

Staff Ride

Resources



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

Rattlesnake Fire – Audio Transcript

Interview with Paul Turner, Stand #3

[Narrator] This is an excerpt from an interview with Paul Turner. Mr. Turner was the crew boss of the New Tribes Mission crew out of Fountain Springs, California during the 1953 Rattlesnake fire. Mr. Turner was a professor of anthropology with the University of Arizona when this interview was conducted by John Allendorf in 1986.

[Mr. Turner] So we were notified then that there was a fire and I remember flipping a coin, someone flipped a coin to see which crew would go because they just called for one crew. And I won the toss, so my crew went.

We got into the truck, I think it was a forest service truck but I'm not sure about that. And then we were, there were about, well I'm not sure now, maybe 15 or so of us. But anyway, we got into the truck and we're taken to the fire, it was a ways to go. When we got there, we were told to go up to where the fire was and so I started off with my crew. And I think we had shovels, I'm not sure about that, but I made a mistake by trying to go too fast up this slope because it was quite a ways to the fire. And I had men with me who were not in condition. And yet I didn't want to slow down or stop because I thought we needed to get to the fire as soon as possible. And I was even winded myself, and I was in pretty good shape. But I do remember we stopped once because somebody was yelling instructions to us, so we got a little bit of a rest that way.

Then we got to where the fire was and we were assigned to put a fire line around it, around part of it anyway, so we started to do that. And we worked for a while. I don't remember how long now. But someone came and told us that we needed to pull back, that the fire was burning too fast. So it was about that time when the fire jumped the road to the other side and a forest ranger, someone in the forest service, came to me and asked me to name some people to go with him to fight the fire on the other side because it had jumped the road, so I named the people who were near me. As I remember, every single person that I named was killed. And that's bothered me slightly down through the years.

But anyway, they went with this fella, and by then, the second crew from Fountain Springs had arrived and became part of that group. So they were taken to the other side and they did put a fire line around that fire, which was a smaller fire, of course. And since they had the fire controlled, they sat down to eat their, it'd be their supper, I guess it was a bagged lunch, and while they were eating their lunch, their lunches, the fire jumped through it again, and started burning towards them. And there was a lookout on their side of the road, a forest ranger, his name was Charlie somebody, I've forgotten his last name. But anyway, he saw what was

happening and realized they were in danger. So he ran partway down the slope and yelled to them to go east.

Now I've often wondered, if they'd just stayed where they were, if they'd just sat in the middle of that burned out area, if they wouldn't have been safe. And I would estimate that that burned out area was about 100 yards across. But I might be mistaken about that, 75 to 100 yards maybe. But anyway, most of them did go east and they were overtaken by the fire. And one fella came close to making it. His name was Cecil Williams. He left the group and tried to follow gullies down and he evidently ran out of oxygen before he could make it but he probably came within 100 yards or less of making it out.

The rest of the fellas were overtaken by the fire and were killed within a relatively short radius of each other, I'd say maybe, and this is just an estimate on my part, maybe all within about 25 yards of each other. Some of them fell on top of each other and others were off to the side. Now, the reason I say this is because I saw some of the pictures that were taken afterwards of the bodies.

Now anyway, on the other side, we saw this fire just almost, well almost like an explosion, the wind came up and just fanned the flames. And we were concerned about that, but as I said, some more than others. I wasn't that much concerned, but we had a word of prayer that God would watch over them and protect them. And we didn't eat that night as I can remember. We didn't do much after having been pulled back from the line.

They brought in Caterpillar tractors, I think, and they called in a lot more people to fight it so that, I think all our group did, all my group did was to try to put a fire line around the fire on our side. We weren't successful, pulled back, spent the night sleeping on the ground, and then early the next morning, we saw the flashbulbs going off on the other side. And they bulldozed in roads for ambulances, hearses, to come in and take the bodies out. So we were pulled off the fire line, came down and ate breakfast, were told then what had happened and were told that we were being sent back.