smokejumpers who made a name for themselves during World War II. Originally, the first back country firefighting and road building muscle has been provided by CCC crews during the 1930s, but this manpower disappears during the war. Afterwards, fire strategy evolves along military lines, and attack teams are developed which can jump quickly into a fire to provide line construction, fell trees, and back fire where needed.

In the 1950s, the "Shots," the abbreviation the Los Prietos team has for itself, become the primary ground attack force in the Los Padres National Forest, and by the 1960s, with the development of heliattack, can be lifted quickly into any terrain to fight under any conditions. By the early 1970s they are being used regionally throughout Southern California to fight wildfires. Eventually, the Shots become one of the first national strike teams, capable of flying anywhere in the United States, and prepared to be in the air with less than 5 minute's notice.

"What it's about now is total mobility," Mark explains from his small office located at the back of the Santa Barbara Ranger District headquarters on Paradise Road. "You need crews that are capable of fighting any type of fire anywhere. We've become a national resource."

As the heat begins to build in Santa Barbara on Monday, the Shots load their 60 pound packs quickly into several helicopters and are flown directly to a ridge on Santa Cruz Island overlooking China Harbor where a grass fire, dubbed the Julianne Fire, has broken out. A high security Navy installation is nearby, and they hurry to make sure that the flames do not reach it. With the help of several air drops, the crew mops the fire up quickly. Though it is steep terrain, it is relatively open, mostly sparse grasses due to drought conditions which affect the island habitat just as much as it does Santa Barbara.

On its way home on Tuesday, the crew is rerouted at 4 pm to Ojai where they work all night constructing hand line in a canyon above Ojai. It is tough, demanding work, the kind they like. The crew is divided into two 10-man teams, called 4A and 4B, each with a foreman responsible to Linane, who is known affectionately as "Soop" to his kids. Tony Donato, a 16 year veteran who began his firefighting career under Sup in 1973, is responsible for 4A; Stan Stewart, who has 18 years of heliattack and hot shot experience, leads 4B.

While Soop coordinates overall strategy, the foremen move up ahead of the crew members, shouting directions, looking for the best line to take, always watching the fire for a sudden shift in direction which

might put them in danger. Two crew bosses, Ron Bollier and Steve Selle, direct the line work. Two sawyers are in the lead. While the head sawyer does the actual cutting, the other, called the smoker, carries the extra fuel and pulls the brush out of the way. Several more follow up with pulaskis, hacking the thick chaparral stubs back to ground level, and after them come the scrapers with McClouds, which look something like rakes except that these have broad tongs and razor sharp edges on their backsides, to clean the duff and debris down to mineral soil.

Depending on conditions—wind, whether the crew intends to backfire, if there is a hose lay to back them up, or if they've just had a load of the wet, sticky retardant known as Phos-chek laid down on them—the line may be just a few feet wide or as much as 10-to-15 feet, a tough proposition in the rugged Santa Barbara and Ventura back country. "It's probably the hardest job there is on the fire line," Linane says with a measure of pride, "it's labor intensive and generally on the piece of dirt you can't get a truck or dozer into."

If there is one reason the team is so good, Soop is it. He is a quiet, self-assured man who chooses to let his actions speak rather than his words. "I kind of believe in going, and going hard, as long as need be," he says with a pinch of tobacco in his cheek, "and until I get the job done." Neither he, nor his foremen Tony and Stan, expects any less of their kids. "You take pride in your work. That's just the way it's supposed to be," Sup continues. "We don't talk a lot of sh—, we just show it."

"The real story is the kids themselves, not us," Soop affirms, "They don't get paid much and they do a hell of a job and we ask a hell of a lot from them—long hours, no whimpering, no whining, no complaining, no sick time, and lots of discipline."

"Every one of the crew is tight. I tell the kids when they start with me that they'll probably develop lifetime friendships and become closer to some of the people on the crew than anywhere else—that they stand a very good chance of these being their lifetime friends and their best friends, probably closer than most of their family."

Evenings you can see the Shots relaxing either on the veranda at the Paradise Store or on benches outside the Cielo Store near the San Marcos Station, their bond evident in the friendly way they relax together and joke with one another. It stems from the pride every one of them feels.

"When you walk in somewhere wearing a green shirt with our Shot emblem on it," says crew leader Ron Bollier, "everybody knows who you are. It makes you proud, and it makes you work that much harder to keep it up."

"You go anywhere and say you've worked on the Los Prietos Hot Shots," adds the other crew boss, Steve Selle, "and you know you've made a name for yourself. If you've been on our crew they know you've got to be good."

About 3 am, the crew finds itself in a tight spot when the Ojai fire kicks back up on them causing a brief firestorm to blow through the canyon where they are working, but luckily they are able to jump into an open area which has been backfired—hopping into the black—the crew calls it. It is a few tense minutes, but eventually the hot flames pass, and they are able to tie in the hand line, though not until about mid-morning. When they reach fire camp at 11 am, most of them eat quickly and drop into an exhausted sleep.

Two of the crew members are women, one of them Tanya Lovelace, who has done a standout job. “She does real good,” her crew boss Ron says with a grin, “though we’d probably never tell her she’s progressed that far.”

There aren’t many women who have the strength—and most of all—the heart demanded by Sup. “It’s tough for them,” says Linane. “It isn’t easy being the first, and this is extremely hard work.” Nevertheless, he is also proud that a number of the kids he has brought under his wing have been women. “We had the first woman ever on a hot shot crew in 1976, Deanne Shulman,” he adds, “before it was in vogue and court mandated,” he laughs, “What matters is quality, not quantity. Numbers don’t mean sh— to me.”

Just as Soop is about to grab a few hours of sleep himself, the other woman crew member comes up to him, a worried look in her eye, and asks if they can talk for a moment. She is a first year member from Berkeley and has the best physical qualities of any woman he has ever had, which is why Sup recruited her.

“You know, she could have been great, but she had always been able to out-physical everyone, even the guys,” Linane explains. “But down here we’ve got some pretty intense lads who are into fitness real strong, and she never got used to being unable to keep up with them, no matter how good she was.”

Moreover, she is shaken by the firestorm which blew over them last night. At camp she has seen a story in the morning LA Times describing the deaths of six firemen in Arizona in a similar situation. “Nope,” she says simply, “this isn’t for me.”

“You’ve got to have a certain sort of heart for this work,” Soop says in reflection, “not that her’s was good or bad, it just wasn’t the kind you need for what we do.”

In just a few hours Soop’s crew will be fully involved in the Painted Cave firestorm, at one point totally engulfed in flames for 5-to-8 minutes, perhaps the toughest test yet of all their hearts.

IN SANTA BARBARA, AT 2:13 pm Wednesday afternoon, the dispatch’s voice from the Emergency Communication Center located in the basement of the County Jail sounds the dreaded words, “Brush fire reported, County Transfer Station.” At Station 13, located along Hollister Avenue and just east of San Marcos High School, two County Fire engines respond. From another station comes rescue equipment and additional support rolls from City Fire Station 4, if needed.

County Fire Captain Vince Agapito is first on the scene along with firefighter Mike Patarak and Captain Carl Durtche, discovering that stacks of cardboard destined to be recycled have caught on fire. Shortly after, engineer Kent Tapper arrives with a 1250 gallon per minute (gpm) pumper.

Agapito’s main concern is to keep the fire from spreading into the surrounding brush, which, because of the intense heat and hot flames, almost seems assured. Quickly he requests a second alarm, and begins to organize his men and equipment around the fire’s perimeter. As the cardboard pallets begin to ignite one by one, heavy plumes of thick reddish-brown smoke are driven high into the air. The fire moves rapidly through the material, driven by 15-20 mile per hour winds, and begins to threaten several county buildings located just north of the Transfer Station.

When Battalion Chief Dave Bianchi arrives from the County Fire headquarters he assumes the role of Incident Commander and Agapito shifts over to Operations Section Chief. At 2:59 pm, just three-

quarters hour after the start of the fire, a third alarm is sounded, along with a request for an additional three strike teams for structure protection, which will bring 15 more engines to the blaze.

About 3:30 pm the fire threatens to escape through the brush eastward toward the city. Residents gather along Sherwood and El Sueno, worried that they may lose their homes to the rapidly expanding fire. To the west, homeowners on Sierra Madre and El Rodeo also gather in tight bunches, wondering similar thoughts.

Fortunately, IC Bianchi has enough forces under his command to bring the Dump Fire under control just before 6 pm, though not before the county maintenance shop is destroyed, along with 10 brand new black and white Sheriff's vehicles, a loss of more than \$1 million.

Spectators begin to drift back toward their yards, breathing a sigh of relief. They are sure their homes have been saved, not realizing that in less than an hour the Painted Cave Fire will rip through this area, leveling almost every one of them.

A BIT AFTER 4 PM, with four hours sleep behind them, the Shots are released from the Ojai fire and begin the bone-weary drive back to Santa Barbara. As 6 pm approaches they pass through the traffic lights on Highway 101, cautiously looking in the direction of the Transfer Station, relieved that the Dump Fire is now under control.

But at 6:02 pm, a time that will be etched into the minds of many thousands of local residents for the rest of their lives, the dispatch's voice comes over the radio again.

"Brush fire reported on Highway 154 at Painted Cave Road," the radio announces in a calm voice.

At the Transfer Station, a hundred heads turn north and spot a wisp of smoke rising innocently skyward. "They'd better get the tankers," says County Fire Captain Tom Franklin in a whisper. Then the men scramble, the scores of engines and brush trucks, making a mad dash in the direction of the fire.

"We had more strike teams in the area than you could ever expect to have," County Fire PIO Charlie Johnson says later, "and yet it still kicked our butts."

At Station 41, located at San Marcos Pass, power has been in and out all afternoon. Forest Service engine leader Roger Dahlen and firefighter Tim Davis are working on the station's emergency generator when a small pickup truck flies into the parking area and the driver yells at them that there's a fire down the Pass near Painted Cave Road. At nearly the same time, dispatch radios a similar message. Grabbing their gear, Dahlen and Davis rush to their engine along with Mark Moore, another San Marcos firefighter. This will be his first big fire, having just joined the team a few weeks earlier to get more fire experience. He eventually wants to become a city fireman.

They scream down Highway 154, arriving on the scene at 6:05 pm. They are greeted with 25-to-40 mile per hour winds. "There were good flame lengths, even then," Davis remembers "and they were moving down canyon and across the ridge parallel to Old San Marcos Pass really fast."

They make a quick analysis of the situation, and even before the truck has rolled to a stop, Dahlen is on the air. "We've got heavy black smoke, heavy brush," he tells dispatch. "Height of the flames is 15-20 feet. It's really churning."

"We got any air tankers?" he adds. "We get one up here and we might be able to do some good."

Minutes later, Mark vonTillow and Wes Preston from the Pendola Station arrive. available because of an earlier report of a fire on West Camino Cielo in the Haney Tract. Dahlen quickly takes command of his men, ordering a “progressive hose lay”—one main line strung out from the pumper, with gated valves every several hundred feet that allow one inch lines to be run off it, a line that can be made progressively longer as needed. His strategy is to contain the fire’s west flank to keep it from spotting across Old San Marcos and burning into the Trout Club.

At Painted Cave, when volunteer fire chief Robert Keeler hears the pronouncement over his police scanner, he assumes it is another false alarm. urely, he thinks, its just another report of smoke from the Dump Fire. But when he hears Dahlen’s words on the scanner, Keeler quickly gathers a few of the other volunteers and rushes down to the fire scene in their antiquated 1956 Ford fire truck. Though hopelessly overmatched for chaparral fire duty, it is all the Painted Cave Volunteer crew have available.

When they reach the intersection of Highway 154 and Painted Cave Road, the fire is only 200 by 400 feet, about 2 acres total, usually a manageable size, except that the winds are blowing from 35-to-45 miles per hour and the fire’s perimeter is beginning to expand rapidly.

Realizing that there is nothing his group can do to stop the fire’s downhill run, the Painted Cave volunteers return to their home base to prepare for a shift in wind which might turn the fire back up on them.

Dave Hardy is at Santa Barbara City College when his pager beeps and the call name “911” comes over it. That is the signal he has set up with his wife, Carol, to tell him that a fire is threatening their home in Painted Cave. The code means simply, “Drop everything and get home as soon as you can.” Realizing that San Marcos Pass will be closed, Hardy cuts up Gibraltar Road and across East Camino Cielo to Painted Cave.

Home is on Rim Road, a thin asphalt path perched on the edge of a Coldwater Sandstone bluff, and overlooking all of the Santa Barbara coastline. The cloud of smoke has become a thunderhead and through it they can see the flames racing towards town.

“Chief Keeler’s new Bronco was parked in my driveway when I arrived,” says Hardy. “A crowd was gathered on our deck, nervously surveying the devastation below us. Keeler was on his radio, talking to other volunteers around the mountain.

With almost no hesitation, Hardy changes into his firefighting gear—heavy boots, long-sleeved t-shirt, blue jeans, and bandana—then joins Keeler and the others to plan out their strategy.

On the Pass residents have created their own fire departments a decade ago, the Painted Cave and San Marcos Pass Volunteers, under the auspices of the Wildland Residents Association.

But as the flames continue to be pushed downhill, the volunteers prepare themselves for the prolonged stress that will come with the wondering, the wondering when the wind will turn and when the fire will come and get them.

At the fire scene the San Marcos crew is outmatched.

“We’d only gotten two packs of hose out, about 400 feet of it,” says Mark vonTillow, “when Roger realized that our efforts were futile, that it was moving too fast to get a line around it. We knew the

way it was going that the fire would be hitting homes pretty soon so we abandoned the hose lay. On the radio Dahlen reports to dispatch, "The fire is outrunning the initial attack. This may turn into a major incident. Get a command team in place up here as soon as you can."

When Forest Service fire specialist Gary Self arrives from the Santa Barbara Ranger District, he relieves Roger Dahlen and immediately puts in a request for 5 engines, 3 patrol trucks, 2 supervisors, 2 air tankers, and a helicopter, not yet realizing he won't get the air support.

Near the Trout Club intersection, the San Marcos firefighters treat a man who has had a mild heart attack. Though Mark Moore is new to the San Marcos Station, he is a medic from Torrance with 10 years experience, and he is able to stabilize the elderly gentleman.

As the Forest Service crew starts down the Pass, the fire begins to loop back upcanyon and towards Highway 154, pushing a lot of smoke in their faces, making it difficult to continue. At 6:24 pm a large spot fire a half-mile in front of the main front is reported, caused by embers being spit out by the intense heat and tremendous winds. Spot fires continue to burst out as embers are showered down on the foothills.

"We knew we weren't going to be able to stop it, but at least we hoped we could keep it from jumping the road," adds Wes Preston, Pendola Station Captain. "It got pretty hot and smoky. Rocks were beginning to roll down on the road and we were starting to take some big heat. We backed out of the zone for a few minutes and sat tight while the fire burned through."

In the first 20 minutes of its brief existence, the Painted Cave Fire has traveled 2 miles, and 10 minutes after that, structures are being threatened.

Jim Averitt is at the Cielo Store with Trout Club resident Rocky Siegel when they see the San Marcos crew rush out of the station. "I hope it's not serious," Jim remembers thinking as he and Rocky repair one of the ranch vehicles from Laurel Springs, the 160-acre retreat owned by Jane Fonda. "Then I heard it on the scanner, that there was a fire down there, and we both looked at each other, and Rocky says 'Let's go' so we jump in the truck and get down there as fast as we can.

"Rocky's baby daughter, Cassandra, is in the truck with us. We're worrying about the fire, and having the baby with us is making us both very nervous, but when we rounded the corner we both got kind of quiet. You could see the flames over the top of the hill. They were huge, and I could tell the Trout Club was in danger."

Rather than trying to fight the fire, warning Trout Club residents becomes their main priority. The entrance is just a few hundred yards down Old San Marcos from the main highway and there is a siren near the mailboxes which they hope to set off.

"When we got there," Jim explains, "Rocky jumped out of the truck and went down to activate the siren. Then he turned back to me and said 'the electricity is off, we can't use the alarm,' and I knew he was really worried.

"Rocky lives down there, and he knew his wife, Mary, was down there, and a lot of other people."

On the way down the rough, narrow road into the Trout Club, they spot several kids walking along. "Walk back down, tell your parents there is a big fire," Rocky tells them. "You've got to leave!"

When they get down to Rocky's house at the bottom of the residential area, the first thing he does is to start putting on his fire paraphernalia.

While he's doing that he says to Jim, "Put Cassadra in my car and I'll get Mary. You have to drive around and get the people out of the Trout Club. Nobody knows there is a fire.'

"I look up at the hill," Jim remembers, "and I can see the smoke and flames but because of the canyon and the trees, a lot of people won't be able to see it. I put the baby in the car and strap her into her car seat. By this time Rocky's wife, Mary, is at the car."

Rocky gives her a big hug, puts a scanner in her hands, and says, "Go to Grandma's, See you when I can."

Jim gets in Rocky's truck and drives back and forth through the Club with my horn on constantly. There are still children still playing, family barbeques going on, people unaware that anything has happened.

"I'm yelling at the top of my voice, screaming at them," says Jim. "Get out! A fire's coming! Get out! Because Rocky's the one who is always worried about fire, when they see me coming in his truck, they know something bad must have happened.

"My next thought after I've gone through the Trout Club was saving the children at Laurel Springs Ranch. So I start to drive out—and I'll never forget this—there were flames on both sides of the road, and they would flare out when strong gusts came by, covering the road. There was a fireman there, trying to direct traffic out of the Club, just freaking out, screaming at people to get the hell out. He saw me hesitating and he just yelled 'Move it! Move it!' and I did.

"As I drove up Painted Cave Road I was able to look down and see the fire for the first time. I couldn't believe how big it had become. I've never seen that kind of violence before."

There are 50 children at Laurel Springs Ranch, ages 12-14, who have just arrived two days earlier for a two-week stay. When Jim reaches the Ranch, the kids are in the dining hall in the middle of dinner. Everyone can see the smoke, but it is so thick that you can't tell if it is heading towards them or not.

Breathless, Jim finds David Hodges, the Camp Director, and Deborah Bernal, his assistant, and blurts out, "It's big. It's going places. We've got to get the kids out of here."

The three of them quickly decide to evacuate the children to the auditorium at Santa Ynez High School where David teaches. While the meals are finished, Deb, David, and Jim load sleeping bags into vans which are at the Ranch for just this purpose, while the staff helps the kids gather personal gear. Within an hour they are all safely relocated in the Valley.

At the Trout Club, after seeing his wife and baby off, Rocky jumps in the San Marcos Volunteer truck known as "Brush 1" stationed at his house, flips his siren on, and hits the gas hard, and makes a run through the Trout Club to make sure everyone has been alerted.

"I was figuring people would say they were staying," says Rocky, "but nobody said much of anything. They were all just packing stuff and getting the kids in the car. Nobody really wanted to be caught down here if the fire turned on us."

When Rocky Siegel comes by to check on the Bates family, they are ready to flee. Earlier, after work, Bill Bates, a self-employed contractor, heads down to the Harbor for an afternoon of sailboat racing, leaving his wife Jill, her mother, and their sons, Jesse and Charlie, at home.

“The electricity went off, that was the first annoying thing,” says Jill. “Then we heard all the sirens. I told the kids, just get in the car. Jesse was wearing shorts, no shoes and no shirt. That was it.” After rounding up her mother, they are on their way, taking almost nothing with them.

“Charlie tried to bring Barney, his boa constrictor, but I said no,” Jill continues. “He wanted to bring his younger brother’s pet rat as well, but I rejected that, too.

“I said, ‘Charlie, you’re not taking that rat out. It’s supposed to be boa constrictor food.’ He let it go.”

After this, Rocky heads for the top. “I knew that people would be trapped if we couldn’t keep the flames from coming over the hill,” Rocky explains. On top he meets his partner on Brush 1, Steve Moore, who lives at the upper end of the Trout Club. Brush 1 has a 200 gallon capacity which can be extended by adding a foaming agent.

For the next several hours the two of them rush back and forth along Old San Marcos, from Highway 154 down to the first swithback, a distance of a quarter-mile, smothering everything that comes over the top of the ridge.

“The wind was blowing east of the ridge,” Rocky says, “so that helped us. But if the fire had gotten over us and down into the canyon, the Trout Club would have cooked. You just couldn’t tell what it was going to do. The wind was so erratic. It was blowing like an SOB.

At the bottom of the Pass, the Shots, in their two apple green Forest Service vehicles, go “Code 3” when they hear the dispatch, reaching an area known as Windy Gap a mile below the fire start at 6:20 pm. But already the fire has become a monster.

“When we reached Windy Gap,” Sup remembers, “we were greeted with a wall of flames 50-to-70 feet high. I could see there was no hope for doing any hand work so I called for reinforcements right then.” Calmly over the radio he asks the IC for 10 strike teams of engines, 10 crew teams, and 3 dozer strike teams—more than he’s ever asked for in his entire career—and more than he probably ever will again.

“The amazing thing was that we still had traffic going down the Pass despite the flames,” he continues, “so I called for a halt to the traffic above Painted Cave and told them I’d escort whoever was down here out of the area and turn around anybody else stupid enough to be coming up the Pass. My next thought was that we needed to keep the fire west of Highway 154, so we turned around and prepared to backfire all the way down.”

While Ron Bollier drives the lead truck, Tony Donato follows. Two men from each crew run beside the trucks torching the brush on the downcanyon side of the road. At first they try using helitorches, but the wind is so severe it keeps putting out the flame so they shift to “fusees”—or road flare—to ignite it. The fusees turn the dry plant material into a fiery caldron in seconds. “You didn’t even have to touch the chaparral with the flame,” says Ron, “with the wind and the brush the way it was, all you had to do was wave the fusee across it to get it going.”

The flames have begun a downhill run that cannot be stopped. As the wind crests the top of San Marcos Pass and pours downcanyon it follows the upper part of San Jose Creek, then hops over the ridge on which Old San Marcos Pass Road is located, and cuts across the upper parts of the east and west forks of Maria Ygnacio Canyon. It is on a diagonal run that is pushing it directly across the mountain flank towards Santa Barbara.

The wind is thundering downhill by this time, in excess of 50 miles per hour, bending the brush in front of it, blowing wave after wave of smoke and flame down the mountain. The colors are intensely fascinating, misty sheets of whites, greys, browns, and blacks that turn a dozen different shades of red, purple, and yellow as they pass through the path of the setting sun. The crackling brush roars, full of sound, the combination of wind and fire maniacal. It is like a tidal flood spilling over the Pass, the glowing embers and waves of flame pouring downhill with a vengeance.

For the Hots Shots, they hurry, seeing if they can fire out the upper end of the Maria Ygnacio watershed all the way down to the bottom of the Pass before the fire cuts across the canyon and jumps Highway 154. It is a race they do not win.

Curtis Vincent is a 27 year veteran of the Forest Service and Carpinteria Fire Department. Currently, he is the fire specialist for the Santa Barbara Ranger District.

Vincent has fought every Santa Barbara wildfire since the early 1960s, beginning with the Coyote Fire. In 1971, during the Romero Fire, except for a quirk of fate, Vincent might have been another Santa Barbara wildfire victim.

“I’d been working as a tractor boss at the upper edge of the fire near Divide Peak with 8-to-10 dozers,” he says. “On the shift right before the men were killed in Santa Monica Canyon I was told they wanted me down in that area. Just after dinner I got my gear ready and I happened to see my dad, who was Montecito Fire Chief then. As we passed he asked me how it was going and I said fine, but that I was being reassigned to the bottom where the fire was getting more active.

“Right after that the tractor manager came up to me and said, ‘forget that, we don’t want you down here. We want you back up on top—you’ve been there all the time and you know what’s going on.

“So I went up there, but my dad thought I was on the bottom. Not but two hours later was when the four dozer operators were killed in the canyon. Dad thought I was still there. He rode up with a Forest Service crew to the area where they’d died, and he saw the bodies, none of which you could recognizing, thinking one of them was me.

With everything going on, it took quite a while before he found out differently. In his heart he knew I was there. He hoped and prayed I was still alive, but the longer the time went on he didn’t see me, the more worried he got.

“God, was he glad to see me.”

When the Painted Cave Fire breaks out, Vincent is at the Los Padres National Forest headquarters in Goleta meeting with a group of amateur radio enthusiasts who will be acting out in the field as “the eyes and ears” of the Forest Service during the balance of the Red Flag Alert.

“We’d started the meeting at 5 pm and had just gone outside to set up the group’s communications van,” Vincent remembers, “when the dispatcher poked her head out the door and said ‘we’ve got a fire to respond to.’ I just continued out to my truck and headed up towards the Pass.”

There has been a false alarm in an area off West Camino Cielo about an hour earlier, smoke that turned out to be from the Dump Fire, and Vincent hopes that this will turn out to be another false alarm, but as he reaches the Fairview/Calle Real intersection he sees the smoke and realizes that this will not be the case. He arrives at the fire scene about 6:20 pm and takes over Incident Command from his assistant, Gary Self.

“When I got there,” says Vincent, “I could see our crews were there. The Painted Cave Volunteers were there. County crews responding from the dump fire were there too. I could hear Gary ordering more reinforcements, and I could see that this fire was going to get really big. In my mind I began to put together a visual picture of what we’d need.

“I could see that this was our fire, it was in the forest. But I could also see that this was heading right down into town, and that it was also going to involve County areas of authority, and possibly the City’s too. When Assistant County Fire Chief Keith Simmons reached the scene at 6:30 pm we agreed to set up a joint command structure, with Forest Service handling the upper part of the fire, and City and County forces responsible for structure protection in the lower part of the fire zone.

Immediately, Vincent reaffirms the need for additional air tankers, helicopters, and engine teams, and requests a Class I, or national, fire command team to be flown in. These teams are composed of nationally recognized fire experts who train and work together on fires that are too complex for local agencies to handle. They begin to arrive in Santa Barbara late that night and the command structure is in place by 9 am the next morning, but by then most of the damage has been done.

Meanwhile, Simmons authorizes Deputy Fire Chief Don Perry to order 15-to-20 additional engine strike teams. Because the Riverside Fire Lab command center is so busy, Perry is forced to turn to the LA County Fire Department for call ups.

From his home at 2000 San Marcos Road, Santa Barbara City Fire Captain Mike Hankins understands the terrible destruction and heartbreak a fire can bring to one’s door step. Fifteen years earlier, on the day his family moves into his new mountain home, an arsonist starts a fire which burns their home to the ground. Earlier on Wednesday afternoon he has watched the progress of the Dump Fire from his porch, wondering about the fate of some of his fellow firefighters who he knows live nearby.

“I was looking down at the smoke from the dump fire,” he says, “when something told me to look around. I immediately saw a large column of smoke pouring over the ridge and I knew we had a major fire moving in our direction.” Quickly, Hankins gathers insurance papers and grabs Cecil the cat and throws it into the cab of his pickup truck. But while he is lifting his dog into the back Cecil jumps out and scurries off in terror before he can catch it. He leaves the cat behind, even though he knows it will probably die. But he has no choice—already the fire has reached his doorstep and he knows that if he doesn’t leave now it will probably cut him off before he can reach the bottom of the Pass.

Steve Kurstin and his wife, Marina Alzugaray, live halfway up Old San Marcos Pass Road, on the east side, facing down into Maria Ygnacio Canyon. They rent a bungalow-style home from a dear old mountain woman known simply as Angie.

Steve is an avid computer bug, and Marina is a certified nurse-midwife with her own practice. For them, it is a piece of heaven. They are both free spirits, and they feel comfortable in the mountains, where they are able to live a little more unconventional lifestyle, such as having a tepee in the front yard. Though renters, they have lived here for nearly five years, and have a secure and friendly relationship with their landlord.

Marina recalls Angie telling her, "You can live here as long as you like, unless one of my kids needs the house, or it burns down." She also remembers that they both laughed then.

On the evening of the fire, Marina is home alone, working on a book about midwifery when her kitten tensed up and began to act strange. Peeking her head out of the tepee, she is shocked by the size of the huge cloud of smoke heading in her direction.

Suddenly, a neighbor cruises by, shouting at her to get out. "I went in the house and looked around and said to myself, what do I grab?" Marina recalls. But while she is looking around, at the VCR, the computers, and the clothes, trying to decide, a sheriff's deputy comes by, ordering her out of the area. In the end all she takes with her when she drives away are the first few chapters of the book which she has clutched in her fingers.

"I was screaming and crying and beating the steering wheel as I left," she says of the frustration she felt at the time.

About halfway down from Windy Gap to the Royal Egyptian Farm, the Hotshots discover two vehicles pulled off the road in a large dirt turnout. A man in a pickup truck with wooden sideboards along the back is in one of them; a woman in a VW in the other. Ron pulls over quickly and runs up to them, discovering that they are afraid to advance through the thick smoke and have decided to wait it out there.

"Follow me he tells them. Whatever you do, stick right on my tail and don't let me out of your sight." They can see the urgency in his eyes and hear it in his voice. The caravan moves slowly, the smoke and fire beginning to gain on them. Just above the first uphill turnout Bollier realizes that they won't make it. He pulls over again and yells to the crew in the rear, "Get them water and tents now!"

Several of the crew members dash out of the back and gather several gallon jugs of water and pup tents for the occupants of each of the vehicles. Because the woman in the VW looks like she might be going into shock, Ron directs one of the Shots, Mark Cohoon, to get in with her.

They struggle on through the smoke but only make it about a quarter of a mile when the flames begin to surge up over the road in front of them. Finally, they stop, unable to see anything but a fiery red wall of flames.

"The flames were hitting the windshield and then mushrooming over it," Sulley explains, "You couldn't see anything. It was like someone was spraying liquid gas out in front of us and igniting it. Then the wind would push the flames right up against our faces. Right after that the flames totally engulfed the

truck behind us. I could barely see the guy in it, there was so much flame. All I could see was bits and pieces as the flames moved over us, but I could see that he had the pup tent over him.”

Meanwhile, Ron is jockeying the truck back and forth across the road from lane to lane. The fire has jumped over Highway 154 and moved up the far hill towards the San Antonio watershed, and as the wind whips back and forth it causes the flames to blast the trucks and vehicles from both sides.

“The only thing I could do was to move when I could see enough to do it. First I’d move to the inside of the lane when the flames came up from Maria Ygnacio Canyon, but then the wind would switch and the flames would whip back on us and I’d have to move to the outside. I just kept moving from side to side and kept hoping we’d make it through.”

“There was actually no time to panic. You could have if you didn’t know much about fire. I just kept moving the truck around but at one point, when the smoke began moving in, the truck stalled and I began to wonder. The fire was coming in on us from all directions and all of a sudden I had ten backseat drivers yelling at me and telling me what to do—I mean, they weren’t panicking, they all were doing pretty good self control, but it was scary. Here I am. I can’t go anywhere, I can’t see anything, and I wondering what am I going to do to save these guys?”

Steve Sulley is one of those in the rear of the truck. “Behind the pickup truck I could see the woman in the VW,” he remembers. “Her vehicle was a little further back, about 50 yards, and just before the worst of the fire hit us I could tell she was about to panic because she looked so frantic. I was really glad we had somebody in the car with her.”

Just as the worst of the fire hits them, Selle has enough presence of mind to snap a photo out of one of the windows. “I wish I’d taken more shots,” he says later, “it was a once in a lifetime opportunity, but that was the last thing in my mind. To tell you the truth, I didn’t think we were going to make it. Right after I took the picture the fire was everywhere and I couldn’t even see the guy behind us even though he was only a few feet away. At the moment when it really hit us it hit all of how serious this was. The guy was totally covered with flames and I thought the guy was dead and that we were next.”

“Yeah,” says Ron calmly afterwards, “we were probably very close to dying.”

After the worst of the fire has passed, the crew cautiously emerges from the truck. There is still a lot of burning going on around them, and the heat is still bad, but at least they are still alive. They have withstood a direct hit from the fire for more than five minutes, with sustained temperatures of more than 150 degrees. All of the reflectors and running lights have melted off. The paint is scorched. The gear on top has caught fire—sleeping bags, personal items, backpacks, and fire equipment—and they have to rip it off to keep it from igniting the rest of the truck. The tires have also caught on fire. None of the metal, inside or out can be touched. The steering wheel can barely be held.

“When the fire was past us we got out and extinguished the fire on top of the truck,” Ron adds, “and we were just about to check the guy in the pickup when all of a sudden his vehicle caught on fire—his tires, his sideboards, everything—it was really hot, and lots of smoke was coming up, and here he was still inside, under the tent, with no idea his truck was on fire. We grabbed a fire extinguisher and put it out and right then another blast of fire hit us and we had to duck back in our truck barely after we’d put his out.”

“What was really amazing,” says Sulle, “was that afterwards he just calmly got out, looked at the damage, and drove away without even saying anything. I think he was just happy to be out of there.”

Eventually, Sherri Harker, the woman in the VW, makes her way down to a Red Cross shelter on the 4400 block of Calle Real.

“My house is probably gone,” she tells people there, thankful to be alive. Though she has lived in her San Marcos Pass home a mile below Painted Cave Road for six years, it is the terrifying experience she has just been through that preys most on her mind.

“It was so scary,” she remembers. “I thought my tires were going to melt and my car was going to explode.

“I thank God for the Hot Shots. They took care of me. I was right in the middle of this excruciating heat. The flames were licking at my car.

“The firefighters were beautiful.”

At 7 pm the Shots are able to weasel their way down to Cathedral Oaks, where they hope to meet up with the dozer crews which Sup, who has been placed in charge of operations by Curtis Vincent, has ordered.

“On the way down, on a knoll just above the San Antonio bridge we went by this one house,” Bollier remembers, “I knew it was a Spanish style, tile-and-stucco house, and I thought it would never burn, but there it was fully engulfed.”

At the Cathedral Oaks, where a roadblock has been set up by the Highway Patrol, it is chaotic. The sight of the Hot Shots causes people to swarm over to them. Many are in tears and you can see the worry and the fear in their eyes.

“Did you see my house?” one man asks.

“What about mine?” another says, trying to describe it to the crew.

“One man was just hysterical,” Ron says. Though he has just been through the most difficult situation in his life, the normally even-tempered crew leader is moved by the emotional situation.

“He asked me, did you drive by my house?” Ron adds. “I asked, where was it? He explained to me, and I knew it was the one we’d just gone by and that all that had been left was a burning frame. He was so upset that I told him that I didn’t know if I’d seen it.

“I wanted to leave it that way but I just couldn’t. He was too upset. Finally, I told him, your house didn’t make it. I don’t know if it helped or not.”

On El Sueno Road, Sheila Ehrhardt walks with her husband, John, from their nearby mobile home to watch firefighters put out the stubborn Dump Fire. “We were standing on a ridge....when we saw these firemen running out of the county fire headquarters across the road,” she tells News-Press writers Keith Dalton and Joan Rigdon. “We turned and looked up the hill and there was the fire right behind us....There were these huge explosions and I thought, ‘This must be what a nuclear bomb is like.’

“The sound was just like this massive freight train was coming up behind us and then all of a sudden it was dead still.

“Then all we heard was the crackling of the flames.”

Throughout the Valley people at the beaches or getting off work are agape at the menacing cloud that is building up over the mountains.

Along Old San Marcos, at first, many of the homeowners water their roofs, but as the firestorm approaches, pushed by gale force winds, and 100-to-200 foot flames that boil down the slopes, they flee in absolute terror at the fiery caldron above them. Within minutes, 10 homes are consumed by the fireball as it moves rapidly down and across Maria Ygnacio Creek, burning everything in its path.

The entire upper bowl of Maria Ygnacio has become one massive ball of flame, a solid one-half mile wide, wall-to-wall fire front.

Thirty-seven year old Andrea Gurka is alone at home on the 10-acre plot that she and her husband, Michael, own. “We had a desire to be in harmony in the hills,” Michael tells News-Press writer Barry Bortnick later. “We had come to appreciate the beauty of the wild areas here.”

When the fire begins, Michael, a photographer and designer, checks in with Andrea, to be sure she is okay. “She was not panicking, and she understood the danger,” he says. “I told her to try to get a ride out of the area with a neighbor, but that if none are on hand, to flee on foot. The idea was for her to take shelter in a low, cool area.”

When the flames descend, Andrea never has a chance. The next day, her body is found just a few hundred yards from her home. “It appears she saw the fire coming,” explains County Sheriff’s Deputy Jan Bullard, “and felt she might have a better chance if she got down low. Sometimes a fire will move up and over you.”

Instead, the canyon acted like a chimney, funneling the heat and fire through the area where Andrea Gurka has taken refuge, killing her at about the same time that the Hot Shots are being overrun by flames.

Linane sets up a staging area on Highway 154 near the intersection of San Antonio Creek Road. “When the fire blew through enough to get down there, I knew we couldn’t do anything with the brush,” Sup explains, “so I ordered the engines to save what houses and lives they could. Then I got on the horn to the Shots down at Cathedral Oaks and said, as soon as you’ve got those dozers, get up on the Windy Gap Fuelbreak, we’ve got to hold that line.”

When the big earth movers arrive, Ron and his crew lead them up to the ridge above the first turnout where they’d been trapped and begin to work their way up the mountain. While the two dozers scrape the fuelbreak down to mineral soil, the Shots burn out the west side of the ridge and cut hand line where the tractors can’t go.

At the upper part of San Antonio Creek, homes on Via Clarice and Via Maria literally explode, spewing huge glowing embers onto the houses below, beginning two hours of the most intense hell that Santa Barbara has ever known, a 120 minute period in which more than 600 structures vanish.

As Forest Service trucks arrive, they form into strike teams and begin to head down into the San Antonio nightmare. Along with several other engines, Roger Dahlen, Tim Davis, and Mark Malone from San Marcos Station 41, and Wes Preston and Mark vonTillow from Pendola Station 47, spend the rest of the night trying to save what structures they can along San Antonio Creek and Via Los Santos.

For most of these firefighters, the next eight hours prove to be some of the most difficult ones of their entire lives.

“We’d get to one place that was just about to go up, and do what we could,” says Sup, “then we’d hear screams and hollers on the radio for support from somewhere else. It was crazy. The air was overloaded with calls for help and there just weren’t enough of us to go around.”

“Houses were going up everywhere,” Wes Preston adds, “it wasn’t just one here, one there, there were going up all over the place. Any of them that had a room or more fully involved, we didn’t even bother with. We just didn’t have the water or manpower.”

As Wes drives down San Antonio with Roger Dahlen, the enormity of what they face is realized. “Every house on the entire block was burning,” Wes says. “Roger’s looking on his side and he’s marking them off. ‘That one’s gone, that one’s gone, and that one, and that one, and that one’ he’s telling me while on my side I’m saying the same thing—‘that one’s gone, that one’s gone,’ and so on.”

At one of the intersections the strike team stations its water tender and the individual trucks drive into the adjoining cul-de-sacs to save what houses they can.

“We made some good attempts” vonTillow interjects. “We’d try to catch the house before we could see anything inside on fire. Some of them you could rip off part of the roof, or a porch, or some of the wall and be able to save it, but if the living room or anything else was going up inside, you’d forget it, no matter how hard it was to do that.”

“We saved some,” Sup says in support, “but we didn’t save enough—we just didn’t have enough fire trucks. I felt kind of helpless. There just wasn’t enough equipment or water.

“Finally I went around to the west side with my crew,” Sup adds, “up on Old San Marcos, to see if we could do anything, but the down power lines kept us from getting very far up. I was out of water when this guy comes leaping up out of the brush yelling, ‘Save my house! Save my house!’ I said, ‘I’m out of water—there wasn’t any water left in the hydrants by this point.

“Two of my guys took off towards his house. The fire was just getting under his porch, but it hadn’t gotten the main part of it. They took their pulaskis and tore the porch off and pitched it down into the fire and saved the house. But damn, there just weren’t many victories like this. There was a lot of good work done, a lot of places, saved, but not nearly enough.”

The memories are powerful. “I’ll never forget these two men in particular,” says Mark vonTillow. “Just below Highway 154 in one of the first turnouts, these men in business suits were up on the roofs of two houses, spraying them down and ripping off parts of the shingles. I just assumed the houses belonged to them.

“The roof of one of them was partially burned, but after they’d knocked the shingles off and hosed it down, it was saved, as was the other one. Just as we were about to leave, two of the men walked out onto the lawn, still in their business suits, and sat down, each with an ice cold Coors in his hands.

“They just sat there calmly, watching two houses right across the street burning. All that remained of the burning frames were red silhouettes. The whole time I thought that they were trying to save their own homes, they’d been helping friends with theirs, even though theirs were right across the street full involved.

“The guys were totally calm. They weren’t going bananas. They’d just busted their asses saving their friends and now they just sat there on the lawn so calm.”

Not everyone is this calm. As the firefighters pass by people clutch at them. “Some of them would beg you to work on their house,” says Wes Preston, “and you felt so bad because you could see it was already gone. All night long it was the same, people running up to you, begging you to do something.”

“In a fire like this there really isn’t much you can do,” Vincent explains later. In a wind-driven fire, especially one that is moving through such dry brush, a frontal attack is almost suicidal. It’s like a flood. You try to pick up the flanks of the fire so that while it’s running you can keep it from spreading outward. I don’t think anyone thought it could run that fast, though, or blow right across the freeway.”

Further down towards Tucker’s Grove, spot fires burst out in the cluster of houses strung out along San Antonio Creek Road and Via Los Santos. A half-hour earlier residents here have stood outside their homes, watching the fire get going. Now, at 6:45 pm, just 45 minutes later, they are in full retreat and in fear for their lives.

The first street hit by the main body of fire is Via Los Padres, which adjoins Via Los Santos. Everything there goes quickly. With all 40, or more, of the houses in this area completely engulfed in flame, County Battalion Chief Harrison receives authorization from the Incident Command to backfire into these houses in hopes of cutting off the fire’s fuel source.

The flames from the backfires catch and race madly through the brush, colliding with the firestorm, but the wind pushing the upper body of the fire is too strong, and the flames blow right over them. By 7:15 pm, the front has moved across Tucker’s Grove and into the Camino del Rio area. Now, there are hundreds of houses are on fire.

For the first time in their lives, tens of thousands of Santa Barbarans experience sheer panic. Side streets are clogged with people. The freeway slows to a halt. Firefighters are finding it extremely difficult to gain access to the fire area.

“Parked cars and trucks exploded as the fire moved towards Cathedral Oaks,” theNews-Press reports. “Dogs and cats, separated from their owners, frantically tried to escape the intense heat and wind that moved ahead of the wall of fire.

“The choking smoke and heat made escape dangerous. Residents, with cars and trucks loaded with belongings....were forced to drive slowly because they could only see a few yards ahead.”

The frustrating part for many homeowners in many neighborhoods isn’t understanding how difficult it is to fight such a fire, but that they see no firefighters the entire night.

“Where are the firefighters?” one woman is seen yelling in exasperation on a nationally-televised newsclip.

“You have some people up there who are really mad at us,” says Curtis Vincent. “Their homes burned down and there was no one there to save them.

“At a certain point, lives became more important than the houses. You’d have a strike team set up to work on a house, then all of a sudden a call would come in—‘people trapped, lives being threatened’—and they’d take off. And of course the people whose homes are burning are thinking ‘those blankity blank firemen are leaving. How dare they leave?’

“But when you have that many houses burning, you have to develop some sort of system of prioritization. You do the best you can.”

Just as many of the homeowners are angry afterwards, quite a few of the firefighters experience a fallout from the fire, too. “It hurts,” says Vincent, “when you know you’ve done the best you can, when you’ve put your life on the line, and you still know in your heart that it wasn’t enough.”

Ken Duffield, News-Press director of operations, has just finished a five-mile run on the beach when he notices the smoke and makes a beeline for his home. Though a roadblock at Highway 154 and Cathedral Oaks stops him, he parks his car and hurries on foot the rest of the way home. “As I walked up the driveway I could see the house in flames,” he tells Keith Dalton and Joan Rigdon. “The faces of the bricks had fallen off in the heat. The refrigerator drooped forward.”

Around him, eucalyptus burn fiercely, the sound like “exploding electrical transformers.” As the fire descends on him, he discovers that his escape route is cut off.

“I thought, ‘This was stupid.’ I was standing there in shorts waiting for my hair to be singed. I’m going to be one of those people you read about.”

At that moment he decides to flee in the truck parked in his driveway. “The grill, tail lights, dashboard and steering wheel were melting and dripping,” he recalls. “The right front tire was smoldering and the tread was beginning to fall off.”

Still, the engine starts, and Duffield is able to make his escape.

The wall of fire, still unchecked, moves across Cathedral Oaks Road. “It was like what you’d see in a napalm attack in Vietnam,” says Al Todd, a parishioner at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, located near the corner of Turnpike. Todd has served as a Navy Seal in Vietnam from 1965 to 1972. “There were fires starting everywhere. It reminded me of the aftermath. It was terrible.”

The flames burn through brush and clusters of oaks on El Rodeo and Sierra Madre, gutting homes there. Laura Hout Ryan, age 33, rushes towards her parents home on El Rodeo as soon as she hears about the fire. Choking black smoke is roaring out of the mouth of Tucker’s Grove and a blockade keeps her from reaching the entrance to her street, just a few hundred yards east of Turnpike off Cathedral Oaks.

Unknown to Laura, her younger sister, Teresa Jamison, has gotten there just a few minutes earlier, before the blockades go up. Even though the police officers warn her to stay back, she drives past anyway.

One by one she carries the four family dogs out to her car, grabs a few of the photo albums and flees just as the fire enters the neighborhood.

"I listen to her and think she is brave," Laura says of Teresa, "and I think she is very foolish too. She is seven months pregnant, and she went in there and rescued those dogs and I will never call her my 'little sister' again.

Nearby, Alpha School for the Developmentally Disabled is destroyed when the fire leaps across Cathedral Oaks at the bottom of Camino del Retiro. A low security facility for inmates housed at the County Honor Farm goes next. Inmates at the County Jail are evacuated to the football field at San Marcos High School.

Then at 7:38 pm, when it spots into a grove of eucalyptus, the fire does something that firefighters have feared might happen since the Eagle Canyon Fire in 1979—it jumps the freeway and from there races into businesses at the intersection of Hollister and Modoc.

Susan Frame is driving home on Modoc with her twin four-year-olds when the fire crowns over the freeway. "The cars in front of me were turning around," she tells reporters. "A screaming woman running in the street was almost hit by a car."

But because the traffic is deadlocked, she cannot turn around.

"I just had to go forward," she continues. "I didn't have a choice....All of a sudden, something exploded and flames came toward my car and sparked. That's when I stopped because I didn't know if it was going to get me."

As the smoke boils around her, Frame thinks, "My God, we're going to blow up right here."

As the smoke clears, the truck ahead of her pulls out, and she is able to drive to safety. In the back seat of her car her son has slept through the entire incident.

At the trestle going over Hollister Avenue, what reporters describe as a "sea of fire" covers the area, leveling all the structures on the freeway side of the road, including the historic Philadelphia House.

East of the bridge the flames also burn brightly, burning through Eller's Donut House, Ocean Rhythms Surf, and Ye Old Butcher Shop in minutes. Next door, firefighters make a desperate stand at the Pool Supply and Patio Center where flames threaten to ignite a 5,000 gallon tank of liquid chlorine.

"If the fire had burned into the chlorine," Assistant City Fire Chief Sam Dumas tells reporters afterwards, "the deadly fumes would have gone all through Hope Ranch. It would have been a real killer."

Fortunately, they are able to beat it off.

Between 8 and 9:30 a desperate struggle is waged by firefighters near the Modoc/Hollister intersection as apartments with hundreds of rental units burn to the ground. But there is little they can do other than to save surrounding structures.

The fire jumps Modoc and continues its path towards the ocean. People now are extremely worried that it could burn right through Hope Ranch, cut across Las Positas, and go all the way to the Harbor.

In Painted Cave, the Volunteers maintain their vigil throughout the early evening. At about 9 pm, at the same time as Modoc is on fire, Keeler can feel a change in the wind. "That's when it started getting scary up here. I just thought, 'Uh oh. It's really, really going to get us.'"

The shift in wind is good news in the Valley. Though the fire continues to burn in Hope Ranch, by midnight the air has cooled enough to stunt the wind, and what had been a solid wall of flame has subsided, becoming hundreds of small islands of fire. Though still intense, the Painted Cave Fire no longer threatens the city.

Smoke, ash, and cinders fill the air. A charred smell permeates the air. Though the damage cannot be seen, everyone knows that dawn will bring with it a heartbreaking sight.

At Command headquarters, Vincent and Simmons make plans for tomorrow's war. They both know the fire is far from out and that the next threat will be on the mountain wall.

With the wind no longer capable of holding it back, it will now burn uphill with little difficulty. Moreover, sundowners are predicted for the next few days. If the fire zig zags across the mountains, burning uphill in the mornings and back downhill in the afternoons when the sundowners pick up, Vincent realizes that tonight's violence could only be the beginning. "Everything depends on the winds," he says.

Six hundred firefighters are now on hand, along with more than 60 engines. Another 160 have been requested from as far away as Washington and Idaho. "Get me as many air tankers as you can spare," Vincent tells the Riverside Fire Lab. "Tomorrow could be really tough."

To Mark Linane, he says, "Make sure you can hold the Windy Gap Fuelbreak. If we don't, we're in big trouble."

Shot crew leader Ron Bollier has been with the County dozers on the Windy Gap Fuelbreak since just after 7 pm, directing the two dozers as they blade out the main portion of the break to a width of 60 feet while the crew cuts hand line where the tractors can't go and backfires down towards Highway 154. About 2 am they reach a boulder-filled outcrop known as the Rockpile.

"We probably could have got around it if we'd needed to," says Ron, "but in the dark I didn't want to take a chance. We were tired. It would have been too easy to make a mistake." Instead, he turns the bulldozers around and sends them to the bottom to be picked up at daylight and brought to the top.

The next morning they start off the top about 8am. The air is still, and since midnight the flames have had the potential of jumping Highway 154 and moving up to the crest. "All the way down we were worrying what the fire was going to do," Bollier continues. "An inversion layer has set in. It was holding the smoke and the wind down, but I knew that sooner or later the heat would build enough, and it would break through the layer. When it does that, it'll suck the air right in and cause the fire to get real active. I figured I had at least a couple of hours."

Just after dark on Wednesday night, Rocky Siegel and Steve Moore foam down their last hot spot near the top of the Trout Club. They can no longer change going down into the Club to top off the tank in Brush 1 because of the fire danger.

“You just couldn’t go down in there without a backup,” Rocky explains. “The fire was moving so damned fast I just didn’t feel good about being down in there unless I had somebody up on top to radio me, to tell me to get the hell out if I needed to.”

Nobody wants down in the Trout Club. Not the County, not the Forest Service, not even the Volunteers.

“It wasn’t worth getting cooked,” Rocky adds. “I thought, as long as the wind doesn’t shift, we’ve got it made, but if it does, you’re a goner down there.”

Though big Los Angeles fire rigs line the road above the small mountain tract, they are helpless, the trucks far too big, the hoses not nearly long enough. Not that they wanted in there either. Seeing 150-200 foot flames in the brush isn’t their cup of tea.

The fire has spotted below the first switchbacks within the first hour, but because of the heavy winds, it has difficulty coming back up the hill. By 10 pm, though, it has made considerable progress in the heavy brush below Rocky’s house, burning through the understory.

“You could sit here and just watch it coming,” Rocky says. “The fire would get underneath the wind in the lower stuff, cook the bottoms, then crown out with a woosh and go right back to the bottoms. Then the flames would move over a bit and do it again.”

Just after midnight, the fire reaches the houses. The emotions of the moment hit each of them hard. “In the dark you just couldn’t see which houses were burning,” Rocky continues. “At one point I remember saying, ‘I think my house is gone. God, if I could only just get in there, knowing full well that there was no way I was going down there.’ After a while I couldn’t watch anymore. Steve didn’t want to watch anymore.”

Throughout the night propane tanks blow, sending 40-to-60 foot flames into the air. The fire crowns through the large, graceful oaks interspersed throughout the Club crown out, showering homes with burning embers, torching more of them.

Instead, Steve and Rocky go up Painted Cave Road to see if they can be of help there. “By this time, I was really getting scared. I couldn’t see the fire. The winds were erratic. I didn’t know what the brush was like or the terrain. Every once in a while Steve and I would see a big flame length, then you’d just see the glow. You never knew exactly where it was.

“I asked Steve, ‘Do you feel comfortable here?’ He said, ‘No.’ I said, neither do I. Let’s get out of here.”

At Laurel Springs Ranch the two of them get an hour of fitful sleep, then proceed at dawn back down to see what remains of the Trout Club.

As they drop down the narrow road, pillars of smoke filter up from piles of rubble sitting on top of foundations that were once houses. Near the mailboxes, almost all of the houses are gone, save Steve’s.

“Why it didn’t go, Lordy knows,” says Rocky, “but it didn’t. I came around the corner where mine is, fully expecting to see it gone, but there it was. I said ‘Bitchen,’ but then as I began to look around at all of my friend’s places, they were all gone. I couldn’t believe it.”

More might have gone except for the quick action of San Marcos Patrol Officer Fred Montes. “When dawn broke,” he says, I could see that a few houses were about to go, so I radioed for backups, and when they got there we took the pumpers down and saved several of them.

With the help of the Forest Service crews, Rocky and Steve go from house to house, those still standing, and put a layer of foam around each, checking inside to be sure the fire hasn’t gotten in.

The fire continues along the canyon bottom, heading towards the Yoga Institute and Hidden Valley Guest Ranch. The Volunteers work hard to push it away from the structures, to keep it west of the homes, and by 11 am the fire has passed by the Trout Club.

At the Yoga Institute, LA firefighters back their rigs into the driveway as far as they can get them and lay hose to protect structures there. They are able to keep the fire out of the Institute, but aren’t able to stop it from crowning into a grove of eucalyptus and spotting across Highway 154 onto a steep hillside.

“That’s it for the mountaintop,” some of the Forest Service officials on the scene think.

But the Goleta air tanker, No. 27, and others spy what is happening and begin to pound both sides of the ridge leading up to Painted Cave with retardant, slowing down the fire’s progress.

At Painted Cave, the long hours of waiting seem to be over. “It’s coming,” one of the LA fire captains yells.

“The smoke clouds were getting real big,” says Jim Averitt who has been at the Laurel Springs Ranch all night along with Ranch manager John Boland. “The firemen were nervous. They didn’t like being in this kind of stuff. They’re all sweating it, and it’s making me nervous, too.”

Nearby, Dave Hardy and the volunteers ready themselves. “It changed around noon,” says Dave. “The flame front that had been dancing around the Trout Club all morning and was heading up San Jose Canyon toward West Camino Cielo and Hidden Valley, veered to the east, hopped the highway, and started towards us.

“This was the front that we knew would test our preparation, our hose lays, our fire truck, our 60,000 gallon community water tank, our brush clearing, our ability to communicate under crisis..”

The flames leap up out of Maria Ygnacio Canyon and crest the east side of the ridge on which Painted Cave Road is located about 1 pm. The Volunteers don their heavy jackets, and the helmet, goggles, and gloves that are standard safety issue, the kind of stuff you need to protect you not only from the fire, but embers that drop from the sky. The front isn’t moving quickly, but by this time it is only a quarter mile from the nearest house.

Then the air tankers ran out of retardant.

“Our adrenalin was pumping,” Hardy remembers, “And we were asking ourselves, ‘Where are the damned tankers?’

The dozers under Ron Bollier’s direction are almost to the Rockpile when the weather breaks. “We would have made it, we were that close,” the Shot crew leader says. “When eleven o’clock rolled around, I could see the layer was starting to lift so I told the dozer guys, ‘Let’s step on it.’ I knew this was an important ridge and that we needed to hold it.

“But they were getting a little bit jittery. One of them had been through a bad fire on the Spanish Ranch in New Cuyama, and he didn’t like being down here with the fire beginning to act up. About a half hour later, when it did break and the fire started to get active below us I made the decision to pull the crew.”

First, he has the dozers scrape a safety zone for themselves should they need it, then Bollier calls for a chopper to lift them out.

“The chopper called me on the radio and said, ‘Let me make one water drop at the top of the fire, then I’ll pick you up. The next thing I hear on the radio—all he said was—’4-Charlie, meaning me, send your best qualified helitack people up here, I’m going down.’ That’s the last I heard from him.

By this time the head of the fire is just below the helicopter. The air tankers are grounded until more retardant is flown in. And Bollier must make a difficult decision between staying with his crew and heading down to the helicopter.

“My main priority seemed to be to go after the pilot,” Bollier continues, “so I went, even though the fire was getting pretty active. Luckily, he was okay, standing on the skid of the helicopter when I got there. I radioed for one helicopter to pick him up, which they did, then I got another which lifted me back up to the dozer crew. We got them in and got out of there real quick.”

Fortunately, the fickle wind shifts direction before the flames reach the fuel break, and it never really is threatened.

John Sieglinger is the pilot of the graceful and powerful silver-and-orange P3 known as No. 27. Sieglinger has been flying air tankers since the mid-70s after serving in the Navy as a fighter pilot. The converted submarine chaser which he flies can carry 3,000 gallons of Phos-chek, the retardant used on fires today, and is capable of daring flights into steep, mountainous terrain to deliver its payload. Sieglinger and his co-pilot, Mark Bidgood, are experts at this dangerous business.

It has been a frustrating two days for the pilots. On Tuesday, when the Painted Cave Fire broke out, they are in Glendale, working that fire. By the time they are done with it, they’ve already logged their limit of flying time—eight hours a day, six days a week—which means that they can’t head north to fight the fire in their own home town.

Instead, they are routed to Lancaster and spend the night there. Even from 50 miles away they can see the cloud of smoke rising from Santa Barbara. “It was really hard having to stay in Lancaster while Santa Barbara was burning,” Sieglinger tells News-Press photo editor Bob Ponce. “I had trouble sleeping that night, knowing the fire was burning all those homes.”

They are in the air at daybreak, on their way to Santa Barbara to do what they can. On Friday, Sieglinger and Bidgood drop 51,000 gallons of retardant in 17 runs, a personal record for them.

But at midday, as the fire becomes more active, they are grounded again, not due to flight time, but because they have run out of Phos-chek.

At Laurel Springs Ranch, when the bombers stop coming, the firefighters pull out pup tents and distribute them to everyone. The captain says, “If it comes over, lay down and cover yourselves with the blanket. You may get a little burned, but you’ll be saved.”

Just in the nick of time, the sound of the bombers can be heard overhead, having been resupplied, making low runs over the rooftops of houses there and at Painted Cave, coating both sides of the ridge with thick blankets of the retardant.

“Tanker bombers would careen down the canyon at 30-degree angles to drop a load,” Dave Hardy says in admiration. “Simply incredible.”

About halfway down Painted Cave Road, near the overhang that is popular with rock climbers, hand crews prepare to burn out the brush. Local residents cringe, memories of the eight houses lost during a backfiring operation in the Coyote Fire in their minds.

But the backfire works, checking the advance of the flames and giving the hand crews breathing room in which to work. Though the fire will continue for several more days, it is all but contained. On Monday, July 2, at 6am, the Painted Cave Fire is officially declared over.

Friday morning residents are allowed to walk back into their homes. Some are elated to find their homes intact, but horror stories abound. Some of those who live in the San Antonio area walk quietly up the entire length of the road, trying to absorb the meaning of this. Most of them are introspective, the visual images too strong for words.

Many of them will have to build their lives almost from scratch.

Laura Hout Ryan and her sister, Teresa, have watched the news all night, desperate for news about their parents home. At 3 am, the news reporter walks down their street, announcing house by house, which ones are still standing.

“Our parents’ house was not among them,” Laura says.

The next morning the two of them are up at 6 am, determined to visit and see for themselves. Their hope, partially dashed by the announcer on KEY-T, is now crushed totally.

“There are no walls standing,” Laura says, reciting in stark images her first impressions, “nothing but the shell of a refrigerator or the steel of a file cabinet to mark separate rooms. Car windows have melted down the doors in grotesque liquid sculpture.

“The chimney stands alone, surrounded by cinders and ash, anchoring the site like a gravestone.”

Steve Kurstin and Marina Alzugaray spend the night in an apartment offered to them by strangers. Though it is a difficult situation, they refuse to believe the worst. The next morning they slip past the police blockade and manage to make their way up Old San Marcos Pass Road.

As they walk up the long, winding road, which in the lower part is on the west side of the ridge, away from their home, they experience shifting emotions, not knowing quite what to expect. As they reach the saddle and are able to look down into Maria Ygnacio Canyon for the first time, the view hits them like a punch in the stomach, knocking their breath away.

A deadly, barren landscape faces them. With the exception of two large tile-and-stucco houses, nothing remains but scorched earth and a few smoking stumps. A quarter of a mile further they discover what is left of their house. Their brick and stone chimney stands at one end. A fire-blackened tree stands at the other end. Inbetween is just rubble.

“We should have bought a long time ago,” Steve mumbles, the realization sinking in that they will have little chance to find another place to rent in these ravaged mountains.

“For renters like us,” he muses, “we’re in the wind. We’re just in the wind.”

Even three months after the fire, for Bill and Julie Bates, the road home is still a bumpy one for these Trout Club residents. They have been unable to reach an accommodation with their insurance company, though they are getting nearer. The latest offer is close to \$90 a square foot—not quite what some of their neighbors have received—but much closer than earlier offers they have rejected.

What is most difficult is knowing that they must rebuild not only their home, but their lives. Until they can settle the insurance questions, this is difficult to do

“Every time we come back,” Bill tells News-Press writer Jerry Cornfield, “Jesse says, ‘I hate this fire. I hate it. I hate it, I hate it.’”

For Jim Averitt, who along with Rocky Siegel, alerted Trout Club inhabitants of the danger, it is a pain that is not easy to exorcise, even though he has not lost his home.

“Even now,” he says, “when I begin to talk about the fire I get tears in my eyes.” A part time composer and singer, he writes a song about the fire, intending to play it at one of the benefit concerts for Painted Cave victims. But when he gets on the stage at the Red Lion Inn to perform, he finds that he cannot sing it.

“It was just too close to me right then,” he explains. The song is called, *Out of the Trout Club*.

Panic Struck like pain.
Believe it’s happening,
Move as fast as you can
To try to save another man.
An old lady’s eyes jumping from inside
I have a car, we have to make it
through the flames.
Panic struck like pain.
Oh, what will remain?
Out of the Trout Club.

When the firefighters return to their home bases, they find that they, too, have paid a price. Lungs are clogged with every sort of chemical. House fires are the worst—500 of them going all at the same time is a fireman’s worst nightmare.

Stan Stewart, one of the Los Prietos Hot Shot foreman, realized that he was getting into a hazardous occupation at age 17, but he didn’t know it would cause him to get sicker and sicker.

“The doctor told me I look like I’ve smoked 10 packs of cigarettes a day all my life, but I’ve never smoked. I get a little more worried every year I do this.”

Right now,” says crew chief Ron Bollier, I get a cold any time of the year and it turns into bronchitis.”

During the fire season, these men and women literally live in the smoke. After a while, it seems like they're coughing all summer.

"When the adrenaline's pumping and you're saving property and lives and important natural resources," their boss Sup adds, "it seems worth it. But when I retire and I'm coughing and gagging, it may be another story.

The doctor here recommended that I take full pulmonary tests. I said, 'Yeah, yeah, sure.' But I never did it. I'm afraid he'll tell me there's really something wrong. We're all afraid to do it. None of us wants to know how much lung function we're really lost."

Mark Moore, the medic from Torrance, who has joined the San Marcos Station earlier in June to gain fire experience, pays an ultimate price.

On the Ynez Fire, which breaks out along the Santa Ynez River at mid-afternoon on a sunny August day, most likely due to a faulty exhaust system, Mark slips while he is working his way up one of the lines opened up by the Shots. He stumbles, then falls backwards, tumbling 60-to-80 feet down a steep hillside.

He is rushed to the hospital and is in intensive care for several days with potentially serious back injuries. At one point he lapses into unconsciousness. When he comes to, he is given intensive therapy, eventually graduating from a wheel chair to a walker, and finally to a cane.

Still immobilized, Mark takes the time to study for and pass the California disabled driver's test, then drives down to Los Angeles for the wedding of a friend. Though things seem to be improving, the next day he is found face down in his apartment, dead of an aneurism, perhaps another fire victim.

"Personally," says Wes Preston, the captain of the Los Prietos Station, "I think the fall caused it."

The small black bear, believed to be one-to-two years old, shows up at the Hidden Valley Guest Ranch just a few weeks after the fire's end, on July 19. Bill Long, the property manager, is in the house when the bear shatters a window and makes its way inside.

The day afterwards, I am awakened at 5 am to the sound of the metal pail which holds our chicken food being knocked over. When I open the sliding screen door and step out onto the upstairs deck, I can see the tiny bear, perhaps 100 pounds in weight, possibly 150 pounds, scrounging through the pellets.

The bear walks through the yard and disappears around to the other side of the house. I quickly move over there, opening a window so I can see the bear better. It moves over to our dog, Zona's, food dish and begins to pick at the food there. I whistle at it and it scampers across the asphalt driveway and scurries up a small path into the oak forest. I wonder if it is the same bear.

Probably not, I think. Afterall, I live on the other side of the Pass.

After the black bear breaks into the Hidden Valley ranch twice more, game officials place snare traps around the area and issue Long a permit to shoot it.

Early on an August day, on a Sunday morning, Long finds the bear caught in one of the traps beneath a plum tree outside his kitchen window. "It was a beautiful bear with a golden brown color," he says, "It looked like a pet." He calls the trappers from the County Agricultural Commissioner's office for help.

"I couldn't shoot her," he says, "she was so tame, like a dog on a leash. You could get within 10 feet of her. I called the trapper to do whatever they had to do. They were amazed at how docile it was, and they didn't want to shoot, either"

But though they call their boss, asking for a last minute reprieve, the order comes back to shoot. It is felled with one rifle shot to the heart from 15 feet away.

"It was almost like watching a human being [get] shot," Long adds.

"I felt bad myself," says state Fish and Game Warden Natasha Lohmus. "But if a bear enters an occupied dwelling it is slated for destruction....It is hard to shoot an animal as majestic as a bear, but sometimes you don't have a choice."

Teresa Jamison, who has saved her family's four dogs, though not her parent's house, writes a letter to the editor of the News-Press several days later. "I cannot believe they shot her," she writes. "Tied helplessly to a tree, 'like a dog on a leash,' shot on the heart...."

"Perhaps I watched too much 'Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom' growing up, but I always felt our job as humans was to act as caretakers of the Earth.

Another victim of the Painted Cave Fire.

While thousands of people are trying to adjust to the emotional difficulties caused by the fire, Forest Service arson investigator Jim Burton spends his time putting together every bit of information he can about the person who has started it.

At the urging of city and county fire chiefs, the Santa Barbara County Fire and Arson Association is created in 1980. Out of this comes a structure based on the Incident Command concept, which allows local fire investigators to work together in harmony.