

FIVE FEET MADE FATAL DIFFERENCE FOR FIREFIGHTER

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ASSOCIATED PRESS
4:39 p.m. September 21, 2004

SAN FRANCISCO – Eva Schicke made it within five feet of the road where two colleagues safely found shelter before she disappeared in the fire that had turned on her seven-member crew 30 seconds after the wind shifted directions, according to a preliminary report on the death of the 23-year-old firefighter.



The report, released to employees of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection last Friday as a training tool, offers a glimpse of how suddenly a routine late-summer mission in Stanislaus National Forest turned tragically awry for the members of CDF Columbia Helitack 404 on Sept. 12. The crew had been in the forest using hand tools to build a fire line on a steep slope between Lumsden Road and the Tuolumne River Canyon when the light and steady wind abruptly gusted, sending "a sheet of fire" uphill toward them, Schicke's crew mates told investigators from CDF and the U.S. Forest Service. Four crew members made it back down to the river — the captain and a firefighter after running through a hole in the flames — and a fifth crew member who had gone back up to the road to retrieve a piece of equipment found safety there. One other firefighter and Schicke scrambled the 20 to 30 feet after him, according to the report, a copy of which was obtained by The Associated Press. In the five-page document, which identifies the crew members by number instead of name, Schicke is Firefighter No. 3, the colleague closest to her Firefighter No. 2. "FF{PI:EF}2 rolled over the lip of the road within the oncoming flame front as the fire hit the road," it states. "FF{PI:EF}3 was last seen by FF{PI:EF}2 immediately behind approximately 5 feet from the road. FF{PI:EF}3 did not reach the road." Schicke was discovered missing in the thick smoke after the captain conducted a crew count by walkie-talkie. They called for their helicopter to drop buckets of water on the area and started searching for her. By the time the water arrived, the wind had died back down and the fire had returned to its previous lateral direction. "Firefighters on-scene estimated the elapsed time from the wind shift to the burn-over was less than 30 seconds with the total wind event lasting less than two minutes," the report states. But it was already too late. "As the smoke cleared and bucket drops cooled the area, the searchers discovered the body of FF{PI:EF}3 located in the newly burned area approximately 100 feet below the road," according to the report. Schicke was in her fifth season as a firefighter but only her first as a member of an elite helicopter squad. A complete investigation into the circumstances that led to her death is expected to take several more weeks, if not months, according to CDF spokeswoman Karen Terrill.

Thanks to www.firefighterclosecalls.com for supplying this article.