Inmate Firefighter Fatality

July 5, 2017

Interstate 8

17-CA-MVU-016308

17-CA-MVU-016337

California Southern Region

SUMMARY

On Wednesday, July 5, 2017, at 1400 hours, a CAL FIRE inmate firefighter crew responded to a wildland fire in the Lakeside Fire Protection District of San Diego County, California. While constructing direct handline, an inmate firefighter suffered a serious laceration from a chainsaw to the right upper leg. The inmate firefighter was transported to a local area hospital in critical condition and succumbed to the injury on July 11, 2017.
CONDITIONS

Weather:
Temperature: 92° Fahrenheit
Relative Humidity: 35%
Winds: West 4 mph
Visibility: Clear

Fuel Type: Sumac, Chamise, and Sage

Road Conditions: Dry

Topography: 58% slope with large rocky outcroppings

Fire Behavior: Overhaul phase

Make/Model of Equipment: Stihl MS461 chainsaw with a 24-inch bar

Personnel Involved:
(C1): La Cima Crew 3
(FC1): Fire Captain
(IFF1): First Sawyer
(IFF2): Second Sawyer
(V1): Victim/Puller for the First Sawyer

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

On Wednesday, July 5, 2017, at 1328 hours, a wildland fire was reported in the Lakeside Fire Protection District, in San Diego County, California. C1 was in the area on a work project located within two miles of the wildland fire. At 1356 hours, C1 contacted Monte Vista Emergency Command Center (ECC) to inform them of the crew's location. At 1400 hours, C1 was dispatched to the Interstate 8 Incident, with an arrival time of 1420 hours.

C1 was assigned to Division A on the incident. FC1 received a briefing from the division supervisor. FC1 gave a safety briefing to the crew and described the fireline assignment. C1 made access to the fire on the southwest corner. Due to the steepness of the slope and the limited working area, the saw teams determined they would “leap frog” each other along the fireline. The first saw team began cutting on Division A, followed by the second saw team. The saw teams completed 79 feet of cut line when they encountered a rock out cropping with a steep drop off and a slope of 58%. FC1 continued above the saw teams and was scouting potential handline when they encountered a flagged off area denoting the area of origin. FC1 advised
the saw teams to stay out of the flagged off area and not to throw any cut brush in that direction.

Saw team two began cutting the brush on the 58% slope. IFF2 lost his footing on the steep slope and slid down the hill approximately five feet. Saw team one leap frogged saw team two and stopped on the slope at a small bench and rocky area to begin cutting direct line. The vegetation in the area was sumac brush, approximately six to ten feet in height. V1 was throwing the cut brush down the hill to saw team two. V1 was having difficulty throwing the brush over the uncut remaining brush due to the height of the brush.

IFF1 was standing on a small shelf of flat ground with a steep drop off to the west; there were rocks to the east and south side of the area of origin. IFF1 and V1 were building direct line, due to the limited working area, V1 positioned on a 13-inch-high rock, in front of and to the right of IFF1, standing slightly above the operating chainsaw. V1 needed the leverage to assist IFF1 in pushing on the sumac as they cut.

At approximately 1440 hours, IFF1 began his cut into the sumac, as V1 was pushing on the sumac toward IFF1, the sumac branch snapped and V1 lost balance. As the momentum carried V1 off the rock, V1 stepped forward inadvertently straddling the bar of the chainsaw striking the back of the upper right thigh directly behind the chaps. V1 stated, “Oww, I’ve been hit”. FC1, along with the fire investigator and the firefighter paramedics nearby, heard V1 and immediately started toward V1’s direction. Simultaneously, IFF1 felt the chainsaw grab on the chaps of V1 and engaged the chain break. IFF1 removed the chainsaw from the entwined Kevlar of the left thigh chap and grabbed V1 by the web gear and pack. IFF1 moved V1 to an open area just south of the accident site. IFF1, paramedics and other crew members began administering first aid.

At 1441 hours, IFF1 called for the crew swamper to bring up the medical aid kit. The puller from saw team two told IFF2 to quit cutting and move to the location of V1 and remove V1’s web gear and pack. The crew swamper supplied a Tactical Tourniquet to the firefighter paramedics who began patient care and the incident commander requested an ambulance. The tactical tourniquet was applied to his upper right leg to control the bleeding.

At 1459 hours, V1 was transported by ground ambulance to a local area hospital.

**INJURIES/DAMAGES**

V1 suffered a serious laceration from a chainsaw to the right upper leg. On Tuesday, July 11, 2017, at 0430 hours, V1 succumbed to the injury and was pronounced deceased by the medical professionals at Sharp Memorial Hospital in San Diego, California.
SAFETY ISSUES FOR REVIEW

- Maintain situational awareness while working in close proximity of crew members utilizing a chainsaw.
- Take into account steep slopes and rugged terrain which may cause saw teams to work in closer proximity.
- Review Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG)
  - Planning for a Medical Emergency (Page 3)
- Ensure both verbal and non-verbal communications are utilized around chainsaw operations to assure personnel safety.
- Ensure all PPE is worn and fits appropriately.
- Standard Firefighting Orders:
  - #7: Maintain prompt communications with your forces, your supervisors, and adjoining forces.
  - #10: Fight fire aggressively, having provided for safety first.

INCIDENTAL ISSUES/LESSONS LEARNED

- By having appropriate medical equipment on the fireline, personnel provided immediate care to the patient.
- Training on chainsaw operations in both favorable and unfavorable terrain will reinforce proper safety chainsaw techniques.
- The cause and effect of chainsaw operations in relationship to weight distribution on uneven terrain affected the saw teams working in close proximity and increased risk of inherent dangers.
- Good clear communications and coordination contributed to a swift and effective removal of the patient to advanced care.
PHOTOS/SITE DIAGRAMS/MAPS

Interstate 8 Overview Map
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Interstate 8 Slope Perspective
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Overlooking Accident Site

Accident Site