The Honda Canyon Fire

December 20th-21st 1977

Joseph N. Valencia
South Vandenberg – 1977

Vandenberg: 98,000 acres, 35 mile coastline

North Vandenberg – Main Base, BX, Airfield Command & Admin. Facilities, Contractors 1st STRAD, 1st Strategic Aerospace Div. 4392nd, Aerospace Support Wing 394th ATG, Aerospace Test Group

History of South Vandenberg also includes:

- 1923 Shipwreck of 7 Naval Destroyers, 23 Died
- 1977 Honda Canyon Fire
- 1986 Titan Rocket Explosion
The Initial Response, December 20th 1977

+ 7:06 am, Power Pole on Tranquillon Ridge Blown Over

+ VAFB Fire Response –
  > Sgt. Mike Holmes
  > Asst. Chief Gene Cooper
  > Fire Chief Billy Bell

+ Military Response – 7:45 am
  > 4392nd Base Commander, Colonel Joseph Turner
  > 1st STRAD Commander, Maj. General David Gray

+ Santa Barbara County Fire Dept. SBCO, 7:53 am
  > Hot Shot Crew (Lindaman)
  > Battalion Chief Don Perry
  > Strike Team (Engine 51/31, Brush 51/31) *
Fire on Tranquillon Ridge

+ Weather Conditions – Dec 20th 1977 @ 8:00 am.

  > Drought - 2 Year 1976 - 1977
  > High and Low Pressure Systems
  > Pre-frontal Santa Ana Wind
  > Winds – 41 – 75 MPH
  > Humidity – 14% and Dropping

+ Rain from Pacific Storm – 24 Hours away.

+ Fire Season Closed Dec 19th 1977.

+ 8:23 am. Chief Bell, Asst. Chief Cooper, Sgt. Holmes, Sgt. Fink all meet on Tranquillon Ridge.

+ Chief Bell instructs Ron Fink to be a lookout—while he goes to meet with the base commander Col. Joseph Turner.
Fire Ramps Up to Firestorm Conditions

+ Officials believe fire will proceed down Honda Canyon to Sea.
  > Winds increase, 1st Overrun occurs on Tranq Ridge
  > Lookout indicates fire is heading for SLC-5
  > Fire gets deep into Honda Canyon

+ Commander, Fire Chief, Asst. Chief & Santa Barbara Co Battalion Chief meet on Camera Pad near SLC-5.

+ Chief Bell orders Holmes and crew to new position.

+ Bulldozer unloaded and begins to work Target Ridge Road.

****The Pivotal Change:  9:30AM****

+ Fire jumps to top of Target Ridge. Fire Chief Bell orders retreat.
+ Retreat delayed, then fire cuts off group attempting to escape.
The situation at 9:40 AM December 20th, 1977

Delphy Road

Location of VAFB Engine #11, SP Vehicle & County Strike Team

SB Co. Battalion Chief Perry Plus Lindaman, Gabbert & Grossnini

Avery Road

Dozer entrapment, McCauley

Chief Bell Col. Turner Asst. Chief Cooper

Holmes & crew escape east on Target Ridge Rd.

Pacific Ocean

Col. Johnson's Security Police Force escapes south

Fire as of 9:40 AM

Fire as of 9:20 AM

Fire goes over ridge 9:15 AM

Overrun of Engine #12 8:56 AM
Firestorm: Fire jumps to Target Ridge, and races to Ocean.

Fire Overruns several Fire and Air Force personnel on Avery Road, then on Delphy Road, and again on Coast Road.
Overrun of Commanders Vehicle-results in 3-deaths.

“The courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point”

C.S. Lewis

Dozer Operator Clarence McCauley

Dozer Operator Clarence McCauley

Col. Joseph Turner
Fire Chief Billy Bell
Asst. Chief Gene Cooper
Santa Barbara County Battalion Chief overrun on Avery Road.
--Four occupants in vehicle, fire shelter used--all survive.
Chaos on Space Launch Complex –4 (Titan Launch Site)

+ Strategic Rocket Launch assets in danger.
+ 2 more Overruns occur.
+ One firefighter with major injuries.
Death & Decision

+ Two Headed Fire, North Flank & South Flank. Est. 750 Acres.
+ 12:00 PM. AF Locates bodies of Col Turner, Chief Bell & Cooper.
+ Leadership Broken. Chaos on South Vandenberg.
  > TSgt Holmes on North Flank, MSgt. Fink on South Flank
  > SBCo BC Perry in the middle of burning mass
  > General Gray & aide travel backside and back to front.
  > New Leadership arrives. SBCo Deputy Chief Halliburton and Chief McGaha from base.
+ Leadership Recovery 12:30 to 1:00 pm.
  > SBCo Dep. Fire Chief Halliburton sees broken system. Establishes new Strategy on North Flank
  > SBCo BC Perry recovers from overrun and pushes for backfire to encircle fire on south side of Tranquilllon Ridge
Forces of Nature

+ Two more overruns. Plato Road & Coast Road. Two men burned.

+ Nature gone wild. California Windstorm.
  > San Diego/Ramona. Truck overturned 1 man killed
  > Northern California. Tree falls on Truck –2 killed, 2 fishermen missing.
  > Bakersfield windstorm. 3-killed, City in virtual standstill

+ Vandenberg AFB.
  > Heavy military involvement (1st STRAD/4392nd)
  > Mutual Aid
  > Seabees form Port Hueneme

+ Public Affairs
  > VAFB Public Affairs deals with Media
  > Radio broadcasts news, rumors flourish
Peak winds at VAFB 117 MPH, Bakersfield 192 MPH
Southern San Joaquin Valley Wind/Dust Storm
20 December 1977
192 MPH Peak Wind
3 Died, Several more from Valley Fever
25 Million Tons of Soil Lifted
Major Property damage in Bakersfield, Arvin
Livestock Killed
Gov. Brown Declares Disaster
Augmentees from north base units are deployed to fight the fire.

Military and civilian forces fight the fire together.
8 Fire Overruns on Honda Canyon Fire –

Overrun of Vandenberg Engine#12 Crew.
  Time: 8:56 to 9:05 am.
  Location: Near Origin on Tranquillon Ridge.

Overrun of Commander & Fire Officials, SBCo BC / Dozer Operator.
  Time: 9:36 to 10:00 am.
  Location: Avery Road and Camera Pad.

Overrun of SBCo Strike Team, VAFB Engine#11, and Security Police.
  Time: 9:40 to 10:00 am.
  Location: Delphy Road and Surf Road Intersection.

Overrun of Ambulance #3 transporting burned dozer operator.
  Time: 10:10 to 10:20 am.
  Location: Coast Road. One half mile north of Delphy Road exit.

Overrun of Vandenberg and County Bulldozers.
  Time: 10:55 to 11:20 am.
  Location: Perimeter Road around east side of SLC-4 Complex.

Overrun of SLC-4 Titan Complex.
  Time: 11:00 to 11:20 am.
  Location: Nearly all of SLC-4, including west and east pads.

Overrun of Vandenberg bulldozer and Rescue truck on Plato Road.
  Time: About 2:00 pm.
  Location: Plato Road, North of SLC-4 Titan Complex.

Overrun of Two Vandenberg Firefighters on Coast Road.
  Time: About 2:00 to 2:30 pm.
  Location: Coast Road
**Backfire on the South Flank**

+ SBCo BC Perry briefs Maj. General Gray on need for Backfire.

  > General Gray is uncomfortable with plan. Tells Perry, he has more fire than he can deal with. General is concerned about unexploded ordnance and SLC-6 Rocket Assets.

+ After re-assurance from SBCo & aide, he gives approval.

+ Backfire begins with BC Perry in charge.

  > Strip burning uses dozer cut from Honda Ridge Road to Coast Road

  > Hot Shots, Dozers used, Augmentees used as lookouts

+ Backfire successful. Completed around 2:30 -3:00 pm.

+ South Flank Okay for now. Future is wide open.
Backfire on the South Flank

Battalion Chief Don Perry explains to General David Gray the need for a Backfire Operation
Joe Lindaman briefs the troops on Coast Road.

General Gray views the troops with Col. Johnson.

Hot-Shots assemble for Backfire Operation.
Conscience & Command

+ Sun sets at 4:40 pm. Longest night of year ahead.

+ Two front fire—still out of control.
  > North Flank – threat to go over Bear Creek Road, North VAFB, local communities.
  > South Flank – threat from backing further in Honda Canyon and then Tranq Ridge. Sudden & Jalama Ranches.

+ Command Post set up at Fire Station #5 at entrance to South VAFB

+ Difficult Situation. Confrontation occurs.
  > Command (USAF vs ICS)
  > Control (Problems w/different Ops & tactics/culture)
  > Communications (Physical/Human factors)
**Night Fire**

**North Flank Operations:**

+ Defend Bear Creek Rd, SLC-3.
  - as contingency use Santa Ynez River as last fire break.
  - Seabees from Pt. Hueneme provide Support at Santa Ynez Riverbed
  - Fire crosses Bear Creek Road and fire breaks at 9:30PM.
  - Tactics call for direct attack. Many Injured

**South Flank Operations:**

+ Fire jumps over Tranquillon Ridge. BC Perry orders retreat to Coast Road.
  - Space Launch Complex-6 (SLC-6) threatened.

+ BC McGready takes over task force & moves resources to SLC-6.
  - Deploys resources to back of SLC-6 to protect LH2/LO2 & Solid Rockets
  - Air Force removes all military resources, and asks SBCo to do same.
  - BC tells military that he will stay

+ SBCo Fire Chief Patterson establishes new coordinated system.

  + Backfire works and fire skirts around site and burns to ocean.
Fire and Rain – Dec 21st 1977

Winds die down, Low Pressure moves towards coast and rain begins to fall.


Memorial is held for fire victims.

Future: Staff-Ride VAFB/USFS

Burn Area est. 10,000 Acres
Beyond Tranquillon Ridge is a story about a phenomenon called firestorm. It follows the individual characters of this tragic wildfire, from the high command; including fire chiefs and generals, down to the men on the front lines; the firefighters and airmen. Beyond Tranquillon Ridge is a place and time that stood still for twenty-four hours. It is a story of devastating wind, explosive fire, and the stranglehold of human drama—amid the secret space launch facilities of Vandenberg Air Force Base.

Drawing on more than one-hundred interviews, Mr. Valencia re-creates the experience while his narrative describes the confusion and fear that was part of the worst fire in Vandenberg’s history—the “Honda Canyon Fire.”

Valencia’s detailed research as well as his own personal experiences completes a puzzle of nature gone wild and man’s attempt to control it. The story ties together the physical and human dynamics that led to the deaths of the Air Force commander, two fire chiefs and a heavy-equipment operator. It is a sweeping reconstruction of a significant event that changed the fate of Vandenberg for years to come.