



# Los Compadres Newsletter

October 2012

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The following information about the Wellman Fire on the Los Padres NF June 1966 was sent to me by our Los Compadres member Carl Hickerson. The September newsletter and the story about the Redding Smokejumpers assignment on the Wellman seemed to have struck a chord in Carl's memory; after all he was the Los Padres Fire Staff at the time and also the Fire Boss of the Wellman Fire.

Enclosed is a scanned copy of the official narrative report of the Wellman Fire dated 12/7/66. Up until the Marble Cone Fire in 1977, the Wellman Fire at 93,600 acres was the second largest wildfire on the Los Padres. It is interesting to note that many of the same issues facing fire managers in 1966, still face fire managers today (note item #5, page 10 of the narrative).

I am sure some of you reading this issue of the Los Compadres newsletter were assigned to the Wellman Fire and have memories of it both good and bad. If you have something to share with Carl and his account of the Wellman Fire, he can be contacted at the following:

Carl Hickerson:

[REDACTED]

(Dear Los Compadres members, please for your enjoyment consider this a special edition of the newsletter financed entirely by anonymous donors).

September 28, 2012

Ted Mathiesen, President  
Los Compadres (Retiree) Newsletter  
P.O. Box 403  
Santa Margarita, CA 93453

Dear Ted,

By now you likely have received and read my letter dated September 19, 2012. I apologize for having omitted a clear, direct reference to the nature of the error in the official Wellman Fire Report in that previous letter and narrative for publication.

Accordingly, I offer this *revised* version of "Wellman Fire -- Forty-Six (46) Years Later," from the perspective of the GHQ Fire Boss.

The verbatim copy of the Official Narrative Fire Report, dated 7 December 1966, is enclosed. However, as the principal author and preparer (as Los Padres FCO), I must take responsibility for an unfortunate error for which I have no explanation. The following factual error must have made its way into the Report between the early drafts and its submission by District Ranger Ed Smithburg and approval by Forest Supervisor Bill Hansen, on 12 December 1966.

To correct the record here, I can verify that the airplane crash which caused the Wellman Fire killed only the pilot, not two people as misstated in the Report. There were, in fact, only two people involved in the crash, the pilot and one passenger, not four people on board the aircraft, as misstated in the Report. The lone passenger was seriously injured in the crash. Both the pilot and the passenger were Airmen from Vandenburg Air Force base, flying a rented aircraft.

Upon our arrival at about 0700, from the Oso Fire, I personally determined that the pilot was dead. Through discussion with the lone survivor, we obtained their identities and a brief account of the crash. We also questioned the survivor about the extent and behavior of the fire between the time of the crash and our arrival.

I flew out to the Santa Ynez airport and phoned Forest Dispatcher Dillingham and outlined the situation. I requested that local authorities be notified and asked to assist with medical help and rescue of the injured passenger and recovery of the fatality. In addition, I requested that the FAA and aircraft owners be notified.

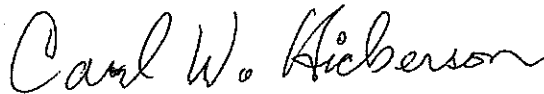
At this point, I was able to place the first specific additional orders for the fire-fighting forces I knew we would need to fight a multi-zone, very large, backcountry fire. In my effort to expedite and maximize such forces, I ordered the R-5 Smokejumpers to aid the attack.

As a matter of my own personal interest and perhaps that of other old-time/long-time R-5 colleagues and firefighters, I offer a belated but well deserved salute, sincere thanks, and recognition to the following Wellman Fire Fire Bosses, their staffs and firefighters:

1. Lynn Biddison, Zone I Fire Boss, who operated out of the Sisquoc River Fire Camp (and later Zone V Fire Boss, as described below);
2. Ed Corpe, Zone II Fire Boss, who operated out of the Davy Brown Fire Camp;
3. Bob Flynn, Zone III Fire Boss, who operated out of the Miranda Pine Fire Camp;
4. Bill Beaty, Zone IV Fire Boss, who operated out of the Montgomery Potrero Fire Camp; and
5. Zone V Fire Boss, Lynn Biddison, who finished up stopping the fire after stabilization of Zone I, operating then out of the Hurrican Deck Drop Fire Camp, unofficially known as Buzzard Fire Camp.

Finally, I must say in closing that I find it impossible to think of the Wellman Fire as merely an "INCIDENT." This is from the heart and soul of one old, even ancient, life-long forest firefighter, from the 1942 CCC Camp era to my mid-1980s assignment with the Food & Agriculture Organization of the United Nations to introduce "Modern Forest Fire Control" to India.

Duty, Honor, Country,  
Sincerely,



Carl W. Hickerson  
GHQ Fire Boss, Wellman Fire  
USFS Retiree

December 7, 1966

NARRATIVE REPORT

WELLMAN FIRE - 6/11/66

ORIGIN

The Wellman Fire started at approximately 1900, June 11, 1966. It was caused by the crash of a private airplane during an attempt to land at Wellman Flat on the Sisquoc River. (See photo #1) The pilot and one passenger died in the wreckage. Two other passengers survived although seriously injured (see Trespass Report).

The fire was first sighted by Mrs. Charles Hubbel, a passenger on South bound United Airlines flight #2861, at approximately 1915, June 11, while in the vicinity of Santa Maria. Mrs. Hubbel assumed the pilot also saw the fire and would report it. Unfortunately, the pilot did not see the fire and her sighting was not brought to light for several days. After reading accounts of the fire in the local papers, Mrs. Hubbel wrote a letter to Congressman Teague suggesting action to require cooperation from airlines in fire reporting. Subsequent investigation revealed she had actually seen the fire shortly after it started.

Next sighting of the fire was at 0228, June 12, by an American Flyer Airline jet pilot enroute to Los Angeles, at 20,000 feet. This report was given to the Santa Barbara Flight Tower. The report was for a fire at 330° bearing and 22 miles from Santa Barbara OMNI. The FAA operator on duty at the Santa Barbara Tower attempted to call the Forest Dispatcher via the regular business phone number which is on FTS switch board and unmanned at this hour. (Forest Dispatcher Dillingham was on duty at the time, working on the Oso Fire and could have been reached only thru listed emergency numbers.)

Failing to reach the Forest Dispatcher, the FAA operator called the Sheriff's Office with the OMNI report. The Oso Fire was in progress at the time on the same bearing from the OMNI, approximately 2 miles out, on Santa Barbara District. The Sheriff's Dispatcher assumed this was the fire being reported and took no further action.

The next sighting of the fire was at 0517, June 12, by Figueroa Lookout. The Lookout observed drift smoke in the Sisquoc at the mouth of the Manzana, more than 6 miles down river from the origin, and reported it to the Forest Dispatcher in Santa Barbara at 0518, and this resulted in the initial dispatch to the fire.

Two other fires were in progress on Los Padres National Forest at this time. One at Wizard Peak on the Monterey District, and the other at Oso Canyon on the Santa Barbara District. These two fires had most of the available forces on the Forest, including available pre-season aircraft and considerable manpower committed.

After some checking with McPherson Peak Lookout, the Forest Dispatcher notified Santa Maria District FCO Righetti, and District Dispatch was initiated at 0523. At the same time, Forest FCO Hickerson was notified of the new fire on the Sisquoc at 0528, at the Oso Fire Camp. Available day shift forces from the Oso Fire, about 150 men, were diverted to the new fire on the Sisquoc immediately. Also, plans were made to get two additional helicopters, available on a local spray contract, ready for use as soon as the pilots could be notified and the spray equipment could be detached. The first available helicopter was one being used on the Oso Fire. This helicopter was fueled and took off from Los Prietos with FCO Hickerson and AFCO Mansfield at 0624. While in flight in the vicinity of Cachuma Saddle, it was obvious that the fire was spreading and of sufficient size that, due to location, it would become a major project fire. The Dispatcher was so advised at 0647, and instructed to "alert the Zone Dispatcher of possible need for a 'drop camp' and to start ordering additional resources for 'a major back country campaign fire'". At 0655, the Dispatcher placed an order for 200 additional men with overhead, and other resources through Zone. Additional local forest and Oso Fire resources were ordered to this fire.

#### FIRST PHASE (Initial Attack)

At approximately 0700, Hickerson and Mansfield arrived at the scene. Fire at this time was approximately 300 acres in size and spreading rapidly down canyon. Wind was out of the east from 25 to 35 mph causing the fire to spot and spread rapidly. A landing was made near the point of origin in the Sisquoc Canyon bottom where the wrecked aircraft, two survivors and the two victims were located.

After determining the extent of injuries, confirming the fatalities, and obtaining the aircraft and victim identification, Hickerson returned to Santa Ynez Airport where he could get appropriate fire action and information correlated with the Dispatcher and initiate action to effect the rescue of the injured airmen. This was done. Mansfield remained at the fire to tend to the survivors, do scouting for the initial attack and direct the initial suppression effort. At 0736, FCO Hickerson called the Dispatcher by phone from Santa Ynez Airport and placed the first specific orders to build up the manpower, equipment and other resources, including a fire team and 500 line workers with overhead.

In the meantime, the other two helicopters had been activated and the initial attack forces were being ferried from the end of the road near the Sisquoc Ranch to the fire, a distance of more than 20 miles. It was necessary to fly these people in since vehicular travel up the Sisquoc to the fire was not possible. Due to accessibility, the Region 5 Smokejumpers from Redding

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were ordered, at 0832, to the fire in the "all out" effort to hasten and strengthen attack on the fire.

First action by local forces arriving on the fire was directed towards keeping the fire from crossing the Sisquoc River to the North and picking up the east flank which was backing into the wind. (See photo #2) By 1000 hours, there were more than 20 people engaged in this effort. Additional manpower and equipment originally dispatched from the Oso Fire, was making its way up the Sisquoc River with the objective of trying to drive as far as the junction of the Manzana. Fire camp and headquarters were planned initially at this location.

At 1030 hours, the fire spotted across Sisquoc and started a major run to the north in the vicinity of Wellman Canyon. (See photo #3) The fire also became very active on the south side of the river making a major run to the south and west.

At this time, it was apparent that a major back country fire was in progress and a strategy meeting was arranged for 1200, at the Sisquoc Ranch, the nearest commercial phone outlet to the fire. This was attended by Hansen, Hickerson, Maule and Mansfield. The Wellman Fire at this time was estimated to be more than 3,000 acres. (See photo #3)

As a result of this strategy meeting, the following plan was confirmed: (1) The original off-forest fire team and first manpower ordered would go into the Sisquoc, in the vicinity of Manzana School as planned, and establish Zone I, covering the west side of the fire. (2) A second Zone Fire Team and 500 line workers would be ordered to go into the Manzana at Davy Brown, and establish Zone II, covering the south side of the fire. (3) A third Zone Fire Team and 500 line workers would be ordered to go to Miranda Pine, and establish Zone III, covering the north side of the fire along Sierra Madre Ridge. (4) A GHQ would be established at the Santa Ynez Airport with Los Padres personnel filling the key positions in this organization. These orders were given the Forest Dispatcher by Hickerson, from Sisquoc Ranch, at 1316, June 12, 1966. The need for Zones IV and possibly V, were anticipated at this time, but due to the fire location, accessibility, rate of spread and the magnitude of the mobilization job already initiated, this plan was deferred, pending progress of the fire and stabilization of the situation.

Total overhead and manpower orders placed as a result of the above, including the original orders at 0528, 0647 and 0736, added up to nearly 2,000 people. Other resources, including helicopters, air tankers, dozers, tankers, 4x4 vehicles, etc., were also ordered as part of these original plans.

The GHQ, at Santa Ynez Airport, was established and functioning by 1400. Commercial telephone provided the initial communication link between the fire command and the Forest Dispatcher.

Subsequent investigation revealed the order placed with the Forest Dispatcher at 1316, relayed to the Zone Dispatcher at 1330, was apparently delayed until after 1700, before placement with the other forests and manpower sources.

When the magnitude of the mobilization job was determined, a mobilization center was established at Santa Barbara Municipal Airport to receive all incoming manpower. Assignments were made thru this center from GHQ - the same facility later became a demobilization center.

#### SECOND PHASE

By mid-afternoon, June 12, sufficient forces had reached the fire via the Sisquoc River that Zone I organization began to shape up. Zone I Fire Camp was established at the mouth of Horse Canyon, and a "foot hold" established both north and south of the Sisquoc with handline crews on direct attack. This work continued with the night shift of June 12, and by morning of June 13, well established lines were making progress on the west flank in both directions out of the Sisquoc.

During the night of June 12, and early morning hours of June 13, manpower and overhead for Zones II and III began arriving and camps were set up as planned at Miranda Pine and Davy Brown. During the night of the 12th, two groups of local forces with tankers, each under the supervision of a qualified Class I Line Boss were sent into the Manzana and up onto Sierra Madre Ridge as a holding action. They were instructed to take whatever action was necessary to hold these key locations and fire out ahead of the fire. Effective work was started in these areas by the afternoon of June 13, at which time the fire had crossed the Sierra Madre in the vicinity of Peak Mountain and had crossed over Bald Mountain to the south and started dropping down into the Manzana in the vicinity of Nira Camp. The fire had also moved east up the Sisquoc River to the mouth of Big Bend Canyon. Further movement, westerly was stopped with the effort in Zone I. Total size by 0800, June 13, was estimated at 26,000 acres. Total length up the Sisquoc was fifteen miles. During the afternoon of June 13, an additional Zone Fire Team, 200 men and 20 tractors, were ordered for Zone IV, and Fire Camp at Montgomery Potrero, to handle the fire from the east end of Sierra Madre Ridge working westerly to tie in with Zone III effort near McPherson Peak, and also to try and establish a hook on the east line into the Sisquoc.

June 14, progress continued favorable in Zone I with lines being extended and no major change in general fire location. Some problems on south line near mouth of Manzana. Zone II concentrating on constructing fire line down Manzana from Nira Camp to tie in with effort from Zone I. Zone III

main effort firing Sierra Madre Ridge and building indirect line around slop-overs north of Sierra Madre Ridge, west of Bates Canyon. Zone IV, activated late afternoon, started picking up fire on east end of Sierra Madre and building fire line westerly towards McPherson. East flank still very active with no control effort yet possible. Zone IV manpower brought the total on the fire to 2,400.

June 15, progress continued on all zones. Some trouble experienced with slop-overs west of Bates Canyon on Zone III, and establishing a hook to the north out of Manzana Creek in Zone II. Zone I and IV making good progress.

June 16, Zone I nearing completion of assigned line. Split the organization taking some manpower and overhead into Hurrican Deck and established Zone V. Lack of road access necessitated air dropping the camp set up and subsequently completely servicing it by aircraft. Started work to control fire on east flank from Hurrican Deck, both north to tie in with Zone IV in Sisquoc, and south to tie in with Zone II in Manzana. Zone II holding Manzana Creek from Nira Camp west, and having trouble with line in upper Manzana. Zone III holding ridge east of Bates but experiencing trouble with slop-overs west of Bates. Zone IV making progress holding Sierra Madre and establishing hook on east corner into the Sisquoc from Salisbury Potrero.

June 17, work on Zone I completed to mop-up stage. Zone II held Manzana from Nira Camp west down Manzana to tie in with Zone I. Fire made run to south out of Manzana over McKinley Ridge, west of McKinley Peak. Zone III still having trouble picking up slop-overs west of Bates Canyon, remainder of Sierra Madre being held, and line down Horse Canyon Ridge to Hiawatha Camp completed and tied in with Zone I. Zone IV holding Sierra Madre Ridge and picking up line into Sisquoc on east flank. Zone V holding line on Hurricane Deck and working north towards Sisquoc and south towards Manzana.

June 18, Zone I on mop-up and patrol basis. Zone II line fired out and held down Manzana. West flank, from Manzana going south, held and being mopped up over Cachuma Peak and down to Peachtree Road. South line out of Manzana to McKinley being worked. From McKinley south in Mine Canyon giving trouble. Zone III slop-overs cold trailed and being mopped up west of Bates Canyon. Remainder of line on a mop-up basis. Zone IV Sierra Madre Ridge section on mop-up and patrol basis. Line on east flank into Sisquoc being held. Few small flare-ups picked up. Zone V line completed from Hurricane Deck into Sisquoc. Some line remaining to complete into the Manzana to tie in with Zone II. A Demobilization Team was formed and some specialists were ordered. Organization was set up at Santa Barbara Municipal Airport in anticipation of release of large numbers of people.



This organization used the same facilities as the mobilization center during the build-up stages.

June 19, all lines tied in on all zones, with the exception of a small (about 20 chains) piece of line in vicinity of McKinley Peak. Release of forces started according to plans. Mop-up and patrol to continue for several days as the forces are being reduced. Fire reported corralled at 1800.

Fire reported controlled at 0600, June 22, 1966.

Fire mopped up at 1800, July 9.

Fire out and abandoned at 0600, July 11, 1966.

#### WELLMAN FIRE SUMMARY

Total acreage burned - 93,600

Total perimeter - 133 miles, including 113 miles hand line.

Total manpower on fire - 2,500 plus 200 Co-op.

Total Air Tankers - 10

Total Helicopters - 24

Total Tractors - 77

Total Ground Tankers - 56

Total Suppression Cost - \$2,254,793.16  
(As of 12/7/66)

There are several reasons why the Wellman Fire became a large Class E fire:

1. The Wellman Fire was known to have started at approximately 1900 hours, June 11, 1966, from an aircraft crash, however, it was not reported until 0518, June 12, a period of 10-1/2 hours from origin. The fire, as described by the survivors of the crash, was known to have crept around the river bottom in light fuel for several hours before reaching the steeper slopes and heavier fuels and making any significant spread. Had the 1915 sighting by Mrs. Hubbel been reported by 1945 to the Forest Dispatcher, there is no doubt the fire would have been controlled at Class A or B size in the Sisquoc River bed. At this time it was still daylight and a helicopter and helitack crew were available on the Oso Fire, and could have flown to the

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fire in less than an hour. The sighting by American Flyer Airlines jet pilot at 0228, is believed to have been too late, even if reported to the Forest, for successful initial attack because of the long and difficult ground access.

2. The problem of off-hour telephone communication to the Forest Dispatcher has existed since the FTS system was installed. The main FTS switch-board is manned only from 0800 thru 1700 five days per week. The Forest Dispatcher's Office can only be reached, by telephone, between 1700 and 0800, and on weekends and holidays, through three emergency numbers listed in the Santa Barbara telephone directory.

3. Even though early season critical fire conditions were known to exist, proven by early invocation of the fire closure, early application of differential, large pre-season fire, etc., all levels of preparedness were not activated. This had no effect on the fire becoming Class E in size, but did complicate and make more difficult the planning and execution of the build up of forces. Some of the resources throughout the Region in this state of readiness were:

- a. Air tankers not yet on contract or activated.
- b. Helicopter contracts not yet effective and aircraft not yet on base.
- c. Hotshot crews not yet manned.
- d. Most fire agreements for equipment and supplies not yet negotiated.
- e. General level of budgeted fire forces on Los Padres below normal, due to abnormal spring budgeting restrictions and June manpower ceilings.
- f. Forest unable to meet required level of manning as indicated by Fire Load Indices, through application of Emergency Manning.

Most of these deficiencies could have been corrected with sufficient protection funds and full implementation of the 1960 Base Fire Plan.

4. The Wellman Fire occurred early in June, on a scale and magnitude not ordinarily encountered, even in Southern California this early in the season. It was difficult to convey the urgency of the need, for resources being requested, to people who were not on-the-ground and faced with the realities of the situation. The Wellman Fire only proves, if further proof is needed, that in Southern California very large fires can and do occur any time of the year during critical fire weather.

5. Large, inaccessible, highly flammable "primitive" areas present the most difficult fire protection problem and challenge on Los Padres. The Wellman was destined to become a large and costly fire, failing immediate control at the crash scene. Complete perimeter control must be established if the Forest is to be successful in meeting burned area objectives and minimizing the threat of fire to the primitive area itself and the surrounding country. In the case of the Wellman Fire, this could best be accomplished thru the construction of the planned transportation system on or near the perimeter of the proposed San Rafael Wilderness along Sierra Madre Ridge, Manzana Creek and Horse Canyon. These perimeter roads together with planned fuel breaks would have provided the access necessary for earlier and more effective control. This problem has been recognized and has been given priority in recommendations for the classification of San Rafael.

6. The remote, inaccessible and blind location of the origin of this fire delayed effective initial action until approximately 1500, June 12, or about 20 hours after origin. This, despite the fact that men, equipment, overhead and transportation were staged and available at the Oso Fire. Men and equipment were dispatched from the Oso Fire prior to 0600, by ground transportation, and were not able to reach the fire edge until about 1400. All forces on the fire prior to this time were either smokejumpers or had been flown in by helicopter. This same problem of access was a factor that had to be reckoned with, to one degree or another, on the entire perimeter.

In spite of the enormity and complexity of the fire, several commendable points concerning the action should be mentioned:

1. Immediate (from the moment of initial report) recognition by the Fire Command of the potential, probable size and difficulties to be encountered before control could be achieved. The Wellman Fire was never under estimated from the outset.
2. Rapid placement of orders and mobilization, despite the obstacles, of manpower, overhead and equipment resulted in an unprecedented number of men and machines being on the job before the second burning period. Nearly 2,000 men, three fire camps and three Zones were implemented by 1000, June 13.
3. The dispatching of entire Zone Fire Teams from one forest aided immeasurably in early effective effort on the fire.

The two Zone Fire Teams that were each made up entirely from one Forest were in place and effective immediately upon arrival.

4. The establishment of a GHQ organization at an early stage kept management of the fire abreast of the problems thru all stages of buildup.

The location of GHQ at an airport facilitated reconnaissance, coordination and rapid movement of key overhead.

5. Assistance provided by Co-op agencies was outstanding. The U.S. Navy thru the Hueneme-Mugu complex furnished more than 100 people from start thru control, and their willingness and performance was outstanding. The California Division of Forestry furnished a number of conservation crews that performed outstanding work as usual. The Santa Barbara County Fire Department assisted immeasurably and established a fire camp at New Cuyama to handle assigned areas of responsibility.

6. The early decision to establish separate Zone procurement sources, and channels with Supply Officers and purchasing agents assigned to each Zone to provide supplies directly to each Zone proved to be very effective and reduced supply problems to a minimum.

7. The Forest Dispatch organization was built up and strengthened to meet the work load and problems encountered. Other forest dispatchers were requested with the initial order for manpower and in anticipation of the large fire problems.

The Wellman Fire was not without problems, some of the more significant were:

1. Adequate access - Absence of roads in some areas and the low standard of existing access in others caused concern and difficulty. The only major accident on the fire occurred on sub-standard access when a military vehicle left the roadway and rolled down the mountain with a load of inmates. There were no fatalities, however, several people were critically injured. Roads, providing for two-way traffic with turnouts and safety zones, designed to meet fire needs are essential.

2. Air operations control - Providing the technical guidance essential for the safe use of aircraft, particularly helicopters in this case, and not removing control of the machines from fire management once they have been assigned, presented real problems on this fire. A review of the air operations management and organization should be undertaken with the objective of providing for smoother utilization on large fires.

3. Aircraft contracts - At the start of the Wellman Fire there were no aircraft on contract. This included helicopters and air tankers. Current contracts do not provide for air tankers prior to July 1, and only a skeleton force of helicopters before this date. With current contract requirements what they are, the number of aircraft that could be activated early, either on account of maintenance or pilot availability, is questionable. This could again be a serious problem in the event of a major early season fire.

4. Low flying over the Forest - Aircraft activity over remote Forest areas has become a serious problem. A study with FAA would seem to be in order, to determine what action can be taken to alleviate the problem of low flying aircraft in isolated mountain terrain.

5. Fire Control Program

This fire again illustrates and emphasizes the need for a fully implemented and fully integrated Fire Control and Related Facilities Program, including Manpower, Equipment, Pre-Attack Plans and Fuel Treatment (including Fuelbreaks), Structural Improvements and Road and Trail Construction Programs. There can be no real solution to the protection problem as long as we are grossly under financed in providing all the tools necessary for its accomplishment.

Dec 12, 1966  
Date

Submitted by E. J. Smithburg  
E. J. Smithburg

December 12, 1966  
Date

Approved by William H. Hansen  
W. H. Hansen