

## Local Firefighters Make Narrow Escape Battling Wildfire

Two firefighters who serve the Riverbank station barely escaped being "burned over" while tackling recent grass fires in the foothills.

As evidence of their close encounter with the flames, Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District Capt. Ron Keyes has burns on one hand and the tip of his nose. Engineer Bob Rocha escaped injury. But their fire truck has scorched paint and melted plastic all along the driver's side.

"Rocha was on top of the truck unrolling the hose and I was in the road when a wall of fire came up out of the canyon," said Keyes. "There was a lot of wind, a lot of noise. It was very hot. The fire was crowning (jumping through the treetops) across the road."

Rocha jumped down and got into the truck. Keyes ran toward another truck in front, thinking there was a safety zone ahead. There wasn't.

That truck started backing up. Presumably they could see fire coming up the ridge. Keyes stopped running because now there was flame between him and that truck. When he turned around, there was flame behind him.

"Then I realized how hot the air was that I was breathing," he said. "I really thought I'd gone and done it, bought the farm big time. Then I dived into a ditch, Bob got the truck moving, picked me up and we got out."

Rocha told Keyes he almost abandoned the truck at one point because flames were beating against the driver's window.

Keyes burned the back of his right hand, he said, when he pulled off a glove to open the truck door. As for his burned nose, he said, the helmet used in fighting grass fires has canvas flaps to protect the lower face but with movement the flaps sometime work down and expose the nose.

"We laughed about it later, of course," said Keyes. "But it was scary. It was as close as I've ever come to dying. We do all this book learning about fire, but when it happens it's amazing how fast fire moves."

Reserve firefighter Doug Falley was supposed to go along with the crew that day. But he had to leave the station just before the strike team was called out.

Keys and Rocha were part of a team assigned to fight three fires, which burned more than 4,400 acres in Calaveras County on Aug. 6 and 7. The 82- acre Armstrong fire that they tackled was near Avery, off Highway 4, in steep terrain and thick manzanita brush.

Oakdale City, Oakdale Rural, Salida and Modesto trucks were also involved in the fire fighting.

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