

**The Fatal Vandenberg Fire, 1977**  
excerpted from **The Fire Season**, Wildfire Magazine, courtesy of Joe Valencia

On December 20th 1977, I took another journey into the deep canyons southwest of my hometown, only this time it would end up being a fight for survival. It all started when Captain Simmons from Station 51, called me the night before and asked me to fill in for one of the Firefighters. He told me to report to Station 51 at approximately 7:00 A.M. in the morning. I was pretty excited about filling in for a Regular Firefighter and still wanted the opportunity to prove my dedication to the Fire Department, hoping that my chances for becoming a Regular would increase with added experience. But before reporting to Station 51 the following morning, a unique pattern of meteorological events began to unfold during the night of December 19th. An extremely high-pressure system began to develop over the interior regions and high Deserts of California and Nevada, while off in the Pacific Ocean a low-pressure system was advancing toward the West Coast. Later that night, these large circulating air masses began to create a flow of dry air that funneled down slope through the coastal canyons, heated by the natural effects of friction and compression.

After taking my shower that next morning, I casually opened the bathroom window to let out some steam. A gust of wind rushed into the shower blowing over some towels and creating a lot of turbulence. Looking outside the window I could see the neighborhood trees swaying back and forth by the powerful winds, while leaves and dust were scooped up in the turmoil that whipped across the street. The white steam coming out of the Grefco smokestack at the edge of Lompoc was flowing in a westerly direction and since the sky was gray it appeared that a Winter storm was moving in, perhaps a Hawaiian Express as Dr. George the Weather Reporter used to call it. Quickly I showered and got dressed and I innocently wondered to myself what the day would bring as a reserve at Station 51. On my way out the front door my Father was also getting ready for work and making toast in the kitchen. We exchanged a few good mornings to each other and then I said a good bye on my way out the door. More than anything else, I wanted to make my Father proud of me, just as any Son would want to do. But it wasn't out of pressure imposed by my Dad, rather, it was a desire to be like him and earn respect from him - and from myself. From a poor orphan growing up in the depression era, my Father had risen to great heights in his life and had maintained a strong role in our lives as well as in our community. The gray sky took on a sinister look. I could feel the strength and power of the 50 mile per hour winds even while driving in my truck, and the extremely low atmospheric pressure made my ears feel as if they were plugged up. When I arrived at Station 51, Captain Simmons, Engineer Fed Liss, and the previous day's crew sat in the front office drinking coffee and joking around. Fireman Larry Jones walked in and informed us of a reported fire on Vandenberg Air Force Base. He indicated that Santa Ana winds gusting to eighty miles per hour, had blown down a power transformer in the brush near South Vandenberg.

We could hardly believe that this was happening so late in the year, because most of us had all expected a calm transition into the Winter season and another wildfire was the furthest thing from our thoughts. We walked over to the front office window and looked

out towards South Vandenberg. The fierce winds were now more powerful than I had ever seen, and the gray sky cast an eerie glow over the hills above Lompoc. The Missile Launch Pads at Vandenberg were visible in the distance and so was a small plume of thick black smoke that rose up in front of Tranquillion Peak. Some quiet comments were made by the veteran Firefighters, and I can remember feeling both excited and scared at the same time. We all listened to reports from our Santa Barbara County Dispatcher as our uneasiness grew by the minute. The Air Force Fire Department was already on the scene sizing up the situation and a Disaster Response team led by Col. Joseph G. Turner; the Base Commander, had just arrived at the fire.

Captain Simmons ordered the previous day's crew to stay on duty a little while longer, he also discussed the possibility of using the Reserves to cover the Station if our Engines were ordered to respond to the fire. Now, I could only hope that they wouldn't leave me behind to cover the Station. I had a great deal of respect for Captain Simmons, and all the other Captains and Firefighters at Station 51. They believed that the critical factors in firefighting involved teamwork, discipline and hard training. At about 7:45 a.m. the Station bells rang, and the County Dispatcher alerted our Engine and Brush Trucks to respond, as well as other crews from Stations 31, 32, and Station 21; which was practically the entire North County Force. We quickly dressed into the yellow fire retardant coveralls, fire coat, and helmet, and then sped off towards the fire. Driving through Lompoc and then down Ocean Avenue I looked over at veteran firefighter Fed Liss - there was a deep expression of distress on his face.

When we finally arrived at the South Vandenberg Gate we waited for the other Engine Companies and Battalion Chief Don Perry to arrive, so we could all go in together as a strike team. The strike team would consist of at least four engines, three brush trucks, a hotshot crew, bulldozers, and over twenty-five men, while other County forces would arrive later. The brush truck I was in carried 250 Gallons of water plus other additional equipment; yet even with all this weight we were pushed back and forth by the strong gusting winds. I had previously experienced Santa Ana winds up to 50 to 60 miles per hour at the Sycamore Fire some five months before, however these hurricane force winds we were experiencing today were truly unbelievable. The winds pushed us around to the point where your center of gravity was changed, and in order to even balance yourself would require wide steps just to stay anchored. I was now much more concerned as to the assignments we would be given, because there was a heavy atmospheric threat of something that was about to burst open. I can remember telling myself to be composed in my thoughts and actions.

Our strike team now linked up and continued along Coast Road towards the fire where we eventually we met up with the Air Force and Civil Service Firefighters. Along the canyons and hillsides of South Vandenberg the brush was dehydrated from two years of drought. The tangled shoulder high manzanita, sage brush, and dense ground cover was 90 years old in some places, and it contained dead and decaying vegetative matter that causes fire to burn so intense and hot. Now, I could not deny the increasing danger of the situation we were in, but I wouldn't have thought it would have been in conjunction with the strongest winds of the Century. In the distance was a three-mile wide front of wild

shooting flames, which was moving quickly across the lower hillsides between Space Launch Complex- 3 (SLC-3) and SLC-5. The fire took on a wild appearance, it was evil looking and the winds were pushing it into thick chaparral. Frightened Aerospace personnel who had been working on the Launch Pads were being evacuated as fast as possible to the safety of North Vandenberg. There seemed to be some confusion and uneasiness with the rapidly evolving situation. This was because of the swift movements of the unpredictable blaze and the ever-changing assessments of what action to take. Our County Engines did not carry the Air Force frequencies over the two-way radio, which further complicated setting up a command post that was now necessary for the arriving firefighting forces.

We then parked on a narrow road leading up to Space Launch Complex Five (SLC-5). When I got out to help back the brush-truck into an area, I was nearly swept away by the winds and I had to cinch down my helmet strap so it wouldn't blow away. Then Fed Liss motioned too me to get back into the truck immediately. Within just a few moments an impenetrable wall of swirling flames advanced down the hills as we watched from the cab of the brush-truck. It seemed as if the chaparral and brush didn't even have time to burn, it just seemed to disintegrate in mere seconds from the descending fire. All the other firefighters jumped into the safety of their Engines and waited for the fire to pass. I glanced to my right and saw the flames cresting a small knoll and could hear the strange crackling and tearing sound that precedes a fire. I sensed outright dread for what was about to happen. Various animals scurried across the road in front of us. They were running back and forth in a panicked frenzy to escape the fire, but it was just to fast. We were then engulfed in high flames and burning debris.

The air inside the truck was superheated and we protected ourselves with our thick fire coats and wet bandannas over our faces. All around us the thick smoke turned the day into total blackness. Red flames swirled around the windows of the vehicle as I looked over towards Fed Liss. For several minutes we all felt the heat and choking dry air inside our vehicles. For a moment I wondered if the gas tank might explode, and felt an extreme helplessness. We withstood the pummeling of the fire and gradually the smoke lightened and slowly dissipated. I was stunned for a moment, by the quick sequence of events that had just happened and had not completely pulled out of my protective fetal position in the cab of the brush truck. The brush on both sides of the road had been burned away and it took on an appearance of black coal and white powdery ash. In the clearing smoke you could see the dead coyotes, rabbits, and other animals lying in the smoldering barren landscape. There was a very strange and sick feeling among the firefighters as we slowly came out of our defensive positions and began checking for damage to our Engines.

Captain Simmons and another County firefighter drove over towards our Engine in Brush Truck 31 and yelled some orders to the other firefighters who quickly grabbed the breathing apparatus from the side panel doors and rushed them to Captain Simmons. I saw Captain Simmons drive away with one firefighter crouched over in the rear of the brush truck with his breathing apparatus on and the hose line clutched tightly in his hands. They disappeared through the drifting smoke and flames along the narrow road as if descending into hell itself. Something bad had happened up the road where Battalion

Chief Perry had gone with some other Fire Personnel. I looked over and saw some of the County Hot Shots who had narrowly escaped the fire. They waved as though surprised to see me and I waved back. A few moments later Brush Truck 31 returned to our area. As they passed our Strike Team along the road, a firefighter was crouched over on the rear of the brush truck and I instantly knew what had happened. I ran over to Engine 51 and picked up the inhalator bottle and first aid kit and ran over towards Captain Simmons.

I felt a cold chill travel up and down my spine when I looked at the firefighter laying on his back. He was badly burned and in extreme agonizing pain. Evidently, as he was constructing a firebreak with his bulldozer, the fire rushed down unexpectedly from the hill and engulfed him and then our entire strike team, but he was caught outside. Captain Simmons had spotted him face down in dirt near his dozer and brought him to our location. The ambulance arrived a few minutes later and we carefully placed him onto the stretcher. My Captain looked straight at me, then he paused for a moment, and gave me an order to go with the Medics and the burned dozer operator. Although somewhat surprised at first, I followed my Captains direct order. Climbing into the ambulance, the back doors were slammed shut and we proceeded towards the Base Hospital along coast road, unaware of our converging path into the descending firestorm. The Medic next to me began removing the burn victim's clothing which was stiff and smoking. He was burned severely over his face and body. We then poured saline solution over his second and third degree burns, but he was in excruciating pain and his cries of pain cut right through me. It was an awful thing to imagine someone going through this kind of pain. We then removed his bulky back brace that he wore while operating his bulldozer, which was used to protect him from the jarring vibrations of the bulldozer.

I spoke to the burn victim calmly, trying to reassure him that we would soon be at the hospital. Then he asked for water, and I lightly poured water on his lips and mouth so he could drink. He greatly appreciated the water and thanked me, but we could tell he was going into shock, because his body shaking in uncontrollable pain. The Air Force Medic began to cut up his shirtsleeve and we gave him an I.V., but I wished there was something else we could do to alleviate his pain. The Air Force driver began to slow down the ambulance and it suddenly caught my attention. "Why the heck was he slowing down," I thought angrily to myself. Then looking up for a moment his eyes became visible in the rear view mirror, he had a look of absolute terror.

High red flames leaped out of the chaparral onto the ambulance and in another fraction of a second the fire had completely surrounded us. It happened so quickly that we had to stop right on coast road for fear of running off into a gully. We were somewhere between "Slick" SLC-4 and SLC-5. Glancing outside the windows the powerful flames crashed directly against our ambulance making me jump away from such intense forces. The deafening roar of burning chaparral sounded like a Titan Rocket rumbling off the nearby Launch Pads. Our visibility was now down to zero and all that was visible were the red flames licking over the hood of the vehicle.

Caught by surprise by the sudden movement of the brushfire we now became trapped and there was a possibility that the hurricane force winds could break open the windows or

even sweep us off the road. The winds pushed and heaved the fire down upon us as sparks and burning material bounced off the side of the ambulance. It sounded as if bullwhips were crashing on the windows and it rocked the vehicle back and forth. I quickly told the driver and Medic inside the ambulance to stay calm and not to panic, and instructed them to cover their mouth and nose so they would not breathe in the hot air. Within a few seconds the rubber window seals began to catch on fire and extremely bright flames were emitted right outside the windows. Someone uttered something out loud, and I knew there was no translation needed for this. It was an expression such a person might make that in one word describes his plight.

Sparks and fire began to enter the ambulance on the passenger side of the vehicle and I feared the worst scenario was about to happen. I reached over to turn off the oxygen bottle we were using on the burn victim, because the sparks and oxygen could have caused a sudden flash fire. We were all sweating from the extreme heat and our breathing became labored and very difficult. The increasing pressure and heat made our ears feel closed. None of us knew how long we might last in this situation, we just knew that we were in deep trouble and we had time to realize that death may not have been decades away, but now perhaps only moments. A sudden burst of flames rocked against us pushing solidly against the windows shifting the ambulance slightly sideways. I just couldn't believe what was happening to us. The weight of all four men must have kept us anchored from the ninety mile per hour gusts. "What are going to do?" yelled the driver. "Just hold on" I said, "we can't panic, we gotta stay calm, we'll make it through," I ended, even though I had no specific plan to get us out. Our eyes were wide open and full of fear, our hands were holding tightly to anything that was secure.

For a moment the flames stopped and it became dark and quiet. Smoke billowed over us, swaying the ambulance in a back and forth motion. It became very dark, however I could still see the silhouette of the driver in the semi blackness. Then for a moment I could see everything very clearly, the colors of yellow and orange sparks swirled all around us like an Apollo spacecraft reentering the Earth's atmosphere. There seemed to be no sound at all - yet the pressure was tremendous. Giant flames leaped up in all directions and then quickly went back down, enveloping us again in a darkness as black as night. The window seals and weather stripping outside our vehicle were burning brightly and was the only source of light. I felt responsible to do whatever was necessary to get us to safety, however an eerie feeling suddenly came over me and time seemed to slow down. My body felt paralyzed and I wanted to fight against this strange sensation, which I believed at the time to be panic or lack of oxygen to my brain. There were thousands of illuminating sparks and embers floating all over us, just like the kind you would see rising upward from a giant bonfire, and it created a false sensation of security.

I looked down upon the scene as if floating above the ambulance and looking inside. I could see all of us in the dream like sequence. Then another vision slowly entered my view, but it was a familiar scene, which I had seen many times before. I seemed to have traveled straight into another place that was far from where we physically were, and for just a moment I felt if it were some kind of hallucination. The darkness of our home was lighted only by the television set in the Family living room. It seemed as if I was tucked

away in a dark corner of the room and hovering above the light that shone from the television. I could see my family congregated around the couch and chairs in the living room. Although the room was dark, the images of my family were extremely clear. The faces of my parents and then the faces of my brothers and sisters became visible as if the light was shining only on them. It was a vivid scene and powerfully reassuring to me, it reminded me of things we had done while growing up and it made me feel very content and happy. I did not want to leave the warm sanctuary of this place because it seemed so real and reassuring, but then the scene began to fade totally out and I was-back into the reality of our situation. For a moment I was somewhat bewildered by the incredible experience, and could not believe this unusual event actually happened - it just did!

A low rumbling sound outside became louder and closer until a raging inferno heaved itself across the road for the second time. It seemed like I had been woken up violently as the fire slammed into us seconds later. A breath of hot air entered my lungs as we all gasped for cooler air. More sparks entered the back of the ambulance and we quickly snuffed them out with my gloves. The burned firefighter painfully cried out for help and he moaned in his life and death struggle. I knew I had to shake this strange experience that had just occurred and try to think of a way out of the fire, knowing fully well that the windows might break from the extreme heat and expose us to the fire. There was a strong realization that we had to get out of there alive and that action had to be taken right now to survive. I did not seem afraid, at least for the moment, and it almost felt as if something or someone was somehow supporting me. I noticed that when the smoke and fire whipped across the road outside the rear of the ambulance, the white dividers in the center of the road became visible for just a split second, and I knew this had to be our way out of there! Without hesitation I ordered the driver to slowly back up the vehicle while I guided him along the faint white lines. Things suddenly began to fall into place for us. "Were going to make it out of here," I told the medic and ambulance driver. I guided the driver backwards following the curve of the road all the way. Now we were taking action and working together as a team and not just waiting for the worst thing to happen.

By looking straight down out of the large rear window, the white dividers became more visible through the whirling smoke and flame. The shaken men followed my directions as we maneuvered completely out of the path of the firestorm. The flames suddenly ended in one particular spot, which gave us the opportunity to turn the ambulance around. For a second we all saw what we had just come out of when the driver maneuvered the ambulance to retreat from the advancing flames. It was a horrible realization to once and for all see it from a different perspective. It looked like the end of the world in a whirlwind of smoke and fire. We radioed back to the Engines along SLC-5 Road and informed them that we were returning. We all kept our cool in such a tense situation, which probably saved our lives. I am sure that the phenomena I witnessed earlier must have played some sort of role in saving our lives, but the powerful meaning was not apparent to me at that time. The change from near tragedy to relative safety was almost instantaneous, and we now headed back to the Strike Team parked near SLC-5. Although we were all somewhat shaken by the experience, we were grateful to be alive. As we continued South to meet up with our strike team, our thoughts and actions now turned to

the burn victim's situation, rather than our own. Upon our return to the Strike Team of Engines and Brush Trucks, a startled group of firefighters looked on. I opened the rear ambulance doors and firmly told them that we needed some water and an Engine and Brush truck escort on the way out to North Vandenberg. Captain Bill Turpin from Station 32 gave us two canteens from his engine for the firefighter's burns. Saline solution would have been ideal, but we had already used it all on the burn victim. A few seconds later we were on our way in a second attempt with Engine 51 leading the way and Fed Liss in Brush 51 following close behind. This time we burst through the smoke and dying embers along side the road, which just minutes before nearly took our lives. The road was adjacent to the Southern Pacific railroad tracks and was built up in the middle of a large gully. The gully stretched into a larger area known as Spring Canyon, which made a natural path for the wind and fire to flow. From what we could see, this particular area was a terrible place to be when the fire raced through the Canyon.

While continuing towards the Air Force Base Hospital, our escorts turned back when we were safely on our way. We had made it out and it was a big relief. We arrived at the Base Hospital as Air Force medical personnel quickly transferred the burn victim onto an awaiting stretcher and rushed him into the emergency room. His large body was sprawled out on the hospital bed with his stiffened arms raised up in the air. The Doctors and Nurses were cutting away at his burned and tattered clothing and his hands and forearms were blackened with awful burns. With the moans of pain trailing off, the door to the room quickly slammed shut and an instant wave of deep sorrow and emotion came over me.

The burn victim, we later found out was Mr. Clarence McCauley, who worked as a Heavy Equipment Operator (Dozer Operator) for the Base Fire Department. He was a veteran of World War II and had retired as a Chief Petty Officer from the U. S. Navy. From what I have heard, he had parked his rig up on SLC-5 road, then off loaded the dozer and began a fire break to block the advancing fire but was quickly overcome by the huge wall of flames. As I sat in the hospital waiting room many things were running through my mind. The whole fire situation seemed so out of control and I had feelings of heading back to the safety of Station 51. Quite frankly, I just didn't know what to do next, but it was important to try and calm myself down from these disturbing thoughts and think about my next actions. The flow of adrenaline still pumping through my veins was making it hard to concentrate on the task at hand, so I finally decided to call Station 51 from the telephone at the hospital emergency room.

Lt. Billy Eden answered the phone at the Fire Station. Lt. Eden was in charge of the Station 51 Reserves and he was a stern and orderly man. He kept the young Reserves in-line with his low booming voice, but deep down we knew that Lt. Eden had a heart of gold. While I anxiously explained what had happened at the fire he seemed very worried and concerned, then relieved when I told him that our Strike Team was all right. Bill interrupted me for a moment, and then asked me if I had heard the latest reports from the fire command post. "What do you mean," I cautiously replied. Bill paused and then continued in his low resonant voice. "Joe, we have heard reports that some of our County firefighters have been injured in the fire, and they have been taken to the Lompoc

Hospital." "Joe, are you still there?" Bill replied. My heart began to race until it could be felt in my chest and head. "Bill," I said, "I haven't heard any of that, I just can't tell you." "When I left the fire...everyone seemed to be Okay.

I cannot recall any more of the conversation with Lt. Eden, but the information just given to me was now running through my mind. Initially, I believed that the fire had burned past us to the beaches of South Vandenberg. However, it must still be burning in the rugged country of Honda Canyon. I questioned my earlier feelings of returning to the fire station or returning to my Engine Company on the fire line. My duty, I logically deduced, was to return to the fire line and my crew, or to at least make an honest attempt. Battalion Chief Don Perry and his assistants were on a road further up from our Engines, and quite frankly no one knew if they were dead or alive. So I sat down and pondered my next move. The knowledge of returning to the fire scared me more than anything that had happened so far, because even in the hospital you could hear the powerful shearing winds shaking the windows of the building. An Air Force Master Sergeant came over and started talking to me. Where he came from I cannot remember, but he was curious to know more about the fire. While exchanging information about the firefighting efforts he informed me that some firefighters had been killed earlier that morning. "Who were they?" I asked angrily, but he didn't know. "Oh...man, I've got to get back to see if my crew is all right."

Now I was really scared and somewhat jittery, but nothing could deter me from going back to the fire because the crew from Station 51 might need my help. "Could you give me a ride to the South Vandenberg gate?" I politely asked the Sergeant. He hesitatingly agreed, so I quickly grabbed my helmet and we walked out of the Hospital to his car. The Sergeant appeared to have a lot of insight to the firefighting efforts and he was very reassuring and understanding. Driving towards South Vandenberg we could see smoke billowing out of the canyons horizontally to the ocean. Then I asked him if he thought it was crazy to go back to the fire. Looking straight ahead we were both quiet, then he slowly said, "I think your doing the right thing...what's important right here and now, is what's right in front of your eyes." Then he added in his Southern accent, "Ya got ta have faith in God above and in yerself if yer gonna make it in this dog-gone world." I nodded in agreement and did not say anymore, the Sergeant was absolutely right. When we arrived at the South Vandenberg gate for the second time, I said a quick good bye to him and then we shook hands. Closing the door behind me I knew there was no turning back, and I gave him a thumbs up gesture as he drove off. I never got his name, and I never saw him again.

Many of the Aerospace personnel were now assembling at the South Vandenberg gate, as they had been evacuated from launch sites earlier that morning. Everyone had a look of anguish on their faces, and who could blame them. The gusting 80-mile per hour winds continued to torment anyone inside and outside their vehicles. I secured my helmet by tightening my chinstrap, but it was evident that the forces of nature had taken over and the day took on a dark depressing look. The howling winds tore through any exposed vehicle or person. Live power lines whipped brutally against the road by the strong gusts of wind and it became a struggle to even stand up without wobbling like a drunk. The

rotating lights from all the emergency vehicles illuminated the dark road that led up to a devastated "no man's land." Fire Engines, Security Police, and Medic Vans were scattered all around the area and I knew that to hitch a ride with one of these vehicles was my way back to my strike team. Approaching a tall man who appeared to be in charge of the evacuation I explained my predicament. "Sir," I said, "I was in the ambulance with the bulldozer operator who was burned, and now I have returned from the hospital and need to get back with my crew.. Engine 51." He looked puzzled when I said this, however he agreed to help me get back to my unit. He quickly assigned me to help the medical personnel heading up to the fire by riding in the rear of the Air Force Medic Van. "You can find your unit up there," he remarked, pointing straight towards the clouds of black smoke swirling out of the gullies and canyons. The blue Air Force van had a large red cross painted on its side. Inside the van were stationary cots and assorted medical equipment. My plan was to get to my fellow firefighters at the fire line and then jump off at that point.

Moments later we received an emergency call, I quickly jumped into the Medic Van and as the rear doors were closed behind me, then we proceeded "code 3" to the call. The events unfolding around me seemed to be directing me right back to the main front of the fire, and realizing the opportunity to find my crew made me feel good. After several miles of rough driving in the bumpy Medic-Van we stopped and picked up another firefighter from the Civil Service Fire Department. His name was Edgar Alvarez and he had suffered severe lacerations to his right leg in an attempt to escape the oncoming flames. Evidently as the fire advanced down a hill, he found himself in a bad situation and had to jump a barbed wire security fence, and in the process he broke his leg and slashed it quite severely. The other firefighters carefully lifted him onto the Van as we secured him onto a cot. There were no windows in the back of the Medic Van, so there wasn't any indication of knowing exactly where we were, but I think we may have been somewhere near the Atlas Launch Site at Space Launch Complex-3 (SLC-3).

We administered an I.V. and applied direct pressure to his wound, while the semi-conscious firefighter lay sprawled out on the cot. He had lost a lot of blood and was in bad shape but coherent. I felt that he would be all right once we got him to the hospital. The Medic Van turned around quickly and headed straight back to the Base Hospital on North Vandenberg. Realizing that we were going straight back to the hospital, I motioned to the driver to let me out at the South Vandenberg Gate. When we arrived at the gate he slowed down and I jumped out of the Van shutting the two rear doors behind me. I watched the Medic Van speed away down the lonely road with the siren quickly fading to a distorted wail and to the sound of stronger gusts of winds. Standing there in the middle of the road I wondered if I was ever going to make it back to my crew. A sudden sigh of exhaustion came over me. Though somewhat frustrated from all the uncontrollable events going on, I was determined to get back into the fire and catch the next ride in. If my fellow firefighters were in danger, then maybe there was an opportunity to help them.

Two men slowly drove up to the South Vandenberg Gate in an old World War II Army Jeep. They looked to be going in the direction of Honda Canyon, so I asked them if they could give me a ride to my Santa Barbara County Strike Team. "Sure, jump in the back,"

one of the Air Force Sergeants motioned with his head.

For the third straight time we advanced towards the main front of the fire, still burning somewhere in the backcountry. Luckily for me, I had my bandanna and quickly pulled it up to the bridge of my nose, because particles of dust and ash were flying everywhere. One of the men in the jeep wore a pistol attached to his belt, and the other was holding an M-16 rifle. They were both dressed in military type combat gear, so I figured they were probably the Security Police or some other Security outfit from the U.S. Air Force, viewing the fire damage to the area. We continued slowly past the bridge at Honda Canyon. Looking out of the jeep, the wreckage of old Naval Vessels became visible along the promontory of jagged coastline. It was an old graveyard of Navy Destroyers that crashed into the rocks of Point Arguello in the 1920's killing many sailors. Now looking down on the coastline of South Vandenberg, I remembered back a long time ago when my Dad took my brothers and me to Pt. Arguello on a fishing trip. We caught lots of Perch and Rock Cod in this area and had a great time with Mr. Clardy and his sons. When the dense fog finally lifted, and the ragged coast and giant waves were revealed, it gave me the impression of a land that was still wild and untamed, perhaps just the way Juan Cabrillo, or Sir Francis Drake - the first European explorers may have seen it as they sailed up the coastline many centuries ago. Now however, all around the area, in all directions the foliage was burned to the ground and power poles continued to burn and smolder. It was grim evidence of the fires recent path and to me it looked like a war zone. Engine 51 was parked along the road near Point Pedernales and I asked the Security Police to drop me off there and quickly thanked them for the ride. Smoke drifted over the lonely stretch of road while ice plant continued to burn nearby, which I thought was very peculiar. The winds had momentarily died down and all was quiet and still. No one was near the Engine, but there were footsteps leading into the fine black and white ash that blanketed the terrain. I called out for anyone in the area, but there was no reply, only complete dead silence. There was a quiet suspenseful effect in the air where I could even hear my own breathing, and it reminded me of a scary scene from an Alfred Hitchcock movie I'd once seen. Opening the side compartment on the Engine, I grabbed the canteen and took a long sloppy drink that caused me to cough and gag from trying to drink so much water. When my thirst had been quenched, the cap was twisted back on and the heavy canteen flung around my shoulder. I grabbed a shovel from the side compartment of Engine 51 and followed the footsteps into the burned and colorless landscape wondering what might be discovered in this unfamiliar terrain.

Walking through the soft gray soot sent clouds of dust all around me. At the bottom of the gully I heard voices and walked over in that direction. Firefighter Dave Senior and fellow Reserve Mark Hall were busy putting out some hot spots and smoldering logs along the fire's perimeter. It felt good to be back to my crew from Station 51. I offered them some water and the three of us took a well deserved break. I explained what had happened to the burn victim and me, and then Dave filled me in on the current situation. Dave and Mark confirmed that the Base Fire Chief, the Assistant Fire Chief, and the Base Commander, had all been killed in the fire. The deaths occurred down where we were originally parked near Space Launch Complex (SLC)-5, just a little further up the road. They informed me that Battalion Chief Don Perry, Joe Lindaman, and some other Base

Firefighters had also been caught in the fire near our strike team. The Chiefs car became stuck in the sandy soil along side the road as they tried to get around some obstruction. It was too late to make a run for it, so they hunkered down in the vehicle while the fire roared over them. They breathed in the hot air that permeated the Chiefs sedan, but managed to survive. "They walked out themselves and we gave them oxygen from our breathing apparatus, then they were rushed to the Lompoc Hospital for treatment of their seared lungs," Dave ended, in a gasp of air. Evidently, Chief Perry and a Civil Service Firefighter took it pretty bad. After a moment of silence and thoughts about our situation, we all agreed that as best we could figure out - that the fire was still burning out of control somewhere further back in Honda Canyon.