

FACTS vs. MYTHS - RATTLESNAKE FIRE

The Grapevine Rumor

The Fact

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| <p>1. The Missionary crew was sent into the spot fire after seasonad experienced fire fighters had refused to go.</p> | <p>1. A State crew volunteered to go into the spot fire prior to the time that the Missionaries were dispatched to it. At that time the plan of action was to catch the spot on the ridge top and flank it down both sides. For this reason the State crew was not sent in. After the wind died down and the spot did not spread, it was decided to suppress it by direct attack.</p> <p>A logging tractor was not sent in because the owner felt the terrain was too steep and rough to work at night because of danger of turning over. The hazards of terrain were the controlling reason and not the danger of the spot fire which was quiet and not spreading.</p> |
| <p>2. The spot fire "blew up" and trapped the men.</p>  | <p>2. At no time did the spot fire give trouble. It was later reburned by the main fire but even then the spot contained a small island of unburned brush that did not reburn.</p>  |
| <p>3. The men that escaped climbed out of the spot fire on ropes.</p>   | <p>3. Maximum slope of the escape route was 55%.<br/>No bluffs or cliffs were present - no rope used.</p>   |

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The Fact

4. The Missionaries were sent in with untrained leadership.

4. The Missionary crew was much better trained and organized than the average crew used on fires. Two regular Forest officers, a Missionary crew leader and four Missionary straw bosses provided the leadership. Most members of the crew had been on several fires and the crew leaders and straw bosses had special training.

5. The crew was forgotten and neglected.

5. All evidence shows that the crew was not forgotten. They were reinforced shortly after the initial crew was sent in. They were serviced with lunches within an hour from the time of dispatch. They were warned as soon as the main fire began to threaten.

6. The crew was not adequately instructed as to dangers.

6. Evidence shows that the crew was warned to watch for changes in wind, fire behavior, and to have an escape route planned.

7. The Forest officer who called them out gave improper instructions.

7. The Forest officer who gave the warning was in the best position to appraise the progress of the oncoming fire. He gave the best instructions possible under the circumstances at that time. The fact that the fire changed direction from uphill to down canyon after the men started could not be predicted or foreseen with

the information available at the time. Long established safety principle of escaping along the flanks rather than trying to outrun a rapidly burning fire uphill through the brush was applied. The downhill flank became the head and the uphill head became the flank after the crew had started towards the east in an effort to get beyond its flanks.

8. The crew was panic stricken and the leaders lost control.

8. All evidence indicates that the retreat was orderly and that there were no signs of panic until the last moment before being caught when even then the largest number were still with their leaders.

9. The crew suffered slow death in shallow fox holes.

9. Speed and intensity of the fire was such that death was probably instantaneous. They were probably knocked unconscious by heat and gases before the flames reached them.

All evidence on the ground indicates that this was very sudden.

1. Why were so many men dispatched to a small spot fire?

1. The Missionary spot fire while uncontrolled represented a threat capable of spreading the fire to inaccessible Grindstone Canyon. The initial crew of four men could have suppressed it as they were having no trouble. In order to speed up the suppression job and get the spot fire controlled and mopped up at the earliest moment it was decided to send in reinforcements. As the next crew available consisted of 15 men and was organized with both a regular Forest Service <sup>crew</sup>/boss as well as a Missionary crew boss and four Missionary straw bosses, it was decided to send this crew in as a unit rather than split it up. By so doing the job could be completed faster and the spot fire threat ~~was~~ eliminated. The last crew consisting of a regular Forest officer and four men went in to take lunches to the men on the spot fire.

2. The Forest Officer who called out the men should have gone in and led them to safety.

2. As soon as the main fire spotted over the Alder Springs Road and developed a threat to the men on the Missionary spot fire, action was taken to call out the men. This threat developed so rapidly that the officer who gave the warning had to cross above the onrushing head of the fire to reach a vantage point on the ridge above the spot fire where he called to

the man. The fire was approaching so rapidly that unnecessary time would have been lost had he tried to outrun it and go down into the spot fire. He reached a point where he could be heard by the men on the spot fire and directed their escape from this vantage point. He remained as long as he could do so and left only when his position was threatened by the fire. He escaped on his hands and knees through the brush only seconds before his vantage point was engulfed by the flames.

3. Were the men burned up by a backfire?

1. The fire blew up as a result of a spot fire that became established <sup>below</sup> ~~below~~ the Alder Springs road between the main fire and the Missionary spot fire. The turbulent, swirling and jet-like effect of air current that developed very abruptly carried this spot fire out of control. Origin of this spot fire as to whether it came from the main fire, the backfire along the road or the turbulence caused by the two <sup>convection</sup> ~~converging~~ columns coming together could not be determined. The downhill flank of the main fire was in a position to respond to the abrupt change in wind direction. The blow-up spot fire started some 300 feet below the road.