ROMERO FIRE REVIEW

Conversation With Forest Supervisor

At what spot, precisely, did the Romero Fire start? Were the retardant bombings carried out effectively? Is the C-130 practical for such purposes, or was it just an impressive display? Did a motion picture crew record film on fire the firestorm that was fatal to four men? How do you evaluate the fire's dangers to Carpinteria?

Robert G. Lancaster (pictured above), supervisor of the 5-million-acre Los Padres National Forest, is a man who can answer such questions authoritatively. News-Press and KTMS radio newsmen put them, and others, to Lancaster in a tape-recorded interview, most of it printed below.

Questioning Lancaster were Paul Vebelen, John Hall, Keith Dalton and Steve Sullivan of the News-Press and Malcolm Morehouse and Gary Clark of KTMS.

Q: What is the scope of your responsibilities as forest supervisor?

A: We are somewhat different from a normal federal agency in that we are unique in the system of decentralization of authority. The staff, as does a district ranger, is totally responsible for all activities in his given unit of ground.

In this case the Los Padres Forest has seven ranger districts and several district ranger stations and each is totally responsible, but does not have final authority. Some of that authority rests across the lever of the district ranger is held at the regional forest level, but essentially the responsibility is quite direct and quite complete.

Q: Can you take us through the Romero Fire from Wednesday to today? Was it under control when we went to bed Wednesday night? For example, we had the Saturday night situation when there was a Carpinteria fire department meeting and it sounded like the Carpinteria fire department was calling the shots because the fire was burning around Carpinteria. How does the decision-making change in such jurisdictional situations?

A: We both remain totally responsible for our individual jurisdictions. The Carpinteria fire chief always was responsible for structure protection. He never did come under our command. Nor did we ever come under the command for brush land. The same is true of the State Division of Forestry. They were working primarily to help the Forest Service under our mutual aid agreement, on wild land fire fighting. The Forest supervisor himself is totally responsible for every other geographical portion of the national forest system.

Q: When a fire such as the Romero Fire breaks out, who does what?

A: The jurisdiction is absolute in some aspects. The fire protection district, under state law, has a fire protection boundary. With the passing of the Clark-McNary Act of 1924 it became federal policy to cooperate with the states in the protection of wild lands and the suppression of wild fire. And in turn, a subsidy is paid to the various states and is administered through the secretary of agriculture. The funds are used to encourage the organization and training of personnel and extension of fire protection to wild lands.

This is different from what is done in a fire protection district. National Forest is a man who can answer such questions authoritatively. News-Press and KTMS radio newsmen put them, and others, to Lancaster in a tape-recorded interview, most of it printed below.

Questioning Lancaster were Paul Vebelen, John Hall, Keith Dalton and Steve Sullivan of the News-Press and Malcolm Morehouse and Gary Clark of KTMS.

Q: What is the scope of your responsibilities as forest supervisor?

A: We are somewhat different from a normal federal agency in that we are unique in the system of decentralization of authority. The staff, as does a district ranger, is totally responsible for all activities in his given unit of ground.

In this case the Los Padres Forest has seven ranger districts and several district ranger stations and each is totally responsible, but does not have final authority. Some of that authority rests across the lever of the district ranger is held at the regional forest level, but essentially the responsibility is quite direct and quite complete.

Q: Can you take us through the Romero Fire from Wednesday to today? Was it under control when we went to bed Wednesday night? For example, we had the Saturday night situation when there was a Carpinteria fire department meeting and it sounded like the Carpinteria fire department was calling the shots because the fire was burning around Carpinteria. How does the decision-making change in such jurisdictional situations?

A: We both remain totally responsible for our individual jurisdictions. The Carpinteria fire chief always was responsible for structure protection. He never did come under our command. Nor did we ever come under the command for brush land. The same is true of the State Division of Forestry. They were working primarily to help the Forest Service under our mutual aid agreement, on wild land fire fighting. The Forest supervisor himself is totally responsible for every other geographical portion of the national forest system.

Q: When a fire such as the Romero Fire breaks out, who does what?

A: The jurisdiction is absolute in some aspects. The fire protection district, under state law, has a fire protection boundary. With the passing of the Clark-McNary Act of 1924 it became federal policy to cooperate with the states in the protection of wild lands and the suppression of wild fire. And in turn, a subsidy is paid to the various states and is administered through the secretary of agriculture. The funds are used to encourage the organization and training of personnel and extension of fire protection to wild lands.

This is different from what is done in a fire protection district. National Forest is a man who can answer such questions authoritatively. News-Press and KTMS radio newsmen put them, and others, to Lancaster in a tape-recorded interview, most of it printed below.

Questioning Lancaster were Paul Vebelen, John Hall, Keith Dalton and Steve Sullivan of the News-Press and Malcolm Morehouse and Gary Clark of KTMS.

Q: What is the scope of your responsibilities as forest supervisor?

A: We are somewhat different from a normal federal agency in that we are unique in the system of decentralization of authority. The staff, as does a district ranger, is totally responsible for all activities in his given unit of ground.

In this case the Los Padres Forest has seven ranger districts and several district ranger stations and each is totally responsible, but does not have final authority. Some of that authority rests across the lever of the district ranger is held at the regional forest level, but essentially the responsibility is quite direct and quite complete.

Q: Can you take us through the Romero Fire from Wednesday to today? Was it under control when we went to bed Wednesday night? For example, we had the Saturday night situation when there was a Carpinteria fire department meeting and it sounded like the Carpinteria fire department was calling the shots because the fire was burning around Carpinteria. How does the decision-making change in such jurisdictional situations?

A: We both remain totally responsible for our individual jurisdictions. The Carpinteria fire chief always was responsible for structure protection. He never did come under our command. Nor did we ever come under the command for brush land. The same is true of the State Division of Forestry. They were working primarily to help the Forest Service under our mutual aid agreement, on wild land fire fighting. The Forest supervisor himself is totally responsible for every other geographical portion of the national forest system.

Q: When a fire such as the Romero Fire breaks out, who does what?

A: The jurisdiction is absolute in some aspects. The fire protection district, under state law, has a fire protection boundary. With the passing of the Clark-McNary Act of 1924 it became federal policy to cooperate with the states in the protection of wild lands and the suppression of wild fire. And in turn, a subsidy is paid to the various states and is administered through the secretary of agriculture. The funds are used to encourage the organization and training of personnel and extension of fire protection to wild lands.

This is different from what is done in a fire protection district. National Forest is a man who can answer such questions authoritatively. News-Press and KTMS radio newsmen put them, and others, to Lancaster in a tape-recorded interview, most of it printed below.

Questioning Lancaster were Paul Vebelen, John Hall, Keith Dalton and Steve Sullivan of the News-Press and Malcolm Morehouse and Gary Clark of KTMS.

Q: What is the scope of your responsibilities as forest supervisor?

A: We are somewhat different from a normal federal agency in that we are unique in the system of decentralization of authority. The staff, as does a district ranger, is totally responsible for all activities in his given unit of ground.

In this case the Los Padres Forest has seven ranger districts and several district ranger stations and each is totally responsible, but does not have final authority. Some of that authority rests across the lever of the district ranger is held at the regional forest level, but essentially the responsibility is quite direct and quite complete.

Q: Can you take us through the Romero Fire from Wednesday to today? Was it under control when we went to bed Wednesday night? For example, we had the Saturday night situation when there was a Carpinteria fire department meeting and it sounded like the Carpinteria fire department was calling the shots because the fire was burning around Carpinteria. How does the decision-making change in such jurisdictional situations?

A: We both remain totally responsible for our individual jurisdictions. The Carpinteria fire chief always was responsible for structure protection. He never did come under our command. Nor did we ever come under the command for brush land. The same is true of the State Division of Forestry. They were working primarily to help the Forest Service under our mutual aid agreement, on wild land fire fighting. The Forest supervisor himself is totally responsible for every other geographical portion of the national forest system.

Q: When a fire such as the Romero Fire breaks out, who does what?

A: The jurisdiction is absolute in some aspects. The fire protection district, under state law, has a fire protection boundary. With the passing of the Clark-McNary Act of 1924 it became federal policy to cooperate with the states in the protection of wild lands and the suppression of wild fire. And in turn, a subsidy is paid to the various states and is administered through the secretary of agriculture. The funds are used to encourage the organization and training of personnel and extension of fire protection to wild lands.

This is different from what is done in a fire protection district. National Forest is a man who can answer such questions authoritatively. News-Press and KTMS radio newsmen put them, and others, to Lancaster in a tape-recorded interview, most of it printed below.

Questioning Lancaster were Paul Vebelen, John Hall, Keith Dalton and Steve Sullivan of the News-Press and Malcolm Morehouse and Gary Clark of KTMS.
Forest Supervisor Discusses Fire Duties

Continued from Page C-4
organization would have a clarification and would promptly head for the fire.
Q. — As yet you have no command post. Where would this man go? With whom would he be communicable?
A. — Our command post essentially works through the supervisor’s dispatcher office until the fire boss sets up a unit plan and makes a camp.
Q. — Is this your point of communications?
A. — That’s your hub. That’s your command. That’s your unit, where you are co-ordinating. That’s when you start asking other forces for aid through the zone dispatcher and the associates, the radio. He co-ordinates all the aircraft and the ordering from other agencies.
Q. — What would this aircraft, for instance, have we got at Goleta? That’s our contract. Paso Robles has two, under contract to the California Division of Forestry which are available to us through our zone dispatcher. There are two at San Luis Obispo, and there’s one at the US Forest Service, and here’s one under Forest Service contract and one under CDF. Hence one has under Forest Service contract and the US Forest Service. But the CDF one is under Forest Service contract and the US Forest Service, too, are made available to us through the zone dispatcher. A major reason they are not all under one agency is budgetary.
Q. — When you order aircraft from Hemet, are they from the same company or do you want a drop without a plane, can they?
A. — Yes, they would come fully loaded. After their first drop they would be sorted out.
Q. — Under what kind of problem if you can only handle so many aircraft at Goleta. Then you might go out of Burbank or another nearby base.
Q. — What is the time lag between the time a plane is ordered and the time it makes the trip from Goleta to Hemet?
A. — In this case — from Goleta — a matter of minutes.
Q. — Does the dispatcher’s first call involve evasive tactics with the pilot to make a drop without an lead plane, can they?
A. — Yes, they can. Some of the contractors, when the pilots are checked out by us or checked out by our people as if it was not immediately available, the pilot is unable to make it and in this case it would be our choice of either plane or one directly in line with the base.
Q. — Under what circumstance do you not have a lead plane there, they’ve been trained to make a drop be- cause they are trained in that task. They will order the aircraft any lead plane.
Q. — Besides, the region has established coordination in the case of a large fire. If there’s an aircraft that is requesting a drop, they will designate a plane to give them a lead plane.
Q. — We hear accusations from some people that some of the pilots need the fire for an air wa- ke up to make as much money as they could be stay up in the air as long as they were able. What can you tell us about the possibility of this happening?
A. — This is one reason why the California, in the event of a large fire, would ask for Washington service pilots. Some of their jobs is to check the pilots to make sure this does not happen.
Forest Service pilots have no connection if all the airplanes that are available. They are paid to do this very thing. They’re fliers, jumping, and on the ground. These are the people who are trained and qualified to check out those pilots who are hired by contract — and they time them.
Q. — Do you feel the burning of the Ron- sonny is a fire risk?
A. — First, you have to define your objec- tive. What is your goal? Can fire attack put out a fire risk? Yes. Can it put out a fire risk? Yes. Can it put out a large fire, it never can. Can it put out a fire? Can it put out a forest fire without grounds roofs any more it can win a war without ground troops.
What the tankers allow us to do is to put out a fire in a drain or a drain or a drain of drainages where we have at least one water source. Our tankers don’t work at all that’s carried downstream after a fire. Under normal flows, these materials don’t move. With heavy fire loads — and this can occur in unburned watersheds too — you can have a tremendous deposition of mass in this in the flood plain below.
Q. — What responsibility does the Forest Service have in regard to the transportation lines outside of its boundaries — such as the Southern Pacific railway and U.S. 1, when and if bridges are washed out from the flow coming from the burned area?
A. — It’s an act over which we had no control and had taken every precaution — fire lookout control and what not. We had no control of what was happening. We would be responsible. Or, we hung the fight of the fire through carelessness or other such acts, a citizen through court could certainly start adversary proceedings against the Forest Service to determine negligence.
Q. — Have the reports been compiled yet on the fire deaths?
A. — In no, in fact the report now in draft form is being circulated to members of the investigating group — two people from the Chief of the Forest Service office in Wash- ington, D.C., a representative of the regional forester and our deputy forest supervisor. The principal responsibility, however, rests with the assistant attorney general, the Department of the Interior. D.C. The report should be in final form to present to the chief forester by the end of the month. We have reviewed our local reports by the regional forester by the middle of November.
Q. — Was the coroner’s report completely accurate about the event of that evening?
A. — No. His responsibility was to de- termine if there had been a wrongful death and he had to make that determination quite rapid- ly and once he is testified — was there fool play, was there gross negligence, the cause of death, to see what was the cause. It’s his responsibility to determine.
Q. — What about the statement of Jimmy Amos, opened by his wife, who said, “I gotta get out here”?
A. — This is always a problem when you have a large tree. We’ve had it in San Francisco. There’s no such area in San Francisco area that is a ‘normal’ weather phenomenon for the past year. There’s been in the past year a 40 degree humidity had been predicted for that night. We may have had it somewhere down below but not in that fire area. This may have gone into a misleading of the rate of fire spread. I don’t know.
Q. — You said earlier that there was a firebreak. Do you have actual proof that arson was the cause of the Romero Fire?
A. — No. We have a five year average of firebreaks on the forest showing that none of our fires each year are of incendiary origin. In 1951, on the Santa Barbara front country area we had at least 15 fires that burned into the Santa Barbara-Romer fire areas. We’ve narrowed the origin to a 10 foot diameter area. It was in high grass near some sage- brush trees. They have not been able to find as actual device. They have also narrowed the human factor down to the fact that there was no one there within 10 minutes of the start of the fire — so it started nearby 10 feet from the road, inside a closed area — closed by mu- tual agreement with other agencies because of the high fire danger.

Q. — “We don’t put fire protection over human life”

Q. — “The aerial streams will probably qobil”
Q. — When do you learn what the time between the start of a war and the time it makes the first fighters drop bombs?

A. — This is from a cockpit — a matter of opinion.

Q. — Does the dispatcher’s first call involve drop plans? They can’t make a drop without a load plan, can they?

A. — Some of the contractors are qualified air strike pilots and are checked out on the bomb loads. So if it’s all in immediately available, the pilot can in, see and establish ground control.

Q. — Do you hear accusations from some people that some of the pilots used the fire as an excuse to make as much money as they could by the time the war was over, so that they could retire ahead of time. What can you tell us about the possibility of this happening?

A. — This is a one reason why the California region, we hire ten highly qualified Forest Fire pilots. One of their jobs is to check and make sure that this does not happen on a fire.

Forest Service pilots have no connection at all with any profit on the fire. They are paid on an hourly basis no matter what they do. Air power can do quite a few things, but it can’t get out forest fires without ground crews. You can’t get a fire out without ground crews.

Q. — When your tanks allow us to do is to confine the fire in a drainage or within a certain area. You can’t do this very thing. They’re hereditary retarders and we are ground crews who are hired by contract — and they time them.

Q. — Do you feel the bombing of the Russian Fire was done efficiently?

A. — First, you have to define your objectives. What is your goal? Can air attack put a fire out by itself? No, it can’t. If you’re expecting a fire to be stopped in an area that is 10 miles in diameter, how can you do this very thing. They’re not going to tell us you they are air attack. The Service is going to make sure that the fire is kept under control.

Q. — Is there any difference between fire in a burned over area and fire in an area where the fuel is heavy, in back of Carpinteria? And what about a fire in a burned over area and a fire in an area where the fire is heavy?

A. — It’s a yes. On both the places where it can be applied. Controlled burning has been done successfully in the Mediterranean region. So not severe and the soils are stable, you are not going always to find a condition that you can do. Controlled burning is a tool for you and you can do something, but your predictability is pretty low. Controlled burning is the only way it’s been employed mainly on ridge tops, swales, in the past. It’s a tool for you and we are going to be using it where there is a problem and where we can actually modify the fuel to get a permanent cover-type fire.

Q. — How do you feel about the protective system which had been in force for 64 years on the slopes behind Carpinteria? Was it good to get a fire out or was it just a program that could not be changed until the program became a fire?

A. — Again you have to define for protection for the area and the entire area. It is clear cut and will be effective for the rest of this program. You can’t protect it forever from burning.

Q. — Do you have any idea what the value of the land is, or what those values — the protection of the agricultural lands, structures, etc. from the fire — good or bad? What about the fire fighting?

A. — It is bad when the fire fighting is good. We are doing what we can, and I am sure we are doing our best.

Q. — When the fire started were the planes flying on the fire?

A. — At that time, and with that fire, danger.

Q. — Is the C-130 practical? Or was it just another plane that was reserved for putting out the fire?

A. — The C-130 does have a place. Any aircraft are useful, the C-130 is a good aircraft in areas that have been burned over.