

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Honda Canyon Fire	Incident Date & Time: 12/20/1977 @ 09:45
Incident Location: Vandenberg Air Force Base, California	Incident Size: 10,000 acres
Types of resources involved: Vandenberg Fire Department personnel & equipment; Santa Barbara County Fire Department support resources	# of Fatalities/injuries: 4 fatalities / 1 serious injury
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire made a notable impact within the wildland fire service ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>Vandenberg Air Force Base (currently Vandenberg Space Force Base) began as Camp Cooke Army Base in the early 1940's where it served as a training ground for armored and infantry divisions. In the 1950's the land was transferred to the U.S. Air Force and later assumed the Vandenberg name. Additional land was later acquired, bringing Vandenberg Air Force Base's size to over 98,000 acres dedicated to missile and satellite programs, spanning 35 miles of Pacific Ocean coastline.</p> <p>South Vandenberg Air Force Base consists of a series of Space Launch Complexes (SLCs), surrounded by a variety of native vegetation including grasses, trees and chaparral having a known potential for significant fire behavior. Honda Canyon is a prominent east-west running canyon located on South Vandenberg. It is positioned between two of these SLCs and covered in dense chaparral with no known fire history at the time of the incident. Additionally, Santa Barbara County had experienced a two-year sustained drought during 1976-1977, leading to extremely low fuel moistures in the vegetation.</p> <p>At the time of the incident the Vandenberg Fire Department had experience working with their counterpart fire agencies but had not faced an incident of such magnitude. The department relied heavily on multi-agency support for fires exceeding initial attack.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>On the morning of December 20, 1977, a unique weather system known as a pre-frontal, post Santa Ana condition, developed, causing severe winds to impact Vandenberg Air Force Base and nearby communities. At approximately 07:00 a power line broke on South Vandenberg, which initiated a fire on the slope above Honda Canyon. The initial attack response by Vandenberg Fire Department included engines, water tenders, chief officers along with heavy equipment support. Direct attack efforts on the fire were hampered by strong winds and extreme fire behavior, quickly resulting in a near-miss entrapment involving the crew of Vandenberg Engine 12.</p> <p>At 07:53 a response from the Santa Barbara County Fire Department was initiated, to include a Battalion Chief, additional engines, dozers, and a crew. At approximately 09:30, following a delay due to communications issues, the Vandenberg Fire Chief, Assistant Fire Chief, Base Commander, Heavy Equipment Operator and Heavy Equipment Supervisor met with the Santa Barbara County Battalion Chief and Crew Superintendent to develop a plan. After a brief period at the meeting location along a dirt road, it was recognized the wind had suddenly changed the fire's spread and was compromising their location and escape route.</p> <p>As resources began their escape, a heavy equipment transport became stuck in the sandy soil, blocking the escape route. It was freed by the Vandenberg Heavy Equipment Operator with his dozer. As the transport rolled free, it traveled the road to safety, narrowly escaping the fire's path.</p> <p>The Santa Barbara County Battalion Chief with three passengers (the Crew Superintendent, the Heavy Equipment Supervisor and another military member) immediately followed the transport until they were overrun by smoke and fire. Their vehicle then became stuck in the sandy soil along the road. They remained in the stuck vehicle, experiencing intense heat and smoke. The occupants deployed a single fire shelter to help minimize the heat impact and survived the incident.</p> <p>The Vandenberg Fire Chief along with his Assistant Chief and the Base Commander followed down the same road in their own vehicle. When they encountered the stuck Santa Barbara County vehicle, they stopped and reversed direction back up the road stopping below the original meeting location, where the vehicle was later found abandoned by all occupants.</p> <p>Meanwhile, the Vandenberg Heavy Equipment Operator attempted to escape on his dozer, using a path in the nearby chaparral brush. Later, during the entrapment, the operator was observed attempting to take refuge alongside his dozer. Following the entrapment, he was found crawling from the burned brush back up to the road, with severe burns. During the rescue and transport of the operator, the ambulance and fire personnel experienced another entrapment; they escaped by backing out and retreating to the initial pick-up area. The ambulance received an engine escort out of the fire area and immediately transported the burn victim to the Vandenberg Hospital. He was then flown by C-130 aircraft to a burn center in San Antonio, Texas where he died nearly three weeks later.</p>	

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A search later found the bodies of the Vandenberg Fire Chief, Assistant Fire Chief, and Base Commander approximately 170 yards north of their vehicle's location; where they were overrun during an attempted escape from the fast moving fire.

Another near-miss occurred at approximately 11:00, Vandenberg Rescue 6, Engine 10, and Tanker 21 (water tender) were assigned to structure protection at one of the SLCs, where they were overrun by severe wind driven fire behavior. In their haste to escape quickly, one of the Vandenberg firefighters jumped onto the rear of the water tender. As the tender was leaving, a metal gate was blown against the Vandenberg firefighter, resulting in a severe leg laceration. The firefighter was transported to medical treatment and survived the incident. Throughout the incident a series of near-miss events took place; many of these events had lasting impacts on those involved.

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

During the initial attack, fire was burning on a north-facing slope, with winds from the south/southeast. As the fire progressed into Honda Canyon, it burned to the northwest. As high-pressure and low-pressure systems collided, the fire's course shifted rapidly, taking a more northerly direction along Vandenberg's coastline and threatening the high value Air Force assets in its path.

The fire burned at rapid rates of spread, under extreme winds of approximately 40-75 mph, with gusts exceeding 100 mph. Relative humidity ranged between 10-14 percent. Fire personnel described the fire as having surges of intensity with spotting in advance of the fire, which caused significant challenges to control and structure protection efforts. Intense conditions continued until precipitation developed over the incident the following day on December 21.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Wildland firefighting on military installations can present unique challenges and hazards:

- Exposure to unexploded ordnance, toxic chemicals, and unusual fuel depots
- Ongoing military missions & training
- Lack of common communication
- Training and experience with escaped initial attack during extreme conditions

Adequate safety zones, deployment site recognition, consideration of remaining in a vehicle during an entrapment.

Absence of incident command and freelancing.

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

This fire provided for the first and only Department of Defense hotshot crew being established in 1981. This crew was recognized as a hotshot crew until 2012 when the program was cancelled due to military budget cuts. The crew program was re-established in 2018 as a Type 2 IA crew after the 2016 Canyon Fire highlighted the need for fuels management and the suppression capability of an initial attack hand crew on Vandenberg Air Force Base. This fire was also notable for the Department of Defense recognizing and adopting National Wildfire Coordination Group standards.

While this fire was not the specific reason for the adoption of national standards regarding training, physical fitness, Red Card qualifications, nomex use and fire shelter use; it is one in a string of multi-fatality fires* that occurred across the country in the late 1970s that drove home the need for such standards.

**1976 Battlement Creek Fire in Colorado; 1977 Cart Creek Fire in Utah; 1977 Bass River Fire in New Jersey; 1977 Honda Canyon Fire in California; and 1979 Spanish Ranch Fire in California.*

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/honda-canyon-fire-fatalities-1977>

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1977/12/20/honda-canyon/>

Book:

- *Beyond Tranquillon Ridge* ~ by Joseph N. Valencia

Video:

- *Firestorm '77 The True Story of the Honda Canyon Fire* ~ Directors Dennis N. Ford, Christopher Hite – documentary film available on iTunes, YouTube, Google Play, Magellan

Powerpoint lesson:

- [Honda Canyon - Canyon Fire .pptx](#)

This summary page was proudly provided by:

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Honda Canyon Memorial located on-site at the Vandenberg Space Force Base

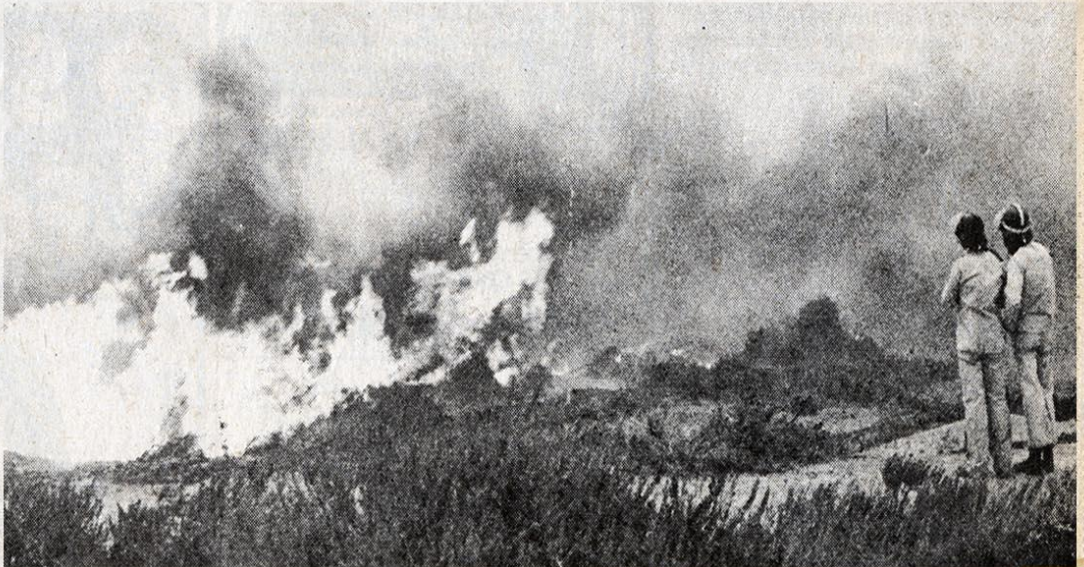
Base commander, 2 others die in 10,000-acre VAFB brushfire

By Mike Raphael
News-Press Staff Writer

VANDENBERG AFB — A brushfire that killed the base commander and its two top fire officials while ranging over 10,000 acres at the nation's main West Coast space and missile base was dying out today.

Base officials, after touring the area with fire officials, reported shortly after 10 a.m. that the fire was generally out except for a few hot spots. Off-and-on rain helped quell the flames, which covered more than one-tenth of the 98,000-acre base. Pushed by gale-force wind of up to 60 miles per hour during the night, the fire had grown rapidly, but containment and finally control came after daybreak.

About 450 firefighters from Santa Barbara, Orange, Ventura, San Luis Obispo and Los Angeles Counties attacked the flames, which burned in the southern section of the base from Pt. Arguello on the south to near Surf in the north, and along the ocean shore.



FLAMES EAT THROUGH brush on sand dunes at Vandenberg Air Force Base.

—News-Press photo by Bob Ponce

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Santa Barbara County Battalion Chief vehicle; four individuals survived by remaining inside.



Vandenberg Base Fire Chief vehicle with very minor damage; three individuals perished after leaving the vehicle.

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One of the high value Space Launch Complex (SLC) sites; these were the initial focus of suppression actions.



“Augmentee” firefighters on the fireline; these individuals were drawn from personnel all across the base. They had little or no wildfire training and were used to provide temporary handcrew capability.