

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Timber Lodge Fire	Incident Date & Time: 08/02/1962 @ 15:49 (per John Van Rasch's watch)
Incident Location: Midpines, California near the Sierra National Forest boundary	Incident Size: 280 acres
Types of resources involved: US Forest Service tanker crew (engine crew)	# of Fatalities/injuries: 4 fatalities /2 serious burn injuries
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list: ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
The Timber Lodge Fire burned in an area historically prone to large fire growth. The fuel layers present a perfect fire ladder from grass to mixed brush to timber, with the normal needle drape associated in a timber/mixed brush stand. With an estimated fire return interval of 15 years there is plenty of time for this fuel type to regenerate new growth and a new surface bed of receptive dead 10-hour fuels.	
Brief description of the event:	
The Timber Lodge Fire started on the afternoon of August 2, 1962. Investigators determined it was started by an electrical failure from a Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) transformer coupled with falling distribution wires. The fire was on State Responsibility Area (SRA) and the California Department of Forestry (CDF) had jurisdiction.	
The US Forest Service "tanker" responded from the Jerseydale Fire Station approximately 12 miles away. The fire was estimated to be less than two acres when they arrived. Tom Foley was the Jerseydale Tanker Foreman with a crew of seven. The Jerseydale tanker could not pump water as it was rolling. It could only pump while stationary. Foley and crew started a direct attack with hand tools on the left flank. After three attempts, having to re-anchor due to spot fires, they gave up the direct attack and moved up Carstens Road to hold it and keep the fire from crossing. The fire made a head run up the slope towards Carstens Road, and again, spot fires were too numerous to effectively hold the road. The CDF Fire Boss, Bill Jones, moved the Jerseydale tanker and several CDF tankers to the junction of Carstens Road and Ponderosa Way. Carstens Road and Ponderosa Way were both narrow with tall vegetation on both sides of the roads. Ponderosa Way was a mid-slope road. They were assigned to "backfire" the downhill side of Ponderosa Way keeping the fire from crossing Ponderosa Way and threatening two private properties with structures as well as burning onto Federal Responsibility Area (FRA). The CDF tankers were assigned to the private properties and the Jerseydale tanker was assigned the firing operation. Foley and crew, augmented by three firefighters from other agencies, began firing the downhill side of the road. Two firefighters were burning with fusees and four firefighters were holding the road with hose lines. The firing operation went very slowly and was not backing very fast down the slope.	
Side Note: Just before Foley moved the tanker up Ponderosa Way, he asked for two volunteers to stay at the junction of Carstens Road and Ponderosa Way to patrol a dozer line. First season firefighter Gary Williams and another new firefighter elected to stay back; they took a position by a water tank. These two firefighters survived with no injuries.	
As firing progressed, numerous spot fires were starting above Ponderosa Way. About this time the main fire made a convection driven head run up a drainage and onto the west facing aspect below the road. This fire ran directly at the Jerseydale crew. Tom Foley and firefighter John Vaun Rasch both attempted to get into the passenger side cab of the tanker. John Vaun Rasch was overrun at that spot and Tom Foley was able to run up the hill but was badly burned and died later in the hospital.	
Martin Georgi, a Soil Conservation Service employee who also assisted in staffing US Forest Service tankers, was overrun and killed. Raymond St. Pierre was also overrun and transported by helicopter to Mercy Hospital in Merced and passed away there. Roy Chapin took refuge inside the tanker rear hose compartment and Kent Stoel managed to pull the canvas hose cover over him and took refuge near the right rear duals. Both Chapin and Stoel were badly burned and transported to John C. Fremont Hospital in Mariposa and survived. Three other firefighters climbed a 5-strand barbed wire fence and ran to the east over a small ridge and survived. The Jerseydale engine only had superficial exterior damage. After repairs it was returned to duty and remained in service until 1975.	
Tom Foley's son, William Foley was working for CDF as a firefighter on the tanker assigned to protect one of the structures. He did not know his father had been killed until he was pulled off the tanker and notified. The Timber Lodge Fire was contained at 280 acres on August 3 at 18:00.	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
The 13:00 fire weather at the Mariposa CDF Station, approximately 7 miles away was Temperature - 91 degrees, Relative Humidity - 22%, 10-hour Fuel Stick - 5 %, with a wind speed of 7 mph from the south. This calculated as a NFDRS Ignition Component of 84 with a NFDRS Spread Component of 8, which equates to a slow to moderate rate of spread.	

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Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Frontal assault with a tanker on narrow roads.

Burning below a mid-slope road offers little to no chance to successfully complete the assignment and, if the road is an escape route, it will be compromised.

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

Not applicable

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/timberlodge-fire-entrapment-1962>

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1962/08/02/timber-lodge/>

This summary page was proudly provided by:
Don Will, former Superintendent Mendocino Hotshot Crew

March 2024



**Foreman Tom Foley, 39
Firefighter John Vaun Rasch, 46
Firefighter Raymond St. Pierre, 23
Martin Georgi, Soil Conservation Service, 39**



Jon Vaun Rasch



Thomas Foley



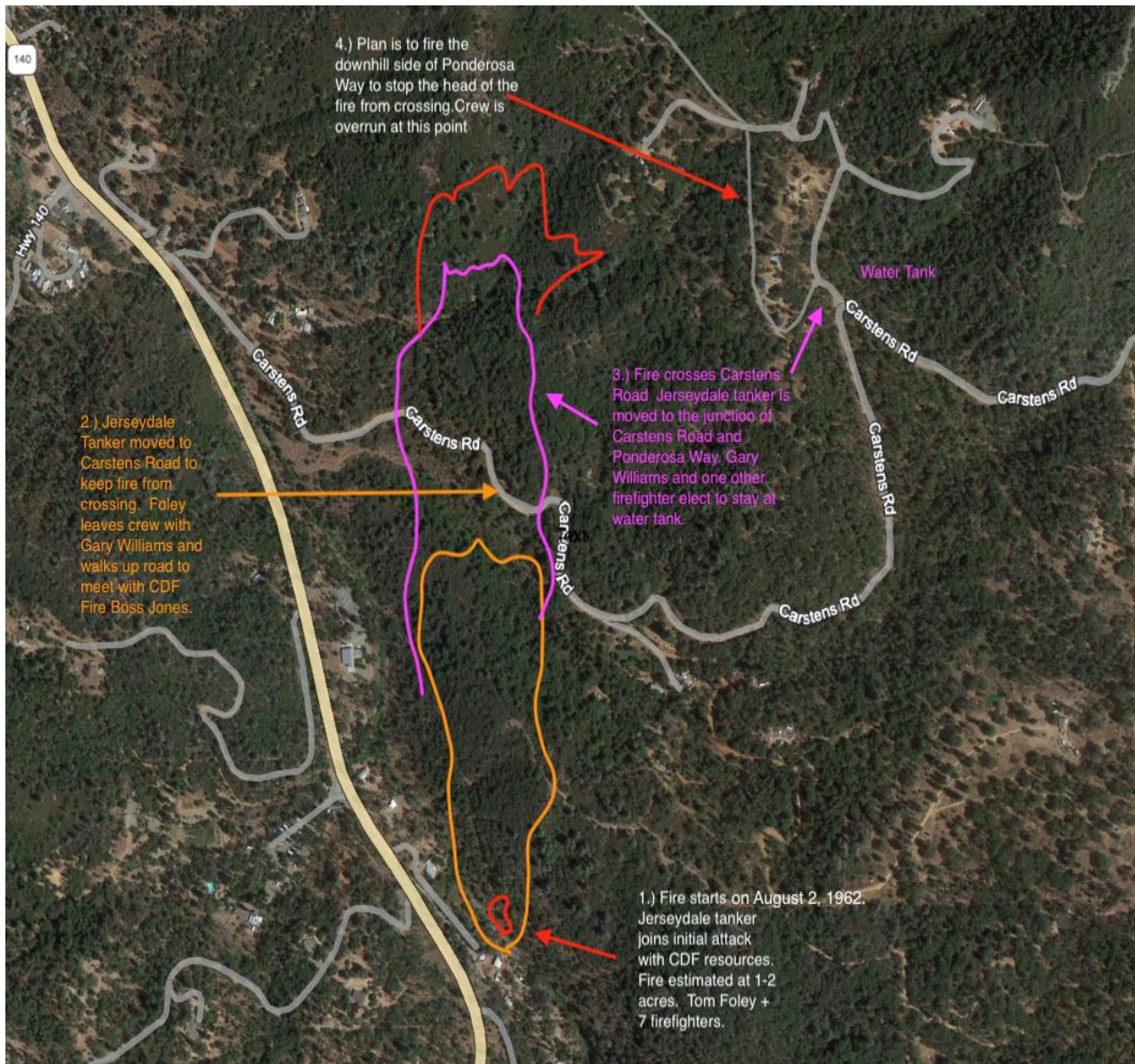
Martin Georgi



Raymond St. Pierre

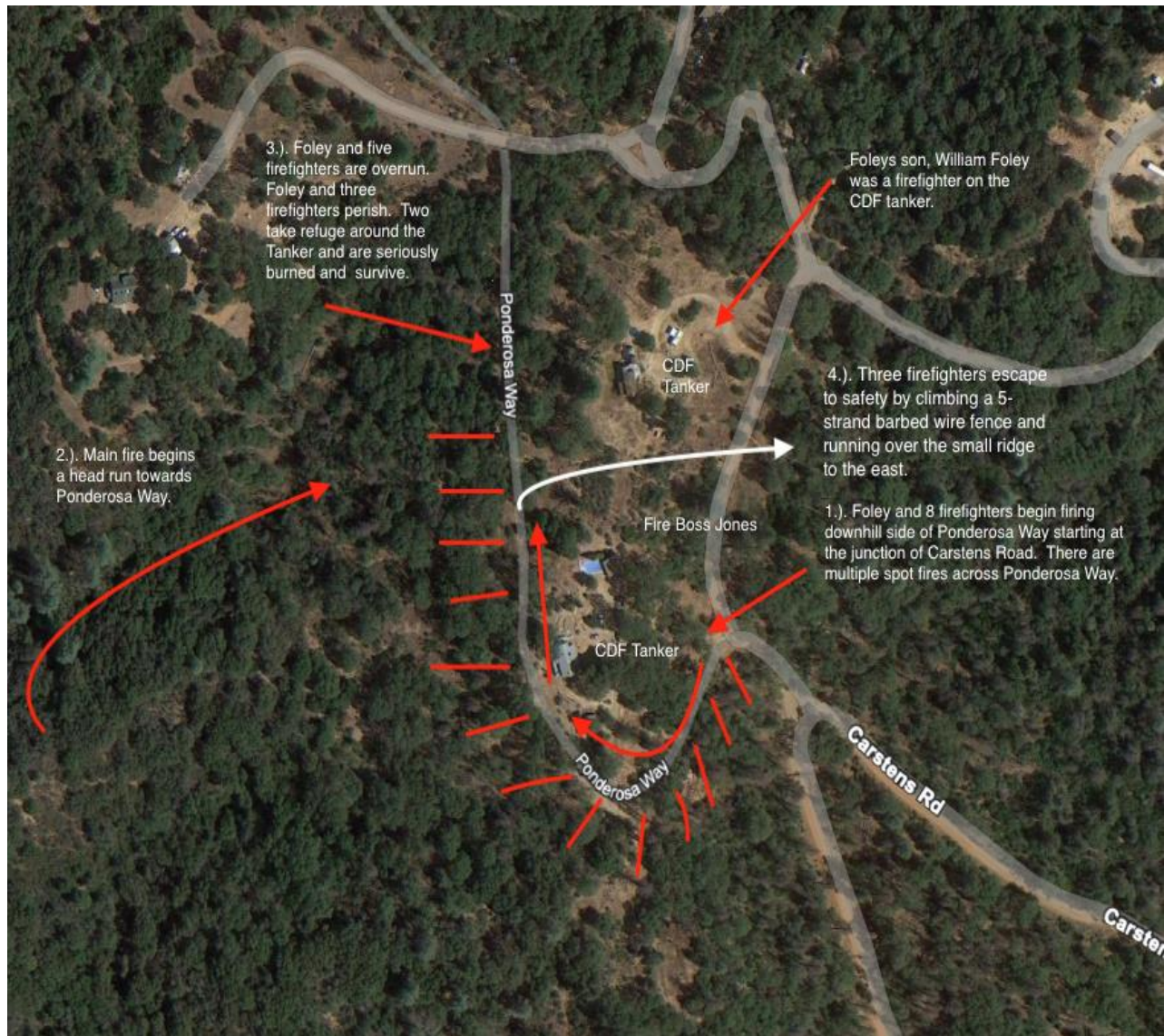


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Overview of the Timber Lodge Fire suppression actions

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Timber Lodge Fire fatality site suppression actions

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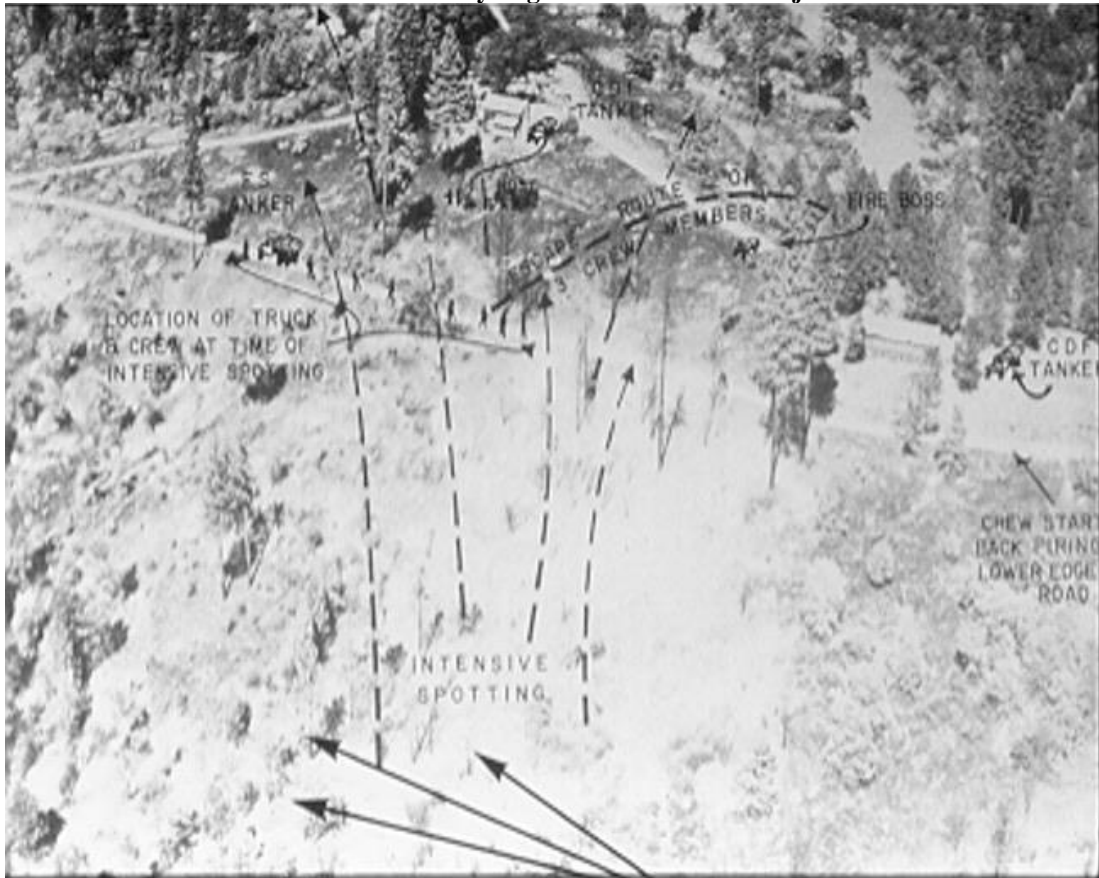
FATAL PATH—This is Ponderosa Way, a firebreak below which four men lost their lives and two others were burned critically in the Timber Lodge fire Thursday. The tragedy occurred off the road and to the left of two

men whose figures show indistinctly in center background. Against the blackness of the burned area are contrasting spots of gray-white fire retardant dropped by bombers.

Bee Photos

Fresno Bee newspaper photo of Ponderosa Way

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Investigation Report diagram of the accident site



**Jerseydale tanker after burn over...note the fuels on both sides of Ponderosa Way
Hose lines were deployed due to tanker only being able to pump while stationary**

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Hose bed where Chapin took refuge



Front of the Jerseydale tanker