

Unforgettable

LONG - A G O S A N D I E G O

THE HAUSER CANYON FIRE (Part 1 of 3)

In the fall of 1943, soldiers in San Diego's backcountry had to stop gunnery practice before noon. After that, the heat became so intense the targets would seem to dance. On October 1 — the Friday before Fire Prevention Week — a bullet missed its mark and ignited the Hauser Canyon Fire, one of the United States' most tragic fires: at least 77 men injured, 11 dead.

by The world was at war. Since much of the defense industry had located here, San Diego wore a bull's-eye. Soldiers maintained 24-hour surveillance at military bases, SDG&E, the airport, Consolidated Aircraft — which covered itself with acres of chicken wire — and the county's precious water supply, especially the Morena and Barrett Dams.

Jeff At Camp Lockett, the largest military facility in the backcountry, the famous African-American "buffalo soldiers" patrolled the border on horseback. At nearby Camp Pine Valley, the Marines trained 110 men every eight weeks. They fired rifles and 30- and 50-caliber machine guns at conventional ranges, but also, on maneuvers in the Cleveland National Forest, at targets in the wild. Every fifth machine gun bullet was a "tracer," its bright red trail a compound of magnesium, perchlorate, and chromium.

Smith The most likely cause of the Hauser Canyon Fire was a tracer. The flammable projectile struck a rock or tree. A spark smoldered through the night in bone-dry chaparral. On Saturday morning, fanned by Santa Ana winds and 90-plus degree heat, a small brushfire began its quest for fuel.

Around 10:00 a.m., a lookout on Los Piños Mountain spotted white smoke in Hauser Canyon. A closer lookout, on Lyons Peak, reported heavy smoke. Since war had made manpower scarce, a fire-suppression crew from Descanso Ranger Station and 18 inmates from Camp Ole raced to the canyon. Later, Jack Ewing, director of operations for the U.S. Forest Service, called Camp Pine Valley and Camp Lockett for assistance. At 12:29 a convoy drove 113 Marines east on Highway 80. Many stood in open truckbeds, whooping and hollering. When they passed Lester Hook's ranch, off Buckman Springs Road, one asked him if he had started the fire.

They arrived at the Hauser Canyon campground at 1:20 p.m. Some Marines had training. How much has been a 60-year debate. Two rules of thumb dominated 1943: (1) A "10:00 a.m. policy" demanded all fires brought under control, if possible, by the next morning; (2) Because military personnel were better disciplined, it was assumed that, even if untrained, they made better firefighters than forest service or civilian crews.

"God knows most of us didn't love fighting fires," writes retired Colonel William Hastie, whose buffalo soldier units fought at Potrero, Hauser, and the Lagunas. "I'll never forget what a dirty and dangerous job it was."

During the summer of 1943 an officer and a noncom from each troop attended a one-day fire school near Cameron Comers. Handed shovels, burlap sacks, and brush hooks, they received "a quick lesson" in the field.

"Although troops received extensive training in the art of soldiering," writes Meredith Vezina, "they were not prepared for fighting fires, a job they were often called upon to perform."

Stephen J. Pyne: "The Hauser Canyon disaster dispelled any lingering sentiments that military units untrained in fire suppression were automatically superior to civilian crews designed for fire control."

Seen from the air, the canyon's shaped like a divining rod. Cottonwood and Hauser Creeks form the tines, which join and flow four miles west, down to Barrett Dam. Concrete uprights from an old wooden aqueduct, from Morena to Barrett Dam, tilt at stray angles in the creekbed.

Hauser was, and still is, a narrow, remote wilderness of scrub oaks, sumac, and jungle-thick undergrowth. The slopes average 60 percent - every ten feet have a sixfoot rise in elevation, so steep that when James Stephenson backed his Allis-Chalmers bulldozer down one, he

Blanket suppression demanded allout attack. But Ewing may have requested military aid for another reason. In 1943, San Diego had no Colorado River connection. Since Morena and Barrett dams were among the county's primary water sources, it was crucial to use men with, if not training, then at least some discipline. A threat to San Diego's water, says historian Jim Hinds, was "like being bombed."

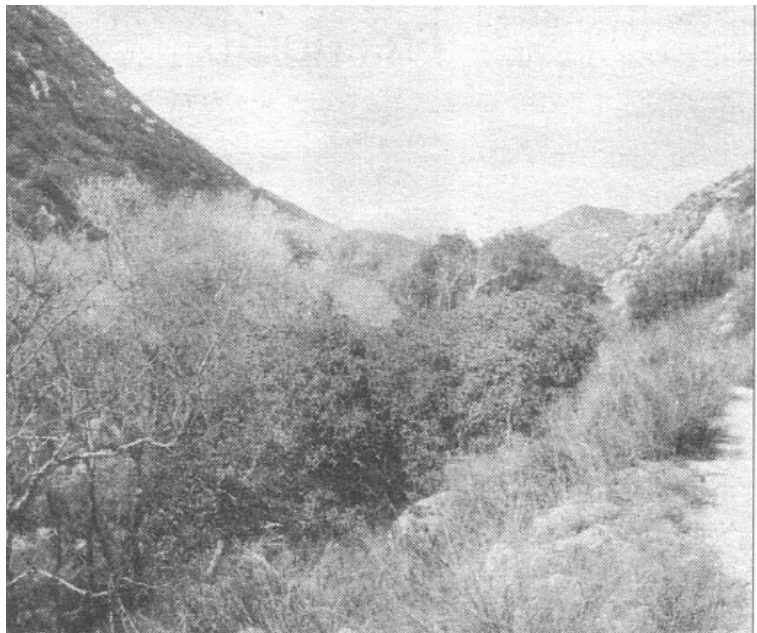
Buel B. Hunt, 34, the Cleveland National Forest's fire safety and training officer, was in charge. Forestry guard Jack Herndon and Marine gunner Willard Wright led individual crews. They issued each man a long-handled, round-point shovel; a Pulaski (an ax with a digging blade on the back) or a brush hook; a one-quart canteen; and paper-sack lunch. At 1:30 p.m., wearing fatigues and combat helmets, Marines began to scrape the "east line" on the northern slope of Hauser Canyon (near where the memorial stands today). Twenty Marines patrolled the truck trail, making sure the fire didn't jump it; nearby Cottonwood Creek was as dry as the brush crackling under their high-top boondocker boots.

By today's standards, the Marines were unarmed. They didn't wear hardhats or fire-resistant Nomex outfits. And none carried a fire shelter, an aluminum tent to crawl into as a last resort. Whether or not they had training, they did know the three rules of firefighting: (1) Keep an eye on the weather; (2) Always have an escape route; (3) Obey your crew boss.

But as Oakland fire man Zac Unger says: "The circumstances are always more random than your knowledge is organized. Fire is chaos given form. Any plan you make will be undermined."

Hunt ordered an indirect attack, instructing his forces to cut a control line 175 to 200 yards from the fire's edge. Men using wicked, curved-steel brush hooks hacked with a two-step, chop and throw rhythm. Brush hooks were so dangerous Marines had to work at least ten feet apart. "Keep a dime!" they shouted.

A second group widened the line to six feet with shovels and scraping tools. They removed everything down to "bare mineral soil."



PHOTOGRAPH BY MIKE CLARK

Hauser Canyon

had to drag the grading-blade to keep from tipping over.

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Q U O T A T I O N S :

1. Roger Challberg: "The question herein the backcountry is not 'if we get a fire,' it's 'when?'"
2. Stephen J. Pyne: "It was originally felt that forests existed in spite of fire; at a later date, because of it."
3. Zac Unger- "Fire fighting is not about the things we conquer but the things we save. For all our macho posturing, we're just caretakers."

Many contend that the direct-attack method — cutting a line at the fire's edge — was safer than indirect, because you could keep "one foot in the black": staying near an already burned area. Should the wind or the fire shift, you could step into the relative safety of blackened ground.

William Hastie: "The Hauser and Potrero fires were a nightmare for us. The federal forest service employees always seemed to want to build [indirect] lines too close to the existing fires, therefore allowing the fires to jump over before a good lane or effective backfiring could take place. It was a federal forest ranger who got the Marines trapped."

Around 2:15 p.m., three events happened almost simultaneously: (1) The one vehicle on the scene — a 300-gallon wildland fire tanker — ran out of water and left to get more; (2) The Santa Anas stopped, and the wind shifted, now coming up the canyon *behind* the fire: 8 to 15 mph from the southwest; (3) At headquarters, as the blaze spread across a 13-mile front, director Jack Ewing ordered a backfire in Hauser Canyon. He forgot he had crews down there in tight quarters.

Buel Hunt (interviewed in 1994): "One hundred untrained Marines sent by fire control officer [Ewing] up a drainage with only two forest service officers: no fire bombers, no bulldozers, a fire engine supposed to anchor us to the road, but it disappeared when wind — or their backfire? — trapped the Marines."

Crews had been working up a narrow draw. Pinned against rocky slopes, they had no escape route when the main fire sucked the backfire into a blow-up — a manic increase of a wildfire's speed and intensity, caused by a sudden infusion of oxygen. Flames rushed along a low ridge, near the mouth of the draw, then jumped across, igniting brush and grass on the other side. The blow-up created its own weather. Embers sailed through the air, exploding on the hillside like incendiary grenades.

The canyon filled with smoke.

"Retreat!" Hunt yelled. As the order passed up the line, men scattered. Some from the lower end of the gulch ran uphill, some above ran down.

"Dig in!" Hunt and others yelled just before the fire hit. Marines dug with a frenzy, but the shovels ricocheted off decomposed granite.

Pfc. Ismael W. Wesson, Pvt. Normal L. Shook, Jr., and Pvt. Ralph C. Peters ran into the flames, their only hope a fire less deep than wide. None made it through.

"Lie on your faces! Cover up your heads!" Men hugged the earth, praying for their lives and the oxygen that, in many fires, can linger up to 15 inches above the surface. They tried to "breathe shallow" to avoid asphyxiation — tough to do with a pounding heart.

The inferno roared over them. Although the flames didn't touch the Marines (Michael Luis Kuk), "Super heated gasses raced along the ground, burning their skin and lungs."

No uniform caught fire. But the radiant heat was so intense, "the men were literally cooked."

Hunt and several others dashed to a brush-free area. "The fire was all around us," Hunt told the San Diego *Union*. "There didn't seem to be anything to do but burrow in. I kept thinking of the Griffith Park fire."

Almost ten years earlier to the day — October 3, 1933 — a wind shift in the Mineral Wells Canyon sent relief workers scrambling up a steep incline. Twenty-six never reached the top.

Hunt and three others dove under large rocks, getting as prone as possible.

In case the job went past dark (the high desert temperature could drop 30 to 40 degrees), Hunt had tied a leather jacket around his waist. He put it on, flipped the collar up. When the blast hit, his cap blew off "First thing I knew, my hair was on fire." He beat the flames, as best he could, and put his hands over his ears.

The heat felt like cremation.

"I wondered if my legs were burning off. It was the most painful thing I ever suffered. At that time I didn't know how badly my hands were burned or that they were suffering a worse injury than my feet."

Hunt waited, a speck in a conflagration, for "an eternity."

The fire blew past. Squinting his eyes open, Hunt saw a world bled of color: white ashes flickering like confetti; gray, smoke-covered rocks; sizzling oaks and sycamores; charred bodies, some moving, many not.

Then his pain awoke. His hair was singed, eyebrows gone. His hands looked like burned marshmallows. The leather jacket was stiff. Super-heating dried out the oils.

They couldn't leave until "the ashes were cool enough to get through without further damage." On scorched feet, Hunt and the others "started out, carrying those unable to move themselves." Everything smelled of burnt flesh.

The gully below was still too hot. Hunt helped a Marine "who said his back was pretty badly burned" Hunt stood in front of the Marine "to shield him from the heat"

The blackened procession began edging downward. As it neared the dirt road next to Cottonwood Creek, someone shouted, "Get down! Don't run! DOWN!"

Several Marines began to run, then dove for the dirt.

A wall of flame fed by a feedback loop crested over a ridge, crackling with all the noise in the world. There was no time to dig — even scrape — a hole. Marines flattened themselves on the ground, hands on their ears, elbows and arms protecting already seared faces.

Fire is fire. It does what it does. But many felt the second assault had returned to finish the job.

This time, though, the Marines didn't have to "step into the black," enter an already burned area. They *were* the black. They held their ground.

Hunt: "Their coolness was something I'll never forget. Not a bit of hysteria that might have cost everyone his life. They didn't yell or cry for help as the flames rushed at and over them."

Later, they learned that had they tried to run, "Probably it would have burned them to death."

The fire flashed through, blocking the road with heaps of detritus. Everyone was burnt, Hunt said later, "in various/all degrees."

Although the monster had moved on, they had another problem: they were still trapped in a V-shaped hell zone with no way out. ■

Next time. **Body Count**

SOURCES:

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