

## Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

<b>Incident Name:</b> Hauser Creek Fire	<b>Incident Date &amp; Time:</b> 10/02-03/1943
<b>Incident Location:</b> Cleveland National Forest near Campo, California	<b>Incident Size:</b> 16,000 acres final size 500 acres at time of entrapment
<b>Types of resources involved:</b> US Forest Service firefighters Fire crews from the US Marine Corps and US Army	<b># of Fatalities/injuries:</b> 9 Marine & 1 Army fatality 70+ Marines and 2 Forest Service firefighters injured
<b>Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Fire is historically significant</li> <li>➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment</li> </ul>	
<b>Conditions leading up to the event:</b>	
<p>In 1943 the United States in the midst of World War II. San Diego's location made it a strategic military asset, but also exposed it to potential attack by sea, air, and land. Many military camps and training facilities were built throughout San Diego County, including east San Diego County where Camp Lockett (US Army 10<sup>th</sup> &amp; 28<sup>th</sup> Calvary) was located for the protection of the southern border and Camp Pine Valley for the training of Marines in truck driving and repair.</p> <p>The Cleveland National Forest was established in 1908 for the protection of watershed. Wildfire was a major threat to this valued resource. Booming industry and population growth during the war made San Diego's thirst for water even greater. The US Forest Service was facing difficulties in staffing for wildland firefighting. With the war effort taking most able-bodied men and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) program having ended one year earlier, they turned to the prisons and military for help. The Cleveland National Forest staffed several tankers (engines) and used inmate crews for initial attack fires, supplementing with the military from Camp Lockett and Pine Valley.</p> <p>The summer of 1943 had been a very active fire season. The Descanso Ranger District in southeast San Diego County had already experienced four fires over 1000 acres. On those fires, the Forest had called on the military from Camp Lockett and Pine Valley for assistance. During the last two weeks of September the weather had been warm, dry, and windy with mild Santa Ana conditions persisting. October began with similar conditions...</p>	
<b>Brief description of the event:</b>	
<p>The Hauser Creek Fire was reported at 10:00 on October 2 by the Los Pinos Lookout. Forest Fire Control Officer Ewing, on his arrival, stated that the fire was approximately 50 acres burning in grass and light brush on the north aspect of Hauser Canyon. The rate of spread was not remarkable with no spotting evident, primarily driven by upslope wind. Ewing assumed command as Fire Boss and assigned Ranger Munhall as the west line Sector Boss. The initial attack involved two Forest Service tankers and one inmate crew from Camp Ole assigned to Munhall.</p> <p>An order for 100 soldiers from Camp Lockett and 100 Marines from Pine Valley was placed at 11:00. Both crews arrived on the fire at approximately 13:20. District Fire Control Officer Davis, Forest Training Officer Hunt, and Fire Guard Herndon also arrived at this time, meeting with Ewing at the Hauser Creek Campground, one mile east of the fire. They discussed strategy and assignments. Davis was to take the Army troops to Munhall on the west line. Ewing placed Hunt in charge of the east flank with Herndon as his assistant. Ewing placed the Marines under Hunts command. Hunt was then instructed to select a location on the east side of the fire and start construction of a line, anchoring at the road, in hopes of containing the east flank. Ewing left and headed out of the canyon. It is unclear if Ewing intended the line to be direct or indirect. Regardless, Hunt decided to build an indirect line and then backfire from it.</p> <p>Hunt proceeded to scout the area and selected a gulch some distance east of the main fire as his line location. Hunt instructed Herndon to take the Marines and begin constructing an indirect line up the gulch. There were 113 Marines total under the command of GySgt. Wright &amp; Pfc. Stewart. Herndon took about <i>"95 marines and started clearing a fairly wide strip"</i> up the gulch from which they were to later backfire from. The remaining <i>"15 to 20 marines were detailed to patrol along the road to guard against the fire crossing."</i> GySgt. Wright stayed at the road while Pfc. Stewart assisted Herndon with line supervision. Hunt assumed the role of Sector Boss.</p> <p>By approximately 14:30 Herndon and the Marines had progressed approximately 650 to 700 feet up the gulch. Davis, on his way to meet Ewing after leaving Munhall, stopped, and talked to a tanker crew. He noticed a significant change in fire behavior. Davis proceeded east to the intersection of the road and handline where he met GySgt. Wright. Wright stated his concern for his Marines safety seeing the approaching fire. Davis concurred and initiated verbal evacuation orders from the bottom of the handline. Davis was not in communication with Hunt or Herndon. The effects of the sudden change in wind direction now caused the fire to race east across the lower slope towards the mouth of the gulch, where it spotted across the handline. This closed the avenue of escape for all men working above the spot fire. 10 Marines upon hearing the order to evacuate and seeing the danger were able to run through the flames at the lower end of the line, but all others retreated further up the handline due heat and smoke. With the brush burning on both sides of</p>	

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the constructed line and moving rapidly up the gulch, Hunt and Herdon, at separate locations now, instructed the Marines that were with them to take shelter among large boulders in the bottom of the gulch. Most of them did, but a few attempted to escape over the ridge through the green to the road below. All were badly burned who attempted this route. After the fire passed and the area had cooled, a search determined that three Marines had perished immediately. Approximately 70 others, including Hunt and Herndon, were burned, some seriously. Ambulances were immediately dispatched from Camp Lockett, and the casualties taken to the Army hospital. During the coming days and months, six more Marines would succumb to their injuries, totaling nine Marine deaths.

There was also a 10<sup>th</sup> fatality...the following day, October 3, a platoon of 25 soldiers from the 10<sup>th</sup> Calvary, Camp Lockett was assigned to the fire. At approximately 10:30, the platoon leader, Lt. Stiles Gaffney was leading his group of soldiers along an uncontained section of the fires edge which had recently burned. When the fire flared up again below them, Lt. Gaffney ordered his men into the still hot burn for safety. According to the troop's morning report, it was a backfire that caused the flare-up. This fact was never substantiated. During the order by Lt. Gaffney to seek refuge in the black, Cpl. Leroy Carter became separated from the platoon and tried to escape from the approaching fire by running up hill through the green. He was overtaken by the flames and burned to death. The remainder of the platoon escaped injury. The investigation into this fatality was handled by the Army. The official military investigation stated, "*The fatality resulted from the trooper's own disobedience of orders given him by superior officer.*" The complete details of this incident and the exact location are unavailable.

### Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

It was October, which normally means fuel moistures in chaparral brush are at critical levels. Santa Ana weather conditions (east wind, low humidity, high temperature) had persisted for the preceding two weeks. On the day of the fatalities, the east wind appeared to be confined to ridge tops and exposed terrain. On the fire, in the canyon, there was very little wind aside from upslope gradient. According to Fire Boss Ewing, at around 11:30, "*the fire was pretty much uphill and fanning out as the usual fire does, to the small ridges on either side. It had a continuous front of fire, no spotting but rather normal and fast.*" According to Fire Control Officer Davis, at approximately 14:35, he stopped to talk to two tankers that were working along the road near the indirect handline. He noted a "*distinct change*" in fire behavior. This would be the time that the west wind began blowing up canyon. The fire spread in the canyon bottom went from upslope to up canyon with 30 foot flame lengths and spotting.

### Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

**Windows of opportunity** – the window of opportunity for action is always either opening or closing. Successful tactical planning must consider timing for engagement.

**Perception of reality** – situation awareness will be degraded by personal bias, external pressures, and hasty assumptions. In uncertain situations try to involve others in the decision making process.

**Leadership experience** – individuals filling incident supervision roles have "position power" and it is easy to assume they have the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience. In addition to establishing a solid working relationship with your fireline supervisor, try to identify individuals on scene who possess "expert power."

### Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The Hauser Fire was one in a string of major tragedy fires which occurred between 1937 and 1956. Several of the events gained wide public notoriety, which eventually prompted a national task force to be appointed and directed to study these fires and suggest ways to improve the situation. What followed in 1957 was *The Report of the Task Force to Recommend Actions to Reduce the Chances of Men Being Killed by Burning While Fighting Fires*. This work was the original source for the "10 Standard Firefighting Orders" and many other improvements for the wildland fire service.

This fire is a historical example showing some of the staffing methods that the US Forest Service had to utilize during the first 50 years of its existence. Organized hand crews staffed completely with agency personnel did not become a reality until the 1960s.

### Links to more information on this incident:

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/hauser-creek-fire-entrapment-fatalities-1943>

[https://www.wildfiretoday.com/documents/Hauser\\_Creek\\_Report\\_1943.pdf](https://www.wildfiretoday.com/documents/Hauser_Creek_Report_1943.pdf)

<https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2004/aug/05/unforgettable-hauser-canyon/>

<https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2004/aug/12/unforgettable-hauser-canyon/>

<https://www.sandiegoreader.com/news/2004/aug/19/unforgettable-cold-trailing/>

[http://ppolinks.com/forestservice/museum/M1992\\_63\\_1.pdf](http://ppolinks.com/forestservice/museum/M1992_63_1.pdf)

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1943/10/02/hauser-creek/>

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Videos:

- <https://youtu.be/XaA1EzX2R1w>
- <https://youtu.be/LVwthbRy6Zc>

**This summary page was proudly provided by:**

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September 2023



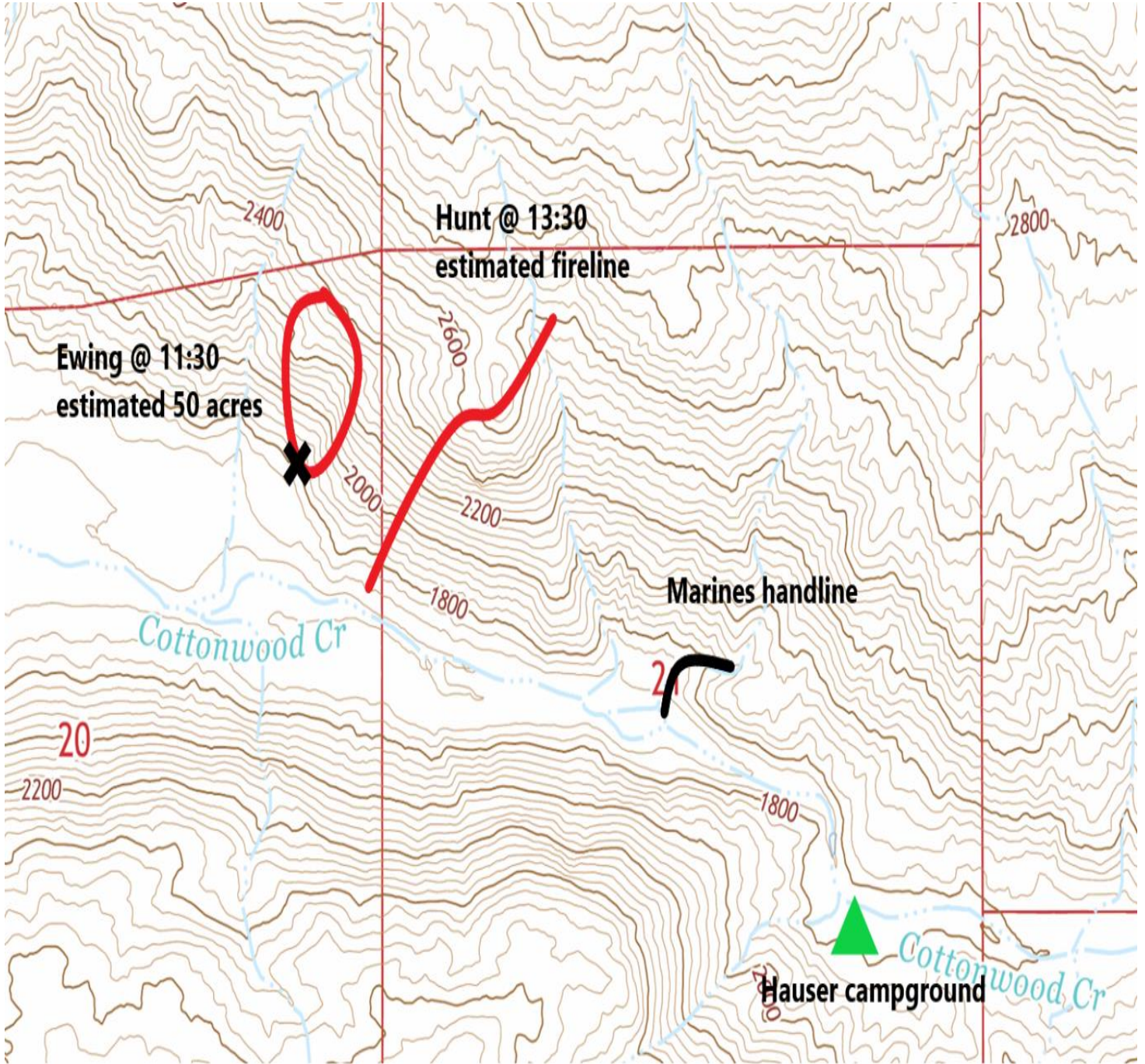
In total, 9 Marines and 1 Army soldier were fatally injured on the Hauser Creek Fire with over 70 others injured to varying degrees. The name, age and home state of those who perished were:

USMC Pvt. Roger D. Kirkpatrick	19	Washington
USMC Pfc. George F. Lehman	20	Colorado
USMC Pvt. Ralph C. Peters	32	Oklahoma
USMC Pvt. Frank C. Rogers	31	California
USMC Pvt. Wilbur U. Rossen	20	Minnesota
USMC Pvt. Norman L. Shook Jr.	19	Indiana
USMC Pfc. Ishmael W. Wesson	20	Tennessee
USMC Cpl. Elmer C. Winkelman	27	California
USMC Pfc. L. Rex Whetsel	38	Indiana
US Army Cpl. Leroy C. Carter	28	Missouri



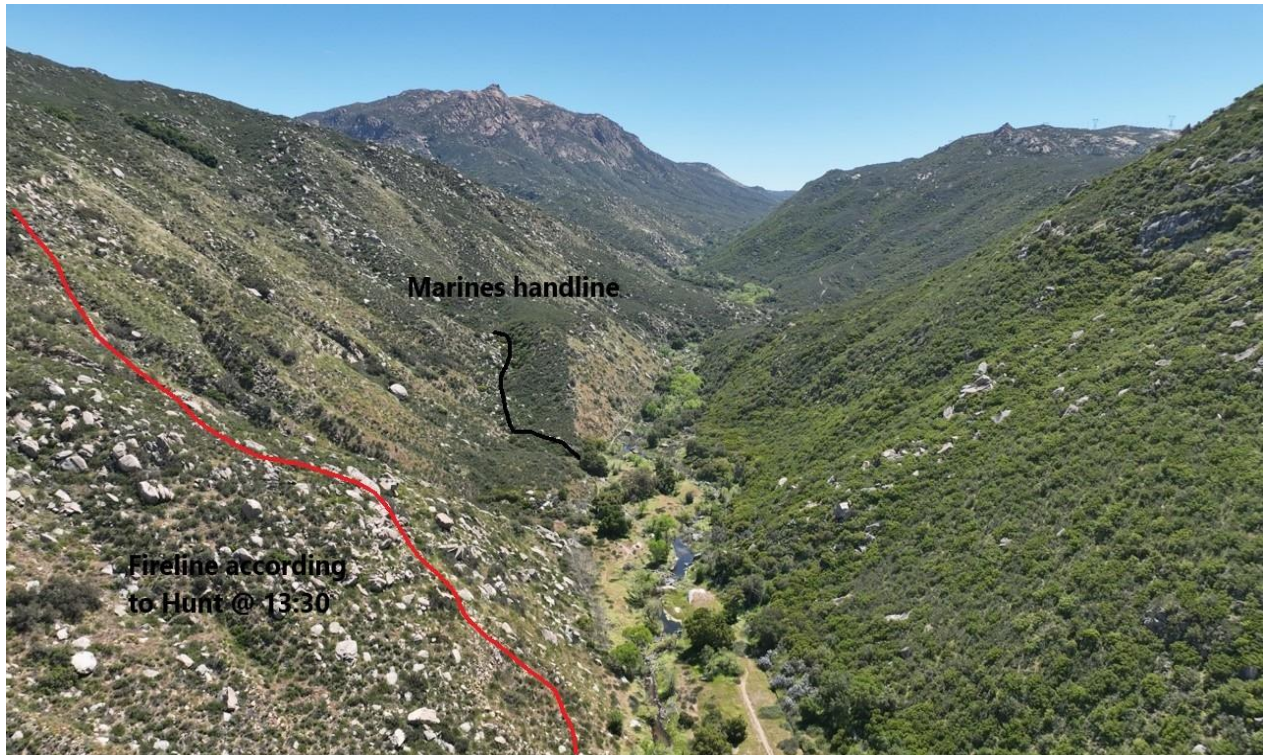
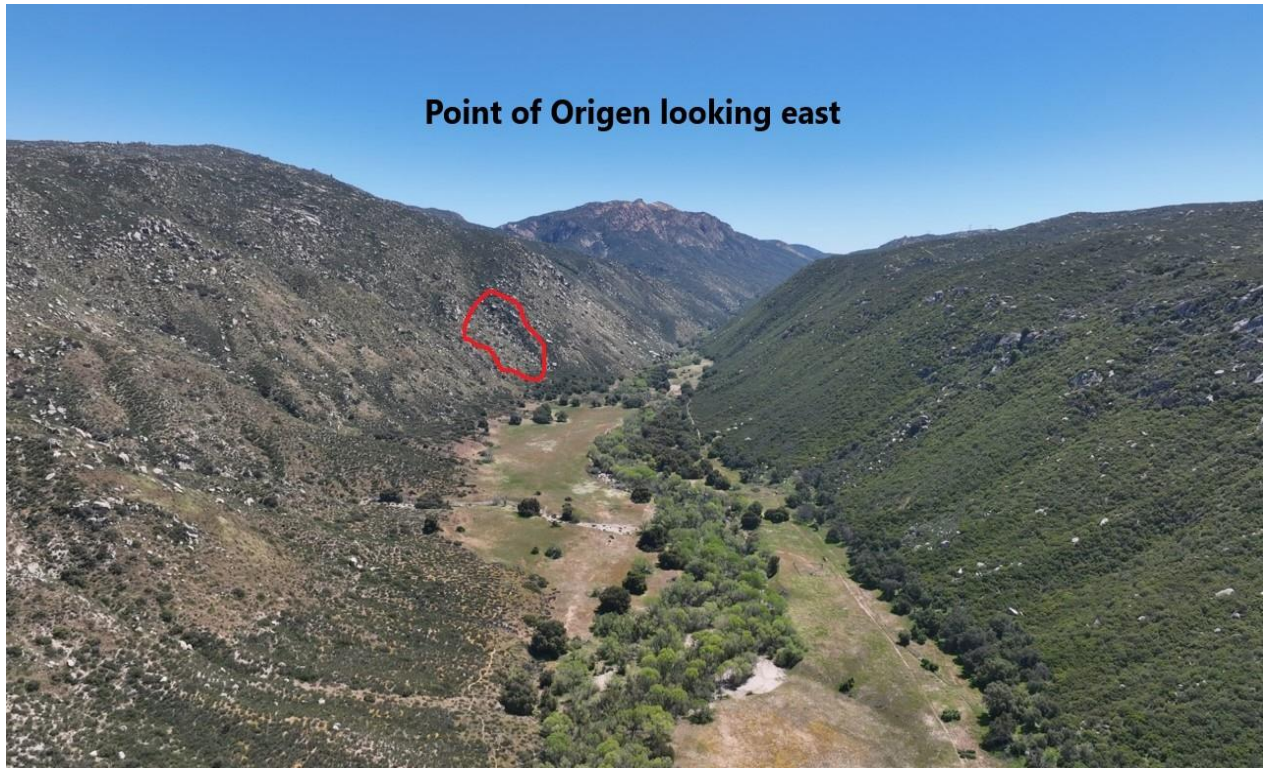
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**Map sketch from the Hauser Creek Accident Investigation Report**



**Estimated fire movement on current topographic map**

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