

MESSAGE SCAN FOR NOLAN SMITH

To NOLAN SMITH:R05F17D54A

From: Bob Brady:R05F01A  
Postmark: 24 Jan 96 1326 hrs Delivered: 24 Jan 96 1328 hrs  
Status: Certified Previously read  
Subject: Johnstone Fire 7/20/60 Mt Baldy RD, Angeles NF

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Comments:

I remember it well. McIntyre sent me your inquiry. I was on the fire for the duration but don't recall any fatalities, except ALMOST my own and several others. This is a story I wrote for our Centennial newsletter and other prestigious publications. You know, "eye witness-I was there" kinda dramatic stuff...Robert Brady

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PREY  
JOHNSTONE FIRE ENCOUNTER, 1960  
by Robert F. Brady

Firemen hate to lose! The Johnstone Fire kicked us around for 18 hours, then bottled us up in Tanbark Station, like cornered rats and circled for the kill.

It was sometime in mid-morning. The sun was out, birds were chirping and we were asleep, after working all night on the Boundary Fire. We were enjoying a brief respite from a week of marathon fire assignments, when the Mt. Baldy Station phone rang and the Johnstone Fire was visited upon us. Engine 2-12 crew was back in action. I was the Driver/Operator. It was July 20, 1960, exactly nine years, to the day, that men first walked on the moon.

The fire was on Johnstone Ridge burning into the San Dimas Experimental Forest. It taunted us and defied all firefighting effort, burning out hoselay after hoselay. The fire seemed possessed of an evilness that stalked us like we were it's prey.

We had linked up with Gordon Rowley's Engine crew (Engine 2-11, Lower San Antonio Station), and an engine from the San Bernardino NF, Car 2-2 (Bill Longacre-DFMO), and two patrol units, P 2-10 (Ray Payne) from Tanbark and P 2-4 from Dalton.

Backfiring from the Johnstone-Tanbark road was the next order of madness. Gordon Rowley and Walt Hesbol started firing-out the roadside by hanging off the rear bumper of the patrol unit, wielding fuses, as the truck bumped slowly down the road.

I made a water run with Engine 2-12 into Tanbark Station, the scientific headquarters for the Experimental Forest at that time. On the return trip I entered a new dimension in motoring! Smoke suddenly shrouded everything and garish red flames shot across the hood of the truck as the fire converged along the road. It was wonderful! Welcome to terror! Gears ground, wheels turned and the truck lumbered through like a great wounded beast, churning up burning bushes and other debris in it's wake.

The devious fire had jumped the road and then swept up out of Bell Canyon with a vengeance and tried to annihilate everyone. Fender paint bubbled like a witches cauldron, hose packs smoked like furnaces, and our egos were crushed. Gordon Rowley's plastic sun glass frames melted into the plastic seat covers of Engine 2-11. We had to abandon the ridge and start a new line east from the San Dimas Truck Trail.

Progress was slow during the night. Sometime in the night Longacre heard a rattlesnake buzz and froze. A good thing too because he was standing on the snakes head. A tree started "burning with vigor" near Rowley who retreated

swiftly down the line. At the same time Hesbol was hurrying up the line with more hosepacks. They collided with each other in a resounding "pink" of hardhats, and both ended up sprawled on the ground. Just before dawn the fire went berserk and we were routed. We fled to Tanbark, the eye of the storm, trailing burned fire hose.

Demoralized, starved, grimy with dirt, ashes and "fireline grit" that gets in the eyes, teeth, and down the collar, we huddled around our trucks in Tanbark. The pre-dawn sky glowed a deep apocalyptic orange and it seemed like the whole world was on fire. We gnawed on C-rations while a glowing ring of flame swept the horizon for 360 degrees. The Great Survival Debate ensued (our survival) and options were slim. It was downright scary, then Gordon Rowley gave us a news flash. "Stop worrying about it, we're already dead! I just heard it on the news." Sure enough, the ever-present portable radio spewing out rock and roll and news on the hour had settled our fate. Comic relief! Somehow it made us feel better.

Feeling almost like firemen again we addressed the task of saving Tanbark (along with our hides). We played cat and mouse with the advancing fire, running in and out of Tanbark. The first leg of the fire hit near the gas house and oil storage area. Lucky us! Engine 2-12 got to go and check it out. Lonacre jumped on the crew seat. The gas house, and wooden rack of oil drums and other flammables were indeed on fire! Longacre hit the gas house with one hoseline and I hit the drum rack with the other hoseline. I had visions of giant "Hollywood" explosions and headlines that ran "Forestry Firefighters Vaporized!" But we managed to put the fires on the rack and gas house out and had a very brief respite.

Then, the main fire hit on all fronts and there was nowhere else to run, we swallowed our hearts. Engines scuttled around like big green bugs and hoses were strung like spaghetti. Firemen chased flames, flames chased firemen, Longacre lit backfires like mad and Engine 2-11 pumped the station swimming pool dry. Thousands of gallons of water were pumped on roofs, walls, trucks, people, and burning hillsides.

The fire tried hard to wipe us out, but cornered rats are stubborn. When the smoke finally cleared Tanbark was intact (except one small outbuilding) and so were we, though we didn't look or smell too good. We reveled in victory. The spell was broken, we found salvation and restored egos. The fire of course roared off on all points of the compass to devour more real estate. Oh, we chased it for another week or so, but it wasn't the same. The Fire was the Prey, not us!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Robert Brady spent 30 years with the Forest Service on the Angeles. He Started as a crewman on the Dalton Engine in 1958 and put in 21 years in fire management - Engine Operator, Hot Shot Foreman, Engine Foreman, Patrolman, and Fox Field Air Tanker Base Assistant Manager. This spanned three districts, Mt. Baldy; Tujunga; and Valyermo.

For ten years he worked in the Public Affairs Office at the S.O. In addition to Forest Service time, he spent two years in the U.S. Army in 1964-65 which included a tour in Korea. Robert and his wife Linda live in the Antelope Valley.

# # #

MESSAGE DISPLAY FOR NOLAN SMITH

To NOLAN SMITH:R05F17D54A

From: Patti Hiram:R05F17A

Postmark: 13 Feb 96 1357 hrs

Delivered: 13 Feb 96 1400 hrs

Status: Previously read

Subject: Reply to: Yellow Hound Fire

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Reply text:

From: Patti Hiram:R05F17A

Date: 13 Feb 96 1357 hrs

Nolan - sounds as though we lost these records when the warehouse  
burned a few years ago. We can do more scrounging if you want - just  
yell

Preceding message:

From: NOLAN SMITH:R05F17D54A

Date: 08 Jan 96 1418 hrs

Carmel/Patty - Gene Markley was on a fire crew at Foresthill in the  
early 1960s. Gene was on the Volcano fire and many others during his  
stint. Gene is interested in getting some information on the Yellow  
Hand Fire that he thinks was located near the "End-of-the-World", see  
the Greek Store Quad T14N R12E Sec. 26. He recalls that the fire  
occured around 1960, and that there were two injuries. One of the  
injuries Gene remembers helping load the guy on the Helicopter. The  
second injury he recalls that an inmate was injured after falling off  
a cliff, apparently trees below him saved his life. Gene would like  
confirmation of what he remembers and any additional information that  
you might be able to dig up. thx nolan

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MESSAGE DISPLAY FOR NOLAN SMITH

To N.Smith:r05f17D54A

From: Mike McIntyre:R05F01A

Postmark: 16 Feb 96 1003 hrs

Delivered: 16 Feb 96 1006 hrs

Status: Certified Previously read

Subject: Johnstone Fire

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Message:

I dont know if the person i passed your note on to about needing info has responded but I have another name - Chuck Hartley...he just retired as the AFMO for the District the Johnstone Fire was on and he was on the Johnstone Fire as well as the Pole Fire which was going on at the same time....."they were bouncing back and forth between the two" His phone number is (909) 980-5127...he would be a good lead.

Mike

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MESSAGE DISPLAY FOR NOLAN SMITH

To N.Smith

From: PAULA NELSON

Postmark: 09 Jan 96 0819 hrs

Delivered: 09 Jan 96 0820 hrs

Subject: Forwarded: Yellow Hound Fire

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Comments:

From: PAULA NELSON:R05F17D54A

Date: 09 Jan 96 0819 hrs

Nolan, my records show that the Yellow Hand fire was smoker caused and burned 24 acres. The origin location is listed as SW 1/4 Sec 26, T14N,R12E It started on 8/7/60. There's no other data here and I don't believe we can get access to the FtCollins computer program where all this data is stored. (It's a problem much larger than us!) 1960 was a big fire year for the district acreage wise and fire start wise (26). Jack is the only person I can think of who might remember the fire..or Jerry Vice, perhaps. Paula

Previous comments:

From: Patti Hiram:R05F17A

Date: 08 Jan 96 1612 hrs

We have 2 avenues: corporate memories  
5100-29

Dan - Can you xerox the fire report and ship that over to Nolan pls?  
Do you know of anyone around who may have been on that incident?  
Cliff: FYI. Paula: old-timers on the RD that might know something?

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