

## **Fighting the Flames**

by Joshua Massatt

**A FLASH** of sharp heat. Tendrils of smoke wafted into the air, rising from a small patch of brush off Laguna Canyon Road, north of San Diego. It was 11:50 AM on the 27th of October 1993, at first an ordinary day for people living around Laguna Hills. No one would ever learn the identity of the arsonist who walked away from that brush patch, but the entire city of Laguna Beach would be impacted by that small, new brushfire.

The coastal communities around Laguna were usually surrounded by greenery. The lowest average humidity level for the area was 54.9 percent, but October often saw much higher levels of water in the atmosphere. Onshore winds carried thick fog onto the shore, draping the land with moisture. But on this particular day, the environment was not kind.

In the Great Basin of Nevada, high pressure had built in the atmosphere as the fall season progressed, causing cold air to sink. The cold air was forced downslope through the California deserts, compressed and warmed by twenty-nine degrees Fahrenheit for each mile it descended. As the temperature rose, the humidity dropped—in this case to a mere six or seven percent.

The air grew drier. It continued to dry further and pick up speed as it was forced through the canyons and passes of the California deserts, rushing toward the coast.

In Southern California, these winds are called the “Santa Anas,” after Santa Ana canyon, through which they scream at extreme speeds. In the north, they are called “Devil Winds.” Typical gusts reach up to sixty miles per hour—on this day, they were over ninety miles per hour.

When the wind hit the California coastal lands on October 27th, it only took a few hours for it to suck the moisture from the plants and evaporate all the fog. The plants were left with a four percent moisture level.

The wind caught the little brush fire and tugged it along. The brush around Laguna Beach was knee- to waist- high, and firefighter Chris Grogan says, “it moves through that really quick.” The fire flickered and expanded, was caught in the wind’s force and reached out for new fuels.

Many kinds of coastal sage scrub lined the canyon’s slopes and belly—white sage, elderberry, wild buckwheat and others. The plants normally were full of moisture, bearing pale green leaves that looked like soft pine needles. However, it was October, the rainy season had only just started, and it had not rained all year. Almost all of the leaves were dead.

When the fire passed through that scrub, Grogan says it was “like throwing a newspaper in your fireplace.”

Grogan was in his fire engine when the Fountain Valley fire department radioed his

crew at 1:00 PM to tell them their earlier assignment was canceled. Fountain Valley is about 5 miles from Laguna Beach and all of Fountain Valley's available firefighting resources were being called into action there. Strike teams, each including a battalion chief in charge of five "light units," or engine companies, were rushing out to face the wildfire. Only the reserves, the units essential to Fountain Valley's fire protection, could be left behind.

Chris's engine driver changed course and they sped up the coast. It was one of the fastest responses Chris would ever experience: between half an hour and forty-five minutes from the time of notification, all of Fountain Valley's units had arrived at the scene. Enormous resources were being pulled into action from around the state. Three hundred and forty-five fire engines, seventeen bulldozers, eleven hand crews and thirty aircraft rushed to the scene; a total of two thousand fire personnel were deployed in fighting the wild burn. It was a very dangerous fire, but it had only been burning about two hours by the time the Fountain Valley units arrived. Other outside units were already there.

In the distance, Chris saw the first smoke.

With him in the fire engine were three other crew members: his captain, Lingo, whom they called RJ; his engineer, Couser; and his partner, Tom Reardon. Tom had been fighting fires six months longer than Chris, who had been at it only a year. The Laguna fire was one of Chris's first strike-team assignments.

Chris began to see firefighting crews active on the sides of the street. Soon he found himself surrounded by men struggling to fight the fire. It was in the city already and houses were burning.

Chris found himself thinking, "Man, why don't they just let us go to work here? This looks like something we can work on."

The firefighters were organized like a military operation, five engine captains working under each strike team leader, while the strike team leaders took orders from division supervisors or operations section chiefs, and so on. It was a chain of command, and the people on the top had the most information. It was their responsibility to prioritize the use of their resources to protect as many buildings as they could. They also needed reserves that could stand by and do nothing, mobile and able to easily move from place to place as needed.

Chris says, "being a brand new kid on the job driving by this stuff, it felt like you're on a football team and your coach isn't putting you in, and you're just waiting to be put in. But I do remember that feeling, 'here we are, how come we're moving again?'"

On the streets, firemen were pulling lines off their rigs, the engines, and blasting the fires with water and foam. Other men were working with axes or chainsaws to cut away dry plants, bushes or trees near structures, or were using shovels to beat out small spotfires spread by floating embers.

One man was cutting back hedges and brush that grew up under the eaves of a house. If they had gone up, the fire would have reached the house's attic and burned through the whole structure.

Another man took a chainsaw to a tree and cut it down. The branches grew too close to a house; the structure would have burned. The firefighters were like gardeners energetically landscaping, only their tools were weapons and they seemed to be working in a minefield.

The rig Chris was on reached a place where they were enveloped in smoke.

It was a motor home parking lot. The gray smoke was like paint smeared over the windshield. Through the smoke, they could see lights glowing faintly where motor homes were ablaze. You would have to be right next to them to actually see the fire, in these conditions; Chris could barely see his hand when holding it in front of his face.

The men in the rig put on bandanas to keep from choking, and put on their goggles.

The near invisible figures of firemen appeared to float by in the darkness.

Chris recalls of himself and Tom, "we were both brand new guys, like wide-eyed kids at Christmas, you know?" Chris asked the firefighters, "is this what this job is like?"

No, his crew answered. This was a career fire, once-in-a-lifetime.

The fire born beside Laguna Canyon Road moved more rapidly than the fire trucks could arrive at the scene, in spite of their excellent reaction time. From their birth place, the flames leapt up the canyon walls, crossing the road in six places and jumping two thirds of the slope before alighting and finishing their rush to the top.

As the fire progressed, it turned into a roaring tsunami of light and energy. The fire blazed two hundred feet into the sky and raced across the earth, covering six miles in thirty minutes to boil its way from Laguna Canyon all the way up to the broad, blue expanse of the ocean. There it hit densely packed, old timber homes on the coast and

burned them down. The blue of the sea turned into a murky brown as billows of smoke, thrown out to sea by the winds, blotted out the sun. Carried by these fierce winds, the fire's embers could fly two to three miles before settling down and starting new blazes wherever they landed.

The flames reached the top of Emerald Canyon at 2:00 PM. The thick green foliage that spotted the canyon was laced with dry white, brown and gray shrubs and dry, gnarled plants. Birds could be heard twittering there on most days, there were pleasant hiking trails and the land had an atmosphere of peace. The fire made a mockery of all this, reducing the foliage to ash. It inhaled the earth at a rate of one hundred acres per minute, left it smoldering and flashed its way to Canyon Acres, covering one and a quarter miles in only seventeen minutes. At 3:30, it hit the canyon, torching many homes before leaping up a hillside to Mystic Hills.

Near 4:00 PM, it arrived. The Laguna Beach Independent newspaper would later report that Mystic Hills was "obliterated." Four rows of expensive houses like long, beautiful ribbons had lined the top of the hill. After the fire had passed, they looked like bony carcasses. Ironically, many well-watered gardens survived the inferno, while the houses behind them all but disappeared. Broad, carefully tended, multi-colored bushes of purple, yellow, green and blue, or tall, dark green bushes laced with purple flowers remained tall and beautiful during the fire. The flames raced by and around them without taking hold while mercilessly snatching almost every house. The homes were left looking like empty scribbles of white chalk, shredded newspapers, or blobs of white pond-sludge. The fire burned its way on without stopping for a second to catch its breath, turning toward other populated areas.

The fire was burning in over a dozen places, in six counties, all the way down to the border of Mexico. It “rained” over Los Angeles, showers of white ash swirling from thick smoke clouds. The fire was feeding off of ninety-degree weather and low, single digit humidity; the heat of its flames could be felt a mile away. Nineteen firefighters and civilians were injured, and sixty thousand acres were on fire.

The fire had grown, had matured, and was completely beyond anyone’s control.

The fire entered downtown Laguna Beach. Thick, black smoke consumed the landscape. Flames crept down the hills into the city, eerily matching the bleakly gleaming streetlights, which shone with a red-orange glow through the ash in the air. Red light permeated everything. The trees, buildings, the night sky, even the black smoke looked red in the fire’s bright glare. The flames could be seen leaping dozens of feet into the sky.

The firefighters around Chris knew that this could well be the biggest event any of them would ever be exposed to. Chris calls it the most dangerous wildfire he ever fought, “because there was so much fire all at the same time . . . there was just so much more going on than we had people to do the job.”

Sirens wailed in the streets. Homeowners with garden hoses wetted down their roofs while black smoke billowed about them. On Coast Highway, southbound traffic was bumper to bumper, as twenty four thousand and five hundred residents had been ordered to evacuate. Fire engines were rolling into the city in the northbound lane.

All afternoon, Chris’s strike team had been shuffled from one place to another. The men in the vehicle were all struck with deep awe for this fire. It was simply too powerful and too fast for their resources to defeat before it wrought devastation. It was stunning.

Chris's team's assignment was structure protection. Finally they got the call ordering them to go. It was nightfall when Chris jumped off of his fire engine with his crew, determined to follow his captain and engineer around and do exactly what they wanted of him.

They were positioned ahead of the fire, on the east side of an elementary school below a hill, to protect homes the fire hadn't yet reached but was approaching. The wind was picking up, which blew away enough of the smoke that they had at least fifty yards' visibility. The increased wind speed brought the fire to the houses faster, making it harder to contain. But at least they could see.

R.J., their captain, was a calm, well organized company officer. He knew how to pace himself, taking in the whole picture and coming up with a solid plan for his men. Chris felt secure working for him, confident and ready for action.

R.J. looked at his firefighters and said, "You're watching for spotfires." They would use chainsaws and axes to cut away combustible materials from around houses. "Anything you take off," R.J. said, "I want you to let me know and then I want you to go work on it." He told the crew to pull out hand lines from the fire engine and get to it.

Embers and white ash were floating in the air like flowery puffs of charred newspaper. The embers were nestling down among the properties ahead of the main blaze, starting small spotfires. Up the slopes of the hill were expensive houses surrounded by large properties, and behind them, housing tracks and smaller properties, a normally more heavily populated zone. The hill they were defending was rightly named "Rim of the World." Fire was scalding its crest and descending, changing from a distant glow to a bright, shining light rushing toward them.



The crew had three hundred feet of one-and-a half-inch-thick hose. Their job was to squirt and defend everything in range. Eventually, the fire would pass directly over them, because a fire cannot burn back over the track it has come from. What happened beyond them was not the crew's concern. Their task was simply to repel as much as they could within their assigned area around the elementary school.

The fire was coming from the northeast, heading west toward the ocean. In the open hills it burned flash fuels that intensified it and were spent quickly. Now, it was burning structures.

Chris saw spotfires beginning and took action. Many houses had wood or shake shingle roofs, which are particularly vulnerable to fires. Chris could see on the skyline many two-story houses, illuminated by the glow of the approaching fire.

He rushed toward a spotfire, jumping a wooden fence and running by a swimming pool. Chris attacked fire after fire. He slapped small ones out with the back side of his shovel, while others he blasted with the hose. Sometimes he had to climb onto a roof, because a few shingles were burning. He'd squirt the shingles and then pull a few back, peering in to make sure the fire hadn't eaten deeper into the wood.

Other times, he would rush to another roof because pine needles or a clump of leaves, carried by the wind, were burning it. Pine trees could explode when they grew very hot, a fiercer hazard. The fires around Chris and his companions were growing ever closer, so hot they were melting aluminum ladders.

Then, fires were burning all around them. Chris and his companions were forced to prioritize, hop-scotching between burning houses to save what they could. The heat radiated against Chris. The fire burned in front of him, white hot, seething, raging, and

again and again he put water down its throat only to see it come back at him. It was taking up houses, and they were saving a few, fighting for all they could . . . for hour upon hour.

Chris's crew was fighting landscape as well as fire. Palm trees surrounded by forty feet of dead fronds went up like Roman candles. Embers rose off of them in great shining clouds, flying on the wind.

There were firewood piles heaped up against houses. Patio furniture, hedges, and all those wood and shake shingle roofs homeowners hadn't wanted to spend the money to replace. Fire consumed them like tinder, and it took all the firefighters' effort to save the homes around them. Several were burning and couldn't be saved. A few could. Prioritize, dig in, and battle.

They fought the fire, and the red light was in their faces.

The fire reached Temple Hills and El Morro, the farthest extent it would finally burn. In Temple Hills, it ravaged house after house, burning down twenty-seven buildings before firefighters could win control. El Morro was on the edge of the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, with wilderness on one side and the sparkling Pacific Ocean on the other. That day, though, the residents fled the nature they had once craved as the fire burned its way into their village.

In all, the Laguna Beach Fire incinerated almost seventeen thousand acres and destroyed three hundred and ninety-one homes. Over a thousand more houses were damaged.

Yet the fire's life was coming to an end. At 10:00 P.M., the winds changed.

With the shift in the winds, the fury of the fire faded. It had lost its drive and no longer could leap incredible distances. Embers couldn't spread spotfires so far. Chris found that suddenly, the fire he was fighting was gone. It startled him how abrupt it was; he and his friends had battled furiously for hours to save whatever homes they could against an overwhelming firestorm, and suddenly their opponent vanished.

"You can be waiting for hours for something to do," Chris says, "and then for hours you can be working, just hoping you get a break. That's the thing with these brushfires and strike team assignments—you never know what you're going to get."

At midnight, the Orange County Fire Authority declared the fire contained.

Chris lay down by Laguna Canyon Road, the same street beside which an unknown arsonist had started the fire, and closed his eyes. Along the canyon slopes, the brush was blackened and the earth scorched.

The air around Chris was freezing, and Chris hadn't had anything to eat since he was assigned. Food supplies tend to arrive on day 2 of an operation. Still, after so many hours of physical exertion, he would certainly sleep.

In the hills above him, convict crews were working time off their sentences by using hand tools to cut through the brush around the remains of the wildfire, surrounding it with an impassible zone where it would have no fuel. The con-crews would periodically walk down past the drowsy firemen at the road. The con-crews would be up all night, working in the tall grass, bushes and weeds of the hills to put the fire out.

In Chris Grogan, the job created a profound sense of humility. “The big thing you learn,” Chris says, “is: you’re such a small part of the picture compared to what’s really going on.” The firefighters could only see “a very small piece of the pie, one crew’s work.” Chris was really just a kid during this terrible “baptism by fire,” second-guessing his superiors but bending to them and finally coming face to face with a chaotic nightmare.

Chris understood the fire’s intensity was “just the weather and the conditions.” He says, “It had just the right amount of wind, the right amount of humidity and the right amount of fuels, and it overwhelmed the resources quick enough that a lot of it had happened by the time we got there—we were just reacting.”

As Chris’s crew tried to rest, the fire was still burning, though it was contained. While it would probably take a couple more days to put it out, the rest of the Laguna Beach was out of danger. There were injuries, but no one had been killed. Chris’s crew had saved several houses. The firefighters’ response saved over a thousand homes directly threatened by the fires. Aircraft dropped sixty thousand gallons of fire retardant on the fire while two thousand firefighters battered it from the sides.

Humanity started this wildfire and nature ended it, a bizarre twist on the traditional man- against-nature firefight. It was a twist becoming more and more common, though. Behind Irvine is an open wilderness of about eighteen thousand acres, a vast area that has burned seven times since 1999. One of those fires was caused by lightning, but in every other, there was a human involved. There were arsonists, a welding accident, an accidental cigarette and once a bird hitting a power line and falling to earth in flames. Humans, sometimes on purpose and other times by accident, are taking nature's place as wildfire's cause. Nature itself is reeling from our onslaught, as native shrubs across the affected California regions do not have time to germinate before the next wildfire roars over them. Without the ability to seed the ground, native plant life is disappearing and being replaced by quick-growing weeds and grass. Nature and humanity together are suffering, as fires become both our children and our scourge.

Chris lay sprawled on the road, exhausted. As he fell asleep, ash, pine needles and bark still spewed through the air on the dense black clouds of smoke. Up in the hills the fire blazed, flickering under deep dark of the night sky.