

**FIRST -HAND ACCOUNTS OF
THE MOUNT VISION FIRE**

BY

A RANCHER

A FIREFIGHTER

A PARK RANGER

A FIRE STRATEGIST

A FIRE WARDEN

A WATER DISTRICT MANAGER

INMATE FIREFIGHTERS

AN OBSERVER

HOME OWNERS BURNED OUT

A HOMEOWNER SPARED

A NATURALIST

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWS:

These "oral history" interviews were made over a period of several months after the October '95 Mt. Vision fire. They were done at the suggestion of Louise Landreth, a member of the Committee of the Jack Mason Museum of Inverness, for the Museum's historical archives.

These unabridged interviews barely scratch the surface. They reflect only the personal views and experiences of two dozen or so people whose lives were touched by the fire.

Limits of time and resources eliminated scores of others -- people who played vital roles in fighting the fire and those whose lives were profoundly affected by it.

Of the former group, many are well known through official reports. They include Park Superintendent Don Neubacher, Stan Rowan, Chief of the Marin County Fire Department, and Tom Tarp, the State's Fire Chief. Together they formed the triumvirate of the Incident Command.

In the latter group must be included all of the people who lost their homes in the fire.

We can never measure in full the contributions of the "unknowns" -- hand crew firefighters, engine crews, dozer operators, pilots and crews of helicopters and air tankers and providers of food and shelter.

The interviewer wishes to thank all the men and women who patiently answered his questions. Naturally he accepts responsibility for errors and omissions.

LB. Tennyson

THE RANCHER

Interview with Anne Murphy at the Home Ranch, Point Reyes Peninsula, 3/1/96.

Anne Murphy helps run the 3,000 acre ranch which is located between Drake's Estero and Limantour Estero with her two partners, Scott and Lee Murphy. She moved there in 1977 with her husband Scot. They have two children, son Barclay, 17, and daughter Jessica, 14. A horsewoman and nature-lover, she hails from Baltimore, Maryland.

LT: Tell us something about the ranch, its history, when you moved here, what you raise, and how you fared in the fire.

AM: This is a 3000 acre ranch. It lies between the Limantour Estero and Drake's Estero. It is essentially a peninsula. We have Drake's Bay in front and the two esteros on either side. The ranch buildings set back into the valley behind the marsh lands. It's that part of the Point Reyes National Seashore that begins the agricultural zone. Everything south of us is wilderness, all the way between here and Bolinas. The ranch was established during the twenties. It was part of the Shafter-Hamilton estate.

LT: There had been no ranch here before then?

AM: There was ranching here before Murphy's. There were families living here and they had dairy cows. Murphy expanded on the existing ranch. He came in and bought eleven thousand acres, it went from here all the way to Bear Valley. As a matter of fact, the fire which burned twelve thousand acres of the Seashore National Park was almost the entirety of the original Murphy ranch. The Laguna Ranch, Glenbrook, Muddy Hollow, and Nova Albion were all a part of the Murphy ranch originally.

LT: Did I hear correctly, that it extended all the way over to Bear Valley?

AM: Yes. Eleven thousand acres. Almost to the boundaries of the fire. Actually the fire went a little further south. That is the first thing Lee Murphy, my father-in-law, commented upon after the fire. He is still full involved in this ranch. He said: "I can't believe it, my father's land totally burned, every bit of it. "

LT: Was there ever much timber here, or was it mostly scrub?

AM: Brush, very little timber on this particular ranch that is. There never has been much timber here, this is pasture land.

LT: How many head of cattle did you say you had?

AM: There are tllTee hundred plus mother cows and their calves. Then we have the younger stock that is out by the Estero Trail Head parking lot. And there are also replacement heifers.

LT: What do you mean, "replacement heifers?"

AM: You realize this is a cow-calf operation. It's all beef. There is no dairy herd here. What we do is to raise marketable beef animals. So we have a herd of cows and a herd of bulls and we breed them. We raise the babies. When the babies are old enough to be weaned - at about six hundred pounds - we market them. We sell them like a crop. Replacement heifers we save. They are culled as the best heifers of that year's calving season.

LT: By the way, I'm sure not many people know that the U.S. Park Service takes care of some of your fencing. Did you expect that when you moved here?

AM: Yes, we did. Our agreement with the Park when the Park bought the ranch was that they would be responsible for our boundary fences. They are our landlords, so to speak. If you were renting a house, then you would be responsible for the maintenance of the house, or whatever the agreement is. They are, as a matter of preference, responsible for the boundary fences, helping ensure that the cattle don't get out into the park.

LT: We're talking now about boundary fences that were burned in the fire and which the Park Service is replacing.

AM: Yes. Our cross-fencing we are responsible for ourselves. That is within our own ranch business. The boundary fence is extensive. There is quite a lot of it. We lost six hundred acres to the burn, which isn't bad at all. It is going to come back, it is actually coming back beautifully. We are just looking at the work entailed to fix the fences and it is going to take quite a long time.

LT: Tuesday the third of October, you saw the smoke coming from the top of Mt. Vision.

AM: Yes. I saw it practically at the moment it started. I looked up and saw a gray smoke coming off the ridge. I knew immediately there was a blaze but didn't heed it as anything serious. I drove to school to pick up my kids and from Point Reyes you could get a good view of how fast the fire was growing. We stayed in town for a while to watch. It was accumulating volume fast. We didn't feel threatened yet. Nobody did. Everybody in the street was talking, pointing, and looking but nobody thought that it was going to go anywhere. There were fire engines running through town and we thought they had it under control. Since it had just started we thought everything was going to be fine. By that night, though, it appeared it was out of control. We drove over to Martinelli's ranch on the other side of Tomales Bay and watched from there. You could see and hear the fire and the explosions of propane gas tanks at the burning homes. We watched plumes of smoke erupt as something would ignite. It was unbelievable to see.

LT: The pines especially provided pyrotechnics.

AM: They did indeed. It was a most extraordinary experience to witness. It was one thing to watch it remotely from across the Bay. It was quite another thing to realize that it was happening in your own back yard.

LT: Will you talk about how the ranchers came here to the ranch from all over the area

including from ranches across the Bay to help save the ranch?

AM: Yes, They even came from Marshall. Merv McDonald used to have the Pierce Point Ranch that was his home ranch. Now his home ranch is on the Marshall-Petaluma Road. Pat Arnt lives in the Marshall area, he came with his wife and son, Rob. They brought equipment. All the ranchers brought equipment, whatever tractors they had, whatever animals. They brought their horses and their horse trailers. We thought we were going to have to evacuate the cattle. That would have been very difficult. Fortunately we didn't arrive at that point. We moved out the animals that were here in this valley. They included a herd of twenty bulls, all of our horses, and all the local animals that are around here in the compound area which consists of some twenty-five acres. But the animals that were out at the point, down by the esteros, we couldn't get to.

LT: How did you move the animals, by horseback?

AM: Yes. We pushed them on horseback, the bulls and the cows that we wanted to get out of that area.

LT: I suppose the children didn't go to school for a couple of days.

AM: They didn't go to school for a few days. The West Marin School had been transformed into the fire crisis center. The Red Cross was there and we set up a switchboard there for information and communications.

LT: So many places were brought into use specifically for this fire.

AM: Absolutely, all kinds of places. And so many homes too were opened up. Their doors opened up for the fire fighters, to everybody, and to anybody. Everybody wanted to help. I couldn't wait to help. The next day, Thursday, the day after we had our big day here when so many people came to help save the ranch, we got a phone call at five in the morning. It was from a ranch family in the Olema Valley. They felt threatened, fearing that the fire was going to come down to their ranch. They asked us to come over and help evacuate their cattle out of the valley. We all were so delighted to do it. We drove right over there with our horse trailers.

All the ranchers who stayed over here on Wednesday were over there on Thursday moving cattle and helping out. It was a great bonding experience.

LT: I guess you're already bonded by virtue of what you do in common which is husbanding animals. You also must pay attention, in ranching, to the elements. That must bring people together like sailors in a gale at sea.

AM: It's a lot like being at sea. You have to read the weather all the time. That's why the ranchers were here so early Wednesday morning. They knew by the wind, during the first night, the Murphy Ranch was threatened by the fire. They knew before anybody called in. They also knew that this ranch is on the border of the agricultural zone and that, as I said before, everything south of us is wilderness. Starting here at our boundary the Murphy Ranch

is the first in the agricultural zone, and if this ranch had burned, it would have meant that all of their ranches were threatened too. It was important to everybody to save this ranch.

LT: Late in the game a lot of fire equipment did get down here, did it not?

AM: Yes, but not right off, not at daybreak. We were very worried about whether anybody would come besides our local friends and ranchers. We knew we needed more help, that we couldn't do it all by ourselves. We were trying, we had the tractors going and our small caterpillars working. We couldn't make the big wide fire breaks that the C.D.F. cats can carve. They have the big equipment.

LT: I reckon the C.D.F. must have some of the best fire fighters as far as training is concerned.

AM: They are, they're professional. They were wonderful. When they did come in, in the late morning, everything started to come together as far as organization was concerned. I went over the maps with Carl and what I could do to help him was to show him where the best place was on the ridge was to come down, cutting a fire-break line. All I did was to show him where the threatened places were and then he did everything. He organized everybody and got it done. That's when he ordered us all to get out of the fire zone. That included the ranchers who had come to help along with their equipment, caterpillars, our tractors, and backhoes.

LT: Who is Carl?

AM: The C.D.F. man, I have forgotten his last name. He was in charge of the Wednesday operation when they were cutting the containment line for the fire. He was excellent.

LT: The trio who made up the command unit for the fire had to make tough decisions about priorities and make them fast. I guess the first priority was to try to save the forest homes on Drake's View and Paradise Estates. Still, I 'm surprised they didn't immediately send helicopters over at first light on Wednesday to dump water on your out buildings.

AM: No they didn't. We never had helicopters here until the afternoon. They actually helped move some of the cattle with the helicopters. By that time in the afternoon we weren't allowed to go out there anymore. Carl didn't want to have to worry about private citizens being out in the fire zone. He ordered everybody to stay down here. There were some cows in the danger area. He used his helicopter man to push them out. It worked.

LT: I've seen pictures of that being done on big ranches.

AM: It worked, they missed only one cow. It was due to a matter of nature. The cow ran back into the fire after her calf. They both perished. The only casualties.

LT: It was predicted that most of the wild animals, unless they were burrowing creatures, would be able to flee the fire.

AM: Yes, I think so.

LT: Ground crews reported that in the midst of the fire fight they frequently saw animals, particularly rabbits and deer, fleeing the flames.

AM: We were fearful of the fire. but it had yet to threaten us. On Tuesday, the third of October it was still on the other side of the Inverness Ridge and threatening to engulf the town. Then at three o'clock, Wednesday morning, we realized the wind had shifted and the fire was going to come our way. We couldn't wait for daylight to get a good look. So we went up to the top of the hill to get a view. We saw it was already burning down to Limantour Beach. That put me into a panic because if it jumped over the marshland between what we call that Glenbrook Peninsula next to us and over the Limantour Estero onto our ranch, our cattle would be threatened. That whole area out there was vulnerable. At daybreak when the ranchers arrived we started building our own firebreaks as best we could. The places I was most worried about we couldn't reach with equipment. We needed professional fire equipment. Jim Love's fire unit, a County group, arrived first. I raised hell with the guys who were only here for structural reinforcement. It was true that our structures weren't threatened yet. I wasn't worried about the structures, I was worried about the ranch.

LT: Jim Love came from Point Reyes, didn't he?

AM: Yes, he works out of the substation in Point Reyes. He had been working in Inverness all night the night before. He arrived here without any sleep. He already had been without sleep for twenty four hours. The first thing he did was to go down to the dams down below, at Limantour Estero, and back-burn them. That way the fire couldn't lick across those two little bandaids. That was important. When he returned the C.D.F. units had arrived. It was about 10:30 by now. Then they started seriously making the big fire-breaks here, going up to Mt. Vision. As it turned out it was the northern containment line for the entire fire.

LT: That wind shift, which now threatened you, saved Inverness. I gathered that the wind was high and the fire virtually out of control then.

AM: It would have ripped right on down through Inverness. The shift really did save the town. Out here, it burned twelve thousand acres of Park, but that's not so bad. Actually the Park now is looking beautiful, it's gorgeous. It hasn't done any great harm. In the long run, it's beneficial. Yes, that shift of wind scared us for a day, but what could have happened is another story .

LT: Outside of burned fencing you had no damage done?

AM: No damage to the buildings at all.

LT: Lucky.

AM: We were very lucky. It was beyond luck.

LT: Any stories about the fire or the end to it that you recall?

AM: I talked to my daughter about it and how she felt. She'd felt a lot of panic. We were all panic-stricken at the thought of losing our home. That happened on Wednesday afternoon when we thought we might lose it. The flames were racing down from the Ridge so fast that I didn't think the fire fighters could finish the fire break in time. We had everything packed. We took everything out of the house, every picture, every pillow, everything we wanted to save. We packed all these horse trailers that the ranchers had brought with them and pointed them in the direction of the driveway so that we could get out at a moment's notice. We never had to.

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THE FIREFIGHTER

Interview with Scot Patterson, Inverness, CA, 12/05/95

Scot Patterson lives in Inverness with his wife Georgina and their two young children, Andrew and Samantha.. He is a life-long member of the Community. He grew up in Inverness, learned to sail on Tomales Bay, came to know the hundreds of miles of trails in the Point Reyes National Seashore Park, and became a budding volunteer fireman for the Inverness fire station.

LT: Scot how did you become involved in fire fighting?

SP: By just being interested in the fire services and helping out. Specifically it happened because of my boyhood friend Rufus Blunk. He lived up on Mt. Vision. One day he said he had a lot of junk up there to bum. It was a damp, foggy morning. He decided to bum it before the fog lifted. Fog had been forecast for the next couple of days. He thought it was a safe bet. Right after the fire got going and a good pile of smoke was rising, the fog lifted. A sheriff across the bay spotted it. He alerted the fire department and pretty soon fire trucks, sirens sounding, started up the mountain. Rufus, hearing them, hurriedly put the fire out and tried to make it appear as though nothing had happened. Mike Meszaros, the Fire Chief, didn't buy that. He looked around, found the source of the smoke, and said: "Well Rufus, you'd better join the Fire Department." Mike knew I'd been working with Rufus for years. He turned and added: "since you and Scot Patterson have so much experience with chain saws, heavy lifting, rigging, and also boating activities, why don't you see if you can get him to join with you? We need some new young guys." Rufus cornered me. We decided to take the plunge and so we joined up. Rufus only lasted a year. I think it was mostly because he was living on top of Mt. Vision and not in town.

LT: What makes a good fireman? Any particular qualities?

SP: Well, you could be a good story-teller. But that doesn't always save your life when the shit hits the fan. You have to be strong, be able to assess a situation, and make decisions quickly. You can't take all day to decide whether or not it is too dangerous. Nor can you afford rash judgments. Still you've got to size things up things fast.

LT: Did you ever go to a fire fighting school?

SP: I didn't do a full course but did attend different programs. I went to an auto extrication course for twenty hours. These are the sort of training programs the fire department pays for. We did "fire command," a weekend course in Solano County where they throw everything at you to see how you respond. People who didn't respond well were washed out. They were told, "you can leave now. Thank you very much. We don't want you to endanger the lives of the rest of us." Our training included having to walk into a burning wall of propane gas.

LT: How's that?

SP: There's a burning "Christmas tree" structure of propane jets. Two teams go into the area. Their task is to get to the valve that turns off the propane flow. You have to push the fire back with fog spray to get to the valve. One wrong move and you lose.

LT: Were you married by this time?

SP: No, I was married two years ago, I joined as a volunteer in '86.

LT: Nine years.

SP: As members, every month we have two training meetings. We constantly go through the exercises in Mike's "Fire One" book. We even get to go to fight fires in burning buildings where the Marin County Fire Department has set up simulations.

LT: Let's get to October 3rd. When did you get the signal?

SP: I'd been doing some electrical work up on the Ridge for Jessie Young. He's a rock musician. My pager went off. They were reporting a brush fire on the Ridge.

LT: Where were you then?

SP: At the top of Paradise -- at the crest. I jumped back into my car. I said I would call in. If it was a medical call, I was going to let other guys deal with it, they were closer. But when they said fire, or "wildland fire," I said "I'm leaving." I told them: "If you smell a lot of smoke, don't hang out here too long. I'd get my stuff and get out." They did. I made it down into town just in time to meet up with Tom Fox and engine 380.

LT: You had your gear?

SP: I went to the fire house and got it. We were late arrivals, he was working somewhere far away, and I was too.

LT: Did you go back up the mountain on one of the fire trucks?

SP: Yes, we went in 380, one of the newer engines. We use that as backup to wildland. Usually we use 381 because it has all the wildland hoses. First we thought maybe we should go up Highland Way to get to the Ridge. But nobody really had yet pinpointed the fire. So, we called in and asked Mike about Highland. "Why don't you go ahead and check it out," he said. We turned around. I went into the hotel and rang up Rufus Blunk. He was up there working on his new house. It was he who, after spotting the fire, made the first 911 call. He said there was no access to the fire from Highland. So we went to the top of Ottinger's Hill. Instead of going down to the Vision Overlook Road, we went up the Gunn's driveway at the top of

Ottinger's Grade to the Park access road. We just did a contour and zipped right up. We made up for lost time.

LT: Isn't that road a steep climb?

SP: No, it's a gradual slope, nothing like Paradise Ranch Drive. At the top we found the gate locked so we got out a hack saw and cut the chain. By the time we'd arrived there were other engines on the scene.

LT: Where, exactly, were you?

SP: We were right at the top of Pt. Reyes Hill where the FAA radio beacon tower is. The parking lot is right below that. At the end of the road where the gate is, we parked and headed out to the northeast and fought the fire. We'd pretty much knocked it out, it was not that big.

LT: Was it you, Tom, or some one else who discovered the origin of the fire?

SP: I think it may have been some of the earlier arrival guys. I'm not sure Tom discovered it.

LT: I thought it extraordinary that, almost immediately, they found out where it had originated. At least so it was reported.

SP: I'm not sure who it was. One of our guys found a milk carton, an apple core, a jar, and evidence of a fire pit. There was ample evidence that somebody had been there.

LT: You were relieved that it wasn't very bad?

SP: It didn't seem severe. But as soon as we got there and I was walking down the trail with all my gear and my hose pack, out of nowhere comes this C130, flying at tree top level. He flew over our heads dumping his red dye everywhere. It was a high response day, because it had been dry for five days. I thought, this is great we have air support so we surely can contain it.

LT: Are they federal or state planes?

SP: They're contracted out to the state. When it gets really bad the feds bring in other stuff. They bring them in from all over the country.

LT: I thought these planes were located somewhere in Southern California.

SP: The first ones came from up near Garberville, it's up north and east.

LT: I've been told that they saw small planes guiding the air tankers.

SP: They do that. They serve as spotters and guides for the tankers. They're more agile than the big planes. If they spot something dangerous ahead they can pull up, signaling to the bomber that it is necessary to make another run on the target. The tanker planes fly at between five hundred and a thousand feet. They have new safety rules to help cut down the high incidence of accidents. The guide planes contribute to safety. The bombers, or air tankers as they are called, are highly effective in containing fires with the chemical retardants they drop. Containment make it possible for firefighters on the ground to put fires out.

LT: Did they get the helicopters on it the first afternoon?

SP: They did, I didn't see any myself. They may have been over at Paradise. When things started to get out of hand, I kept calling Rufus up on the Ridge asking him where the fl 1"e was going.

LT: You had a cellular phone?

SP: I had a brand new little pocket flip phone. Since I knew Rufus had originally called in the fire's location, he had a bird's eye view from down below as to what was going on. I called him and asked "what's going on going on?" We could only see what was right in front of us. We couldn't look down the ridges. They were hidden by smoke. Rufus told me the fl 1"e had jumped a thousand feet. I told that to Booker, who was standing about ten feet away. He'd taken over from Meszaros.

LT: Booker: who's he?

SP: Battalion Chief Booker, a big, no-nonsense guy. He said, "nobody told me about that." The planes by then had left and there was nobody spotting. They'd left to refuel and reload, a forty five minute round trip to and from Santa Rosa. Without planes overhead, I realized there was nobody else communicating the movements of the fire other than Rufus down below. I told him to call the dispatch headquarters in Woodacre and give them a progress report every five minutes and tell them exactly what was going on. Then they could relay the information directly to Booker.

LT: I'd had the impression that communications were much better organized.

SP: They were, but in the initial response there was nobody else spotting and reporting the fire from other vantage points below us.

LT: When you were up there the wind was out of the northwest?

SP: Yes. It was blowing pretty hard. When we fl 1"St got there the wind was blowing about fifteen miles an hour.

LT: That's quite a lot.

SP: Maybe it was twenty. Meszaros gave us a reading the minute we got on the scene. he estimated fifteen to twenty, gusting to twenty-five. Then it kicked up and got a little higher. By the time we left it was blowing about thirty-five. But in the "chute" -- the saddle area on the Ridge to the southeast -- the wind was just cooking through. Meanwhile, Rufus got on the phone to the dispatcher. He was instrumental in pinpointing exactly where the fire was headed and whether it jumped or not. He saw it jump once, twice, three times. It put him into something of a panic. At that point we knew the fire was out of hand. Fire fighters ran hoses through the woods to it. But they couldn't touch it at that point it was moving so fast and it was so far down slope.

LT: It was too steep?

SP: Impenetrable.

LT: Did you encounter a lot of explosions of dry brush?

SP: Not at that point. Later on when we got into the thick of it, it was very intense.

LT: You came back down to the firehouse again late that afternoon?

SP: Yes, up at the top, everyone arrived and we had a huddle. They started doing strategy, calling in units from all over. They were calling C.D.F. task forces. At that point they said they had about half of California's C.D.F. response units.

LT: C.D.F. - California Department of Forestry. Right?

SP: Yes. One of the Marin County engines arrived up there with only one man on board. He was the crew. His name was Tom Nunes.

LT: Where was the engine from?

SP: Point Reyes Station, engine 1584.

LT: You knew the guy?

SP: Yes, I'd had dinner with him at his station. I'd go over there for an abalone meal on occasion. Anyway, he was short on crew, so Bill Hart and I jumped on board after Meszaros asked if we wanted to commit to the engine. He said: "If you go on this engine, we don't have any control over you. You're on your own. You'll be with a Marin County engine so they'll call the shots." We said sure, let's go. We took off and went back down the mountain to the fire station, got reloaded, got more water, batteries, and radios. We then were instructed to go to a staging area at Inverness Park. We got there and sat around for a long time.

LT: At Perry's Deli?

SP: Yes. All these units there had been ordered by the Incident Command (I.C.). There were so many chiefs, none of them could decide what to do. They hesitated to go up the hill and commit because they were afraid they were going to put too many engines in jeopardy. They were running out of water, and faced other uncertainties. They were just kind of slow to jump. They didn't want to jump into the fire, but they didn't want to hang back either. Then a funny thing happened that may have galvanized the various chiefs into action. A guy by the name of Ethan Foote appeared on the scene His parents had a house on a road up in the fire zone. He was the C.D.F. man out of Santa Rosa. He drove up with three fire trucks and walked right up to the Incident Commander. "Hi I'm Ethen Foote, " he said. "I've got three engines with me. Do you want to give me two more? I'm going up to save my parents' house". He didn't ask. In effect, he just told them "this is what I'm doing, I'm not taking orders from you." The guy stared at him. The IC was one of these Marin County guys who wears aviator glasses, has dark, really short hair, and mustache. He sort of reminded me of an Arkansas state trooper who won't take any sass. He looked at another chief next to him and said "Hey, who is this jerk?" Before they could do anything, Ethan was back on his rig and departed with two more engines - five in all. They took off -- to do a little freelancing.

LT: This was up at Paradise Estates?

SP: Yes. We were there a good half hour and feeling frustrated because we were doing nothing. I finally yelled at Eddie Mestre, a Point Reyes Station fire captain: "let's do something." He said, "Okay if you guys want to do something, take these guys up to the top of Drake's Summit and do structure protection." There were five other engines from San Rafael. We went up towards the summit of Drake's View and protected houses that were still quite a distance from the flames. It didn't seem to be of paramount importance.

LT: When you say you protected them a reasonable distance away from the flames what does that mean? What did you do?

SP: We went on to the property to assess whether or not we could save the structure if the ground were to catch on fire -- to make sure there was enough clearance around it. If the trees were virtually over the top of it, there would be no way to clear it. So we would just drive to the next house. Salvageable houses were the only things we were concerned with. If it was a house in the dense forest, with trees ten feet away, we would not even consider it. We were up there until about 10 p.m. Then they moved us to the top of the Ridge to carry out backburning operations. These were pretty hazardous. Along the Limantour Road were Bishop Pines and Douglas Firs on both sides. Our job was to start a back burn before the fire came down that far in order to protect the top of Drake's Summit and keep it from burning down. We started our back burn. Then the other half of our job was to try to keep burning embers from the back burn from falling into the canyon, igniting brush below and then flaring back up. We started the backfires and then got our hoses and ran off the cliff down three or four hundred feet into the canyon. We were putting out the hot spots and thought we were doing a great job of it. One particular ember fell pretty far down, maybe a couple of hundred feet below us. It spread flames quickly up the hill. We couldn't get to it and didn't dare commit to going down

the cliff. It would have been suicide. Then we had a communications failure: our radio went out. We couldn't communicate with the guy at the pump panel on the engine.

LT: This was the south side of Limantour?

SP: Yes. the south side at the top of Limantour. We were at the top of Drake's Summit looking out towards Arch Rock. We were near the Goldfield's B&B. We were at a good four hundred feet below. It was almost straight up to the engine. We started to coil our hose on our shoulders and tried to walk out with them. By that time the fire below was gaining on us. It was no use. We threw our hose on the ground and started up. It was nerve-wracking. At that moment it was a good three hundred feet almost straight up to the engine. The guy ahead of me was pulling himself up out of the canyon using the hose. He was doing what he'd been told to do in such a situation -- that is, to uncouple the hose lengths as he went up. Ordinarily this is standard procedure. But he'd forgotten about me being behind him. I heard the captain above screaming to get the hell out of there. Actually, he was more explicit than that. I'm trying to pull myself up with this hose, and the hose keeps coming down on me. So I started crawling and running up the hill looking over my shoulder. By that time the fire had gotten up into the tree canopy.

LT: You had a wall on both sides?

SP: Yes. At that time there was a fire above on the other side of the road and the fire was coming up the draw towards us.

LT: That's what I was asking. You had two fires coming together.

SP: The fire at the top was creating a lot of up draft. I ran like hell, as fast as I could. Then I realized I couldn't outrun this thing, it was coming up the hill too quickly. I remembered there was a trail that cut across the slope. I found it. I knew the fire wasn't spreading outward as fast as it was going upward -- up the canyon wall. So, I ran diagonally across it.

LT: Do you remember the name of the trail?

SP: I thought it was the Bay View trail but I'm not sure. I ran quite a ways on that. Meanwhile, I could hear them screaming. They didn't know if I was out or not because all they could see was flames. It was coming over the treetops and they couldn't see the ground down below. I knew Captain George Thornton who was on one of the rigs was very worried about us. I found my light and shined it up the hill to let them know I was still around. Finally I found my way back up. I was only about a hundred yards from the engines. I ran down the road just in time to see my buddy come up the hose line. The guys were yelling at him, asking where I was. I came up behind him, and tapped him on the shoulder. He was very relieved. We were both on the edge of exhaustion. I was wiped out,

LT: It's incredible: no injuries or deaths.

SP: No injuries but a lot of very tired guys like us. We snatched a two hour nap at the Sky Camp trailhead and then went back through the same area where we had been. There were still flames on both sides of the road and trees were still burning a little further west from that area. On the upslope side of the road, there were, probably, two hundred foot high walls of flame. On the down slope side, flames were probably sixty feet above the road. We were driving through a corridor of fire.

LT: How did you know you could get through that tunnel of fire? Was that the only way?

SP: It was the only way to the Youth Center. We'd been ordered to go to the Center to do structure protection down there. A battalion chief who'd driven through before us said it was drivable, no problem. Bill Hart and I were the only ones on the engine who had been on that road before. I grew up driving that road as a teenager so I knew it like the back of my hand. The engine driver, Tom Nunes, had never been on it. He had no idea whether to turn left, or right, go up or down. He was relying on us to tell him which way to go. When we got to a point further along the road where there is a lot of Coyote Bush, conditions were super-volatile. We had flames on both sides of the road, with high winds down in the lower sections. It was blowing about forty knots.

LT: I should think you would have been terrified had you suddenly come upon a huge burning tree that had fallen across the road.

SP: Down there, there were no trees, just burning Coyote brush and a lot of flames.

LT: When you were in the coyote brush, you were traveling west?

S.P. Yes, toward Limantour Spit. So as it turned out, we came to a point where there was a high bank on one side flames were blowing clear across the road. We drove through that. We didn't go too slowly. We didn't want to run the risk of burning anything. At one point we would see rabbits running down the middle of the road. It was the only part of the area that wasn't fully engulfed. Occasionally they would see us and they would run right into the lights and right under the engines. . We didn't dare get out of the engine at that point because of flames blowing across the road and over the engine. I was in the back, in the truck's canopy, a contained area. Flames were licking over the side of the fire engine. We could scarcely see the road. When we arrived down at the Youth Center, we checked our hoses. The tops of our large hoses had melted. You could barely see the road, it was all ashes.

LT: Going back after the fire, did you see how the soil in some hot spots had been baked solid?

SP: There was nothing left of some of the trees that I'd seen burning up on the ridge. Nothing left, not even the roots. It looked like somebody had drilled with a post hole digger or as though a laser beam had cut a hole six feet deep.

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THE PARK RANGER

Interview with Dorcy Brownback Gurth, Inverness, CA 11/20/95

Dorcy Brownback Gurth is a member of the staff of the Point Reyes National Seashore. She played various roles in helping fight the fire of October 1995 that swept the Point Reyes National Seashore Park. She and her husband, George Gurth, live in the village of Marshall on the eastern shore of Tomales Bay. A naturalist and aquaculturist, he farms oysters in the Bay, a 12-mile long estuary bordering the Point Reyes Peninsula. Their 15-month-old son Sandy is equally at home in the woods and on the water.

LT: Can you begin by telling how you became a ranger for the National Park Service?

DC: In 1977, after a summer in work programs run by the American Farm School in Greece, a Peace Corps-type program, I decided I wanted an out-of-doors job. I was torn between working on the water or working in the woods. So I gave myself ten years to decide between water and woods. First, I joined a tug boat union and went to sea. I had a wonderful time.

LT: Where did you go to sea?

DC: I was in the Inland Boatman's Union in the San Francisco Bay. We hauled barges up and down the coast from Seattle to San Diego.

LT: That sounds great.

DC: I loved it but discovered I became very seasick and couldn't get over it. Finally I decided I would go to work in the woods and go to sea for fun.

LT: In the Navy that was described as "swallowing the anchor."

DC: Well that was it. It was very hard to go ashore because I'd loved being out on the open ocean. When I went back to land my first job was in the woods with the California Conservation Corps. -- the C.C.C. as it was called. I was the rust woman they ever hired.

LT: Where were you?

DC: I started out at San Louis Obispo. I remember my grandfather telling me that I couldn't possibly have joined the Civilian Conservation Corps of the '30's because it was for men only.

LT: He was right. The C.C.C. then was a depression era works program for young unemployed men.

DC: Anyway, I decided I had to try to get into the California C.C.C. I did. I was their first woman, too.

LT: The very first woman in the California CCC?

DC: Yes. They hired twenty-five girls and seventy-five boys. We were all between eighteen and twenty-six.

LT: You were sent all over California?

DC: All over California to do a wide variety of forestry jobs. We did fires, floods, earthquakes, and all kinds of erosion control.

LT: Where did you get your training: on the job?

DC: It was very much "on the job" in the California Conservation Corps. I learned a lot of different skills when I was with them. I even picked up heavy equipment operation.

LT: What sort of equipment?

DC: Bulldozers, graders, rubber tire tractors, and tracked loaders. We did a lot of erosion control work. What I found was that if you started out with a crew, you did a lot of hand work. And if you showed some initiative you could move up to be crew leader pretty quickly. Within a year I moved up four ranks. Each rank is designated by the color of your hard hat.

LT: Did you, therefore, rise up into the world of mechanized equipment?

DC: Definitely. I was able to move readily from hand work to machinery. By the way, they were very strict in the Conservation Corps. You were only allowed to speak to other people who had the same color hard hat that you wore.

LT: You're kidding me.

DC: No I'm not. It's true. I had a rough time at first. In the first six months I wore a "blue hat" like everybody else. Then I moved up a couple of ranks and became a "green hat." I was a green hat in San Louis Obispo. There was only one other green hat. But he was up in Humboldt County. We would have long telephone conversations with each other about how rough it was to be the only green hats

around.

LT: What color was above you?

DC: Yellow. We both were finally promoted to yellow and things became a lot smoother. All of the crew supervisors wore yellow hats. We got to trade places with each other.

LT: What were you doing with all this heavy equipment in San Louis Obispo?

DC: As heavy equipment operators, we rarely got to stay in our home towns. We were sent up to Sacramento during the heavy floods and we moved a lot of sand bags around. I ended up driving a tracked loader.

LT: What is a tracked loader?

D.C. It's a piece of equipment that can go over land without getting stuck. You take the rubber tires off and put the tracks on, it is a serious four wheel drive piece of equipment that can go anywhere. In a really mucky place, like the Delta where you have flooding, it is what you needed to keep from getting stuck. We would go from hand crew to hand crew and carry loaded sand bags to reinforce the dikes.

LT: How long did this stint of yours with the California Environmental group last?

DC; I worked for them for two and a half years. I finally left because I was promoted to a position that involved a desk in Sacramento. They wanted me to recruit women for the program. I did that for about three months and realized that I would much rather be out in the field or "out on the grade" as they called it. I thought: "I'll go back to the office in my seventies. Now I want to be out in the woods. "

LT: And so, you quit?

DC: I switched agencies. The other problem I was having was that the C.C.C. had taken in many Spanish-speaking people and though I had a lot of school Spanish it wasn't adequate enough to communicate with the Southern California crews in the C.C.C. I found myself in charge of crews that I couldn't instruct. That was frustrating. When I learned that another yellow hat friend of mine in the Corps was being offered a job with the Youth Conservation Corp in Idaho I joined forces with him and left for Idaho.

LT: Tell me about the California Conservation Corp. It reminds me of the national C.C.C. founded in the pre-war depression years.

DC: They were similar except that in California they let women in. Two out of the twenty-five made it the first year. Now one third of the Corps is made up of women.

LT: Great.

DC: The program has become big. I loved it. You really had a chance for a wide variety of experience. When I first applied for a job there, it was because we had spent all of our summers here in West Marin.

LT: Is this how you came to join the Point Reyes National Seashore Park?

DC: Yes. I was in West Marin as a teenager. I then had a job teaching sailing at Sea Drift.

LT: Where is that?

DC: It's next to Stinson beach, down the coast a little way. I decided I wanted to balance it out with a job in the woods. So, I went to the Park and asked them how one got on with the Park Service. They said if you were game to volunteer for about nine years you might get a seasonal position. It was very difficult - a real waiting game -- like getting on with the cable cars.

LT: You mean you also considered becoming a driver of San Francisco cable cars?

DC: Yes. I had friends who tried to do that. They were told if you could wait around for nine years, they might get to your name. Meantime, I thought I'd get some experience with other agencies. I put my application in at the Park. They said it would probably be about nine years until they got back to me. I told them I'd do some other things in the meantime. I went and finished college. I have degrees in forestry, fire science, and English literature.

LT: Weren't you a bit over-educated?

DC: Well, I was over-educated for the maintenance division of the Park Service, where I now work. I've found in the National Park Service that white collar staff the scientists and management personnel - are badly underpaid. If you are willing to work in the maintenance division, as I do, you can earn union scale wages and afford

to live in West Marin. Law enforcement rangers, scientists, and the administrators make a lot less money and can't afford to live here unless provided with free Park housing.

LT: Now, tell me more about getting your foot in the Park Service door.

DC: After the C.C.C., I went to Idaho. I worked for the Youth Conservation Corps. That was just a summer job. I came back and went to the College of the Redwoods, graduated with a vocational degree, and decided to get a job in forestry. My choices were logging or firefighting. I thought well, I'm going to try some of the local lumber mills for a summer job. I went down to Scotia, which is just below Humboldt. I met the head of one company who said: "The only problem you have is that you are a woman. When my grandfather, my father, and I die, then we might be ready to hire women. Right now the only girls we have are in the office. "

"I don't want to be in an office," I said. And that was that.

LT: Where did you go from there?

DC: From there I went to the California Department of Forestry in Ukiah. It is the agency that had a big part in the Mt. Vision fire. The initials for the California Department of Forestry are CDF. It's the major firefighting agency in the state of California.

LT: Why did you go there?

DC: Because I heard they were hiring women. "You need to apply to every single fire station in the state," they advised me. "Then you will probably get two offers from places where you don't want to go at all."

LT: Did you get discouraged at this point and say to yourself: " Never mind the whole thing. I'll just go off somewhere and live in the woods, or get married" -- or both?

DC: No. I'd decided to work ten years pursuing this career before getting into marriage. My mom got married at 28. That seemed soon enough to me. At that point I was about twenty-three. I have always been a real tom boy and wanted men's jobs. I had had a couple of "women's jobs." I couldn't stand them. I couldn't wait to get into a "man's job".

LT: How did you get the Point Reyes job?

DC: It was through CDF, the forestry division. I'd spent three summers with them and was promoted up through the ranks to being crew member aboard a helicopter in the Santa Cruz mountains.

LT: Spotting fives?

DC: We shared our helicopter with the sheriff and the highway patrol. The duty was very varied. We had to go on pot raids with the sheriff and with the highway patrol to places like Lawrence Livermore Lab where we dropped smoke bombs.

L.T. Why?

DC: Because, there were people protesting outside the nuclear plant.

LT: Dh? Didn't know there was a nuclear facility at Livermore.

DC: A problem I had was that on both the pot busts and the Lawrence Livermore Lab demonstrations, I knew people on the other side. I imagined them saying: "Dorcy, what are you doing in a law enforcement helicopter? Aren't you one of us?" I thought, this isn't really me either. Most of all, I enjoyed fighting fires from a helicopter. The way it works in a helicopter, is that they carry a crew of six. When there's a fire call, you are the first ones to go. You get to see it from the air, so you see exactly what you're getting into.

LT: What kind of choppers were they?

DC: We were in Bell Jet Rangers.

Some other helicopters carried more than six. The helicopter would drop us off in the fire zone. We'd be the first ones there. We would radio to the dispatcher describing the nature of the problem and what was needed. Then the helicopter would fly off, find a lake, scoop up water and dump it on the fire. It was a great luxury because you didn't have to hike to the fire, you were just dropped off there. Out of a total of 93 fives I'd fought, seventeen were by way of a helicopter. I had a great time fighting fives from a chopper.

LT: Will you tell about your first jump?

DC: You don't jump from a helicopter.

LT: But sometimes you can't put down a helicopter, you have to parachute in to

fight the fire? Not so?

DC: I had one job that was jumping from the airplane as a smoke jumper. I didn't care for that at all, it wasn't worth the pay. Fighting fires from a helicopter seemed much safer. Sometimes they had to lower a rope and have you rappel down to the ground, rarely more than ten feet. But you never jumped out because of the danger of going into the rotors.

LT: How long did your fire fighting career last?

DC: I fought fires for the state of California Department of Forestry for eight years. The last two were on helicopters. I fought about eighty-five fires before I went to helicopters. It was much more fun than being on the ground. One day, on our way back from fighting a fire in the Santa Cruz Mountains, we flew too low and the tail rotor hit a tree. The craft started spinning. The pilot said: "We're going down. Put your heads between your legs and sit on your hands." We didn't have time to do anything except just that. We crashed through the trees, landed on the ground. We were shaken up, that's all. But the pilot had broken his back. He hadn't been able to put his hands under his seat, he had to steer and run the controls. The whole helicopter shut down, we no longer had radio communication. We carried the pilot out for about three hours to medical aid. We got him squared away and were back to our station about six hours later, still shaken by the experience. We'd put out the fire and I'd been back at the station about two hours when the phone rang for me. It was the trail foreman from the Point Reyes National Seashore Park. He told me: "We've been through the whole list of women candidates who were Vietnam veterans and you were the first non-veteran to come up on the list. Are you still interested in coming to work at Point Reyes?" I didn't want to make any rash decisions. I'd just been in a helicopter wreck and it did make me think about changing my line of work.

LT: You already knew the whole Point Reyes area. You must have hiked and camped all over that region.

DC: Oh yes, I had.

LT: You were secretly excited?

DC: Yes, I was excited but I thought I couldn't, because of the crash, run away from helicopters. That didn't seem fair. On the other hand, I had been waiting eight or nine years for a Point Reyes job. Now here was the head of trails calling in to ask if I wanted a job. I went to my fire captain at the helicopter base and I said I'd been

offered another job and asked: "What do I have to do?" He said: "You can't leave here until you find yourself a replacement. This is the fire season and you are a member of an emergency crew." Ibat put me in a real bind. I'd been warned that I had to be at Point Reyes within three days or the next person on the list would get the job.. It seemed totally unfair to me. Every other job offer I've ever had came with at least a two-week grace period.

LT: But it was the fire season.

DC: Ibat's right. There was one faint possibility. I knew a girl, a childhood friend I had known since third grade, who might be interested. She was another tom boy. Right then, she was on a survey crew with the forest service in Utah. She'd told me it was the most conservative place she had ever been in. She was based in a Mormon town where she'd grown tired of turning out the lights at nine o'clock and never being able to find a beer on Friday nights. You weren't even allowed to go out without an escort, she told me. It was, she said, Dullsville. I called her up. "You're the only person I can think of who has at least five years experience fighting fires," I said. "You have to be the right size and weight for a helicopter. You can't be too big or too small. Would you like to replace me at the helicopter base?" I asked her. She said: "Ibat sounds fantastic, I'll be on the next plane. "

LT: No red tape delayed her?

DC: No. She hopped on the plane and came from Utah to San Jose. I drove picked her up, brought her to the station, and put her in my bunk. The next morning she had to deal with the fire captain who was looking for me and found Kim instead.

LT: So you rushed down to Point Reyes?

DC: I arrived a day ahead of schedule, and thought it was fantastic that I was finally coming back home. I had spent summers here since 1963 but had never lived here full time.

LT: What year was this?

DC: It was 1979. I have now been here about fourteen years.

LT: So you crawled up the ladder, rung by rung, fighting fires and anti-feminist efforts to dislodge you?

DC: I have. I started out with the National Park here in a program called the Young Adults Conservation Corps. I was back in another C.C.C. type of program. The job paid the minimum wage. I had been making \$6.95 an hour on the helicopter. Now I was to earn \$2.50 an hour. But I had free housing thanks to my folks who let me build a little cabin on their property. I figured I could afford the big cut in pay. So I took the minimum wage job and had it for a year. The advantage of being in the Conservation Corps with the Park Service is that you get to work in all the different divisions. I got to work at the Morgan Horse Farm as a horse handling assistant. I was out at the Lighthouse doing interpretation. I worked in administration as a clerk. In short I got to work all over the park.

LT: What do you mean, you were doing "interpretation" at the Lighthouse?

DC: "Interpretive rangers" are the people you see behind the desk when you come into the visitors' center. They generally wear a Smokey-the-Bear hat and the Park Service uniform. They are meant to interpret the natural environment.

LT: Explain things to the tourists?

DC: Right. They are the explainers. I initially ended up being an interpreter at Bear Valley because I got a bad case of poison oak and I didn't want to be in the woods for a week. So they put me in as an interpreter. I didn't like it. All we did was answer the telephone. I felt like I was back in a secretarial job.

LT: When did your family persuade the powers above to let you outside to be an out-of-doors ranger?

DC: It was about a year and a half. One day one of the crew bosses who drove a big bulldozer took sick. The Park officials needed a great mountain of dirt moved in a hurry. Without asking, I jumped on the dozer and moved the pile of dirt. The foreman came out and hollered: "Hey, what do you think you are doing?" "This needs to be done doesn't it?" I shouted back, "and Richard isn't here." He said: "Well that's true it needs to be done, go ahead." So I got to move the pile of dirt. The next week, the trail foreman came up to me. "How would you like to try out in the trail crew?" he asked. At that time the trail crew consisted of law enforcement rangers who rotated through the program. We were now into 1982 and a big winter flood had just hit West Marin. We didn't have enough people to repair damage to the Park after the flood.

LT: What were law enforcement people doing on the trail crew?

DC: They had nobody else. So the trail foreman was pulling people in from all the different divisions and he started with the law enforcement rangers, because that's what he used to be. He also discovered that as a law enforcement ranger you couldn't make more than \$8.00 an hour and if you were in the maintenance division, you started at twelve. So he switched over from law enforcement to trails and asked me if I wanted to switch from the conservation corps to trails. I joined his crew. It consisted of six men who were all law enforcement rangers.

LT: And you became a well-to-do woman?

DC: The paychecks were great. The main thing I noticed though, was that these law enforcement rangers were very much into long coffee breaks and telling lots of jokes. Not very much work was getting done. Harry Carpenter, the first trail foreman, was happy to have me because I was gung ho and ready to do the job. I was tired of sitting around answering questions. I started on the trail crew in 1982 and have been with it ever since. We have one hundred and fifty miles of trails and there is one person above me -- the trail foreman who is now Bill Michaels. The previous foreman went on to work as chief in another Park.

LT: How many people do you have overall in the trail crew?

DC: In the summer time we get up to twenty-five people. In the winter we cut back to just the trail foreman. I work nine months of the year, and I am generally off for three months in winter.

LT: There are only two of you doing trail maintenance in winter?

DC: There's not many. There is the trail foreman and myself. My job title is "tractor operator leader." Under me there are a couple of maintenance workers, a few laborers, and a lot of college and high school students.

LT: Given all your experience in the Point Reyes Park you certainly must have been a key figure when the forest fire broke out on the 3rd of October, 1995. Among other things, you knew about the geography of the Park. What did you do initially? How did you get involved?

DC: It was about 1:00 on Tuesday afternoon, October 3rd. I was leading a crew on the D Ranch Trail at the foot of Mt. Wittenberg. It has about the same elevation as Mt. Vision.

LT: About 1300 feet?

D.C. Mt. Vision is, I believe, 1302. I turned to the two fellows working with me (I had a small crew that day) and said: "Why are you guys smoking, it's not lunch time." They both said "We're not smoking." We started to climb a tree when half way up the tree we heard on our two-way radio a ranger on Mt. Vision calling the dispatcher reporting that smoke had been spotted on top of the mountain. So we continued to climb and looked over.

LT: You carried two-way radios?

DC: Yes. We'd heard the ranger who lived on Mt. Vision call in the smoke. Then at the same time, one of the fellows at the Tomales Bay Oyster Company on the east shore of Tomales Bay called it in. The Mt. Barnabe lookout, the official area fire lookout, spotted the smoke and called it in.

LT: What time was this?

DC: It was at 1:30 p.m.

LT: But the fire had actually started earlier had it not?

DC: As I understand it, there had been a campfire there three days earlier. Four young men had come up to camp. They built a fire, stayed overnight and put out their fire the next morning. They did everything properly. They stirred the dirt, they put their hands on the ashes to make sure there were no embers, and they doused water on the fire. They believed they were leaving a campfire safely extinguished.

LT: They went away contented that they'd been good boy scouts?

DC: Yes, they thought they had done a perfect job of putting out their fire. A ring of rocks around the fire kept it contained. But the fire penetrated down through the bottom into dry tree roots. These root tendrils smoldered underground and carried the fire like burning fuses outside of the ring. Four days later the fire surfaced and spread.

LT: Underground roots of what kind of plants or trees. Do you know?

DC: I'm not sure. The vegetation in that area is Coyote Brush, Bishop Pine, and Douglas Fir.

LT: The boys came forward to acknowledge they'd built the fire. That was a brave thing to do.

DC: I think they knew, since they lived in a small town, that everybody was going to know in a matter of days. They knew it was better for them to come forward before someone else said: "I know who did it. "

LT: The smoke was spotted by four different observers in various places in the area. Then, what happened? What actions were triggered that set into motion the planning and logistics of fighting the fire?

DC: The first thing that was in our favor, was that there were no other wild fires burning at the time.

LT: In the county?

DC: No. In the entire state of California. What this meant was that we had all the firefighters in California at our disposal. When the fire was spotted, a call was placed to Woodacre, headquarters of the Marin County fire dispatcher. Immediately their regular "Wildland Crew" was dispatched..

LT: "Wild" what?

DC: "Wildland Crew."

LT: What does wildland mean?

DC: In fire fighting there are two types of apparatus. There are four-wheel drive trucks which respond to wildland fires. These fires involve trees as opposed to fires which involve structures. For a structure fire you would call in a city fire truck and for a woodland fire you would call in a forestry four wheel drive "wildland" truck. So when they heard the fire was on Mt. Vision, they dispatched two wildland trucks and an ambulance.

LT: They came from where?

DC: Initially from the Point Reyes firehouse. Simultaneously, when the alarm signal sounded at Woodacre, it rang at firehouses in the villages of Inverness and Point Reyes Station. They were nearest to Mt. Vision. The alarm in turn automatically triggered pagers carried by local fire fighters. They immediately responded to their

firehouses.

LT: The signal went originally to Woodacre, not to Point Reyes, but to Woodacre?

DC: Consider the State: its capitol is Sacramento. You call Sacramento if you want anything in the state. If you want anything in Marin County in the way of fire equipment, you call Woodacre. That is the headquarters for Marin County fire. As soon as you call the dispatcher through the 911 emergency number, it goes to Woodacre They hear the call and decide what needs to be sent and where from the fire station closest to the fire . There are nine stations in Marin County; Point Reyes was the closest. So, all the equipment out of the Point Reyes station was sent to Mt. Vision. Then the next closest station would be over by the Cheese Factory in Hicks Valley. Fire trucks from there came to "cover" the Point Reyes Station, in case a second fire or second alarm occurred. As it turned out, trucks from every Marin station responded to the fire, from all over Marin.

LT: There were trucks only from Marin County?

DC: Yes, but only for the first half hour.

LT: About how many trucks were there?

DC: Eventually there were three hundred and sixty four wildland fire trucks and eighty four structural fire trucks.

LT: That number included trucks from outside the county?

DC: Right. That was the total for the entire fire. I believe there are only about eighteen wildland fire trucks in all of Marin County:

LT: How do you describe a wildland fire truck?

D.C. It has a four wheel drive and carries a lot of small diameter hoses. They are small diameter because you need to be able to run through the woods with them. Whereas a structure truck would have two wheel drive, a lot of ladders and much larger hoses that you just lay down in the street. You wouldn't carry it.

LT: Do these trucks carry water or other anti-combustion material?

DC: Standard fire trucks usually carries five hundred gallons of water -- about what

you have in a standard hot tub. When a wildland fire truck is called to go to a fire, they are either going to hook up to a fire hydrant or bring a water truck -- called a water tender - with them. The task of the tender driver is to keep going back and forth to the hydrant bringing water to the fire truck.

LT: When the equipment and fire fighters arrived in the region of the fire how were they dispatched to fight it? How did the command procedure work? To an outsider, it seemed that the command -- logistics and direction of the operation - was superb. Yet it is something of a mystery. Tell us something about this, insofar as you know about it.

DC: It was not a fluke at all. It was well-organized as the result of experiences with the Oakland fire four or five years ago and with other forest fires.

LT: What lessons were learned?

DC: The main lesson was that if you have more than one agency responding to a fire they all have to be able to communicate with each other. The main problem they had with the Oakland fire was they were operating on different radio frequencies. Consequently, for example, when structure trucks performed an operation they sometimes counteracted what wildland trucks had just done. Frequently they worked against each other. Back fires were lit without knowledge of what other units were doing. They had people being evacuated down the same roads they were using to bring in emergency equipment and firemen. The logistics didn't work well at all. After the Oakland fire they set up something called the Incident Command System. We now call it the LC. System.

LT: This applies only to Marin County?

DC: No, the system is now nationwide like " 911."

LT: The LC.S. was set up as the result of the Oakland experience?

DC: As far as I know. Within three months after the Oakland fire, those of us at the Point Reyes National Seashore were all sent to the Incident Command System training center for a week.

LT: Where did you go for it?

DC: To Fort Mason in the Golden Gate National Recreation area. Many rangers were assembled there where fire officials said they would introduce us to the I.C. system. The idea would be similar to 911. If you call 911 and report that someone is choking, they always give you the same information. With the I.C. system you call up, say what your problem is such as "we have a quarter acre fire," and they do the same thing every time. They don't worry about which agencies they are calling, they call for the specific equipment that's needed. So what happened with our fire was that we called Woodacre and Woodacre responded with everything they had. When the head of Marin County Fire Department at Woodacre, Stan Rowan, arrived at the scene, he took over the Incident Command job from our local park ranger, who had been in charge for the first hour. The highest ranking officer always takes the Incident Command position so that you have the most qualified person in charge. Stan Rowan assessed the situation and said we would need some more help. So, he called back to Woodacre and told them to call in C.D.F. -- the California Department of Forestry. When you call in C.D.F., it rings bells in about twelve stations and they immediately send what's called a "strike team."

L. T. Where are the twelve stations?

DC: Those in the state closest to Marin County. They immediately send in teams. A strike team is made up of five fire engines and all the people that go along with them. So, when you call the state and ask for five strike teams, you are going to get twenty-five engines, all wildland vehicles with four-wheel drives. Within the first hour it was also decided that because it was getting into the afternoon, we needed air support.

LT: In the first hour after what?

DC: The first hour after the fire was spotted. It was a wooded area and all we could see was smoke. We couldn't see in which direction the fire was traveling. We needed more information about it.

LT: How did you call in air support?

DC: We called back to the Woodacre station. The Incident Commander, Stan Rowan, was head of Marin County fire operations and stationed at Woodacre. He told the Woodacre dispatcher to call for air support.

LT: What does "air support" consist of?

DC: With air support you get a spotter plane called Airco, for Air Command. It fires high and radios information about the fire to the I.C. At a lower level fly big twin-engined and four-engined "bombers." They are air tankers carrying fire retardant to drop on the fire. The spotter also helps direct tankers to fire targets. These larger aircraft also use other small aircraft to lead them. Lastly and lower down fly the helicopters. They "bomb" smaller, fire targets with water scooped up from nearby lakes or estuaries. They take their orders from the spotter plane and sometimes from ground crews. After every drop they call in to the Incident Commander reporting on the status of the fire they are fighting, where it is headed, and whether ground crews should be moved.

LT: What kind of chemical is the retardant?

DC: It's called "phoscheck," a thick goo they drop to smother oxygen. It works a lot more efficiently than water.

LT: I understand helicopters arrived from various parts of the State, all called in by Woodacre. Who's in charge of that operation?

DC: With the helicopters comes a helibase commander. The helibase commander was stationed, in this case, right across from Park headquarters in a big field. He was in charge of the air traffic. Everybody who was flying and landing went through him.

LT: He had nothing to do with the tanker planes?

D.C. The air command would call in and say when they needed more tankers or needed more helicopters. The helibase command was in charge only of flights and landings of helicopters. The air command (spotter plane) and tankers were flying out of Santa Rosa. They came and went through there and got their orders through Woodacre.

LT: The spotter plane was Woodacre's eyes and ears?

DC: Right, they would always go through Woodacre. They would call and say this is what we see -- so many acres of woodland in flames, the wind is blowing in such a direction at such a speed, and so many structures endangered, etcetera.

LT: How did the heliport commanding officer know how to direct the helicopters which were going over the ridge, down to the bay to get more water, and up again

to keep them from running into each other?

DC: The helicopters all fly at the same elevation. There has to be a ten-minute interval between bucket loads and drops. They fly a circular pattern, maintaining the same distance from each other.

LT: Can they do this at night?

DC: No. That was why we called for them within the first hour of the fire. We knew we could only use them until dusk.

LT: How many hours were they used before it was necessary to shut down operations because of darkness?

DC: About three. We were moving into fall and it was dark by six o'clock.

LT: How many helicopters were eventually involved?

DC: I believe there were seven helicopters. The helicopter operation was fascinating to watch. They were scooping water out of the Bay just off from the deck of my mother's house. It was fascinating for me, having left my last job being on one of those helicopters. I got to see the pilot I worked for, the same helicopter, the whole crew was there.

LT: Night had come, the helicopter operation shut down. Fire engines and crews kept coming into the area. How did this call go out to rally fire fighters from throughout the state?

DC: Once it becomes too dark for the air attack to continue, you have to call for ground support to continue efforts.

LT: Hadn't ground support already been called?

DC: Ground support was called in the way of fire trucks, but we didn't have that much manpower. What we called next were inmate crews.

LT: Inmate crews? Who were they and where had they come from?

DC: They are state convicts who are serving time. As I understand it, those that come to fight fires have less than six months to serve. They receive a five-year

sentence if they try to run from a fire assignment. It is not to their advantage to leave. They make five dollars a day when they fight a fire. The crews that we called came from Fort Bragg and from a "prison without bars" in the Sacramento Delta region. We ended up with sixteen inmate crews, seventeen people on each crew. That's several hundred inmates. I believe the first night we had between three and four hundred convicts fighting the fire on the ground. That figure rose to over 800. Their job is to hold the line until daylight when the air attack can be resumed.

LT: Were they trucked in by their own institutions?

DC: They came in regular fire trucks that belong to the California Department of Corrections. Each truck carries a crew of 17 or 18 people and all their fire-fighting tools and gear. The inmates spend their time doing forestry projects throughout the year and fighting fires in the summer and fall. They are dispatched throughout the State from headquarters in Sacramento.

LT: Who's in charge of them when they reach the scene of the fire?

DC: Everything is coordinated through the Incident Command system. The inmates work for the California Department of Forestry. The CDF oversees paid fire fighting crews and inmate crews.

LT: Where do the paid fire fighters come from?

DC: They come from throughout the State. There is one fire station every forty-five minutes as you drive up and down the state.

LT: They're volunteers?

DC: No, they are paid.

LT: Are they paid on a standby basis or how?

DC: They are paid full time. When you go by a firehouse, there is someone always there. There is always at least a captain and a lieutenant in the winter months. In the summer and fall there is a captain, lieutenant, an engineer, and up to five fire fighters.

LT: There were over two thousand firefighters at the Mount Vision fire. Were they all either fully paid or inmates? I'd thought there were some free lancers who would

turn up and offer their services.

DC: That's not allowed. Firefighting is no longer means going to the local bar and rousting out able-bodied men to fight the fire. The liability is too great. Now, if you want to fight a fire you have to be physically fit. You must pass a physical test each spring to make sure you're able. On this fire we had about six volunteer companies. We had volunteers from nearby Pt. Reyes Station, Nicasio, Inverness, Stinson Beach, and Bolinas. Others came from more distant places. State crews from throughout California are paid year round. The inmate crews came accompanied by paid C.D.F. staff members. The Marin County firefighters were full-timers. The closest thing to casual volunteers you asked about are the O.C. crews. These are organized crews, generally made up of college students who had been seasonal firefighters for the California Department of Forestry or the Forest Service. When there is a fire, their crew boss calls them up and asks if they want to go. If they can get twenty people together, their tools, and a vehicle, then they respond to the dispatcher and say they are an organized crew.

LT: They are paid?

DC: Yes.

LT: How much?

DC: They're just paid the minimum wage. I think it's \$3.25 to \$3.50 an hour now. For college students it is a way to make a little extra money. We had a D.C. Davis crew, a Humboldt State crew, a Cal. Poly crew. They all came as organized crews. Often they stay on. We still had one of the organized crews working for us here in the Point Reyes Park a month later.

LT: It is a wonderment that various forces were able to come together under a unified command with such speed and organization to fight the fire. Planning, operations, and logistics worked so well that it resembled a whirlwind military campaign. How was it mounted and why did it work so well?

DC: Well, it was interesting in that for the first time fighting a fire I was on the home turf. In past fires, I've been on the C.D.F. crews that traveled to the fire. Because I live and work here, in the first twenty-four hours I was part of the fire suppression crew. Then, I became part of the fire support crew.

LT: What is the difference between suppression and support?

DC: Fire suppression means you're out there putting out the fire. When the State's crews showed up, they took over fire suppression. We, in the Federal Park Service, became fire support crew because we knew the local area.

LT: Why?

DC: The State is the primary firefighting agency, they run the show. Once they show up, they ask the local people to provide support. That includes figuring out how and where the visiting crews are going to sleep, how to get food to them and other logistical problems of how they will be supported. One of my first jobs, after suppression, was to figure out how to get all these people dinner the first night. The reason they pick local people, is because they know where to go. I did. I ran right down to Perry's Deli in Inverness Park and ordered 150 sandwiches.

LT: Describe Perry's Deli.

DC: Perry's Deli turned out to be in the middle of the fire command. When I got down there it was about 8 p.m. on the first night of the fire. We had been fighting the fire until about six, then they pulled us off saying the State has arrived. You are now on support. Come up with headlamps for the night shift and then bring us dinner. So, I went down to Perry's, a tiny store. It's country-type seven-eleven store between Point Reyes and Inverness. The "Knave of Hearts" bakery next door had opened up and all the fire chiefs were having a big pow-wow in there discussing the logistics of the fire. I went into Perry's. They are familiar with us because

Park Service people are in there frequently for coffee and sandwiches. If there is any kind of emergency we go there to have our meals prepared. Still they were stunned to learn that we needed 150 dinners an hour before they were going to close.

The owner wasn't there, just three high school kids behind the counter. Two of them had been on the youth conservation corps crew the previous summer. That was great, because they were dying to help. They went outside the store and recruited about seven high school kids who'd been hanging out. They were hustled inside washed up and became sandwich makers. So, we had about eleven people making sandwiches behind the counter. We had one person who was politely telling the public that they would have to come back another day, that we were feeding the firefighters. There was a very pregnant woman who came in from across the street with her husband and her two year old. They opened bags and gave everybody a candy bars and soft drinks. We just put all these dinners together, because these crews had been out on the line since 2 o'clock. So we got all the food together and brought it up to

the crews at about 9 p.m. It was a kick to be on the other end serving the meals to the firefighters rather than being one of them. They decided that I had done such a

good job of delivering dinner that they asked me to bring breakfast at 6 a.m. So we ran into this again. But between midnight and six a.m. the fire personnel reached a specific number, I believe it was three hundred. When they reach three hundred, they call the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, and the convict kitchen. So, sometime in the middle of the night, these organizations were all called and dispatched. I went back down to headquarters at 3 a.m., after having dealt with the dinner, and found the convicts setting up their kitchen. So, I went up to them.

LT: These were the lady convicts?

DC: No, these were not the lady convicts. I've been on fires with lady convicts. They're really a rough bunch. I would much prefer to work with male inmates. The women are brutal. They spend all their time beating each other up and swearing, and causing a ruckus, and not being very interested in working on the fire. The men are just there happy to be out of prison, and to have a real job to do. The male inmates came in and set up the kitchen. I went up and said, "We are now up to four hundred people. Can you provide breakfast at 6 a.m.?" It was very smooth, I went in with a pickup truck. They gave me a big vat. It contained scrambled eggs, potatoes, sausage and bacon for four hundred people. I wakened two of my other trail crew buddies. Together we went drove out to serve breakfast to the fire crews on the line. They'd been up all night and had had no sleep.

LT: Where did you go?

DC: We went back up on Mt. Vision. Since the fire had begun, a bulldozer had cleared a line from the top of Vision (where we used to go hear the piper play at sunrise) down to the Perth road and into Inverness. When we got up there they asked me if we'd deliver breakfast directly to the men on the line? With a four-wheel drive truck we were able to reach the exhausted inmate crews. The two people with me were college students who'd never been around inmates before. They were nervous. I said, look, we're serving breakfast, that's it. And we're doing it off the tailgate. As far as we could see were guys in orange jumpsuits, the inmates. We served them all breakfast, it took about half an hour. Then we were on our way. It was well organized. In the middle of the night Don Neubacher made the decision to allow bulldozers on the fire line. it was too dark for air attack so they carried on where the air attack had left off.

LT: Where did the bulldozers come from?

DC: From far and wide. A lot from individual contractors.

L T. The Park Service knows about these people -- how to reach them?

D.C. The state of California Department of Forestry is the overall agency. They have twenty bulldozers ready to go all the time.

LT. These are super large, are they not?

D.C. They are not large. When you see Caltrans equipment on the freeway, you'll see that their dozers are much bigger. Usually on the fire they have D9's. That is a medium-sized bulldozer. It has about a twelve-foot blade.

LT: That is a pretty big blade. When they cut the fire breaks, do they put three or four dozers abreast to cut a fire break?

DC: It depends on the location. In the National Park bulldozers are generally not allowed at all. The superintendent decided that the homes needed to be saved if possible. So he had a dozer line go in that was three dozers wide.

LT: Now we're into the second day.

DC: Just after midnight, the morning of the fourth. The dozers were called in. While they started cutting their line, Don was looking at the map trying to figure out where we could stop the fire.

LT. Neubacher wasn't getting any shut-eye.

DC: Not then. He was working with Stan Rowan, the Marin County fire chief, and with the State fire boss Tom Tarp who'd come down from Sacramento. They decided there was a possibility they could stop the fire on the Laguna trail. This is in the middle of the park, below all the homes, just cuts right through the middle of the park. He thought if the fire could be stopped there, there was a chance it wouldn't go all the way to headquarters. So at three in the morning, he called me on the radio, I was running around getting breakfast organized. He said I was the only person he knew of who knew where the Laguna trail was. Can you go in and flag it for me and in an hour we will send the bulldozers in there? So I woke up two of my trail crew workers and we went out there together. The fire was very close. It seemed a dangerous situation. We were on the Limantour Road and there was a trail that paralleled Limantour Road and we had to put a flag line in with plastic tape, as to show where the trail could be hooked back up to Limantour Road from Laguna trail, which went all the way down to the ocean. So, we were running through the

brush hanging the flagging tape with the aid of coal miners lamps on our hard hats. The whole time it sounded like a freight train was charging down on us. The fire was getting very close. We could see sparks in the air and we knew we had better get out of there fast. We just got that done, got back into our truck, and saw people running down the road. We got them in another vehicle and we all drove out.

LT: Who were the people who were running down the road?

DC: They were people who lived in the homes across the street. They'd been told to evacuate but refused to leave their homes. When the fire closed in they knew they should have fled.

LT: What road were they on?

DC: Limantour.

Scarcely ten minutes later we got the call that breakfast was ready to be delivered. We then switched again from fire suppression to fire support, got into our vehicles and took breakfast out to the Mount Vision fire line.

LT: You, the all-purpose ranger.

DC: Because we knew the area and we knew all the local contacts, it was much easier for us to do this stuff.

LT: Lucky they were to have somebody like you around.

DC: It was the one time I felt I knew all the trails, knew exactly where to go, and what needed to be done. There wasn't anybody else to send at that hour to do the job.

LT: Dawn broke, it was the morning of the fourth and the fire was not yet under control?

DC: Far from it. Forty-five homes had been burned in the middle of the night.

LT: Most of those were at the top of Drakes View Drive and the Paradise Estates?

DC: All of them were on the top of Drakes View Drive. We had one fire on top of Mt. Vision and about dusk the wind changed, and a spot fire developed on another ridge just towards the ocean. The wind shifted and started taking that spot fire down

towards the homes. The hill was so steep that we couldn't get the bulldozers in there. We had tried to drop water and fire retardant in the area, but there was such a heavy forest canopy that it wouldn't penetrate through the trees. We hadn't been able to do much to protect those homes. It was clear they were threatened. A call went to Woodacre asking for a structural strike team. That means they call in city fire trucks. Since no other fires were burning, they were able to dispatch one fire truck for every single house threatened.

LT: No other fires burning anywhere in the County?

DC: None in the State, as far as we knew. They sent forty five structural fire trucks, one for each threatened home. That was about an hour before some of those homes burned. They got there in time to water the houses down. Fire trucks can stay until their gas tanks are in danger of exploding.

LT: They succeeded in saving some of the houses?

DC: Some.

LT: It was because of their efforts?

DC: It was because they were right there. None of the other firefighting crews had been right there on the ground at those homes. It was crucial that those trucks were there.

LT: There it was: dawn coming up on October 4th. When did you feel that we were going to have the fire under control?

DC: Not that day. It was completely out of control. They were still calling in extra troops. Everywhere you looked a plane was overhead and a red truck whizzing by. It was out of control for the next three or four days.

LT: It wasn't really until the fifth of October that you felt you had the fire under tamed?

DC: It was about four days after the fire started that the weather changed and we got some fog. That started to slow down the spread of the fire so we at last had a chance to try to put it out.

LT: Four days later, that was the sixth then.

DC: Yes, on the sixth we had a lot of fog come in and we were able to get eighty percent containment. In fire fighting there are a couple of terms that are used. Containment means that you put some sort of a line around the perimeter of the fire. That could be a hand line with the inmate crew, or a bulldozer line. There must be some kind of trail or road around the whole thing. Once you've got that, you can say that you have a hundred percent containment. The fourth day we had eighty percent containment. The next goal is to reach something we call having the fire controlled. This means that for one hundred and fifty feet inside the containment line, all the way around, there is no fire. It was another week before that happened. Containment came later.

LT: You have been in the middle of the whole thing. You have a cornucopia of fire lessons and stories. Given your experience, are there any lessons to be learned from this fire besides the obvious ones such as: " For goodness sake, be more careful about having brush around your property, or, people shouldn't build houses in places like Inverness where there is inflammable stuff all around?" What do you say?

DC: Most of the lessons were learned in Oakland. A lot of people who had homes in the woods did clear around them. In this case the homes were built in the forest. If they had cleared down all their trees, it would have really devalued their property. So most people kept their trees and they did the minimum amount of clearing. They were at risk because they lived in the forest. I don't think we could have done a better job. The fire crews came in right away, they saved as many houses as was possible.

LT: I wasn't suggesting a better job could have been done. I was suggesting that something can still be learned about fire containment particularly insofar as forest-dwelling people are concerned.

DC: You shouldn't build your house in the woods unless you're willing to lose it. As I understand, there was only one family uninsured who lost their home up there. Most of them will have a chance to rebuild. The fire was nearly unavoidable because we hadn't had a fire in a long time. It was thirty years since the last one. A lot of underbrush should have been burned. The fire itself was healthy for the Park lands.

LT: Do you feel confident that when you go out on Mt. Vision and down to Limantour next spring you will be delighted by all the greenery you will see sprouting everywhere?

DC: The botanists say it will be the best year ever for wildflowers. It should be

fantastic. The old Bishop Pines will be regenerated. The Bishops' cones burst open by the heat of the fire sowed seeds throughout the forest. Lots of little Bishop pines will be sprouting in the Spring.

LT: I'm glad to hear that. It has been a good talk. We could go on. Would you like to end with a final thought about the fire?

DC: The main thing that was so exciting was to see how everyone came together. All groups pulled together and worked as one team. At the Oakland fire a lot of agencies fought between themselves. Here we had some forty seven different agencies working together. There was no bickering. We had meetings every morning at six a.m. to discuss the day's plans. Then from eight to ten each evening we talked about how things had worked. Everybody contributed their expertise, not their egos. Nobody worried about who was in charge. Everybody moved forward the entire time. It was a relief for me to see, having worked for nine different agencies, how it all come together this time, as if it was a family with a single purpose: to save lives, homes and, put out the fire.

LT: So it was a happy object lesson on how forest fires should be fought?

DC: It was the most organized firefighting campaign I've ever been on.

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THE FIRE STRATEGIST

Interview with James Selfridge, Deputy Fire Chief,
Marin County Fire Department, Woodacre, CA, 4/29/96

James Selfridge played a key role as a strategist in the Mount Vision fire fight last year. This year he was named Deputy Chief of the Marin County Fire Department after serving as a Battalion Chief in the MCDF since 1979. He has been a professional firefighter since 1970.

LT: What sort of guys get into firefighting?

IS: People attracted to the business like it because it combines an intellectual as well as a physical challenge. It takes a lot of thinking -- it is really an intellectual challenge. You have to think. You have to out-think a fire. You can't just do physical work. There's a lot of quick thinking. You have to make split-second decisions and just run with them.

LT: I suppose you've been to a lot of fives and every time a fire's over you try to figure out what you've learned from it.

IS: Exactly. It is that communications and management structures are paramount.

LT. As a result is there a better command structure?

IS: The rest of the world with the exception of a few departments has adopted a system called the "Incident Command System." We adopted it in the early eighties and have been using it ever since.

LT: What are its primary characteristics?

IS: You have a command structure that starts basically with the first person on the scene usually being in charge. With escalation, more people come in the command structure and it grows. It's based on a span of control, the rule of 5 to 7, so no one individual has to deal with more than 5 entities at a time. Even when you're up to 2,000 people as we were up on Vision, every management level was dealing with 5, 6 or 7 people, no more. All the way down to the bottom. Actually, the incident command system is far more complex than that, but in a nutshell it breaks into work units, basic command functions.

LT: Why was Woodacre the center of command for the Mt. Vision fire?

IS: Woodacre was called the resource origin point. All the resources - fire trucks, personnel, helicopters, etc. -- were all ordered through Woodacre.

LT: How does Sacramento fit in?

IS: Marin is a contract county. There are six contract counties in the State. In the early 40's, because of a new state law, the Division of Forestry was formed - now called the Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. They were given responsibility for primary protection of all private watershed lands in the State and, at that time, they gave every county in the State the option either to go with the Department of Forestry or to form their own department. In Marin, there are about 195,000 acres of state land that the CDF is responsible for. We protect it under contract to them and they pay us annually to protect these lands.

LT: Sounds reasonable.

IS: Contract counties are Marin, Orange, Los Angeles, Kern, Ventura, and Santa Barbara. These counties have elected to have their own county fire departments. The rest of the State that has watershed land is protected by the Department of Forestry. The CDF is ultimately responsible for the almost 200,000 acres in Marin and they pay us to provide the initial attack, that is short term fire protection. Our contract only covers initial attack. When fires get big they are the responsibility of the state.

LT: And the Mount Vision fire got that big?

IS: Right. Any time you go beyond initial attack, even though the Department of Forestry may not actually be present, it starts paying the bills.

LT: Say again?

IS: Once a fire goes beyond the initial attack stage we must substantially augment the forces, even our own in-house forces. The state has to pick up the tab for that. In the case of the Vision fire the state has twelve what they call major incident management teams, six in the northern part of the state and six in the southern part of the State. They are established teams of people that will come in and manage any kind of incident for you.

LT: How are they selected and how is the team set up?

IS: They are selected from among people with a certain degree of talent from all around the state. A team usually stays intact from three to five years. It has an incident commander, it has an operations section chief, its got a logistics section chief, a finance section chief, a planning section chief, an air operations section chief, a liaison officer, an information officer and a safety officer.

LT: Does any other state have anything comparable?

IS: The U.S. Forest Service does. It's nationwide.

LT: You were on one of the incident management teams, were you not?

IS: Yes. It was the team that happened to get the Mt. Vision fire. They're on call one week out of every six and my team happened to be on call that particular week. The fire was spotted simultaneously by a citizen at the lookout on Mt. Barnabe and one on Mt. Tamalpais.

LT: What did that trigger?

IS: We responded with a normal initial attack which is five engines, a water tender, a bulldozer, a battalion chief, one air tanker, and one air attack helicopter. In addition we were augmented by the Inverness Fire Department. I think they send two engines on the initial attack.

LT: How was the helicopter operation mounted?

IS: The helicopter comes with a seven-person crew.

LT: Aboard each 'copter?

IS: Yes. The CDF initial attack helicopter happened to be the one from the Santa Cruz mountains.

LT: Did you have any Chinooks?

IS: We hired two Chinooks for this fire. But the initial attack helicopter was a heli-attack crew from Alma -- seven people in a helicopter with a bucket. They all worked together plus the pilot and a fire captain riding on the other seat. It's a UHI-F model.

LT: That's a lot of heavy lifting.

IS: I think it's probably got about a 6000 lb. lift capacity. It carries a three-hundred gallon bucket. I think before it was finished, at the height of the fire which would have been on Wednesday or Thursday, we had nine helicopters assigned to the fire.

LT: That's a new figure. I had heard six.

IS: We had nine, counting my helicopter and a small helicopter for observation.

LT: The air tankers were also part of a contract?

IS: Yes. We had two kind of tankers out there, the S2's, ex-Navy twin-engine tankers owned by the Department of Forestry that they contract out for pilots. The other tankers we had -- some DC 6's and some C130's -- are pure contract ships. We also had two National Guard MAFFS aircraft, which are C130's owned by the National Guard specially equipped for dropping aerial retardant.

LT: You had many more aircraft than I thought you had.

IS: Yes, I think we had ten tankers, nine or ten at the height.

LT: I understand that you had observation plane...

IS: It's called the air tactical.

LT: What is it?

IS: It's an OVID, twin-engine push-pull, very fast, two-seat airplane. There's a pilot and the air tactical supervisor who rides as a passenger.

LT: And it that just stays out there and carries a lot of gear?

IS: It has a lot of radio gear in it. The air tactics' job is to communicate with the tankers and with the ground controllers to coordinate all the tankers.

LT: You don't have any special small planes leading the tankers in?

IS: If we have a federal air tanker assigned to the fire, it has a lead plane with it. Actually we had a couple of lead planes assigned to this fire because we had a number of federal tankers. The fed tankers have to drop with a lead plane, but the CDF tankers do not. State regulations are different from federal regulations. Actually we had two lead planes because we had a number of federal tankers.

LT: You decided very early on in the fire to have aircraft in the operation, didn't you?

IS: Well, we had aircraft on the initial fire. We're really talking about almost two fires -- the original fire that came in at one-thirty in the afternoon was contained at one point. Then about a quarter to three we were just reaching final containment when a northeast wind that was blowing high overhead surfaced and brought the fire back to life within the perimeter.

LT: Northeast or northwest?

IS: Northeast. We had a northwest wind during the course of the fire at about twelve miles an hour, then an overhead wind that was northeasterly at much higher velocity surfaced, brought the fire back to life and spotted about a quarter or half a mile further south. That spot fire was really what became the Vision fire.

LT: When you say that the wind was coming out of the northeast and that the fire "spotted", what does that mean?

IS: Spotted means that embers from the fire were carried up into the convection and dropped ahead of the fire, causing more ignitions which had been intensified tremendously by the drier air and accelerated wind. They went into the canopies of the Bishop and then were carried downwind, starting additional fires on the ground on the opposite side of the canyon. That was

how a spot fire became the Vision fire.

LT: The spot fire was how far from the origin?

IS: A quarter of a mile. I think it was about a quarter to three.

LT: Something else that is striking is how much like a military operation it was.

IS: Very much so. It's combat pure and simple, yes, that's about what it amounts to. There's one big enemy...very dynamic.

LT: On the next day, the fourth, was there a point when you said we probably won't be able to save it, we're going to have to...

IS: I said that on the third at about ten minutes to four in the afternoon. I went up in the helicopter. Things weren't looking really good. The wind was blowing so hard that the smoke was laying down and we couldn't tell how big the fire was...the spot fire. I went up in the helicopter at the request of the chief to determine what we had, what the potential was, and once I got over the top of this fire knowing we only had two air tankers, one was back at the base filling, there's a saddle in between Vision and Paradise and it became very apparent that if the fire crossed that saddle we were in deep trouble up to our noses. So I got back on the ground and told the chief, we're in trouble. We're not going to catch this fire. It was only about fifteen or twenty acres, but it was obvious we were not going to catch it and we were probably going to lose some buildings in the process.

LT: Was it racing at that time?

IS: Yes. It had just started to race and we could not get access to it. The vegetation was too heavy. It was on a side slope down a canyon and we couldn't get access to where they were trying to cut in with a bulldozer. The winds were so strong that the aircraft were minimally effective. It was apparent that we were not going to stop this fire. At that time it was going to make a run into the Paradise Ranch subdivision and probably further and we needed to do something quickly. So we discussed it briefly and we decided to up the air tanker count to four. We ordered twenty-five additional firetrucks immediately. We ordered an evacuation of

Paradise Ranch subdivision. About five minutes later I doubled that engine request asking for fifty additional firetrucks. The aircraft count went up to six and we went to work.

LT: Where was the fire heading at that time?

JS: It was headed south, directly toward the top end of the Paradise Ranch subdivision. At about four o'clock I told the chief, "I think it's going to hit Paradise Ranch in forty minutes. You've got to get those people out." It took me about twenty-five minutes to drive around to the top of Drake's View Drive. The fire was already there. There were two houses burning.

LT: The B.A.E.R. report had plenty of statistics in it. I imagine you have a lot of statistics about the fire...the rate of combustion, how that can be put in terms of acres?

JS: Sure. What was interesting was that the fire really started its southward run and became the Vision fire, I'm going to say about three-thirty in the afternoon. The other fire's history now. By midnight it had consumed forty homes...

LT: Are we talking about the night of the third and morning of the fourth?

JS: At midnight of the third it had destroyed probably forty homes, the fire was between 800 and a thousand acres in size, it jumped the Limantour Road, there was about thirty acres burning on the south side of Limantour Road and the fire remained pretty static for a little while.

LT: Did the wind die?

JS: It didn't die. It was in the process of shifting. What happened was at two o'clock in the morning the wind shifted to more out of the east or the northeast which saved a lot of homes. It saved Inverness. It saved houses up on Balboa, Drake's Summit and additional houses in the Paradise Ranch subdivision. But as it made an almost a ninety degree shift in direction the velocity doubled. So we had winds that were steady at forty miles an hour, gusting to sixty, pushing the fire. Now you've got a fire that's as big as this red blob on the map here (pointing to wall map). All of a sudden it takes a right hand turn and it burned all of this brown area in an hour and forty minutes. At three-forty in the morning the fire was at the beach. Now that's 5,000 acres that were consumed in an hour and forty minutes.

LT: How many?

IS: 5,000 acres in an hour between two and three-forty in the morning. It's amazing. If the ocean hadn't been here, if the fire had been in Fairfax or someplace, it could have been an 80,000 acre fire. We would have lost thousands of homes. But it wasn't. That was the maximum spread rate, between four and five thousand acres an hour. That happened between two and three-thirty in the morning on Wednesday. It was incredible. We had to drive through it to get down to the beach because we had two more strike teams down at the Visitors Center, the park residences near the Visitors Center, the Youth Hostel and a ranger's residence on the beach. We didn't lose any of them. That fire came in there with a vengeance.

LT: It was nothing short of a miracle that you didn't lose any large pieces of equipment, more important, that no one was killed.

IS: Exactly. It was good management but there was some luck involved. Had we placed our engines into the Paradise Ranch subdivision twenty minutes before we did we probably would have put the engines and crews in a situation that was non-survivable. So I'm so grateful we were a little late getting in with the fire trucks because we probably could have killed some firefighters.

LT: I gather talking to people such as Onslow Ford and I.B. Blunk and others who live up there that when the wind had gathered velocity, the Bishop pines were exploding upwards of what seemed to be hundreds of feet in the air.

IS: I would say that the wall of fire that came into Paradise Ranch subdivision was easily three hundred feet high. The pine trees were literally exploding. The sap would heat up so fast that the trees couldn't contain it so they were exploded. It was like they had been dynamited.

LT: I suppose every fire you've ever fought has had a distinctive trademark of its own. and that you could look back and say what was unique about this one or that one.

IS: The way I describe this fire is to say this one was vicious. A very vicious fire.

LT: The unpredictability of it because of the wind must have struck you.

JS: I've never been in a fire with a sheer wall of flames, with houses going up in the middle of it and with spot fires all over. It was all the bad things that can happen in a fire. They all happened at one time and in one place in the Vision fire. The fuel was tremendous. The trees were all decadent, mostly Bishop pines, they had a very high turpentine content, and they were overaged and overgrown. There was a density of burn material four to six feet deep on the ground. And to top it off, everyone had wood piles on their outdoor decks.

LT: Could you single out any particular individuals or small groups who did a particularly commendable job?

JS: I think everybody who participated in that fire went way beyond the call of duty. I saw some individually heroic things happen, but as far as agencies...no everybody just pulled together as a two thousand-person team. I was fortunate to have been the guy who was selected to lead two-thousand incredibly talented men and women who put that fire out.

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THE FIRE WARDEN

Interview with Frank Seidner. Inverness 12/16/95

Frank Seidner was one of the people living up on Drake's View Drive, which was hit hard by the Mt. Vision fire. He is now head of the Inverness Ridge Association. At the time of the fire, he was the Association's Emergency Preparedness Chairman. His wife, Lee, runs the Bellwether Shop.

LT: You were the Paul Revere of the Inverness Ridge at the time, were you not?

FS: The Inverness Ridge Association has been in existence for 25 years at least. There has always been in it someone whose role was to coordinate preparation for emergencies. Up until this time they had never had a serious one. I happened to preside over the one that was a true disaster. We've had a couple of fl1'es previously, including a serious one in June of '94. That alerted everyone to the threat. It was contained before any homes burned though it had burned several acres before being brought under control.

LT: Let's go back to that day of October 3rd. What happened, when were you first aware of this?

FS: The times that I'll be giving may not be precise but they are to the best of my recollection. At about 2:15 that afternoon, I was talking on the telephone with an uphill neighbor, Lu Phelps. She suddenly said her husband, Paul, had just come to say there was a fire up on the hill above us. I chatted with him. He said it seemed to be a serious fl1'e. I signed off and went up the hill. I went to upper Robert Drive, into the driveway of neighbors, Frank and Virginia Norris, who lived nearby. From there one could see Mt. Vision. There was considerable smoke up there but it seemed to be contained. At that point it didn't appear to be a threat to us below. After that I hopped into my car and drove up to the top of Drake's View Drive.

LT: Did you call anybody on the telephone?

FS: I made one call that didn't go through. I called Jack Roseaver, the Fire Marshall to alert him. It turned out he already knew about it. At the top of the ridge, I got out my little C.B. radio and turned it on. There was voice traffic on it alerting me that there were other people up there. I started walking in a northerly direction on the ridge trail, down to the saddle under Reyes Hill where the nature conservancy is. There were a couple of other people there, George Jenkins and Bill Beck, both of whom live in our area. We watched the fire. By this time it was about a quarter to three.

LT: How far were you from it?

FS: We were at the bottom of that hill, but the fire was clearly moving at the top. I would say we were no more than a half a mile away.

LT: At the top of Mt. Vision?

FS: At that point it had already moved to Reyes Mountain, which is where the F.A.A. installation is. There was a lot of smoke but the fire was also clearly visible and it was quite big. The good news at that time, as it appeared to us, was that it was heading in a southerly, almost southwest direction, towards the ocean and away from our homes.

LT: As of then, nobody had done anything about it, the fire was just there?

FS: No, there were already some spotter planes circling around. I didn't know it at the time, but fire fighters and fire engines were already up there. We stood there for perhaps ten or fifteen minutes watching. We didn't feel in any particular danger, because as I said, it seemed to be moving away from us. The three of us started walking back, chatting as we went. We were not as concerned as we should have been. When I got back up to my car, I found other people up there wanting to know what was going on. We told them what we had seen. Then I went back to my house and made a few phone calls to alert a few other people.

LT: People on the ridge?

FS: Yes. Then I went back up to have another look from the Norris house.

LT: Was it empty?

FS: No, the Norrises were both there. They were looking out as well. Then I went back to our house to make additional phone calls. By that time it was getting towards four o'clock. I suddenly heard outside loudspeakers from sheriff's cars urging people to evacuate. As a matter of fact, I believe they said it was a mandatory evacuation. Soon afterwards, the emergency alarm we had installed sounded.

LT: When had it been installed?

FS: Early in '94.

LT: That was by the Inverness Ridge Association?

FS: Yes, in cooperation with the fire department. We'd put a thousand dollars into rehabilitating an old siren and installing it up there. I later heard from Fire Marshall Roseaver that he'd turned it on. I was a little puzzled, I realized that the fire was serious, but I felt that maybe the alarm was premature. What I hadn't realized, and what nobody else had known from our vantage point was how quickly the fire had swept around. It had changed direction from an east wind to one out of the northwest. It hooked around up onto our hill very quickly. There was a considerable wind, and once it had hooked around it came up that hill of ours, with all of its dead brush and Bishop Pines, very, very quickly.

Jack Roseaver later told me that one of the first things he wanted to do was to make sure there was an exit off Drake's View available. There is only one exit on the top -- at Sunnyside Drive which cuts off from Drake's View and goes in a southerly direction up to the gate of the Park. He wanted to make sure the gate was open so people could get out. He found that the fire had already reached the far side of Sunnyside, it had come around the whole back of the hill and

was working its way up. He realized then how serious the situation was. He had also been in radio contact with people elsewhere. That was when the alarm was sounded.

At that point, people started clearing out fast. I didn't witness much of that because I stayed in my own house. The sheriffs had closed the road down at the bottom. They weren't permitting any vehicles to come up except fire engines. I didn't actually witness the evacuation except for a few cars that went by. Apparently it went off in an orderly way.

LT: Is it true that there were people who were renting property of some owners up there who simply ignored the alarm and stayed up there?

FS: There were a number of people who didn't evacuate for one reason or another. I don't think they were necessarily renters or owners. They were a few people who did the dumb thing and stayed. I was one of them. I stayed up there till half past eight that night, partly because I did not quite fully understand how serious the fire really was. I was not alone, I know there were quite a number of other people who did so too.

LT: Did your wife stay with you?

FS: My wife was working down in Inverness where she has the Bellwether store. I was on the telephone with her, but she couldn't get back up. She also didn't realize quite how serious the situation was. I don't think anybody quite realized how fast the fire was moving.

LT: When did you decide to come down off the mountain, and why?

FS: What I was doing during most of that time between about four and four-thirty, when the evacuation occurred and four hours later, was packing things in my car I thought were valuable: art works, some records, files, a little bit of clothing and so on. I was also on the telephone with a lot of people, including my wife. I was trying to figure out what was going on and where to go. After dark, I decided I had to get out. I didn't want to spend the night there. One thing I forgot to mention was that the power went off, I don't remember what time that was, I think it was about four thirty. After it started getting dark I had to light candles to see what I was doing. I drove down at half past eight and it was clear by then that the fire was serious.

LT: Did you pass any vehicles coming up, fire vehicles and others?

FS: I don't recall any specifically. But there were a lot of vehicles already up there. I went down Robert Drive so I would have bypassed some of them. I stopped on the way to chat with some people who were, like I was, still up there. There were two or three I talked to. Some of them may have stayed all night. That night my wife and I spent with some neighbors down the road on Kyles Wood Place, Mark and Claudia Roper. Even though we were having dinner down there we still didn't quite realize the seriousness of the fire. Some reported hearing the sound of exploding propane tanks above us. I didn't. The next morning we were up early. We had a difficult night. The road was closed off down below, there was a sheriffs car blocking the road at Drake's View Drive at the bottom of the hill. I ignored that and drove my car past it. The sheriff was busy talking to someone and I don't think he noticed us going by. We drove back up and parked in our driveway. Then we went up on Upper Robert Drive. It was clear the

fire was not out by any means. We heard some houses had been destroyed. The fire was still coming gradually down the ravine.

LT: At this time were there helicopters and the tankers overhead?

FS: Yes, definitely.

LT: When did they appear on the scene?

FS: I think some of them had started the day before but, I think with limited success, because the fire moved so rapidly. Now, we saw them being very active. We walked up to the upper portion of Upper Robert Drive perhaps a quarter of a mile away from our house. The fire was coming right up to the road, and there were firefighters up there. They were having difficulty getting the pressure in the water system. Helicopters flew by. They would dip devices that looked like great bubbles into the Bay, filling them with water, and then they would fly up and spray water right up where we were to try to protect the houses.

LT: Did they spray or dump it?

FS: I guess dump it is probably a more accurate wording. In a way it is a combination of both because when they dump it from a high level it sprays down. We were quite tense and nervous at that time. It was clear that the fire was not yet under control and that even though the wind still seemed to be in the other direction, the fire was gradually making its way down that ravine.

LT: This in the morning of the fourth?

FS: Yes, perhaps mid or late morning. Down at our house there was no electricity, but the phones were working. People kept calling us to find out how we were and what was going on. So we spent quite a bit of time fielding phone calls, including from some people quite far away who had houses there. We had one call from friends in Vermont, for example.

LT: Were you in touch with any of your neighbors on the hill, finding out what they were doing?

FS: Yes, but not in a methodical way. There were some people who were up there, like us and others who had walked back up. We kept putting additional things in the car that we wanted to evacuate. We were getting more and more concerned as the fire still kept coming down gradually in our direction. There were lots and lots of fire fighters up there with heavy vehicles. There were also teams of prisoners, young inmates, who were there. They were digging trenches around the houses. They all seemed extremely aggressive and energetic. We were all impressed by the efforts they were making.

Sometime in the early afternoon, perhaps three o'clock or three thirty, a huge water truck started backing down our road at the top of Lower Robert. It had apparently lost power and they were trying to start it again. Somehow the driver missed the road and got caught in a ditch on the side of the road, off the pavement. He lost control of the vehicle and it came crashing down into our driveway spilling all of its water and a lot of diesel fuel. That was a scary event,

which shook us up even further.

LT: That didn't block your exit?

FS: It blocked the one driveway, but fortunately we have two driveways to the house. It blocked the one where our vehicle was, luckily, not parked. Soon afterwards we decided to drive out.

LT: What time was that?

FS: It was three-thirty or four o'clock by the time we arrived at the bottom of the hill.

LT: Wednesday, the afternoon of the fourth?

FS: Right, Wednesday the fourth of October at about four in the afternoon. There were a lot of people gathered down at the bottom. It was a scene much different than the previous day. Now there were newsmen and people of all sorts. Various agencies and trucks were also there. And there were some people down there who'd just found out their houses were no longer there. There were many people looking terribly distraught being assailed by some newsmen who were poking microphones and cameras into their faces. I found that in poor taste.

LT: Well, that is what they are paid for.

FS: At that point, we were unsure as to whether our own house would survive that afternoon or evening. We went over to watch the fire for a while from the other side of Tomales Bay, on the mesa in Point Reyes. We watched the "bombing." Not only were the helicopters dropping water, but the big two and four-engined planes were dropping their red liquid fire retardant.

LT: Liquid? I thought it was dry.

FS: You may be right. We watched for a while and eventually went back to where we'd spent the previous night. We weren't really sure we would have a house the next morning. The first thing I did when I got up on the morning of the fifth was call our telephone number. I thought that might be a way to learn if the house was still there. The phone rang and I was relieved. I told my wife that our phone was still ringing, it seemed we are all right. Just to be sure, I had my phone book with me and I called some neighbors whom I knew had lost their houses. Their phones were ringing too. The telephone setup was such that even houses that no longer existed still had phone numbers that rang. It wasn't until later, in mid day, when we were shuttled up by the sheriff to our house that we were relieved to see it was still there.

LT: Of the houses destroyed, did they bum on the night of the fourth or on the morning of the fifth?

FS: I believe that all the houses burned that first late afternoon and evening. After that first night, I think all the houses were saved by the efforts of the fire people who were terrific. They were also saved by the lucky fact that the wind had died down and that there was relatively

little, if any, wind that second day.

LT: I gather you join with everyone else who was there to witness the event in testifying that the fire strategy and logistics were superbly planned.

FS: I was impressed by how well these people worked together and how dedicated they seemed to be. These fire fighters came from all over the state. I think there were even some from out of state. The organizational structure, which was run out of the Bear Valley Park Headquarters, was superb. It was amazing how rapidly they were able to get all the people around. Even though there were some minor foul-ups. All together it was a truly remarkable effort. If it hadn't been, more houses might well have gone up in flames on that second day. We were worried about our house. But between all those people, including the prisoners, they were able to hold the line and stop it from taking any more houses.

LT: I suppose you thought it would be great to be able to send personal letters of thanks to the people who were involved.

FS: There were people who did try to thank them all. There were a lot of home-rnade signs put up which they saw. Some were very touching. One other thing that should be mentioned is that fore-sighted measures we'd taken, including putting the alarm up, helped. Sally Behr, whose husband Peter was ailing, was not aware of the fire threat until the alarm went off. Their car was in the garage. They weren't strong enough to open manually the electrically-operated garage door. Happily, they got out just before the electricity failed. I think there were other cases of that kind where people were alerted by the alarm system and by the use of CB radios we had learned to use and with which we were able to talk to each other.

LT: Thank you. It's helpful to get a resident's-eye view of what happened up there.

FS: It was an extraordinary event. Though a tragedy for many people - with forty-five houses burned -- the good thing was that everybody got out alive and nobody was hurt.

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THE WATER DISTRICT MANAGER

Interview with Wade Holland, Inverness, CA 12/05/95

Wade Holland is the General Manager of the Inverness Public Utility District (IPUD.). His is a key role in the town for water and fire.

LT: Wade, can you begin by giving us a description of your job? I'm sure there are quite a few people in this town who, though they know it is important, don't know exactly what it is that you do.

WH: IPOO is the administrative overhead for both the fire department and the water system. Back in the days when we didn't have the water system we had only the fire department. The fire chief was operationally and administratively in charge of the fire department. When we bought and established the water system in 1980, there was a person operationally and administratively in charge of the water system. The District board itself did overall district management. I was a board member from '80 to '85. By '85 we began to realize the system wasn't working very well. Essentially, it was run by the directors themselves, assisted by a secretary bookkeeper, those first five years. In '85 the board decided to replace the secretary with a general manager, complying with the law which says that a public utility must have a general manager. I applied for and got the position. It started out as a half time job.

Unfortunately, because of the bureaucratic fol-de-rol in California and the fall-out from "Proposition 13" which centered all property tax revenue in Sacramento, a tremendous amount of paperwork was generated.

LT: So you rehired the secretary?

WH: No. I do everything from the janitorial work to the payroll, and preparing for the board meetings. I'm the bookkeeper, and interface with state and county agencies.

LT: Have you taken on all the administrative responsibilities for the fire department as well?

WH: Yes, for both departments.

LT: I would like to hear from you about how communications worked during the fire -- as seen from your perspective. Most onlookers were impressed by the organization. Had it particularly affected the operations here?

WH: There are two aspects to that: one is communications within our fire department, and incident command communications out of Bear Valley. In terms of our communications, we have an unusual situation in that our water system has it's own radio frequency. So the water people can talk to each other. All of our fire department radios also have that frequency which nobody else has. That means we can do chitty chat amongst ourselves without any interfering with county and state fire radios. That is a tremendous advantage because we don't have to worry about tying up frequencies somebody else may need.

LT: How did you tie into Bear Valley?

WH: We discovered a problem at a debriefing session at Sky Walker Ranch last week. Four of us went over for that. At the outset, all the command decisions and the command communications being done for the fire were being done by cellular phone. At the very beginning of the fire the cellular system became totally overloaded. Not only were the fire people trying to use it, but private citizens with cellular phones as well. A special repeater was quickly installed in Point Reyes Station which greatly expanded the number of calls that could be handled. But the problem one has when command people do all their communicating by cellular phone is that firefighters listening in on their radios don't hear it. Thus fire-fighting efforts were hampered because the people in the field weren't able to get the overall picture.

Here it was a big mystery to us because we just didn't know what was going on, unaware of the cellular communications traffic. As the evening of the third wore on, we sat listening to the radios. But there wasn't much traffic. Then at about two o'clock in the morning suddenly we heard radio traffic about the Home Ranch, the Estero, Johnson's Oysters, and Sir Francis Drake Blvd. At first we decided someone didn't know place names out here. We knew the fire was out at Balboa Summit. What were they talking about? Then it became apparent to us that the fire must have changed course, but we didn't know that. This remains a problem. It's vital that fire fighters in the field have an overall picture of what is happening.

LT: There was, nonetheless, a network set up which included most of the principal actors in fighting the fire. Yet you were not in it.

WH: As far as the fire fighting effort, that's true. We weren't in it moment-to-moment. County fire, each morning, did come out and visit us. They brought us the daily status report.

After about three days this report became from one half to an inch thick each day. It had a page for each branch and each fire fighting unit, what their assignment was, being updated on everything. So, we had communications that way. It enabled us to condense that information onto a single page which we quickly ran through the computer, made copies, and posted them about. So the people here had an overview. For a great deal of the first three days, the main thing we were doing down here was communicating with the public. People were coming through and people were phoning. Our communications were primarily through the county fire department.

LT: The phone was going constantly here?

WH: Yes. We let people know that we couldn't chat a lot but we were happy to answer questions. It is interesting to note that around midnight on Tuesday, our Inverness and Point Reyes Station local firefighters were relieved. They'd been on the fire since 1:30 that afternoon. They were tired and rested up that night. By the next day, we weren't actually doing firefighting any longer because there were two thousand professionals on the job. We were more valuable as guides and spotters. That meant that a substantial number of our firefighters were just sitting around here waiting for an assignment. Their adrenalin was flowing. They wanted something to do -- anything. So I let them answer the phones.

LT: I gathered from your report they were Scot Patterson and Bill Hart.

WH: There is an interesting story about that, too. We didn't know where Scot and Bill were, all we knew was they had gone off on a county engine Tuesday afternoon.

LT: As guides?

WH: No, as part of a firefighting unit. It was an engine that ended up at the F.A.A. parking lot - the Point Reyes Hill parking lot, where the fire started, with just a driver. The county engine had just a driver and no crew, so they took two of our people to be the crew. We didn't know where they were, all we knew was they had gone off to fight the main fire. It turned out Scot Patterson had a cellular phone with him. He phoned in to tell us what was going on. He phoned his wife, Georgina, to let her know where he was, so through the marvel of communications we were able to track where he was and that they were okay. That was a worry for us -- having two of our people out in the midst of the fire storm.

LT: I suppose even from down here you could see the sudden bursts of flame in the night sky.

WH: No, not then. Inverness was also spared the smoke from the fire as was the Pt. Reyes Peninsula. Places such as Mill Valley had much more smoke than we ever had. Here it was bright and clear, you could see the smoke coming up from the southwest, but going away from us. It wasn't until Thursday, when Mt. Vision burned, that you could begin to see flames from most of Inverness.

LT: When that providential wind shift occurred, it went around from the northwest to the northeast?

WH: Well, it had been blowing out of the northwest initially, then at 2:00 in the morning, it reversed itself and started blowing towards the northwest. Suddenly it just took off towards the Estero and burned seventy five hundred acres in an hour and forty five minutes. Four thousand acres an hour. You go up there to look and there are no trees up there. That is all low scrub, it just raked through there in the middle of the night. The danger was that before it burned itself out when reaching the ocean, the wind would change again, sending the fire back towards us. If it turned and come back this way it could have been a bad scene. In retrospect, there was this issue with the Stinson Beach fire department. Stinson Beach got overlooked in being dispatched to the fire. Bolinas was dispatched early and they were asked to come in and do a cover-in at Point Reyes Station. All of the Point Reyes Station engines had been sent to the fire, so they had to have somebody else come in and cover their fire station In case there was another local fire. I'm not sure they actually even got to Point Reyes Station when they got diverted to the fire itself. Bolinas was one of the fire departments right in the thick of things at the top of Paradise Estates. The way the fire burned, it burned over the top of Paradise estates, curved around, and came back up from the south. They were on Sunnyside, which is on the south side of Paradise Estates waiting for the fire to come at them from the northwest. Suddenly it came up from behind them and they were trapped in there for a while. They had fire burning on both

sides. They did heroic things. Stinson, somehow in the confusion was overlooked. Its firefighters all rushed to the station, suited up, waited to be dispatched but were never called. Suddenly the dispatcher was dealing, not with one little fire department, but with strike teams which came from fire departments as far as one hundred to two hundred miles away. Stinson just got overlooked. One of the county fire fighters stated at a briefing that he had been a fire fighter for seventeen or eighteen years and "all that time I thought how will I perform when the big one strikes." In all that time, they'd had never had a big one. Now this was the big one. There had been no experience locally in fighting a fire like that or of being in charge of a fire like that. Given the facts of no injuries and no deaths, it was miraculous.

LT: An event like this must certainly send the adrenalin roaring, particularly among the young people, thinking "I've got to get out there and do something".

WH: We have four or five fire station house kids in their early twenties, and boy, they are just raring to go every minute. You can't get them to go home and get some rest.

LT: You didn't get a chance to talk with any of the convicts, did you?

WH: Very briefly. Not during the fire, later on during rehabilitation work. That is, towards the end of the week and early the next week. Jack Matthews would be much better to talk to about that. He did a lot of transport of food up to the fire lines, especially to convicts, who tended to get overlooked on food deliveries. Sometimes they would go a long day and meals would not arrive. He was one of the people who was running food to them, and cigarettes which is what they really wanted.

LT. How do I get hold of Matthews?

WH: He lives on Kehoe. His son Bret is one of our firefighters. The Matthews are an old family in Inverness. Jack Matthews has lived here all his life, he went to Tomales High and the works.

LT: What does R.A.C.E.S. mean?

WH: Radio amateur communications emergency service. I mentioned in the newsletter, the RACES base station was set up here the Friday before the fire. We had always assumed before, that when disaster struck, the R.A.C.E.S. people would bring their own equipment in, then we realized maybe it would be better if we already had the equipment here and hooked in. Then they didn't have to worry about getting set up and getting the antennae set up. That was installed by Dick and Richard Flint on the Thursday before the fire. Then Dick went off on vacation so he wasn't here during the fire. So, the load fell to Richard. He was here during the fire.

LT: You seem to have had the entire Fox family involved in the fire.

WH: Yes. Jim is our chief water operator and Ken is a water operator for the system. They are both volunteer firefighters and their brother Tom, also.

LT: I thought Ken was your deputy.

WH: No. Jim Fox is the chief water operator.

LT: How are the costs for fighting a fire such as this one paid and by whom?

WH: That is an interesting point. Until quite recently a fire like this that is going to be paid for by both the state and the feds, the division would be based on acreage burned. In which case the feds would pick up almost all of it, because there were three to five hundred acres outside the park that burned, and twelve thousand acres inside the park. The down side of that is, that during fire fighting effort, each person is looking to minimize their burn acreage. That is no longer the system in effect. Now the system is that it is based on where the effort was expended, which means in this case it would be 70% state and 30% federal. I think the implications are significant. The bulk of the effort was on private land and state park land. A huge amount of resources were deployed to fight the fire and protect Paradise Estates, Inverness Park and Inverness.

LT: Saving personal property.

WH: I think it is so important to recognize that Don Neubacher, the superintendant of the National Park, said very clearly, we saved private property and we will deal with the park later. Somebody with a more bureaucratic bent may have said: "My acreage comes first or it's fifty fifty." The consequences could have been disastrous.

LT: He made the right decision.

WH: I think everybody _ agrees. There has been no second guessing higher up. the federal bureaucracy of his decision. Everybody supports what he did including allowing bulldozers into wilderness area

LT: The dress rehearsal for this was the Oakland fire?

W.H. The Oakland fire was very different but we benefited a lot from it. The way the structure came together here with the incident command at Bear Valley in place and functioning was due in large part to lessons learned from Oakland where there had been lack of coordination. One of the improvements made here was that there were virtually no fire fighters brought into the area who were not committed onto the fire. In Oakland there were hundreds of firefighters sent in who never left staging areas. Here they had much better handling. There is a new state wide system that came about as a result of the Oakland fire.

LT: According to Neubacher, he represented the federal government. And then there was

somebody representing county, and somebody representing the state. Just those three?

WH: Yes, they were the Incident Commanders. Tom Tarp from the state CDF. Stan Rowan, the county fire chief, and Don Neubacher. We were lucky we had Don in charge. He was the one who made the decision very early on to bring in the B.A.E.R. people, the Burn Area Rehabilitation teams.

LT: It defies imagination that they could have put that report together by the sixteenth of October.

W.H. Yes, it took two weeks. They had been there since the third day of the fire.

LT: This was born out of the Department of the Interior? Here was a great place to try out the B.A.E.R. concept.

WH: I think they have been used elsewhere, but it would be interesting to know if a B.A.E.R. team had ever had ever gotten into a fire as early as they did here.

LT: The report was remarkable, thorough and clear.

WH: Tom Tarp said at the debriefing at Skywalker Ranch, "I can take you to San Diego County and show you a four hundred yard wide fire break that I put in twenty years ago. You can see it today." In those days fire people came in, fought the fire, put it out and left. Rehabilitation was somebody else's problem. Nowadays by the time we leave, to the greatest extent possible, everything looking like it did before.

LT: It's a big job to repair those bulldozer gashes.

WH: Now you can't tell where a lot of them were -- such as the ones at our watershed. There was a gash they started at the top, on the southern end of our watershed, came right straight down. A big wide bulldozer trail. You cannot tell where it is, it was rehabilitated within about three to four days.

LT: What sort of impact did you fear the fire might have on the Inverness watershed - that is in terms of water supply?

WH: Our biggest fear was that we were going to lose houses. As far as the watershed is concerned we worry about the long-term effects of erosion and of the capability of the watershed to store water. The positive aspect of our watershed is that we don't depend upon a deep aquifer that can run dry but upon a deep layer of duff on the ground, a giant sponge that collects and stores water. All year round, it seeps, keeping our streams full and providing us with our drinking water. If that ground cover, which is many feet thick should disappear, then the watershed isn't going to store water the way it does today. It is all going to run off and we're going to have water problems in the summer.

We're not getting water from any deep source. It just seeps into this protected, fern-covered, canopied watershed.

LT: What puzzles me is why salt is not in the watershed water?

WH: I don't know, I've never heard that question asked.

LT: It would seem that since fog drifts over the ocean before hitting the Inverness Ridge and condensing on the trees, that some salt must be picked up. Another question I have has to do with the origin of the fire: some of your fire department colleagues asserted that the original fire (the boys' campfire) had "jumped" about two hundred yards to the new spot where it surfaced. Had it really traveled underground by way of root systems?

W.H. Possible, no one knows.

LT: Was that pure happenstance that they saw the spot where the fire had started?

W.H. You have the little ringed campfire, and the burn area was then just an arc, like a pie slice, leading from that point. It was so obvious, in a lot of fires it might not be, but in this fire it was. Actually, what happened, you had the fire ring and then the fire going away from it. On the other side of the fire ring was a tree, one side of which, towards the fire, had burned. Probably what happened, was the root that burned was to that tree. So it burned upwind, underground, to this tree, ignited the tree. Then that is what sent it down away from the fire ring in the other direction. I suspect that the big jumps, the several hundred yard jumps, were fire brands, embers, rather than anything burning on the ground.

LT: There is quite a bit of detective work, mainly theoretically, that goes into it.

WH: We are sponsoring, on the twentieth at the yacht club, a county slide show on the fire.

LT: Wednesday?

W.H. Yes. We will have word out to the community. They are going to show the slide show that they showed to the fire fighters at the fire debriefing. There are some dramatic slides taken in Paradise Estates and of the cinder showers. You see this wall of flame, and how in advance, this rain of glowing, burning cinders coming. That is what most of the houses were ignited by, there were houses still quite a ways away from the fire that were already burning in fifteen or twenty places.

LT: The embers were actually caused by the explosiveness of the materials.

WH: Right, they said there were cinders an inch and a half in diameter falling. Any wood deck, window sill, or rain gutter was susceptible. There were houses with fire proof shingles yet embers fell into rain gutters and ignited wood underneath the shingles.

LT: Do you have any prize fire anecdotes to relate that you haven't yet made public?

WH: I don't think so. I was impressed by the eagerness of our volunteer firefighters. Word had come down from above to block the bottom of Highland Way to keep out traffic. It's the worst job in the world -- to man a roadblock. Yet three local firefighters immediately volunteered.

LT: I bet you didn't get much sleep those three or four days.

WH: I was up all night on Tuesday night, and I think I got about three hours on Wednesday night, and about six hours on Thursday night. I would like to mention the exemplary performance of young Joey Avery. He's about 15 and lives up on Inverness Way, He was totally reliable. You could give Joey any job and you knew that he would do it and stick to it. We had him for two days doing road guard duty up at Perth Way and Douglas. Not a pleasant job. And he was up there by himself. Never was there a word of complaint out of Joey, he was just marvelous. We are waiting for him to turn eighteen so he can be a member of the fire department.

LT: Do you ever find any common personality characteristics among people who become volunteers in the fire department?

WH: I think its interest in performing a public service. They tend to be safety-conscious and responsible people. In our case, we have never had a problem with any of our volunteers.

LT: I think that fills it out unless you have anything to add. I know that there were over eight hundred convicts here fighting the fire.

WH: I don't know what the number was. We also had those hotshots from Texas. They are professional firefighters the feds contract with. They have a very good reputation, except among the convicts. The convicts say they do a much better job than the hotshots do: "look at how we clear, right down to minimum soil, all those guys do is push the brush aside." The inmates really take pride in what they do. Certainly, they don't get very significant sentence reductions for what they volunteer to do. I think they find a purpose in doing this.

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INMATE FIREFIGHTERS

Interviews with Conservation Camp Inmates at the Delta Conservation
Camp CC#8 of the California Correctional Center (CCC) 01/02/96

Some 850 inmates from the Conservation Camps of the California Department of Corrections fought the Mt. Vision fire. They were the largest contingent in a total of 2,164 firefighters. Several of the inmate crews were from Delta Conservation Camp CC#8 in Solano County. Following are interviews with 14 inmates from those crews who were at the Mt. Vision fire, October 3-8, 1996. Other participants in the interview included: California Department of Forestry (CDF) officers Captain Carla Olsen and Captain David Koscis and National Park Service Ranger Kim Cooper of the Pt Reyes National Seashore. Captain Koscis was in charge of an inmate fire crew from the Delta Camp that fought the Mt. Vision fire and Captain Olsen who has also been a captain of inmate fire fighting crews from Delta. Ms. Cooper has supervised inmate crews from Delta on trail maintenance projects at the National Seashore.

LT: We are with D.M. "Mack" Reynolds, spokesman for the California Department of Corrections and a representative of this conservation camp. He has offered to provide some background information about the correctional program run by California's Department of Corrections (CDC) and the Department of Forestry (CDF).

Mack, we're interested in your program and with the people at this camp who fought the Mt. Vision fire in Inverness last October.

DMR: You are dealing with the California Department of Corrections. It currently is responsible for more than one hundred and thirty thousand inmates statewide. One of the programs we have is the conservation camp program. We work with the California Department of Forestry, which has thirty-three conservation camps statewide. We also work with the Los Angeles Fire Department, where we have five conservation camps. Three of the statewide camps are for women. Convicted felons from the women's facilities are selected and sent to these conservation camps.

Our selection process takes into account various factors that determine whether the inmate will fit into the program. First they must have the physical capability to handle the rigors they will be subject to by the Department of Forestry. Then we look at the types of offenses the inmates have committed. It is easier to speak about the kinds of crime that preclude an inmate from being a part of the program. Obviously we do not authorize convicted arsonists. Sex offenders, including child molesters and rapists, are not eligible. Nor are inmates with a potential for violence. We have no murderers, or inmates with a high escape risk potential.

On the average an inmate coming to the camp system would have a sentence for two years, but the average time for an inmate on a statewide basis is about eight months. Basically we seek inmates incarcerated for alcohol, drug-related, and property crimes. There are some who don't fit into these categories but who are minimum custody inmates with low security risk.

The selection process is carried out by a committee of counselor-supervisors and program administrators. They look for candidates with discipline and the ability to live in open dormitories with other inmates. Once selections are made, inmates go through rigorous fitness training. If they complete that program they are checked again for eligibility. Once that is done they are sent out for forestry training. It is a two-week program. The first week is a program

whereby they learn fire behavior, fire signs, types of tools they are going to work with, and they start jelling as a team in a classroom setting. Once they complete the first week and they pass written examinations, they go out and actually learn to work as a crew.

LT: Where do they get this training?

DMR: In one of three places. Men, for the most part, go into the northern part of the State. Nearly all the inmates in this camp went through the California Correctional Center in Susanville. Those from central and southern male camps go through the Sierra Conservation Center near Jamestown. Women, go to the California Institution for Women at Montera, near Chino. Ideally the Department of Forestry would like to have these camps strategically located for fire response, that is in areas prone to fire, flood and other natural disasters. And, of course, there are always plenty of projects to carry out in the state parks.

LT: How many camps are there directed specifically at forest projects?

DMR: All of them are aimed at conservation. The Department of Forestry is more concerned with specific forestry projects than, for instance, Los Angeles County. The latter may do more of their project work along the beaches and highways.

As early as 1915, the Department of Corrections started putting minimum risk trustee inmates out from San Quentin and Fulton for forestry work. The formal relationship between the Department of Forestry and Department of Corrections started 1946. After World War II, the Department of Forestry had a need for able-bodied persons to assist in conservation work and become on-line firefighters. It started in Southern California.

LT: Was this a pioneer effort, the first of its kind in the country?

DMR: Yes. Two gentleman most influential in getting it underway were Whit Nelson, the head of the Department of Forestry in the '40s, and Richard McGee, the first Director of Corrections. Of the two earliest camps, one is still active. It is the Rainbow Conservation Camp in San Diego County. The other one has since been closed. I can't recall its name. The program, by the way, is written about in Irving Stone's book: Men to Match My Mountains. It makes for fascinating reading, especially from the standpoint of the Department of Corrections. The reason we want to see the program continue is because it gives meaningful work to inmates. It puts them in the best arena for rehabilitation. We don't rehabilitate anyone. They rehabilitate themselves. But certainly the work ethic is an essential requirement for inmates at a conservation camp.

LT: In Inverness and in the West Marin area people knew little about the program until more than 800 inmates arrived on the front line to fight the forest fire. Some of us thought it should be widely reported upon because it seems such a fine idea.

DMR: I was on the campaign of the Vision fire as the information officer. It's the first time we've ever done that. There's no controversy about our Conservation Camps program. You are right; not enough people know about it yet.

LT: With a record as a felon, can an inmate get a job with the state or federal government?

DMR: Actually the Department of Corrections has ex-felons working in prisons in various capacities. The only thing that keeps them from going all the way up the ladder in the agency is the legal block against becoming classified as a peace officer. That's the top category. Yes a lot of these guys become fire fighters when they get out. They work in various capacities for Forestry and for the Department of Corrections. Quite often they get jobs with the U.S. Forest Service as members of " hot shot fire crews." We don't have any real numbers for the camps themselves, but the recidivism rate on a statewide basis for all inmates is about 53 per cent. We do not yet have comparative figures on the rate among ex-inmates of conservation camps.

LT: What will be the format for interviewing these people today?

DMR: Of the seventeen who were on the Mt. Vision fire fight from this camp, fourteen are still here. They've signed releases agreeing to talk with you. Their participation is purely voluntary.

LT: As with any group, there are those who like to talk about their experiences and those who don't.

DMR: We are not trying to single out anyone or anything except the program. Let me clarify some things for you. Forestry captains here are the crew foremen. They go with the inmates to the fire line and other projects and work with them. Our role in corrections is to provide for the security and the care of the inmates. We see that they're fed, showered, bathed, clothed, and that medical needs are cared for.. We also deal with any disciplinary problems we may have. Our job is supportive of what Forestry does with these folks.

LT: Do the inmates here have access to educational training programs?

DMR: They can, if they choose, be involved in an education program, but it is a correspondence course. At one time we had classes available at the respective camps. There are some camps that have instructors for vocational programs. In Northern California, at Canacta, there is a vocational program for auto bodywork, and at Inner Mountain they have an extensive metal fabrication and welding program. Upon completion of this program they receive certification. But this particular camp does not have vocational training. One of the things I think is important, and maybe Dave can talk about, is the make-up of the crew and how they're structured.

Kim: One thing you should know is that we had four crews from this Delta camp at the Mt. Vision incident. You are only going to be interviewing people from two of those four crews. That is because of the coincidence of my working with them in the Park after the fire on trail maintenance projects.

Dave: There were eight hundred-odd inmates working the fire, but only four crews from Delta.

LT: We can break them up and do a half an hour with each group. Four or five persons per

group.

(Group comes in. Introductions.)

Kim: (To Carla Olsen) What do you do here?

Carla: I'm a crew captain, just like Dave. He has his own crew assigned to him that he supervises through the week. My title is administrative captain, my primary duties are here at the facility in finance, assigning projects, organizing projects -- basically the day-to-day operations - and helping my boss.

LT: You don't go out in the field then?

Carla: Oh yes I do. In fact Dave and I have been here since the Camp opened in 1988. There are only three of us still here since then. Others have gone on to other jobs.

LT: We're in luck, having you both here today.

Carla: Dave and I have the exact same position in the camp. We just have a different direct responsibility. He has done my job, as a matter of fact, he was the administrative captain here before I took over. Job responsibilities are rotated among people periodically.

DMR: (to inmates) They (referring to the interviewers) have a beautiful Park out there, you know that, you have been there. There is an information center for the public where they hold talks about their facility. They think it is pretty neat that inmates took part in saving their homes and their beautiful Park.

LT: We do indeed. The Jack Mason Museum in Inverness serves as an archival center for things that have happened in West Marin. After the fire, it was decided to do an oral history about it. We realized that if we were going to do a story about the fire for the archives it had to be done from many different viewpoints so we would not end up with a lopsided view of what went on. We've come here to talk with you -- as a lot of people have suggested -- including Don Neubacher the head of the Pt. Reyes National Seashore. He described you as among the most important people in the fight to save lives and property. We want to learn about your personal experiences and observations -- what happened to you, how you got there, what you did, and any particular events you recall that will help fill out the picture we are trying to put together. Perhaps one of you could start out by recounting what happened first?

Inmate: We got there about six thirty in the evening (Tuesday, October 3, 1996). The fire was on Vision Mountain. At that time it was just starting to come over the ridge towards the Bay. Then I didn't know where we were. As we found out, we were on Vision road up at the top of the Inverness Ridge. There were a few engines set up there.

LT: Did you get there by fire truck?

Inmate: Yes, we drove the C.C.V. up. We parked. You could see the fire coming over the

ridge. It was glowing red, the wind was feeding it. They already had a bulldozer up cutting a firebreak.

LT: Were you all suited up and ready?

Inmate: Yes. By the time we'd parked the fire truck we were ready to go.

Second Inmate: Isn't that where we heard that famous remark: "Don't you see the fire coming?"

Inmate: I don't remember, but it was really coming. The wind was blowing it over pretty quick. After we were there for probably forty-five minutes or an hour we had to move, because it was running over the line.

LT: The evening of the 3rd of October?

Inmate: It was the first day of the Incident. We had ended up being right at the original spot where the kids made the campfire.

LT: Who was giving the directions about where you were to go?

Inmate: At the time the fire was under the command of the Marin County Fire Department. They were directing all activity.

LT: I heard that some of you didn't get any sleep for nearly two days.

3rd Inmate: We were thirty-six hours on the line.

2nd Inmate: We worked all that day. That was a regular work day, we got there a six o'clock at night. Then we were up all night, then we worked twenty-four hours after that.

Kim: So you ended up staying up there. They had started moving people out of Inverness. Did they move you guys out in the middle of the night?

Inmate: No we just bunked down on the road.

LT: The Mount Vision Road never closed?

Inmate: No, I don't believe so.

LT: At any time did anyone of you start worrying, saying "how am I going to get out of this?"

4th Inmate: Yes, there was a situation like that but we had Captain Dave with us. We have to credit him for his fire fighting abilities, he does a good job.

Dave: We were on the east side of the mountain. We had to run up that one side.

Kim: Did you guys get moved over to the Sky Trail?

Inmate: The next day they finally decided where they wanted to put the control lines. Our assignment, at six o'clock in the morning, was to clear the fire road where they wanted to hold the fire. Our assignment was to cut all the hazardous stuff.

2nd Inmate: We cut down to tie that fire road in with the cut-back. We cut down there and started a back fire.

LT: How did you handle things with all the other hand crews? There must have been a lot of them from all over. Were you loosely knit, or were you assigned?

Inmate: The fire fighting was divided up into sections. At the briefing time, each section supervisor knew what was assigned to his area.

LT: The briefing area was down at the Bear Valley?

Inmate: I don't know. I just know what my assignment was. We have a strike team leader who goes out with the crews. Normally the strike team leaders will go to two briefings a day, one in the morning and one in the evening. They work two twelve-hour shifts. You know what your assignment is, what area you are in. You have a map and the weather forecast.

LT: Did you have any local guides to help tell you where you were?

Inmate: The supervisor for each area should have a map and be familiar with it. You should never leave without having an idea where you are going.

LT: I heard that was one of the problems on the first night of the fire. People were not sure where they were.

Kim: It was moving pretty fast, I was trying to figure out those Inverness Park roads.

Carla: That is not unusual especially when you get forces that aren't familiar with the area. That is true for every fire you go to. You need to get everybody on the same track, with maps, directions, road signs -- to get people in to the right place,. At the fire information center, once that is established, there is usually a big map of the area with where the fire is, main roads and where people are assigned.

LT: A handful of Inverness citizens who knew the area well were out there guiding fire teams. What about your particular experiences? Any stories to tell?

Inmate: Probably the only one we all know about is when the fire almost ran over ns coming up the mountain. I guess it was the east side of Vision Mountain. The wind was blowing thirty or forty miles an hour.

Kim: I had it in my mind that it was at Sky Trail.

2nd Inmate: It was right down the road from that historical monument, an old miners cabin.

LT: Was that a wind shift that did that or was the fire coming down that direction anyway.

Inmate: It was blowing towards the coast if I remember correctly. Once it got started it ran right over the tops of those trees. It got so smoky you couldn't see very well. You could hardly breathe. What was good about it was that we all pulled together and stayed pretty calm. Dave and I tried to walk through the first time but didn't make it. We tried again and got through the second time. Then we went back and got everybody organized, because it was getting so thick up there you couldn't breathe. We had to break away from the smoke and heat.

LT: How many were you up there?

Inmate: I'm not sure, sixteen or seventeen. There were two other crews there, crew five and one other.

Kim: You were cutting lines at this point?

Inmate: We were brushing back the dozer line. We cut a line on the switchback, we were going to burn that out. We just got that cut and it started to burn and started running up the hill. By the time we got organized and got the other crew up there it started to run across the trail.

LT: Did you get up to a place where they decided to make the stand? You looked over the ridge, the fire was burning madly there, Bishops were exploding, there were a lot of crews up there. They said they were going to hold it if they could. Onslow Ford said he refused to leave. He didn't and by a great miracle his house is still standing today.

Inmate: All of our time was spent at the north end. One of the other crews, Coolidge's, worked on the south end. After that first night and a day we took a shift off and then went back to help with the mopping up. We worked around the residences in Inverness.

LT: Did you have any trouble getting the residents to leave?

Inmate: No trouble at all. They figured out that the best thing to do was evacuate.

Kim: I am a little confused. there. You were on the north end at Vision.

Inmate: Yes, we never did get to the south end.

Kim: So you weren't at Sky Camp?

Inmate: A couple of crews, Martinez and Coolidge, went up there and did some work. They were trying to make a stand. It kept burning and kept going south.

LT: Dave, with all of your experience in fighting fires, were you impressed at all by the

logistics, the organization of the effort at Mt. Vision?

Dave: It was, as far as I was concerned, no worse and no better from all the other fires I've been on. The only problem was, in that area, there were all those one lane roads. Access and parking were big problems. Logistically, as far as the fire was concerned, it was not a problem.

LT: Reading and hearing about it, one got the notion that logistics and command had worked better than at other fires -- such as the Oakland fire, to name one.

Dave: From our perspective, we didn't have the luxury or time to be analytical about it.

LT: Your lives were on the line.

Dave: I know that, but we didn't do anything that was basically unsafe. Everything was within reason.

Carla: In Oakland they had all the wildfire people on structure (protection of dwellings), and structure people on wildfire (forest fire). It was a particularly bad situation.

Kim: We had so many more agencies involved in Oakland than at Inverness that you really can't even compare the two fires.

LT: That's the point. People said the organization here was superior than anything they had seen because everything came together and worked much better than it had at Oakland.

Inmate: Well, they're not going to say it, but I'll say it. Forestry came in and worked under the Incident Command System. They have done this time after time so that now it's a well-oiled machine. When they go in, they bring in a team of experts who have gone through this before. Logistics is a very important part of it, as well as operations, media centers, and food operations. These guys have done it often and they are continually learning about fighting fires from the Department of Forestry.

LT: Is that true that all you men had been in a lot of other fires before this one?

Inmate: I've been in Camp for a few years. I've probably been to forty, forty-five, maybe fifty fires.

Inmate 2: I've been to a half a dozen.

Inmate 4: This is the first big fire that I have ever been on.

LT: Are you also a veteran?

Inmate 3: No I've just been on this fire.

LT: So some but not all of you knew your way around in this business of how to fight forest

fires.

Dave: This was at the end of fire season. If this had happened the first of June, the older fellows would have been around for a while.

Kim: I'm still struggling with trying to figure out where they were and when at the fire.

Inmate: It was a big deal that we get a line around that old cabin so it didn't burn down.

LT: It must have been a cabin that belonged to the Park Service.

Inmate: I think it was supposed to be some sort of historical monument.

Kim: Were there any roads around it I might know?

Inmate: (looking at map) It was right on this fire line.

Kim: Beyond the F.A.A. site? So it would be right along here. You guys were staying at Stewart's horse ranch? Then you went back out Drake's View, or whatever.

Carla: You were asking why this fire seemed to be logistically handled better than at Oakland. Oakland learned the big lesson too late which is ask for help right now, don't be too proud. In Marin, we have a very close relationship with the County Fire Department. They have no problem in immediately accessing our resources for assistance. They know what we have available. We go in immediately on any type of incident they have, even their small fires. We go in with a hand crew and help out. With some agencies, city departments for example that are not well-versed in fighting wildland fires, tend to wait a little too long before calling for outside support.

LT: You don't have a lot of red tape to go through here?

Carla: None. It's an automatic procedure.

Inmate: Fighting a fire is like is being in a battle.

Dave: It's exactly like that. There is a command structure and each person knows what to do and they go out and do it. It is really amazing. Each inmate in the crew has a specific function in the crew.

LT: Like what, for example?

Inmate: Everybody has a job, a specific responsibility.

Other inmate: We have our swamper here, our co-pilot.

Another inmate: First saw, second saw, they have their jobs. First saw punches the initial hole

into the line you're constructing. Second saw comes by cleans that and widens it. Then come polaskies and mcclouds. Then it goes right on back to the drag spoon and he makes sure it's clean.

LT: Polaskies, mcclouds: these are the names of some of the hand tools used for fighting fires?

Inmate: Right.

LT: Can you describe what they are?

Inmate: A polaski has a long axe handle with an axe head on one side and a broad hoe on the other. The mccloud has a rake on one side and a straight edge on the other side used -- used for chopping grass and raking.

LT: You mentioned a third one.

Inmate: The third one would be the drag spoon. It's a shovel. the man using it makes sure the cut is clean, he is the last man through.

LT: How many chain saws per crew?

Inmate: Four to a crew plus two fire saws, and two saws.

LT: About the size and makeup of the crew and the tools that they carry: has this all come out of the experience of fighting fires over many years.

Inmate: All the procedures, all the mistakes people have made, have been written down and most of the things we do are done for a reason. This works well, but that doesn't.

Other inmate: It's like an army rifle squad. These guys are the grunts of a fire. They're the ones right out there on the front line, taking the heat of it.

LT: It's been said that the fire fighting showed up some fantastic chain saw artists as compared to some people who didn't know which way was up in handling a saw. Does anyone have a particular story to tell?

Inmate: I can't remember one.

LT: Did you have problems in getting fed?

Inmate: There were a couple of days there when we weren't fed properly. We were out there doing our best to do our job. When we come back to eat it was not what we'd expected. You have high hopes of a steak dinner when you're on a beer budget. You have to take one with the other. You're incarcerated, they are feeding you, but you're doing a job for them, you volunteer to do this job.

Other inmate: I think they did a nice job. Remember the next morning they brought a hot breakfast to us?

Third inmate: When we were out on the line they took care of us pretty good. When we were back in the camp area it was kind of rough. You have to take the good with the bad.

Dave: You have to understand, the first day is always confusing. You have to get all the logistics, think about assembling an army in twelve hours. It is basically what they were doing. Things are happening, people have assignments, it gradually comes together. Everybody knows you're not going to have the comforts of home until things get organized. You might not have a hot meal. We have rations on the C.C.V., so we have food for a couple of days.

Inmate: We didn't go hungry, but there were a couple of times there when we could have been hungry .

LT: Have you guys had enough of fire fighting or are you going to do more of it if you have to?

Inmate: I'm going to see if I can get with the seasonal fire fighters when I get out.

LT: (to another inmate) You don't want to become a firefighter, do you?

Inmate: No.

LT: No other takers?

3rd inmate: I wouldn't mind having my hands in forestry, probably, but that's pretty hard.

Inmate: It's an honest day's work.

Other inmate: That is the good thing about it. When you finish doing what you're doing, you feel good.

Inmate: I get a lot of pleasure saving the woods. I enjoy the mountains, so for me I like seeing it be saved. Man, it's hard work.

LT: People in Inverness and Inverness Park thank you very much. I thank you for coming. If you can think of any other stories call or write to me.

Inmate: I take that back about being a fire fighter. I wouldn't mind doing it, being paid regular. I don't think I'd want to do it for a living.

LT: These guys do it for a whopping \$1.00 an hour.

Inmate: Something else kind of nice, all the people there, when we were coming back and forth from the base camp to the fire, all the people there were waving, and holding signs thanking

us. It was really nice. It made you feel pretty good.

LT: A great place with nice people.

Inmate: A lot of people when they see the Department of Corrections on the side of the C.C.V. immediately stereotype inmates as bad guys. We're all human beings and we all have a job to do. That's what we go to do. We are not there to loot people's property. When you leave and they show their appreciation it feels good. They probably have a different outlook like thinking "he may still be a criminal still he must have some kind of heart to care enough to get out there and try to save somebody's home." We don't have to do it.

Other inmate: When I was there, I heard one citizen say, "You know I got picked up for drunk driving" and he added, pointing to the C.C.,V. "There but for the grace of God go I. People make mistakes. "

Other inmate: The mistakes are getting smaller and smaller. It doesn't take much of a mistake these days to land you in jail.

(Next group of inmates arrive.)

LT: We are doing this for the Inverness Museum. We are trying to see the fire from various points of view. You are important. We came here to find out if you had any particular experiences or observations you would like to tell, any stories, or things that personally happened to you, the dangers you faced and that sort of thing. I gather you all stayed together. There is always a Delta company under your command.

Dave: However many guys I have on the crew, they always stay with me. I personally take custody of them and supervise all of their activities.

LT: Did you have any direct communications with helicopters or tanker planes?

Dave: Crew leaders have handy talkies, and we can have radios. Normally the only time we would have contact would be during the initial stage. We do monitor the radio traffic. Of course, you can always see or hear helicopters. If we need support because of conditions, I call in myself.

Kim: Did you guys get dumped on at all?

Dave: Nearly. We didn't get dumped on but it was close one day.

LT: That must be quite an experience to get that red stuff dumped on you from out of the sky.

Dave: That stuff comes out of the airplanes. The helicopters just dump water.

LT: (To an inmate.) What is your position on the crew?

Inmate: First mccloud.

LT; (to second inmate) What about you?

2nd Inmate): I'm the swamper. But I was in drag spoon at the time of the fire.

LT: Will you please explain what a drag spoon does.

2nd Inmate: Basically I just look out for the crew. When they are cutting the line (the fire break line), I make sure there are no spot fires jumping over the line. Make sure there is no danger by making sure the line is clean so nothing will bum after they cut it. That would make us look kind of bad if they jump our line.

LT: Were you behind the dozers as they cleared these great swathes?

2nd Inmate: Yes, they were in front of us, in a different section of the fire.

Dave: We didn't do that much cutting that day. They knew that they wanted to hold that flank of the fire at this road. In preparation for their burnout the next day, we dropped all the trees, took out all the dead wood, anything that was a hazard or that might contribute to the fire jumping.

3rd Inmate: It was uneventful. We could only watch the fire bum. I did follow Hugh who was scouting some of the area. We slept that night. The following morning we went in down the road where we cut. We chopped down the trees.

Dave: The fire was below us. There was a stretch of fire road between the Inverness residences and where the road ended. Dozers were operating there. They were trying to tie this in.

LT: Do you know which road he refers to?

Kim: I think it's where the Inverness Ridge trail comes in.

Dave: We didn't come down the whole thing. In each incident, you have to go from point A to point B. You have to make a fire line, or a natural barrier, or whatever you are going to use. It all has to be tied in. There must be no open spaces where the fire can leave. The plan was to bum out along the road and along the dozer trail. The next day we went to work -- on the bottom side of the fire -- that's where we tied it in, where the dozers were.

LT: (to a third inmate) What was your job?

Inmate: I was first polaski. That is, I was tracing the trail where they would follow behind they would wipe with polaskies and mcclouds.

LT. (to a 4th inmate): What about you?

Inmate: Sixth mccloud.

Kim: So, when you guys are working you have the first saw and the second saw. And is there also a swamper with the saws?

Inmate: One for each saw.

Kim: Then mcclouds and polaskies are behind?

Inmate: Polaskies, mcclouds, followed by shovels.

Kim: Then you're cleaning up what the sawyers have cut. You're scraping out. Right?

Inmate: Right. The saws direct the rest of the crew.

Dave: Removing the fuel that feeds the fire is a basic concept in fire fighting. You can either cool it down or remove it.

LT: About the outgrowth of the hand crew: How did it evolve? Or is it something somebody invented and said this it is the best way to do it?

Dave: I think it just evolved. I'm sure that in the old days they were using burlap bags to put out fires, and they just found a better way to do it. I'm sure that before they had chain saws they were using raw hand tools. Within the last twenty years, the chain saw which had been so heavy and clumsy has become much lighter. It too has evolved.

LT: Would any of you men want to become firefighters after this experience? (A lot of laughter). I'm serious. I know young volunteer firemen in Inverness who are very dedicated. They were up there fighting the fire before you and the rest of the professionals came on the scene.

Inmate: I've thought about it but when I come in contact with the firefighters, they tell me they have been temporary for years. The job takes them away from their family. I think I would want something more stable than being on temporary for so many years.

LT: Originally, I thought that there were a lot of free lance firefighters around. I have since heard there are hardly any left.

Dave: In the old days, during the 30's, when they had the old C.C.C.s, when a forest fire started they would just grab people on the street, in little towns all over. That didn't work out. It didn't take long for a guy who was out of work to figure out that one way to get work and earn some money was to start a fire. That is how professional firefighting came in.

Kim: People still joke about it.

Dave: They catch professionals as well as volunteers. In L.A. there were arson investigators who were starting fires.

Kim : It can be intoxicating.

LT: It has a certain fascination for people on both sides.

Kim: How about the rest of you, would you be firefighters?

Inmate: No, not me.

Kim: Even if you weren't cutting line but you were making decisions and moving up?

Inmate: I would rather go on some thing rather similar, like fish and game, but not firefighting.

Kim: You don't like the smoke?

Inmate: No, it's not that. It gets hectic at times and I don't need that.

Kim: A little calmer situation?

Inmate: Yes.

LT: Dave, are there any points that you think we missed that we ought to talk about here?

Dave: Not really, I think part of the deal is that most of the guys have been around for a while and once you have been on two or three fires you know it's going to be hard. Basically it's going to be dirty, you're going to get hot and hungry. You are going to be working long hours. That is pretty much what is expected and what they are going to get.

Inmate: It was cold out there.

LT: You had no blankets?

Inmate: Not all the time. Sometimes it was pretty comfortable with the sleeping bag, but sometimes it was cold.

LT: You only had sleeping bags when you were down in Bear Valley, right?

Inmate: Yes.

Another inmate: It felt good to be a hero for a week or so.

LT: All of you are still heroes as far as we were concerned. There were "thank you firefighters" signs still up long after you had left.

Inmate: We saw that too. Kids stuck "thank you" signs at the gas station and at homes.

LT: What do you think of Kim Cooper? Do you think she does a good job?

Inmate: Kim is great.

Kim: I thought you looked familiar. You were there when I was running around looking for a radio on the first night up on Mt. Vision. I was freaking out, I thought I was going to have to payout one thousand dollars to replace it. I remember standing on the embankment and I thought I had dropped it. I found it.

Inmate: What were the total acres on that fire?

LT: Over twelve thousand.

Inmate: I'm going to bring my son and show him the Park.

LT: It is closed now not because of the fire damage but because of the budget foul-up in Washington. That's why Kim was able to come and lend a hand. She came along because she wanted to see you all again.

Kim: Call the resource office when you guys get out. I know you're on pretty short time, I'll tell you the best trails.

Inmate: Did we save a lot of houses?

Kim: Yes you did. They only lost 45 houses.

LT: For some, their loss was inevitable. Two years earlier, the Inverness fire chief came up and told them they would lose their houses the first time a real fire hit up there. He was right. They allowed the forest to grow right up to their homes, leaving no area around their houses that could be defended.

Kim: To make things worse, they put cedar shakes on the outside of their houses. It's like nailing kindling wood to your house to make sure it catches fire. .

LT: Some friends who lived up on the top lost everything. He and his wife, both in their seventies, thought they were going to be all right. Somebody came along and told them they had ten minutes to get out, and it was just ten minutes. They escaped without a thing. People that age who lose a house lose nearly everything including big pieces of the memory of their past.

Inmate: We all noticed how quickly the fire moved.

LT: The Marin County fire chief said that the fire was moving so rapidly at one time it was eating up nearly five thousand acres an hour.

Inmate: The second night we were there and we were camped out on the road trail we were on. You looked down the mountain you could see the whole expanse. It was just fire moving and moving.

Kim: I was jealous of you guys because I didn't get to see that. They stuck me in the back on Vision and all I could see from there was smoke.

LT: At some point you must have been in the middle of exploding Bishop Pines. I've seen photographs of them exploding, sending showers of burning embers hundreds of feet into the air.

Inmate: I didn't see that.

Other Inmate: We saw that up on top.

Dave: Whole trees were engulfed in flames.

LT: That must have been a hell of an experience for every one of you. You'll remember it for the rest of your lives and tell your kids about it.

Kim: Was there anything about this fire you remember since you have been on different fires all season? Did it have the biggest flames or the largest amount of firefighters?

Inmate: Everything about it was big.

LT: They had over two thousand fire fighters.

L. T. (To new group of inmates.) We are trying to put together a story about the Mt. Vision fire as seen from a lot of different points of view. Your views are important. You were up there fighting the fire for a couple of days. From Dave we've had a lot of basic information about your being there. I think what interests people most are personal experiences and reactions. Do you have any experiences you want to recount, bad or good. What you did, how you felt about it, and so on.

Kim: One question: have you been doing fires all season? Is there anything about this fire in particular that stood out?

Inmate: On this fire, we were right there from the start. On the other fires we went in a little after, on this one we were right on.

2nd Inmate: This was my first fire and it was the scariest thing I've ever gone through. It was pretty exciting because the flames were so close.

LT: Were you worried about your safety?

Same Inmate: At first, yes. But then I saw how Captain Dave was working. He is a very good captain. When I saw him not sweating, it made me feel at ease and under control.

Kim: Did he teach you anything?

Inmate: Yes: stay close to the captain because he has the radio. You pay attention to the captain and see no fear coming from him, you will be alright. You don't want your crew members to panic.

Kim: In that particular situation, when we were facing a lot of heat, Phil and Dave went ahead to try and find a way through. What were you guys doing at that time?

Inmate: Trying to stay out of the smoke and waiting for the captain and the swampers to come through.

Other inmate: We were waiting for the okay to follow them, it took awhile. It was really hot. After that, seeing him not panic in that event, when it was my first fire that was important. The flames were right in front, we were smoked out. It was scary at first but all right, a good experience.

Kim: Would you do it again?

Same Inmate: Yes, if it was with Dave.

Kim: You're bonded with him now.

Same Inmate: To tell you the truth, yes. With any other captain I would be mighty scared.

Other Inmate: We worked with Captain Dave and built up a trust with him, a group thing there with the whole group. He trusts us, he has a shovel in his hand and a shovel alone won't cut a line. I believe Captain Dave trusts us too.

LT: Did you all have to come back and catch up on sleep when the whole thing was over?

Inmate: We had a couple of days to recuperate. We left right after that for another fire. We were there about a week.

LT: Dave, when does the fire season start in California?

Dave: Approximately the 15th of May. It lasts until November 1st.

Kim: (to an inmate) What's your position on the crew?

Inmate: At that time I was second saw. I'm first saw now.

Carla: The last first saw left. Who is the swamper?

LT: What does swamper mean?

Inmate: Second in command.

Dave: He takes care of all vehicles. He takes care of all the tools, all the inventory, minor maintenance.

Kim: You're going to lose him too.

Dave: The guy who was sitting in the last group, Herb, is the new swamper.

LT: (to another inmate) What is your position on the crew?

Inmate: Second puller now. Back then I was mcloud.

LT: For folks who don't understand what this entails, how are you equipped? What exactly do you do?

Inmate: The chain saw cuts and the puller pulls. He carries gas, oil, chains, rags, and whatnot. When the chain cuts I just move the brush and help him clear the path. The next people can come through and cut a wider path and so on and so on.

2nd inmate: If the saw man gets tired it is also the puller's job to take over the saw. The 2nd saw takes his spot.

3rd inmate: They're there to back each other up.

2nd inmate: The saw man has to have a good puller, they have to work together. It is up to the saw team to cut a path so the rest of the crew can come through.

3rd inmate: That is the thing that matters the most, that everybody has to work together.

LT: Obviously with Captain Dave here, that is what happens. As it turned out, the fire fighting at Mt. Vision was a good team effort all around. Without that it could have been so much worse than it was.

Kim: I was at helibase the second day looking across the Bay at the fire. It looked like it was going to take Inverness at any moment.

LT: We heard this from everybody. Miraculously the wind shifted and it blew the fire down to the sea. You go there now, and there is a vast area of burnt grass and scrub.

Kim: It's starting to get pretty green there already.

LT: A lot of greenery is going to come back. The soil enriched by the fire will make for a green carpet in the forest this coming Spring.

Inmate: There is the good and bad of it. It burnt but it is coming back.

Kim: It was pretty spooky on Halloween. I was working up on the ridge on Halloween and I felt I was in a graveyard. We were just asking all the guys if, when you get out, you would be interested in firefighting?

Inmate: I've been thinking about going into parks and recreation, or something along that line. It is different than what I'm accustomed to, I like it, you can see the results.

2nd Inmate: When we come up out of the fire and you go down into the Bear Valley area and you see the people standing out there, you know their homes are saved and you see them smile and wave. It does something for me, right on. I did something.

3rd Inmate: One thing I'll never forget was when we went to our first dinner down in the valley. All the school kids had thank you notes and pictures all over where we ate. That gave me a very good feeling to be appreciated by someone you don't even know. Thank you fire-fighters -- they knew who we were.

Kim: I should let the kids know that. All the groups said that.

Dave: People who see us don't see us as a crew. All the guys are in nomex (fire protective suits). They don't know that they're from an inmate camp somewhere.

Kim: You're putting your lives on the line in the same fire.

Dave: They just know you're a bunch of firefighters out there doing a job. They don't know that you're locked up.

LT: There was an outpouring of gratitude for the inmate crews from the people. They knew there were some 850 inmates fighting the fire and getting paid \$1.00 an hour. They knew you didn't have to do this thing, but you did it.

Inmate: It was exciting. I've never been in a situation like that before. Thanks to the captain we made it.

Another inmate: It is a big reality check. At first I thought being a fire fighter here was just doing some work and getting it over with. But when I see the results of the fire and the thank you notes we got, we were appreciated. Now I think about this job not as a pay back to society but as helping society. You take it like a job, if you appreciate it and you get appreciation back for helping the community, it gives you a really good feeling and you think about it twice.

LT: Maybe Kim and I will see some of you on firefighting forces somewhere around. Again thanks and regards to you from everybody in Inverness. When you get out come visit us and see the Park again -- this time not burning.

Inmate: I think we owe a lot of thanks for the training that they gave us. When you go take the training program and see the films, you know what you're going to be up against.

Dave: I think it's important to know that there are one hundred and thirty thousand inmates state wide. In these camps you have less than four thousand. The Marine Corps says they need a few good men, CDF needs a few good men too. You are the guys who do the job.

Kim: I hope we won't have more fires out there for now.

LT: Dave, are you about ready to retire?

Dave: A couple of more years.

Kim: You have to stick around for a while. These guys won't go out with any other captain.

Dave: I'm not leaving yet.

(Last group of Inmates enter)

LT: We've been talking about the Point Reyes fire. You were there under another crew leader. Some Inverness people believe the Delta crews made the big difference in saving the town. Do you have any particular feelings about it? What was your particular job up there?

Inmate: We were the second crew to respond there. When we first got there we knew the fire was pretty bad. We went in on the initial attack. Then they pulled us out of where we were because the fire started to overtake that area. We were up there for thirty-six hours straight working to put it out. It was a real experience for me that I could be in the community to help. I'm doing a ten month term, and this is my first time in. That fire right there made me feel like I was putting something back into the community. Something that I had taken out at one time. So being there was a privilege to me. At one point we had a structure, an abandoned structure, a historical building, our Captain Coolidge decided he wanted to save. We went in on a direct attack with a back bum and that was amazing. It may have been an abandoned structure, but it was a good experience to us that we were able to save that building. We got to see wildlife taking off and coming into safety zones that we were actually constructing. That made us feel really good and important, that we were able to save as much wildlife as possible.

LT: What was some of the wildlife you saw fleeing?

Inmate: We saw deer, raccoons, squirrels, all kinds of wildlife. It made us feel bad that we knew that some had been trapped in there and there was nothing we could do. We owe a lot to the dozers. They did a lot to control that fire too. While we were there we were able to set back burns off those dozer lines that were able to aid us a lot in what we'd done. There were a lot of air attacks and things like that, that were contributed to controlling the fire. I feel like all crews deserve recognition for this, they all participated in heroic fashion.

LT: Inverness residents were most impressed by the ground crews. They felt that you were the most important part of the operation.

Inmate: You can only cut so much dozer line and then you want to stop the fire as quickly as possible. You have to use hand crews where dozers can't go. I would say eighty percent of the

time that we were there, the fires were right on top of us. I mean, we were right there with a direct attack almost the whole time.

LT: Did you ever fear that you might become encircled by fire?

Inmate: We had to trust the captain's instincts. These men have been doing this for years. We have to rely on them. If they say we are safe we have to have trust that. If we panic it is not going to do anybody any good, including the rest of the crew.

Kim: Were you working alongside Dave's crew, in a similar area?

Inmate: I believe we were on one side and they were on the other. We worked with crew three and crew five at one point. In fact it was the very next morning when we went in with crews three and five.

Kim: So they pulled you off of the rear flank of the fire. Then did you go down to Stewart camp at some point? There was the base camp down at the Stewart horse ranch.

Inmate: We worked for thirty-six hours then they pulled us off and replaced us.

LT: You stayed up on the mountain for thirty-six hours?

Inmate: We were there for thirty-six hours fighting the fire.

LT: Who brought your food?

Inmate: They brought us food. We ate right next to the fire, then we just went back to work.

Kim: Shovel it in and go.

Inmate: That's basically it. We didn't have time to really think about anything other than the fire. There were a couple of times when I was just praying we'd got out of there. Some people who have been in fires before, and have been in direct attacks, knew what to expect. When it is your first time and you're doing ten months, it's something else. We were sometimes five feet away from the flames. When we back burned we were on the flames. A lot of us were thinking of where were the other crews were at the time. We depended on the radio to tell them to get out of the way.

LT: In war it's the same. While you are fighting you never know what's happening elsewhere, whether the war's being lost or won. Firefighting must be pretty much the same way particularly when you're off in the forest in a hand crew.

Inmate: We get assigned to a part of the fire and in this fire everything was happening really quick. With me, I didn't think about what the other crews are doing because I had to focus on what I was doing and to make sure we beat the fire. As far as what everybody else was doing, I didn't think about that.

LT: (to another inmate) How about you, do you have any stories?

Inmate: I'm a veteran of firefighting since '85. To me it is the procedures that get us there. The way the captain wants us to do this and do that. After a while you can see how it fits and what they're doing. That is what I like. The captain has a lot of experience and you just have to trust him. You don't have time to worry about what other crews are doing. We have avenues of escape and that's all run down to us and when the adrenal in gets going, you are out there doing it. There were some big flames. One time we walked right by the heart of it.

Kim How big were the flames?

Inmate: They were tall, as tall as the trees. The wind was blowing and the flames were climbing high.

Another inmate: At one point, at the place that he's talking about, the flames were coming at us so fast that we had to back bum it. First we had to run up the mountain, cutting the line. There must have been three crews getting in each other's way. We got to the dozer line we had to run back down. As soon as we got down the back bum saved us, otherwise there would have been two or three crews toasted. The flames were sixty or seventy feet high up in the tree tops. That was scary.

Kim: It sounds really scary. I'm trying to figure out where this was. Is this the "historical cabin" some of the other crew members talked about?

Inmate: Yes. It was a shack. We tried to save it.

Kim: Well, Dewey Livingston the Park historian may be grateful to you for risking your lives for that shack.

Inmate "It looked like an old cowboy shack.

Kim: Maybe from an old ranch.

Inmate: The flames were so close and I was cutting at that time, I started just going to the top to the dozer line. I had to keep cutting though, it was close. Then they started backburning down there as we were cutting up.

LT. You were all wearing nomex suits. I suppose this gives you a certain degree of feeling of security and imperviousness to the fire. Kim says it could have gone up to twelve hundred degrees, the temperature at which aluminum melts. A lot of the heat generated was probably whipped up by the wind. You fellows had one hell of an experience.

Inmate: We had a lot of motivation. It gave me my greatest respect in my heart when, coming down for food at the camp, the school children had drawn the pictures telling us thanks. The signs that people were holding up and waving to us made a good feeling inside that we had accomplished something. It made us feel really good.

Kim: Does that happen on other fires?

Carla: That's what kind of makes it worth while. You are out there doing your little part and you don't really know how it has an effect on the entire fire. Sometimes when you leave an area you don't know if it's going to hold or not. You've worked thirty six hours, you're dead beat and you don't even know if anyone knows you are there. Then you get down in the fire camp and you start seeing these signs. I always get tears in my eyes. That happened the first one I was ever on, in 1985 the Las Galitas Fire. It burned seventy thousand acres, almost down into San Louis Obispo. We had a similar situation like this. We were out there for two days. You come down bleary-eyed, tired, and beat. All you can think of is sleeping. Then you see all these signs and it warms your heart, makes you realize why you're there. It was worth it.

Inmate: (pointing to a wall map and photos) That's the big one I was on, right there.

Kim: Malibu? Did most of those houses end up getting torched?

Inmate: Yes.

Carla: It almost was looking like that at Inverness at one point. In fact, that is a news media picture. Our camp had four crews right there. These pictures are of the rescues our crews carried out at that fire. The photos made it into Time magazine.

Inmate: Our training doesn't just stop when we leave Susanville (firefighting training center). Right now we have an opportunity to train in structures and to work in a camp structural crew that will handle fires in buildings within a five mile radius. We don't have many structures in that radius but the training itself is good. You really accomplish something while you're in.

Kim: You could be part of your local fire department when you get out.

LT: You don't have any fire fighting equipment here to take out, do you?

Carla: We have a fire engine. It's a camp fire engine. It's primarily for the purpose of fire protection for this camp and the department of health services next door. We also are allowed to respond, if there is a captain on board and four to five inmates, anywhere within a five mile radius to any other type of incident. Most cases here would just be some type of wildland. Last summer they went on three to four and they were the first ones there.

Inmate: So we do have a lot of opportunity when we leave Susanville for more training. They teach you C.P.R. and everything.

Kim: So do you feel like you want to do fire afterwards?

Inmate: I am really happy with C.D.F. because they will accept us with a felony on our record. You can become volunteers and I guess you can come up to a captain.

Carla: You can go as far as a captain in a fire station.

LT: Some people in Inverness who were so taken by what you did at the fire say the trouble is that ex-felons cannot be hired by the state or federal government. Carla tells me that is not true.

Carla: The only thing they are not allowed to do is take any job with a peace officer status. I'm not sure how it works at Susanville, but as far as our department, they could not be a crew captain at a camp. They could be a fire captain at a fire station, which is the same level. That is as far up as they can go because anything beyond that is a peace officer.

Dave: We have ex-felons who work in our warehouses, maintenance departments, and kitchens. So there is some opportunity.

Carla: Our job applications have that on there, but that is just informational. It doesn't mean that the person is not going to get the job. This work is not for everybody. They may do this for one season and that is all they want.

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THE OBSERVER

Interview with Virginia Rothwell, Inverness 11/22/95

Virginia Rothwell lives high up on Vision Road in a house she and her late husband, Easton Rothwell, built in 1974 after his retirement as president of Mills College. Her road leads to the Inverness ridge and to the top of Mount Vision. The panoramic view south from the deck of her house takes in the high ridges and canyons of the fire-ravaged area.

LT: I am sitting with Virginia Rothwell in her house on Vision Road. She found she had a ringside seat overlooking the fire drama as it unfolded. Friends and neighbors came up to watch the fire from her deck with awe and some trepidation.

Virginia, will tell me about those events which began on the third of October, last month.

VR: I can tell you when I first saw it. I had been over the hill, down in San Rafael. Coming back, when I got to Point Reyes Station I saw a considerable amount of smoke.

LT: In the morning or afternoon?

VR: In the afternoon. It must have been about a half an hour after it got started, which would have been about two. I hadn't been home more than half an hour when Sally Behr called and offered me their little guest cottage which is no more. A very sad bit of irony. (The Behr's own house was totally destroyed that night.) I stayed home alone that night. Meanwhile it had spread very quickly.

LT: Weren't you worried?

VR: I was worried sick. I got up every two hours and looked out to see where the flames were. In fact, I have a picture that I took in the middle of the night. I didn't sleep. My dear friends Bob and Norma Wells offered me a bed at their place. They couldn't see the fire and so assumed that they were safe. I accepted their invitation. Meanwhile, as you suggested in your opening remarks, I held "open house" out on the deck for about three days. It was in no sense a party. It was worrisome wait. People brought lunches so they wouldn't have to miss a thing. They were anxious hours. The helicopters, seven of them, shuttling back and forth and bombers flying overhead. It was like a war zone.

LT: Sitting up here on the mountain, did you have a sense of really knowing what was going on down below? How were the lines of communication?

VR: They were a little strange. We had eight pieces of fire equipment on the fire road at one point of time. You know we have access to the road to the top of the mountain. The gate is usually locked but it was opened for access by the fire engines. One of the group on my deck was always calling the poor Fire Department or the Park Service to find out how things were going. We could see it all, we really could see everything. There were two disaster people, from two separate areas, who ordered their people to leave when it wasn't necessary. I knew

it wasn't necessary from where I sat. It's too bad they weren't right here watching. When the fire got to the Paradise Estates because of the sudden wind change, we could hear the fire sirens from here.

LT: Was that Paradise Estates or Drake's View?

VR: All the same thing. That was the terribly tragic part of course. We felt so helpless, we were sitting here watching and doing nothing, we felt so helpless. We did offer, when it was all over to take people in. I called the Red Cross and they didn't need any of us I guess.

LT: Did you have any trouble getting through to the Park people who you said were being assailed by calls?

VR: No, they were wonderful. I didn't call them, but some of the other people here did.

LT: What did the Behrs do after they were burned out?

V.R. They left. I offered them beds but they have family in Novato and so they went directly there. I don't know whether you are going to talk to Sally and Peter or not. You know they barely had time to get out with their lives.

LT: They said they had only ten minutes.

VR: And they prayed that the power would last long enough to get the garage door open. That is something we need to think about, isn't it I can't open mine manually, it's supposed to, but I can't do it

L T: We all need to do emergency drills. Any little interesting vignettes about how some of the people who came up here responded to what was going on?

VR: We were all very apprehensive, because the fire was getting closer. Every time we would see a firefighter, we would wave wildly to him and thank him. Other than I had no direct communication about anything that was going on, other than what seeing what went up my hill.

LT: Did you go up and down the mountain every day without any hesitation, or did you stay up here?

VR: Only as far as my house.

LT: There was not any regular traffic of fire equipment coming up and down Vision road?

VR: There was a lot one day going up. It didn't come back so far as we know. It must have come back eventually, but it probably went back down the other way. One day I found, at the bottom of the hill, some press people with their cameras. I was tempted to say go up to my house you would get the best view of all. But I resented them somehow, so I didn't give them

any help at all. I just told them they couldn't get up the mountain on this road.

LT: I can understand that -- you seeing them as outside intruders.

V.R. Exactly. I visited Janet West down in Inverness one day and looked across the Bay at a mesa which had become an airfield for helicopters - a place where pilots could refuel and park their aircraft at night.

LT: Where was this?

VR: Across the Bay from the boatel. Helicopters took off from there, dipped water out of the Bay with big buckets hanging from long cables and would fly over to the fire zone to dump water.

LT: I thought they were taking off from the field right across from the Park headquarters.

VR: There was a helicopter there, but the seven of them were stationed across the Bay. I understand that they had one that was doing nothing but traffic control for the other six. So they would know where to go and not run into one another doing it. It looked as though they were flying right into the flames or the smoke.

LT: They were brave and persistent people. The whole thing was a very remarkable operation.

VR: It was a wonderful operation, beautifully orchestrated.

LT: It might become a text book case as to how a fire should be fought.

VR: I'm not sure I'm right about this, but in the beginning they thought they might do as they had done in Yellowstone -- just let it go for the good of the land. Then, when it was threatening the town, they reversed all their procedures and got in all this help. One of the ironic things that happened was that the day before the fire, six of the bombers had been sent from nearly Santa Rosa to Los Angeles. Whoever was in power thought the fire danger was over up here.

LT: No, I hadn't heard that. I thought they were normally stationed at Santa Rosa.

VR: These were from Southern California. They are often needed down there too as we well know.

LT: I will find out about those things later on. It is much more important to stir the memories of people like you about that time.

VR: I really don't know any more to tell you except the hours were anxious ones.

LT: Did you ever get warnings from fire headquarters to leave your house?

VR: The woman who is in charge of our disaster area said we should leave. I packed my car,

which was in itself something to think about ahead of time. Trying to decide what to take was something. My car was packed with what I felt I needed and it was ready in the driveway with the keys in it. We were told to evacuate but we could see from here that we didn't need to."

LT: Were any of the people who came up here to stand on the deck and look at the fire among the unfortunates who lost houses?

VR: No, but there were some from Sea Haven who were told to leave and knew it wasn't necessary as they could see from here.

#

HOME OWNERS BURNED OUT

Interview with Ivan and Eleanor Stern, Inverness 04/29/96

Ivan and Eleanor Stern have lived in Inverness for more than a decade. She is an accomplished musician -- a concert singer, pianist, music teacher, and composer. He is a retired chemist, a fiddler and cabinet-maker. Both are avid hikers.

LT: When do you start rebuilding up atop Drakes View Drive? It's been a long time since the Mt. Vision fire and the major misfortune of losing your home to the wild fire. Yours was among some 44 others?

Ivan Stern: I understood the official count was 45.

LT: Were they all clustered in the area where you lost yours or widely spread out?

IS: I think they were pretty well clustered in the area at the top of Drake's View Drive, down Sunnyside and down around Dover and probably down to where the hill begins to get steep.

LT: On the third of October when the fire started did you have any report about it?

Eleanor Stern: We smelled the smoke from about 1:30 on and then saw planes flying low overhead trying to put the fire out. I got in touch with members of the Inverness Ridge Association's emergency disaster committee who live on our hill. I asked them about the situation. They were in touch with the fire chief and said, "Don't worry about it now. You don't have to leave now." So we carried on our business. Ivan was working at something. I was practicing the piano and it was Yom Kippur and I was planning to sing Kol Nidre that evening and as I was at the piano I suddenly saw smoke covering the sun. Everything was in a weird brown light. At that point I realized that we had better get moving. I got dressed to perform, fed the dog, and soon after that we got a call.

IS: In this respect we can backtrack a bit. Paul Phelps was one of the people on the emergency committee who seemed to be phoning various residents. At the beginning of the day we had no indication that we were ever going to lose our house. We did know that there was a lot of dried brush on the ground and, some years earlier, after our discussions about it, Eleanor had gone to see to it that our insurance was up to date, First of all we got an estimate from our architect as to what it would cost to rebuild the house and I took pictures of everything in the house and put them in the safe deposit box just as a backup. My recollection of that afternoon is that I was probably cleaning up after lunch when we saw the tankers flying overhead and the smoke get thicker and thicker.

LT: At four o'clock in the afternoon?

IS: No. One-thirty.

LT: That early on the third?

IS: Yes.

ES: We didn't see the smoke. We smelled it.

IS: Up until about three o'clock. Then as the afternoon wore on it got thicker and thicker and we had a call from Paul Phelps who said, "You'd better turn on the radio."

ES: This was around four.

IS: So we turned on KCBS and after about five or ten minutes of weather we hear, "Residents of Drake's View Drive and Paradise Ranch Estates are urged to evacuate immediately." This we did within fifteen minutes.

LT: 720 on the dial?

IS: There was no other station as far as I knew that would be broadcasting a warning I had tried KGO (710) but heard only their regular programs.

LT: Why do you think the disaster committee was so sure earlier that you were in no danger?

IS: I don't know. That was a conversation that Eleanor had.

ES: Frank Seidner and Paul Phelps said we don't have to evacuate now. Lu Phelps said: "If I were you I'd pack a suitcase". But Paul Phelps said: "No, don't worry. I'll let you know." So I didn't worry. But kept in touch with them.O

LT: The fire obviously got out of control.

IS: There was a 3D-mile and hour wind blowing right into the area where we were least protected.

LT: And so you just had just a few minutes to get out.

IS: We didn't know how much time we had. If we had known that we would have had an hour and a half or two hours to get out and we would have packed more.

ES: We left just a few minutes after we were told to evacuate.

IS: Another complicating factor was that Eleanor had an engagement to sing that evening. So we threw a few things together and went down the mountain for dinner at the Reyes Cafe where

we had a good view of the ridge and the fire. The fire got worse to the extent that we could see no longer see what was happening on the ridge. We decided at that time that the house had to be gone. I called up our number and the answering machine didn't work so we figured either the electricity was off or the house was gone. Actually for some reason the electricity was off because it wasn't until about six o'clock as I understand it that our house burned.

LT: Did you get any kind of report later on from the firefighters about whether or not they tried to save the house?

IS: One of Eleanor's singers Ray Moritz, was with the Bolinas Fire Department. He was one of the people up on the ridge fighting the fire in our area.

ES: I don't think he was fighting it. I think he was documenting it. Taking pictures of it. I saw pictures shortly afterwards of our house burning down. (Showing photographs) There is a firebrand. It's burning by the fence. Now you see how the fence is catching on fire. Now you see how the trees on the side of the house are catching on fire and now you see the house catching on fire... and so on and so forth.

LT: It must have been with somewhat mixed emotions. Did you carry out your engagement that evening?

ES: No, I couldn't.

LT: Can you describe some of the feelings that were going through you when you saw this thing happening? You were losing everything you had.

IS: I felt first of all energized, in a certain sense, to be leaving intact, For I thought it would be just a few minutes before something bad could happen. I didn't want Eleanor to be put in danger. My philosophy always has been that things are things. You can replace them. I felt it was best just to get out safely and in one piece and come what may as far as the house was concerned. We could replace things but not loved ones.

LT: You told me early on that the number of houses lost was somehow in dispute?

IS: My understanding is from the last time I heard the count of it was 45.

LT: And you knew most of the people who lost their houses or you came to know them after that.

IS: I think we knew a certain number. I'm not sure. I couldn't really recite the names of more than a half dozen of them.

LT: Did the firemen tell you later on that your house was destroyed because you hadn't cut back the brush from your house. There was too much tinder around it or what?

ES: Yes they did. The lot next to us on the west side of the house was undeveloped so there were a lot of trees there. And there were trees on the west side of the house on our land where the fire came from.

IS: In actuality though if there was a bad place for the fire to come from that was it, I guess. It came from the west side. But every other side of the house had at least 30 foot clearance. There were a few trees on our property on the west side of the house which were felled pretty quickly by the firefighters.

LT: So your house burned early on, about 6 p.m. on the third.

ES: I think it might have been a little later from the slides I saw. It looked kind of dark when the house was burning.

LT: So what happened? Where did you stay that night?

IS: We drove to San Francisco and spent the night with Eleanor's daughter.

ES: We wanted to be with her.

IS: I did do something strange the next day. I was feeling odd. We went in shopping for groceries to be sure we'd have a bit of food and stuff. I was in the Safeway at the Marina. The doors were open. It was a balmy but windy night. The smoke was absolutely intense in San Francisco, forty-five miles away at least, by car. I asked for something from one of the ladies at the store. She led me to it. I said, "By the way, do you smell that smoke?" She said, "Oh, yes, it's terrible." I said, "That's my house burning down."

LT: Then you say you were investigating various places to stay and finally you found one.

IS: We stayed with Eleanor's daughter until Jim Campe offered us the house of his mother who had died recently.

LT: Was that in Pt. Reyes?

IS: Inverness Park. He lives in Inverness but his mother had lived in Inverness Park.

LT: Is Jim rebuilding your house?

IS: Yes, he is the architect.

LT: Fine.

IS: We had known the house, as a matter of fact.

ES: It was very nice. The place was so beautiful to have. Everyone reaching out to help us. You just can't imagine how the community came together to be a really caring group that tried to do everything possible for those who lost their homes. They set up in the school an emergency area. They had lists of people who volunteered their homes for those of us who lost ours and provided message stations.

IS: Free telephone service.

ES: A few days later when we came back to the area I walked into the bank and asked to use the phone and they said, "Here's the phone." They were just so wonderful and it was wonderful to stay in Jim Campe's mother's house. It's small and cozy.

LT: A number of firefighters who have been around for a long time said they'd never seen the aftermath of a fire like this, so much unity and cooperativeness in the community.

IS: It was really striking to us because we had discussed very seriously about possibility relocating to somewhere else for several days. In fact we went so far as to go to a real estate agent and have her show us a few houses in a place other than Pt. Reyes or Inverness. When we came back to Pt. Reyes we could walk the street and people we hardly knew would walk up to us and say how sorry they were and ask how they could help.

ES: It was only 24 hours after the fire that we realized that we didn't want to move away.

LT: As a neighbor of yours, I'm glad you didn't. Any other retrospective insights into fires and losing a house and living in a community like Inverness, or Pt. Reyes that you want to set down for posterity?

ES: I'm thankful that there were only 45 houses because those of us who did lose our houses were able for the most part to find a rental unit in the area. If there were two or three times the number of homes destroyed people would not have been able to remain in this area.

LT: It's been a telling episode. No one hurt. No one killed.

ES: There were pets.

IS: Our dog, Sally, several weeks after we moved into Jim Campe's house, developed a terrible syndrome -- essentially of exhaustion.

ES: Shock.

IS: We learned later she'd developed a tumor on her heart. but it as quite shocking because shortly before her first attack, I had taken her for a swim at the dam, a place we both dearly loved.

LT: I'm so glad you're going to be staying among us, build again and flourish up there on Drake's View.

IS: It certainly has some improved aspects to it.

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THE HOMEOWNER SPARED

Interview with J.B. Blunk, Inverness, CA 12/08/96

J.B. Blunk is a sculptor. His works are in museums and public buildings throughout the United States. His sculpture "The Planet" commissioned and owned by the Oakland Museum, was a centerpiece for its opening in 1969. He has lived in Inverness for 40 years at the edge of the forest in a house he designed and built himself. His children are Bruno, Rufus, and Mariah Nielson. His companion is Christine Nielson.

LT: Friends and strangers call you J.B. Why?

JB: That's all I've ever been called. My mother decreed it and I have not been called anything else since. The only place where my name "James Blane" appears is in my passport.

LT: About the Mount Vision fire; you lived on the front line of the firefight, a precarious place, was it not?

JB: Yes, that's the kind of place it turned out to be. We were the farthest out southward from Inverness itself. We were fortunately at the right place at the right time because we were closest to the fire and so to the firefighters as well. In order to save Inverness from going up in flames, they had to save us first.

LT: You were up on top of the ridge with the fire raging below and around you. With you was an army of hand crew firefighters with fire engines and bulldozers, trying to hold the line.

JB: In a nutshell that's what happened.

LT: Your house was on the frontier.

JB: That's where they decided to divert the fire to try to save Inverness.

LT: You must have felt helpless up there.

JB: I didn't really feel helpless until 3:30 in the morning on Thursday.

LT: That was Thursday the 5th?

JB: It's the day the fire came roaring up the canyon in front of our house. Until 3:30 there was still a chance that it was not going to go into the canyon and come up the slope in front of our place.

LT: It was already pretty far into the canyon, was it not?

JB: Yes. What aroused me at 3:30 in the morning was a roaring noise. I got up and went to the

window. The sound was very loud. Then I opened the sliding glass door. The noise was overwhelming, unlike any sound I'd ever heard. Visually, I had never witnessed anything like it. The big pines on the south side of canyon -- probably about 300 yards across -- were, one-by-one, exploding in the tremendous heat of the fire.

LT: Bishops?

JB: All Bishop pines. Each one was like a big fire ball. When they exploded into the sky they showered incandescent pieces clear across the canyon.

LT: It seems amazing the fire didn't catch on the north side of the canyon.

JB: It did. The ground fire would ignite the trunk of each tree and travel upward to the top of the tree where the limbs and resins are. Instead of just burning, the tops exploded into great fireballs. Every one of those trees actually went off - that is they blew up. That resulted in the roaring sound caused by the air rushing in to fill the vacuum. There didn't seem to be any wind blowing. Still the embers were being carried across the canyon. I'd never seen such fireworks. It was exciting and terrifying at the same time. Then I looked down and could see the bottom of the canyon was already burning.

LT: So you thought about leaving?

JB: Being on the second story of the house I could look straight down into the canyon and see the blaze. I thought then that the fire was coming up to the house and that we'd better get out. There was nothing that I could possibly do to stop it. We walked out the driveway and went next door on our way out to see if we could help establish the fire break around Gordon Onslow Ford's house. It was then we saw a great troop of fire fighters marching up toward us in single file. Unbeknownst to us, a plan had been put into action to marshal all fire-fighting forces to divert the fire around Inverness. In doing so it would have to be diverted around our house. There were more firefighters than I'd ever seen before. They kept coming. Regardless of the number of them, I never dreamed that even this number of men could turn the tide. They had, backing them up, fire engines, bulldozers, tankers, and other gear all clustered some two hundred yards from the house. First, they cut down all the trees in front of the house at the top of the ridge and let them fall down into the canyon. The idea was to contain and divert the fire westerly along the ridge and in the canyon.

LT: There must have an army of men just handling chain saws.

JB: There were also hundreds of men using those big hand tools --mccclouds they call them a kind of over-grown hoe. Most of the firefighters used hand tools. Big dozers were waiting for the fire as it crept up the north wall of the canyon. Then they started to push dirt atop the burning brush along the edge of the ridge and spreading out the ground fire. They kept worrying it with their machines and pushing it to the northwest to a place where the forest was already burned out. Otherwise it would have gone over the road along the ridge and down the slope into Inverness. There's no question but that is what would have happened.

LT: When did you leave?

JB: We went down at three thirty in the morning. It was just dawn when we returned. I had expected everything to be burned up. Lo and behold the house was still there. A miracle.

LT: Gordon Onslow Ford never left?

JB: He didn't have to. The diversion saved his place too. The fire had been diverted but it was still a serious threat. A crown fire had started southwest of the house. It threatening to jump the road. If it had, nothing could have stopped it. Happily, by then, it was just light enough to resume air operations. The big bombers appeared low overhead with fire retardant. In three passes they killed the crown fire. They had also, inadvertently, dumped retardant on our house, enough to dust it with red residue but doing no damage. The next day a man in a business suit came around. He asked if the fire retardant had caused any damage. We told him it had painted our house red, that was all. He was an official checking potential liability problems the government might face.

LT: You are surrounded on two or three sides by state and federal lands up there, are you not?

JB: Well, we're in the Nature Conservancy and then we're within three hundred yards of that portion of the National Seashore that comes over the ridge and maybe two hundred yards from the State Park boundary.

LT: So you live on a small land peninsula between state and federal properties.

JB: I built our house on a spur that sticks out into the canyon. If you go up on the ridge now and look down you can see how the fire burned around and under that spur.

LT: You lost those beautiful trees in front of the house that screened you. But at least you and Onslow Ford did not lose your houses.

JB: True. I never would have believed it possible, no matter what resources they had in the way of crews and dozers. Saving our house has been one of the great blessings of my life.

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THE NATURALIST

Interview with Jules Evens, Pt. Reyes Station, CA, 12/13/95

Jules Evens is a naturalist and writer who is a leading authority on the flora and fauna of the Point Reyes Peninsula and author of a definitive book about the area.

He was a member of the B.A.E.R. team that studied the impact of the Mt. Vision fire immediately after the event. He has been a long-time resident of Pt. Reyes Station where he lives with his wife Meryl and daughter Veery and son Noah.

LT: Jules, you have expressed a somewhat optimistic view of the impact of the fire. You say that there are different ways of looking at it?

JE: I think of the fire as being two fires, really. One being the human fire, with all the tragedies involved with it. People's loss is very real and each one deals with it in his own way. There is also the environmental fire -- the ecological event -- that is inevitable, given the habitat and the climate here. I see that fire as not only inevitable, but as necessary and wonderful in a way because it is the prerequisite for the regeneration of that habitat. From an ecological viewpoint, there is also sort of an irony to it. If you walked through the forest two months ago before the forest fire, you could see that the fire was ready to happen. Then if you go there today all you see is the process of regeneration beginning to happen. So the opposite potential is always inherently present.

LT: How long has it been since there has been a regenerative fire of similar scope in the area?

JE: I'm not sure of the answer to that and I should get back to you with it because I have been asking myself the same question. I know the Park has done small prescribed burns fairly regularly over the past decade or so, with increasing frequency as it has become more acceptable and as people have come to understand the reason for it. As for a fire on that scale, I'm not sure. There has been logging in the adjacent forest as recently as in the early 1960's which had much the effect of fire, at least initially.

LT: You mentioned earlier that the forest had become a "senile forest."

JE: If you walk through portions of the forest that have not been burned in thirty or forty or sixty years, you'll notice that many of the trees are much the same age, all rather old. Bishop Pines are not long-lived trees. They live seventy to one hundred years -- something in that range. If you walk through portions of Tomales State Park that haven't burned you'll notice there are few, if any, young trees in the understory. They are all rather large trees of uniform size and age. An ecological term for that is senescence. The forest is senile, it is not regenerating.

LT: It cannot reproduce itself?

JE: Right.

LT: Bishop Pines were the predominant species?

JE: Largely where the fire was, they were dominant. There were other trees mixed in: Douglas Fir, Bay, Madrone, and Tan Oak. Tan Oak is largely an edge or seral species; Bishop Pine is the climax species in that section of the Park. The fire stopped to the south where Douglas Fir became dominant.

LT: When you say "seral" species what do you mean?

JE: Tan Oak, which is a fairly common tree in the forest, never becomes dominant. It is in the intermediate stage in the succession of the forest. The Bishop Pine tends to be dominant as long as there are events that serve to regenerate it, such as fire.

LT: Walking in the forest, I've seen new Bishop Pines sprouting along the trails. Yet we have talked about the problem of the cones not being able to broadcast regenerative seeds without the heat of fire. You had a particular term for Bishop Pine cones did you not?

JE: "Closed cones." Yes, some regeneration will occur in the absence of fire. Probably on the edge of the forest or in places where there has been disturbance of the soil and some viable seeds have managed to find their way there. If you think of the forest as a whole, the likelihood of maintaining its extent for a long period of time is probably not possible without fire.

LT: What of the effect of the fire upon animals whose habitat was in the burned area of the forest? Did the fire actually encourage the survival of particular species and lessen the survivability of others? And what is the reason for the particular kinds of species we find in Point Reyes Peninsula area?

JE: That is a large question. Rather than think of an individual species it is useful to think of mosaics of species, or of large groupings of species. The complex of species that we have here are the results of many factors. Our latitude, the overlap of species that come from the south and north, and the equitable climate. As far as the Bishop Pine forest goes, it certainly has its own mosaic of species and there are some species that occur only in the Bishop Pine forest, for instance, a species such as the deer fern. Some of the birds that occur there occur less frequently outside the forest; examples are pygmy nuthatches, some of the woodpeckers, and winter wrens. The Bishop Pine forest creates a habitat for these species that is a kind of optimum. There are some species, notably the Point Reyes mountain beaver, that occur primarily in the Bishop Pine forest, although they can occur also in the coastal scrub.

LT: Would you describe the mountain beaver?

JE: Let me describe its distribution first. It occurs in the Douglas Fir forest and in coastal scrub, but is essentially confined to that related area where the fire was, and a little to the north and south of there. It is a large rodent that burrows underground and rarely comes above ground. Imagine a gopher the size of a large guinea pig. It is not a beaver and it doesn't

necessarily live in mountains. So that is a misnomer. It is a primitive rodent that eats primarily things like ferns, fronds, and other similar soft vegetation. Mountain beavers live in a burrow system underground, in colonial "villages." They need to be together because their habitat is restricted to steep banks where there is soft soil and access to water sources. They tend to be individual, rather solitary, each having its own tunnel system. Because they are sedentary animals they probably suffered significantly in the fire. Walking through the fire area days after the fire, we found areas where we hadn't known that mountain beavers occurred. We found their burrow systems because the vegetation had been burned away. They build their burrows so there is an air current into each burrow thus getting rid of excess carbon dioxide that builds up in an enclosed system. We imagine that the fire was simply sucked into the burrow and extinguished them all. It will be interesting to see how long it will take for some of these sites to recolonize with beavers. I suspect it will be a long time. This colony here has been isolated long enough to become a distinct subspecies called the Point Reyes Mountain Beaver. They are a little smaller and a little redder than other mountain beavers that live further north such as in Mendocino County and British Columbia.

LT: Does one make the mistake of looking at the burrows and saying these are gopher holes?

JE: They are much larger. It would be hard to misidentify them. They look more like fox holes although you see them -- hundreds of them clustered together -- only on hillsides. There is another subject I want to allude to relative to the mountain beaver. If you read that paper I gave you on erosion after fire you will see that a contributory cause of erosion can be animal burrows. Naturalists call this "bioturbation." Water will move through the burrows and create greater erosion than in areas where there are no rodents.

LT: The mountain beaver is seriously endangered. What about the spotted owls, are they okay?

JE: We lost some spotted owl territory in the fire. Individuals may have escaped, although we are not certain. It's hard to track living creatures. They will be forced into adjacent habitats and when breeding season comes in February or March, they will have to establish themselves in areas that may already be occupied. It certainly had a negative impact on spotted owls. Whether there is enough habitat out there in adjacent areas to support those displaced individuals is an open question.

LT: I read somewhere that there is a Point Reyes silver butterfly that seems to be endangered.

JE: Yes.

LT: How can they determine that? Because their habitats have been burned?

JE: They breed close to the coast in the Bishop Pine forest - in places where the fire went down to the dunes. Their habitat was quite affected. There are several dozen species that are either rare, threatened, or endangered, that have been identified as having their habitats impacted by the fire. Some are in the forest and some are down on the coastal strand.

LT: I noticed that some of the small animals of Point Reyes, the jumping mouse and pond turtle, are identified as being particularly identified with this area.

IE: The Peninsula is really an island. As Howard Gillian called it: "an island in time". It is physically an island separated from adjacent forest by grassland and the San Andreas Fault. Some of the more sedentary species that have been there long enough have diverged from their closest relatives sufficiently to obtain that status of being a Point Reyes subspecies.

LT: What about plant communities? Were any wiped out? Are they all going to come back?

IE: Certainly some endangered plants were affected, but for the most part the fire was not extensive enough to impact all the population of these various species. Our best guess would be that a lot of these plants will come back in greater health than they were in prior time. It may take years. In some cases it may be instantaneous.

LT: You did mention, I think, that perhaps we will even see some new or hitherto dormant species emerge next spring?

IE: Yes, I expect next spring we will see some species that are rarely seen in Point Reyes species that happen to be particularly adapted to post fire environments. For example Zigadin ("fire lily") in February or March, depending on rainfall. We will go out there and some of the areas of bare ground now will have these beautiful yellow lillies blooming for a short six weeks. A lot of other annual flowers will be coming up also, particularly fireweed -- Epilopium -- will show its magenta color. There is a list of plants that tend to come up after fire and I expect to see many of them here. Already the growth of shrubbery out there is so vigorous that they may compete with the flowers. We will have to go out and look.

LT: The ash left by the fire acts as a fertilizer -- a stimulant to growth -- does it not?

IE: A lot of the nutrients that are in plants like a Bishop Pine tree or a coyote brush, are returned to the soil in the form of ash when these plants burn. These nutrients become available to whatever species might exploit them, given the right conditions. In a senile forest, a lot of nutrients are lost in the upper stories of the forest. The soil becomes more and more depleted. Fire recycles nutrients back into the soil, starting the growth process anew.

LT: Hitherto, I'd considered you to be a particular expert on birds, but obviously you're an all-purpose naturalist. Maybe we can talk a little about the bird population on the Point Reyes Peninsula before and after the fire. What is your prognosis?

IE: I am not very worried about the birds that were directly impacted by the fire. The obvious species - the spotted owl, the osprey -- were affected as were the prey that the spotted owl eat. Species like nuthatches, wren tits, and small passerine birds probably could escape the fire for the most part. They could have found refuge in stream-side thickets or moved beyond the perimeter of the fire. During and after the fire, when we walked up on the ridge, we saw rather large mixed species flocks. It seems that a lot of the birds were moving and foraging together

rather than in discrete units in search of available food that they couldn't find on their own. It will be interesting to see how various species move back into the burn area. In what complexity or what groupings they move back in. There are several species that were predictably most impacted. Those would be the most sedentary, the least able to fly such as quail, wren tits, white-crowned sparrows that nest on the outer coast and the coastal scrub area. There are a few others, but those are the main ones that come to mind. They were initially able to find refuge in the unburned areas, whether their survival over the long term is assured remains to be seen. People will be looking at that, we will be doing some studies out there. The Point Reyes Bird Observatory is doing some plots out near Limantour Beach and will be looking at individual species and how they recolonize.

LT: You were a member of the of the team that prepared the B.A.E.R. report. Would you kindly tell me what the acronym B.A.E.R. stands for?

IE: Bum Area Emergency Rehabilitation.

LT: The appellation has been used before?

IE: Apparently you have spoken with some Park people. The Park wasn't even aware of their existence. The B.A.E. R. team just showed up the day of the fire. Gary Fellers, one of the naturalists at the Park, told me they didn't even know B.A.E.R. existed. And suddenly, there they were.

LT: Did you play any role during the actual fire, advising Park Service people?

IE: I did work with the B.A.E.R. team. When they came to town they did a little research and talked to people in the Park. They had a list of species that they had to account for. The B.A.E.R. team was mandated to assess the fire's impact on threatened and endangered species, so they had a list of species they had to check out. They got here they found people who were familiar with distribution or biology of the species and contacted them. I had worked on various projects and publications so they contacted me about several birds, including osprey, spotted owl, black rail and common yellowthroat, and asked me to evaluate what the impact might have been. I was also asked to design a monitoring plan for use after the fire to assess the damage.

LT: Have you done that or are you still doing it?

IE: We prepared the report and gave it to them. They incorporated it into their plan. Because of the biology of these species, in February or March, we will go out and do some monitoring. They have the funding for it. We will try to evaluate the damage to certain species and their future population levels.

LT: You will be "their man" in Point Reyes?

IE: I will be working with their entire team, and other people, some of whom are already here. We will set up study sites and, depending on the species we are looking at, we will have a mix of people surveying those sites. For example, Limantour will have a transect of stations going

probably across the coastal slope surveying for species x,y, and z. We hope there will be funding for several years though right now the funding goes for a year at a time.

LT: Any disastrous things happen to the marine life in the area?

IE: Interestingly, in Limantour, the fire did encroach into the tidal marsh, which I consider marine life. One of the species we will be looking at is black rail. The species didn't occur in any numbers at Limantour but their habitat was impacted so we're going to look at that. *As far as those species are concerned that occur below the high tide line, none was impacted that we know of, only the species along the tide line -- mostly plants.*

LT: Is there anything else you would like to add?

IE: I think all the processing has gone slowly because it was such a large event. I remember observing the fire on October 4th, standing out here and looking up at the ridge. I was not concerned then, thinking "oh well, there is a little fire." When the fire unfolded and progressed over the next days we all came to the realization that it was a major event. I think we're all still processing it now. For instance, it would be interesting to go out after this present series of storms has passed to see what erosion has happened as a result. It is going to be an ongoing event for all of us.

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