

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Tunnel #6 Fire	Incident Date & Time: 09/24/1954 @ 02:30
Incident Location: Tahoe National Forest, north of Sierra City, California	Incident Size: 2,300 acres
Types of resources involved: U.S. Forest Service hosted inmate crew	# of Fatalities/injuries: 3 fatalities
Reason this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>On September 23, 1954, a group of men were salvaging some scrap iron from the penstock of an old gold mine in the river canyon where the North Fork of the Yuba River flows just north of Sierra City. Their cutting torches threw some sparks which started the Tunnel #6 Fire. This hillside where they were working is big, open, and drops more than 4,000 feet to the river canyon below. It's broken by drainages and covered primarily in mountain chaparral such as Greenleaf Manzanita, Silk Tassel, and oak brush.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>When the Forest Service got word of this fire, they dispatched a crew of firefighters. This crew consisted of 25 inmates from Folsom State Prison who were supervised by a Forest Service superintendent and three foremen. In summers they lived in canvas-walled tents at the Eureka Honor Camp #24. Each day they would work on timber stand improvement and other reforestation projects; occasionally they would fight some fire.</p> <p>At around 15:00 the crew arrived and hiked up to the fire and started building a fireline. Using brush hooks, pulaskis, and shovels, it was tough going and they didn't really make very good progress. The wind would throw spot fires and they would have to back up and start again. This initial attack effort continued until about 20:00 when they decided to disengage and retreat back to the road and get a bite to eat, rest up, and come up with a new plan.</p> <p>Soon, more firefighters arrived as well as an old cable dozer that belonged to a logging company. The new plan was to put a fireline on a ridge top about a mile to the west of where the fire had gotten established in a deep ravine. This ridge top would connect a couple of roads that contoured around the fire. It was thought if the line could be built and burned out in time, it could successfully box the fire in. By midnight the dozer was pushing downhill, with the crew and some volunteers coming in behind, improving the fireline, getting ready to burn out. The cool evening breeze was flowing downhill/down canyon, holding the fire down below – it wasn't moving uphill.</p> <p>But in the early morning, around 02:30, the wind switched and started coming out of the east. It was a strong dry wind and it started to push the fire toward the fireline and firefighters. The order was given to abandon the line, get everybody downhill, load them into trucks, and relocate them northwest at a place called Mule Camp. This location would be out of the fire's path if the wind kept blowing from the east.</p> <p>All but four of the firefighters made it back to the bottom of the fireline. These four got cutoff by a finger of fire when it blew across the fireline, which forced them to retreat back uphill. Only one of these four firefighters made it uphill to the safety of an upper road. Later that afternoon the bodies of Frank Burr, Richard Fierro, and Mel Grodzik were found not more than 150 feet from the road.</p> <p>That week a headline in the San Francisco Examiner read, <i>Three Felons Die Fighting Fire in Sierra City.</i></p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>Unusually dry summer Steep slopes Unexpected wind shift at night</p>	
Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:	
<p>The investigation team found the headlamps of all three deceased firefighters to be in the "off" position. This led the team to speculate that the entrapped firefighters were asleep when the order to move was given. However, during an intense post-fire interrogation, the one inmate firefighter who did make it safely up to the road, repeatedly denied that he and the three deceased firefighters were sleeping. Despite his denial, this single finding led to the 13th situation in the original <i>Fire Situations That Shout "Watch Out"</i> (Taking a nap near the fireline)</p> <p>Other conclusions included ineffective communication and the need for closer supervision.</p>	

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

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

The Tunnel #6 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.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://yubatreadhead.blogspot.com/2020/08/the-tunnel-6-fire-on-north-yuba.html>

<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1954/09/24/tunnel-6/>

<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/tunnel-no-6-fire-entrapment-1954>

This summary page was proudly provided by:

Transcribed from a 2012 *Acoustic Geography* interview of Todd White, former Captain Tahoe Hotshot Crew

September 2024



Eureka Honor Camp #24 (photo taken September 1954)

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project



Historical fire perimeter map



Recovering the victims following the entrapment