

SAN DIEGO

SUNDAY
November 23, 2003

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THE SAN DIEGO
UNION-TRIBUNE

CITY EDITION

Surrounded by a wall of flames

Strike team members sent to Harrison Park had to fight for their lives

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JULIAN — It was just one night on one section of one front during the most destructive wildfire to hit California.

AFTER THE FIRES

But for a few terrifying moments, a finger of the firestorm threatened to cause the second-highest one-day

death toll among firefighters in U.S. history, following only the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack at New York's World Trade Center.

The night before Novato fire Engineer Steven Rucker was killed fighting the Cedar fire in nearby Wynola, 43 firefighters found themselves trapped by wind-whipped flames and out of radio contact with their base.

"I thought they were dead," said California Department of Forestry Division Chief Randy Lyle.

Before communication cut out, the crews painted a frightening picture of a wave of flame that seemed unstoppable.

"When it hit us, it sounded like a jet engine ... or a freight train," said California Department of Forestry Assistant Chief Steve Hutchison, who was in command of the trapped firefighters.

"They said the ground was shaking," Lyle said.

Senior commanders who tried to punch through the flames by truck

to rescue the firefighters also were nearly overrun and killed.

For almost two hours, hundreds of anxious firefighters stayed by their radios, listening for any sign that their brethren had survived.

Completely surrounded

The battle for Harrison Park began about 2 p.m. Oct. 28, when Lyle sent two strike teams under Hutchison's command into the rustic com-



California Department of Forestry Assistant Chief Steve Hutchison led the strike teams at Harrison Park. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune

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FIRE

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Teams lost radio contact with the base, each other

community. Their assignment: Protect homes, a private ranch and Whispering Winds Catholic Conference Center, a youth camp and conference center covering 368 acres.

A strike team combines fire engines — usually five of the same type, often from different departments — under a unified command. Hutchison had two teams with 11 large, powerful Type 1 engines, each equipped with 400 gallons of water and pumps that can shoot 1,000 gallons of water a minute.

Even so, he had a bad feeling from the outset. Too many homes were sitting among hundreds of dead or dying trees, weakened by drought and a plague of bark beetles, waiting to burn.

The road they took into Harrison Park was too narrow for his rigs to be able to turn around on, and there were power lines overhead. Just as troubling, the ranch and Whispering Winds were too far apart for him to keep an eye on both strike teams.

Still, the two locations looked defensible, so the firefighters took up their positions and waited for the Cedar fire to come to them.

It didn't take long.

"When we first saw it, it was half a mile away," Hutchison said. "Once it got dark, we could see the glow on the mountains. Then the glow became flames. After awhile, we could hear ... that sound."

"It was about 10 or 10:30 that night when it actually hit us."

A shift in the winds sent the flames directly at the firefighters.

"The road into the (ranch) was completely surrounded by fire," Hutchison said.

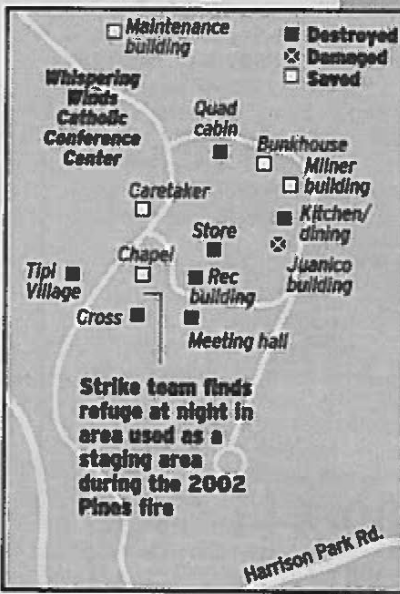
With his firefighters cut off from each other by flames, Hutchison took stock. He could see the strike team at the ranch was holding its own, but he couldn't see the Whispering Winds team at all.

"I got on the radio and called the strike team leader (at Whispering Winds) and warned him the fire was coming toward him," he said. "At that point, we were cut off from each other."

Soon after, his radio link to the fire base went dead. A portable radio "repeater" antenna,

'I thought they were dead'

Two firefighting strike teams were assigned to Harrison Park near Julian on Oct. 28. One was positioned at a ranch, the other at Whispering Winds conference center. Conditions quickly worsened and the 43 firefighters found themselves trapped.



placed atop a mountain near Julian to boost the firefighters' radio signals, had been burned and knocked out.

Hutchinson would have to drive through flames to reach Whispering Winds, one-third of a mile away.

"I said, 'God help me' and started driving," he said. "The road was completely consumed on both sides."

When he arrived minutes later, the fire was devouring Whispering Winds and the strike team was fighting for its life.

"They'd already lost three structures," Hutchison said. "One engine was bogged down in a field. Another had broken down. They were all bunched together."

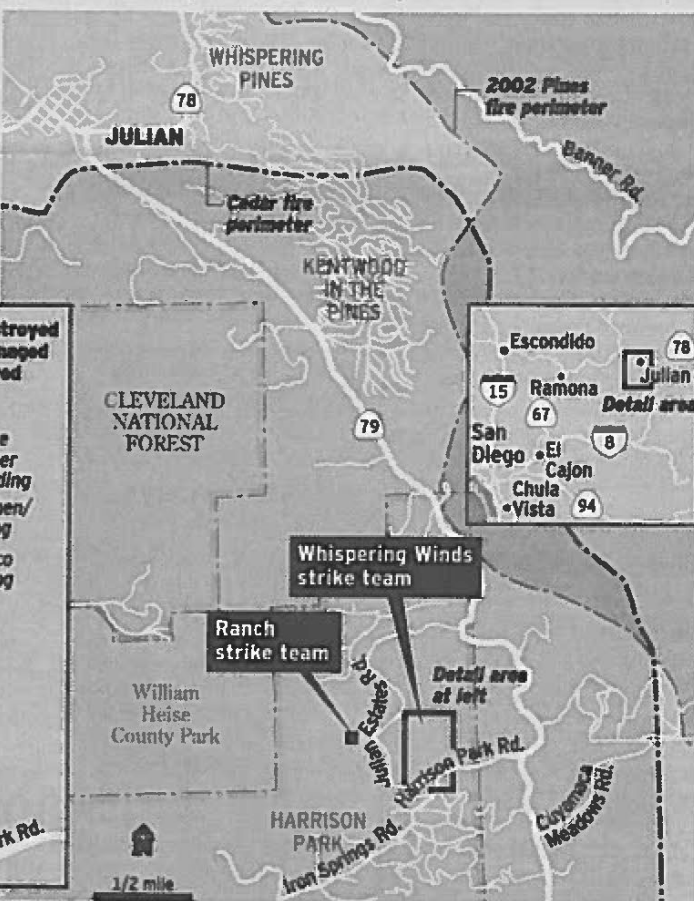
And the fire wasn't done. Propane tanks were venting, spewing jets of flame.

"As I got there, the fire was into the eaves of one building and it was already penetrating inside. I made the decision to let it go," Hutchison said.

"About 15 seconds after that, the whole building pretty much exploded."

Radio silence

Outside of Harrison Park, Bill Clayton, the forestry department chief in command of the eastern half of the Cedar fire, was with two other strike teams at state Route 79 and Sunrise Highway when he



DAVID HARDMAN / Union-Tribune

learned of the crisis up the road. It was night, which meant there was no chance to send air tankers or water-dropping helicopters.

Clayton listened for Hutchison on the Cedar fire radio net. Nothing.

The order went out for radio silence. Hundreds of fire crews, many of them exhausted from as much as 72 straight hours on the fire lines in San Diego County and elsewhere, stayed by their radios, refusing to sleep. They waited, listened and prayed.

"I really thought we'd lost them all," Lyle said.

Clayton, too, was listening, but he wasn't waiting. He jumped into his car with Ventura County fire Capt. Brian Bulger and headed for the trapped teams, only to be turned back by burning trees that fell across their path.

"It was around midnight," Clayton said. "The wind was so strong it blew apart a road sign on Sunrise Highway."

Clayton and Bulger would try again later, this time with two more firefighters trailing them in a truck carrying chain saws.

"It got so hot, the pickup had to retreat. We were totally surrounded in a swirling ball of fire," Clayton said. "We knew we were about to be in very serious trouble."

They weren't able to make it to Harrison Park.

The Whispering Winds strike team was still surrounded by fire and most of the buildings they had come to save "were a smoldering ruin."

They had one card left to play to save themselves: a grassy field just below the Whispering Winds chapel, about 200 feet long and 250 feet wide, where they could gather and hope the fire couldn't reach them.

Hutchison had trained some of these firefighters at the CDF academy in Lone in central California. Now he called them together for a brief refresher course on safety.

"I told them, 'This is why you learned all that stuff,'" he said.

The field held. The closely cropped, green grass didn't burn. Three-quarters of Whispering Winds was gone, but the firefighters survived.

"When Hutchison came back up on the (radio) net, it was almost like a religious experience," Lyle said. "He said, 'The fire's passed us.'"

A short time later, Hutchison said, a deputy made his way to what remained of Whispering Winds:

"He said, 'You guys were here through all this? You guys are — crazy'"

Not crazy, Hutchison said, just very determined.