NOMINATION FOR SEARCH AND RESCUE OPERATION OF THE YEAR

THE POWERHOUSE FIRE

In the mid-afternoon of Thursday, May 30, 2013, electricians from Southern California Edison, were working to energize high voltage power lines just north of Hydroelectric Powerhouse No.1, in San Francisquito Canyon, just north of Santa Clarita. The cause of what happened next is still under investigation, but we do know this: something touched off a wildfire which ended up burning over 33,000 acres and destroying 53 structures over the next eleven days. It would take over 2100 fire fighters from 40 agencies to finally contain the fire. It would threaten thousands of homes displacing over 2000 citizens and costing in excess of 18 million dollars.

The above facts only provide a small glimpse of the magnitude of this incident, but don’t really even begin to tell the whole story. Santa Ana winds, average temperatures of 105 degrees, very low humidity and over 80 years of overgrown brush, coupled with extremely steep terrain begin to paint the picture. A Los Angeles Times article about the fire summed it up best, “Fanned by high winds, the ultra-dry brush literally explodes at the invitation of a spark.” And explode it did.

In spite of this, had it not been for the heroic efforts of Johnny Johnston, Andrew “Goose” Petty, Robb Thompson, Trevor Samoriski, Jeff Godde, Chris Neil, and numerous Volunteer on Patrol members (Jay and Debi Tallent, Dick and Susan Zahnter, Joe Brong, Mike Foxworth, Frank Toothaker, Gene Heintz, and Robin Kennard), there is a strong probability there would have been substantial loss of life due to this fire.

On the first day of the fire, members of the Antelope Valley and Santa Clarita Search and Rescue Team responded and assisted with the evacuation of numerous homes in Green Valley. While doing this, they were notified of hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail. The fear was due to high winds and the constantly changing direction of the blaze, the hikers would be trapped and surrounded by flames.

Johnny Johnston notified Aero Bureau and a helicopter was immediately dispatched to assist with locating the hikers. Within 20 minutes, the hikers had been located. Search and rescue vehicles picked up the hikers and returned them to safety.

On the second day the fire had retreated back into the forest area, away from homes. Still burning out of control and being fanned by high winds, the threat could have resumed at any time, but at least for now it was not threatening the local communities.

On the third day, Saturday, June 2nd, things had changed. The winds shifted, blowing the fire back towards the communities of Lake Hughes and Elizabeth Lake. The Search and Rescue team had been doing quad runner training and saw the huge plume of smoke.

Acton/Aqua Dulce Resident Deputy and Assistant Reserve Coordinator, Scott Short was called away from training and ordered to respond to the command post. Scott quickly learned the fire had spread dramatically, doubling in the size it had amassed the previous three days, just within the past hour. He called Johnny Johnston and requested the Search and Rescue Team respond to the burn area to assist with road closures, to assess the situation and to let residents know the fire was headed in their direction.

The Department’s EOC had been set up and emergency response team units from throughout the county were responding code 3 to the area to assist with road closures. The problem was, they had been notified too late to be effective, as the fire was moving faster than anyone could have imagined.

By the time the search and rescue team had gotten to the area, the fire command was beginning evacuations in the Elizabeth Lake area. The team members went door to door clearing each house along Elizabeth Lake Road.

Johnny and Goose were flagged down by a Fire Battalion Chief from Station151, who told them the fire was heading towards Lake Hughes, Elizabeth Lake and Green Valley. He requested they begin evacuations in those areas immediately, with a priority in Lake Hughes.

Johnny notified the command post in Palmdale and told them of the evacuation orders, especially in the Lake Hughes area. Due to extremely poor radio communications, Johnny was instructed to handle the coordination of the evacuation from his location.

Johnny and Goose formulated a plan based upon the wind direction and speed of the fire, assessing which areas needed evacuating first. They sent the other Search and Rescue units to begin evacuations in those areas.

They established a command post on the hood of the rescue truck on Elizabeth Lake Road. Additional units began to arrive. The Volunteers on Patrol were the first to help. All of the VOP’s who responded live in the area and know the streets well. Several of them lived within the evacuation area and their houses were in danger of destruction. Most had been awake for the previous 72 hours, waiting on pins and needles to see what the fire was going to do next.

Soon, other patrol cars from all over Los Angeles County were responding to assist. As Johnny was assembling the Volunteers, a team from Compton arrived. The Sergeant of the team stated, “Are you Johnston? We were told to report to you for our orders.” Johnny, not missing a beat, told the sergeant and deputies to follow the Volunteers. They know the area and Johnny had briefed them as to the evacuation plan. This would also ensure the patrol personnel didn’t get lost on the winding narrow roads and would be able to escape to safety should the fire shift in an attempt to trap them.

The fire continued to rage, cresting two hilltops as it made its way closer to their makeshift command post. The smoke was so thick it literally blocked the sunlight, forcing them to use flashlights, spotlights and headlights in order to see.

Goose ended up dealing with a medical emergency involving an elderly female with chest pains and shortness of breath, as Johnny continued to brief and allocate deputies from throughout the county to primary areas and then having them report back to his CP. Paramedics eventually arrived, continuing first aid for the female who was eventually transported by ambulance to the hospital.

After four hours, the fire had made its way over its final obstacle between it and the make shift command post, by cresting the last hill. Ash and flaming debris poured down like snow. The truck, the road and everything was covered in grey ash and glowing embers. It was like a light blanket of snow at night with small orange glowing lights. Visibility was getting poor and they could feel the heat of the fire getting warmer with every passing minute.

They had reached a point where they determined they had done all they could do and it was time to get the first responders out of the area to safety. They directed about 40 patrol cars and numerous VOP units out of the area and to the staging area at Elizabeth Lake Golf Course.

By the time all units and animal control had left, the fire had jumped Lake Hughes, a half square mile lake, and was now taking hold of the wooded area surrounding them. Johnny advised the main CP they were getting out and he was relinquishing command. Although they knew it was time to get out, there was a problem. The truck they were using as a CP, suddenly died. Apparently, having all the lights on and the truck idling for hours drained the battery to the point the engine could no longer run.

With the aid of 260R, Robb Thompson and Trevor Samoriski they were towed by a strap at five miles per hours through the raging fire, which was burning on both sides of the road around them.

Several structures were destroyed in the evacuated area. The remaining houses were saved due to air attack helicopters and the giant 747 super scooper.

Had it not been for the actions of Johnny, Goose, Jeff, Chris, Robb and Trevor, coupled with the coordinated efforts of the Volunteers on Patrol and the response team, the evacuation of the residents in these communities could have ended much differently. Additionally, Department members for Lennox, Lomita, Compton, East Los Angeles, and South Los Angeles were literally lost in the winding mountain roads of the area. The quick thinking of placing the VOP’s with Department personnel undoubtedly kept them from becoming lost and potential casualties.

Members of the Fire Command and Sheriff’s Emergency Operations Bureau were impressed with the command and coordination of this evacuation. So impressed, they ordered a Countywide call-out for all the Search and Rescue Teams within the county for assistance on the following day.

On the next day, Sunday, the fire had grown well beyond all expectations. It had jumped the California Aqueduct and was now headed north toward the flat desert area known as Antelope Acres. Extreme heat and relentless winds helped to fan the flames, now burning at the rate of two miles every half an hour on several fronts.

Members of Santa Clarita, Montrose, and Dan Dimas Search and Rescue Teams, as well as Antelope Valley, responded to help. Some teams were helping with road closures, while others were patrolling the burn areas.

Jeff Godde and Chris Neil were blocking the road at 170th Street West and Lancaster Road watching the fire move closer and closer to their location. Chris was looking at his IPhone Google Maps App and saw the fire was headed directly for a housing tract of about 30 homes. There were no fire trucks, just the two of them and the quickly moving fire. Jeff notified the command post and advised they were going to start evacuating the community. A Sergeant at the command post stated, “You can’t order an evacuation. Only fire can order an evacuation.”

With that, Johnny, who was in the command post overseeing the actions of the SAR teams, advised the fire commander of the situation. The fire commander could not believe the fire had spread that fast. The Command Post had no idea the fires boundary had expanded as far north and east as it had. The fire incident commander ordered the evacuation and sent several strike teams and air support to the area. The fire incident commander praised the efforts of Jeff and Chris and all of the SAR Teams. Their knowledge of the mountainous areas, the location, and ability to understand the terrain, lent a perspective from law enforcement which the fire command found extremely useful.

Had it not been for the actions of Jeff and Chris, the fire command post would never have known the fire was threatening the housing tract. Jeff and Chris went door to door notifying residents, and helping them to their vehicles. There is no doubt, had they not acted and just stayed blocking the roadway, the fire would have destroyed the houses and their occupants.

The actions exhibited by the members of the Antelope Valley Search and Rescue Team and the Volunteers on Patrol were exemplary and above and beyond the call of duty. They worked tirelessly each day of the fire, often only sleeping for a few hours before responding back out to help. They have never asked for recognition, reward or favor and had I not been at the command post, staging areas, or monitoring my radio, there is a strong likelihood their heroic actions would have been overlooked and never brought to light.

It is because of their unselfish heroic acts, I proudly nominate this incident and the Antelope Valley Search and Rescue Team for the prestigious honor of Search and Rescue Operation of the year.