

INAJA FIRE
Palomar RD - Cleveland NF
November 25, 1956

"HISTORY"

The "Inaja Fire" started in the Pine Hills area on the Inaja Indian Reservation at 9:10 a.m. on November 24, 1956.

It was set by a young boy who threw a match into some dry grass to "see if it would burn".

At 9:15 a.m. two lookout towers reported the smoke.

At 9:25 a.m. a 3-man engine crew arrived at the fire and reported that they could not control it.

Additional crews and equipment were then ordered to respond and assist.

By 5:00 p.m. that evening, the fire had spread across the San Diego River drainage to the west, run over Mt Gower and down the west side of El Capitan Reservoir and onto El Cajon Mt. By that time it had burned an estimated 25,000 acres.

"WEATHER"

The forest had been in a state of high fire danger throughout the season. Up to this point, the season had been characterized as being more severe than the "bad year" of 1955.

At the time of the fire, the area had been under a prolonged Santa Ana wind condition for nearly a week.

Wind speeds the days of the fire averaged 15-20 mph with some gusts to 40 mph.

Relative humidity's were less than 20% both day and night.

Air temperatures ranged from 45 to 85 degrees.

"FUELS"

The area had last burned 28 years before.

90% chamise - 6 to 8 Ft.

10% sage - 2 to 3 ft.

Fuel moistures were below critical burning levels.

Live - 56%

Dead - 49%.

At that time, the moisture content approximated the lowest ever recorded for the species and was believed to be near the minimum possible.

Fuels were so dry you could light the brush canopy with a kitchen match.

“TOPOGRAPHY”

San Diego riverbed was dry.

Canyon walls were steep and rugged.

Slopes were as steep as 70% in many places.

Rock outcrops were common to the area.

Elevation was approximately 3,500 feet in the disaster area.

“THE ASSIGNMENT”

Complete indirect fireline downhill from the canyon rim to the riverbed below.

Burnout the dozer line at the top of the fire and burn out along completed line crew progressed.

Engine crew support burnout along dozer line.

A ridge was picked out as the shortest route down. It had the lightest fuels (2/3 sage & 1/3 chamise).

“NOTES OF INTEREST”

Two earlier attempts at constructing indirect line downhill into the canyon that day were abandoned due to fire activity.

Attempts to burn out the dozer line during the day were unsuccessful due to wind conditions.

Earlier firing operations drew fire uphill from down-canyon so they were halted.

A strong up-canyon draft about 3:00 p.m. resulted in a major fire run on the opposite side of the canyon.

The day-shift crew was pulled out of the area due to spot fires below them at 3:15 p.m.

Things looked calm and quiet by 6:00 p.m.

At shift change that evening, the line overhead and crew were warned about shifting winds and potential problems with firing operations.

Night-shift crews arrived on the line after dark, approximately 7:00 p.m.

“PROGRESSION OF EVENTS”

Crew began work at approximately 7:20 p.m.

They burned out along the dozer line and a short section of hand line with hoselay support.

Started line construction downhill where the day crews left off.

At approximately 7:40 p.m., a spot fire was observed on a side ridge about 1000 feet below the crew.

A warning was shouted from above to the crew below.

At 7:41 p.m., the crew stopped work and started back up the line at a normal pace.

The men farthest down had approximately 1,100 feet to travel up to the top.

Survivors reported no panic amongst the crew.

Some wondered why they were being called out.

At approximately 7:50 p.m., a second spot fire flared up below the crew. Shortly after that, a third spot fire flared up.

The wind seemed to shift up-slope/up-canyon at this time and all of the spot fires became very active.

At 8:05 p.m., all of the spot fires merged and the fire hit the bottom of the hand line.

The crew was struggling to get out at this point.

The main canyon was now burning out.

Eleven firefighters were cut-off when the fire raced uphill in the ravine to their right and crossed their fire line.

Two men working the upper portion of the line escaped just before the fire hit the canyon rim.

At approximately 8:10 p.m., the fire hit the canyon rim.

Flame lengths were reported to be 100 feet plus at the top.

Five crewmembers who were cutoff, but above the other eleven who perished, escaped by climbing up a 15 foot high rock bluff and running the remaining 75 feet to safety on the left flank of the fire.

Those five survivors reported that the fire was 10 feet behind them at that point.

About the time the fire reached the rim, there was a sudden flashover, which simultaneously ignited a large area, perhaps 40 acres.

This explosive flashover enveloped the eleven firefighters cutoff just below the rock bluff that the others had escaped over earlier.

"THE AFTERMATH"

All victims were found in an area with a radius of 45 feet. The lowest one found was 300 feet from the top of the canyon rim.

The fire barely crossed the fireline at the top in only a few places, where it was quickly put out.

Of the men that escaped, two were working at the very lowest point of the hand line.

Two men who had been working closest to the rim did not escape.

Several of the firefighters who lost their lives, including the correctional officer and the Forest Service officers, stayed with the crew until the last, helping and urging others out even though they might have otherwise had an opportunity to escape themselves.

The Inaja Fire was finally controlled at 6:00 p.m. on November 28, 1956.

It burned a total of 43,611 acres within the Cleveland National Forest and adjoining state protected lands.

The area burned had a 90-mile perimeter.

Five homes were destroyed.

Over 2,000 men fought the fire.

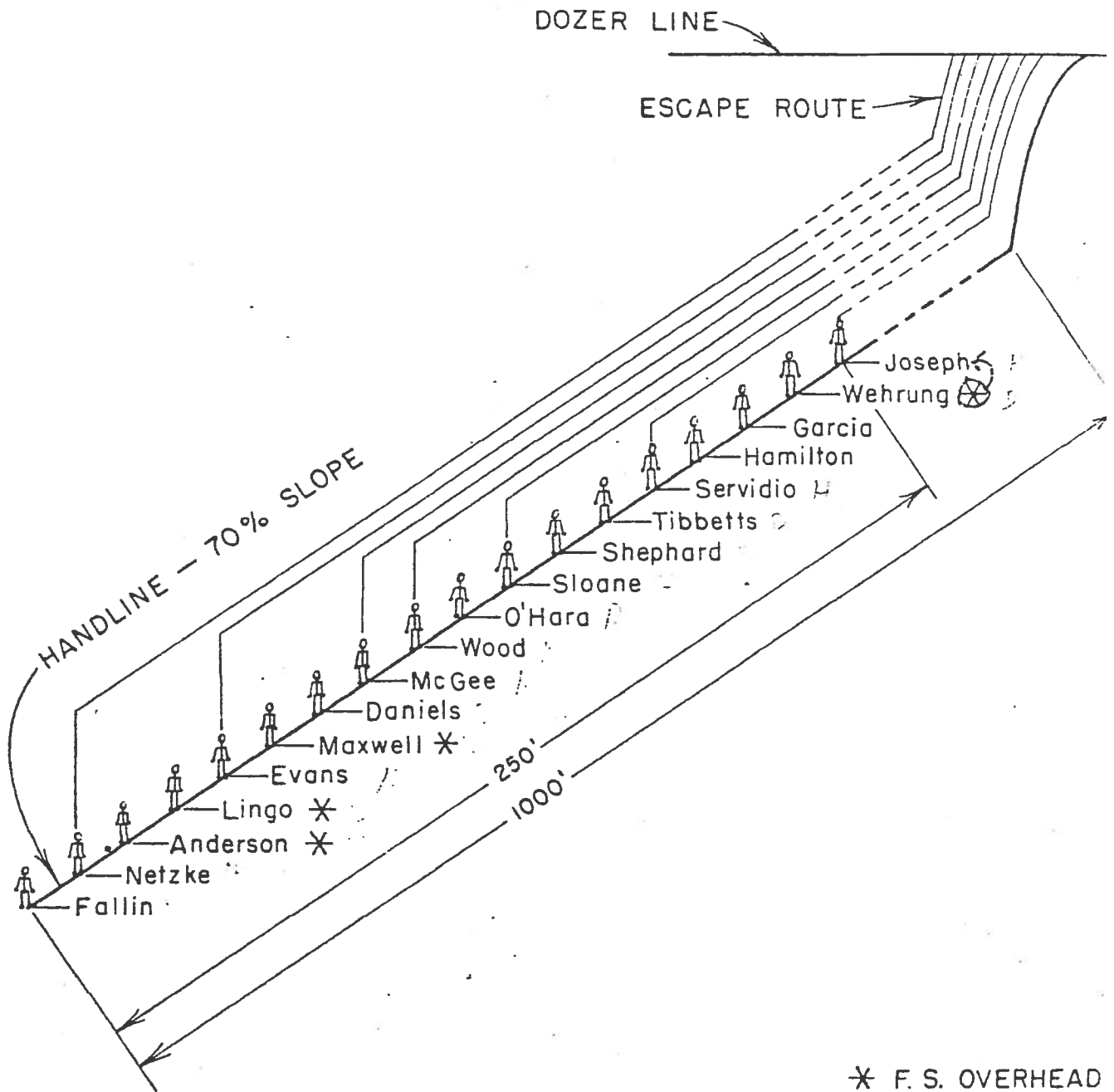
Eleven of those men never went home.

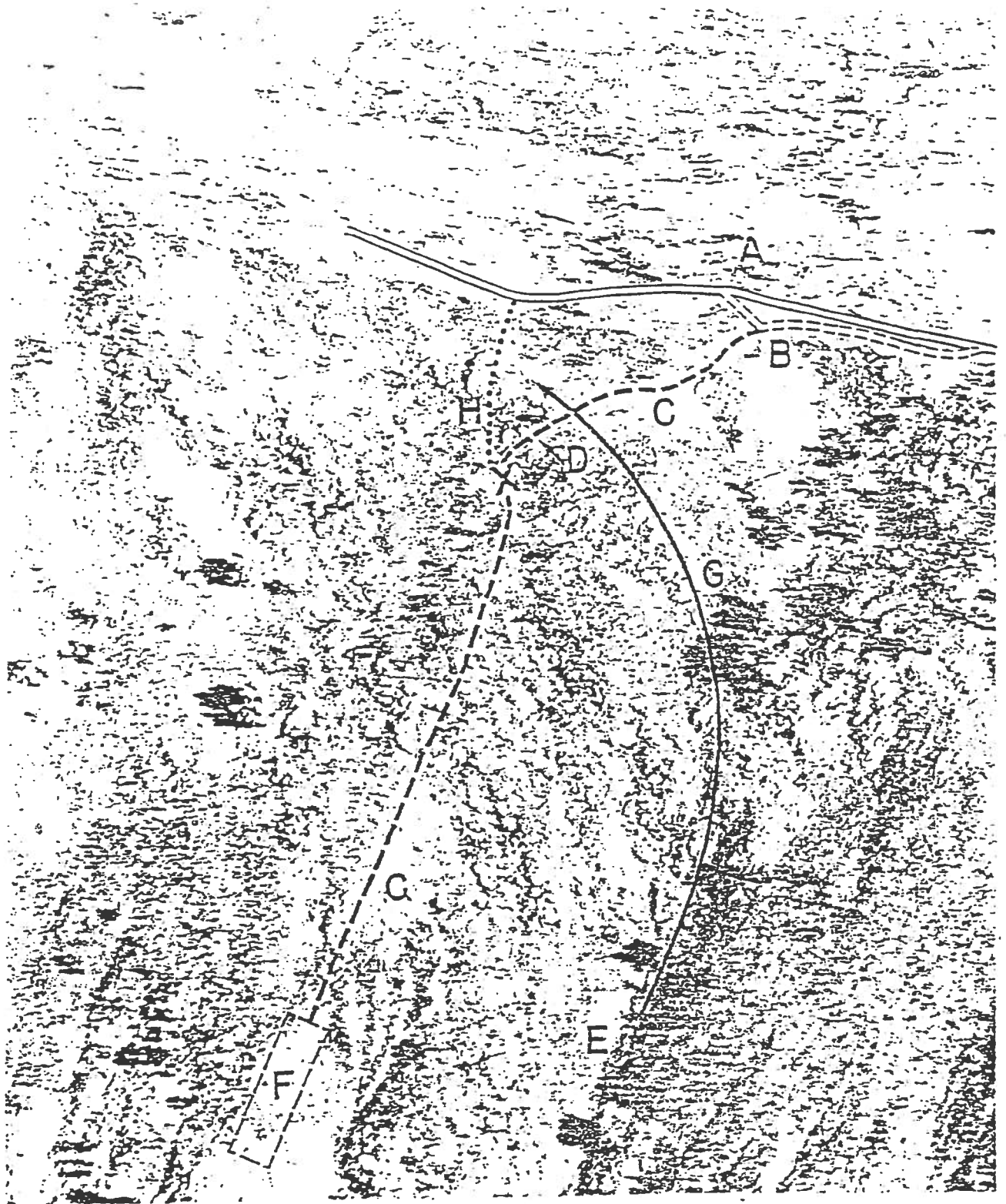
"KILLED IN ACTION IN LINE OF DUTY"

ALBERT W. ANDERSON	AGE: 45	U.S. FOREST SERVICE SHASTA-TRINITY N.F. Night Sector Boss
FORREST B. MAXWELL	AGE: 30	U.S. FOREST SERVICE SHASTA-TRINITY N.F. Night Crew Boss
CARLTON R. LINGO	AGE: 19	U.S. FOREST SERVICE CLEVELAND N.F. Night Crew Boss
LEROY WEHRUNG	AGE: 41	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP CORRECTIONS OFFICER
MILES DANIELS	AGE: 33	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter
WILLIAM D. FALLIN	AGE: 22	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter
GEORGE A. GARCIA	AGE: 41	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter
VIRGIL L. HAMILTON	AGE: 26	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter
JOSEPH P. O'HARA	AGE: 45	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter
LONNIE L. SHEPPARD	AGE: 26	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter
JOE TIBBETS	AGE: 34	VIEJAS HONOR CAMP Inmate Firefighter

INAJA FIRE
NOV. 25, 1956

DIAGRAM
ORDER OF MEN ON FIRELINE WHEN CALL CAME TO COME OUT
AND THOSE THAT ESCAPED





- A Tractor trails
- B
- C Fire trail (hand constructed)
- D Small bluff on trail
- E Chimney canyon

- F Approximate location of crew when first warning was given
- G Route of fire run
- H Route of those who escaped
- X Area where victims were trapped - disaster site