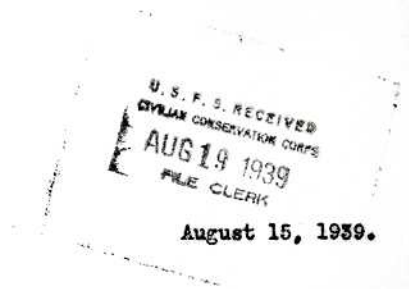


CCC
SAFETY, R-4
Fatalities



Chief, Forest Service,

Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

There is being forwarded to your office under separate cover triplicate copies of a report prepared by Associate Regional Forester W. B. Rice on the Rock Creek fire, which occurred on the Santa Rosa Division of the Toiyabe National Forest on July 28, 1939, and which resulted in five fatalities.

The report discloses unusual heroism on the part of Earnest R. Tippin and Walter James. In Tippin's case the heroism displayed seems to be of an outstanding nature. I would appreciate your consideration of the advisability of recommending these boys for posthumous medals for bravery either from the American Forestry Association or the Carnegie Foundation, or both.

Very truly yours,

C. N. WOODS,
Regional Forester,

By

Acting

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

FOREST SERVICE

CCC
PERSONNEL
General



WASHINGTON

C O P Y

August 8, 1939

Mr. Raymond Tippin,
Oswego, Kansas.

Dear Mr. Tippin:

I wish to extend to you my deepest sympathy in the death of your son while fighting a fire on the Toiyabe National Forest on July 28, and to express sincere appreciation for his heroic efforts in trying to save the lives of his comrades. We have made a careful investigation of all the circumstances connected with this tragic accident. The investigation shows that the fire which caused the fatal accident started from a lightning strike at 11:30 a.m. The fire was sighted by K. O. Studebaker, a storekeeper at Crovada, and other nearby ranchers. These people immediately reported the fire to the Paradise CCC camp 45 miles away and themselves proceeded to the fire, three traveling by horseback and four by car.

About 2:00 p.m. the truck load of CCC boys from the Paradise Camp arrived at the end of the road and continued to the fire on foot. One crew of 13 men, including Foreman Timmons, went to the north side of the blaze which at that time had covered about 25 acres. Another group in charge of your son started for the south side, where the 7 local men were already working and making control progress. Both crews were approaching the fire from the downhill side with the wind in their favor.

When Earnest's crew had progressed about a mile, coming within a quarter of a mile west of the lower edge of the fire, the wind suddenly changed and developed into gale proportions, blowing directly down the mountain opposite the usual prevailing direction and contrary to normal air currents for that time of the day. The fire immediately started to run down the hill, and Earnest, perceiving the danger, gave the order to retreat. Six of the 12 boys who were slightly behind the others in

Earnest's crew immediately turned and escaped on the flank of the fire, reaching a nearby ranch in safety.

George J. Kennedy of the advance group of six in the first few steps of retreat suffered a compound fracture of his ankle. Responding to his call for help, Earnest, together with Walter James, went back and tried to carry him with his arms over their shoulders. The other three boys, Frank W. Barker, Frank J. Vitale, and Richard Powers, were a short distance ahead. According to Powers, Barker either became exhausted or suffered some injury and fell down several times while running. Powers attempted to help him until he was forced to run for his own life, and so he managed to escape to safety.

From this point on there were no eye witnesses, and conclusions could only be drawn from the mute evidence of the bodies as they were found. Kennedy was found about a quarter of a mile below where Earnest and James had picked him up and tried to carry him. This was just a short distance above where Barker was last seen alive. Barker, however, was found nearly a quarter of a mile beyond the place where he was last seen, together with the bodies of both your boy and James. From this situation the assumption is drawn that Earnest and James carried Kennedy until the flames got so close that they were forced to leave him. From then on they probably gained on the fire and encountered Barker, whom they tried to assist to a point of safety, since the three of them were found within a few feet of each other.

From evidence at hand there seems no doubt that Earnest and James performed acts of outstanding heroism in attempting to give aid to the other two boys and lost their lives on that account. Since these two were the strongest and huskiest of the crew, they could have made it easily to safety had they been unhampered.

Fire fighters of wide experience are unable to recall any other instance either in timber or brush where fire ran down steep slopes for such great distances so fast that men were unable to keep out of the way. The reason for the downhill wind early in the afternoon resulting in fire behavior contrary to all experience and causing the death of five men will probably never be known.

We all admire the courage and heroism of your son. I know that his death is a grievous shock to you but I sincerely trust that you will find comfort in the noble manner in which he sacrificed his life.

Very sincerely yours,

/s/ C. N. WOODS,
Regional Forester.