

The
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DEMOCRAT

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'HELL HIGHWAY'

North Coast firefighters recount harrowing experience of driving through firestorm



CHUCK MORRIS / Rincon Valley Fire Department

A strike team of North Coast firefighters battles the Cedar Fire as it burns through the village of Cuyamaca. The area saw a wall of flames 200 feet high a few days ago.

By **JEREMY HAY**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Fort Bragg Fire Engine 8380, heading north out of the village of Cuyamaca, turned right off Highway 79 onto Sunrise Highway — and directly into a tunnel of flames.

The firestorm enveloping the road in the dry, rugged hills 40 miles east of San Diego was perhaps half a mile long, and “the further we got in, the angrier I got,” Fort Bragg Fire Lt. Dave Koski said.

Koski, 48, a mechanic turned computer programmer and 25-year veteran of the volunteer Fort Bragg department, was in the back seat of his engine’s cab Tuesday night when the strike

team of North Coast firefighters was engulfed by fire racing along in winds of up to 60 mph.

Koski, who was in charge of the engine’s crew, became increasingly worried that they might not get out.

“When we got in there I felt pretty angry that I’d allowed us to,” he said.

Just ahead, the strike team leader, 51-year-old Monte Rio-Russian River Fire Chief Steve Baxman, led the team into the flames in his rescue pickup.

When he saw the wall of fire, Baxman said later, “I thought we were . . .” He stopped. He chuckled. “It was intense.”

Koski and firefighter Nathan Orsi, 26, who was riding shotgun

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JOHN BURGESS / The Press Democrat

North Coast firefighters, visible from left, Al Ramos, Rick Marcy, David Castino, Nathan Orsi, Danny Figuirido, Dave Koski and Steve Baxman take a break this past week. Obscured firefighter is unidentified.

RELIEF SOUGHT FOR VICTIMS

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FIRE REFUGEES RETURN HOME

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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

HIGHWAY: 'I didn't know if we were going to make it'

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in the Fort Bragg truck, felt the windows getting hotter.

They checked the aluminum shelters they carry on their belts, meant as a last resort, and wondered if it was time.

"We were discussing whether we would stay in the truck and put them up or get on the ground and try," said Danny Figuirido, the 36-year-old volunteer firefighter who was driving.

A Caltrans equipment operator, he used his vacation time to fight the San Diego fires, and all the time, "when we've got the fire running over us," his mind was on his wife and four children, he said.

The harrowing encounter on what Baxman's crew has come to think of as "Hell Highway" took place about 18 hours before another fire front would leap the highway and sweep up four Novato firefighters, killing one and injuring three others.

On Thursday, Baxman's firefighters — from Rincon Valley, Fort Bragg, Boonville and the Two Rock Coast Guard station — reflected on their experience as they worked putting out smoldering hot spots left from the fire that killed Novato firefighter Steven Rucker.

As the men worked their way along a 14-mile stretch of blackened pastures, oak tree stands and rocky hills, they recalled a day that started with a wall of flames 200 feet high bearing down on Cuyamaca and climaxed with a brush with death on Sunrise Highway.

Their recollections varied in tone, directed by whatever certain and uncertain factors shape a person's reaction to circumstances few can imagine.

Rincon Valley firefighter Kyle Pickard, 20, of Larkfield remembered the events with an almost exuberant awe.

"It wasn't fear, it was just amazement, sheer amazement," Pickard said, laughing as he thought back on his feelings as the fire swept in.

The strike team arrived at 2:20 p.m. at Cuyamaca, according to Baxman's log. The wind-



Photos by CHUCK MORRIS / Rincon Valley Fire Department

A home in the town of Cuyamaca in the hills 40 miles east of San Diego was destroyed by the Cedar Fire this past week.

whipped fire front barreled down steep hillsides from the north and west toward the village, which sits at a lake's edge.

"I didn't know if we were going to make it," Baxman said. "I thought it was going to take everyone and everything out and I saw other fire crews getting scared, moving down the road because they thought the same thing."

Fear, maybe. But Rincon Valley firefighter David Castino, 42, said he had no doubts.

"Never for one second, one second, did I think we were in peril," he said, "because I knew we had the experience to get out of it."

In came the fire and Al Ramos, 46, of Rohnert Park, a cigar-smoking Coast Guard fire captain with a bushy mustache, swore and said, "This doesn't look good."

They hadn't slept for two days, he said. "The adrenaline kicked in. We just said 'We're going to stick together, not



Rincon Valley firefighter David Castino works to contain the Cedar Fire on Tuesday. "Never for one second, one second, did I think we were in peril, because I knew we had the experience to get out of it," he said.

freelance, and follow our safety rules.' "

The fire over-ran homes and propane tanks exploded; the fire uprooted trees and hurled

them. The crew burned themselves a safety zone.

"Every bit of training I've had in 33 years I used on this fire," Baxman said.

They fought the fire for almost four hours. They saved a fire station and half a dozen homes, but about 300 other houses burned.

Then the team was called to confront another fire, and they drove into the firestorm on Sunrise Highway.

"I'll never forget that name," Ramos said.

Baxman went forward and in the Fort Bragg engine, for one, there were doubts and anger.

"We didn't want to go in there and we had a couple of superiors say that was the way to go," Figuirido said.

"I was pretty pissed off," Koski said. "I didn't want to tell my boss that I'm not going in there, but I let him know my concerns."

Over the radio, Baxman said, "yes, this is the way," said Figuirido, who within seconds made a decision, full of apparent contradictions, that not many are likely to understand.

He thought of his duty, and

to whom he owed it: "The strike team leader is ultimately in charge. But ultimately we're in charge of ourselves."

He thought about his family: "If I need to work extra hard to keep myself alive for them, then that's what I'll do."

Then the Fort Bragg engine drove into the fire, followed by engines from the Coast Guard, Boonville and Rincon Valley.

Rincon Valley, the last in line, got cut off.

"There was no way we were going to make it past it," Castino said. They spent the night on the roadside and then in the living room of a house they'd saved earlier.

It was hard to leave the Rincon Valley engine, Baxman said.

"Luckily, it was a guy I knew could handle it," he said of Rincon Valley Fire Capt. Chuck Morris, 44, a 20-year department veteran who commanded the engine.

Inside the firestorm, Baxman and the engines behind him moved as fast as they could.

"It was a couple of minutes," Ramos said.

Rick Marcy, 30, a firefighter on the Coast Guard engine, said "it felt like hours" before the trucks passed through the firestorm and continued toward their assignment in Julian.

Orsi, on the Fort Bragg crew, said, "You're thinking possibly you might not make it through this."

His words rushed on as he wrestled with the memory. "But you know, you never think that, in my mind I was never going to say 'I'm going to die here.' "

On Thursday, Baxman was asked about Koski, who of all the firefighters appeared the most haunted by the experience.

"He wanted to go home; he'd had enough," Baxman said.

He knew Koski had been angry, he said, that perhaps he was still. That's fine, he said.

"He did his job," Baxman said. "He didn't back down when something happened, that's all I care about."

Koski was asked if he would do it again, if he would volunteer for another strike team.

He paused for several seconds. "Yeah," he said.

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