Little Tujunga Hot Shots

ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST

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Alumni Newsletter 40 Year Anniversary

Edited and Arranged
By Rod Wrench

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109 Days left to the October 23rd Reunion

Forty years ago today, 20 "little fellers" began showing up at Bear Divide Station. Little did any of them know the roles they would play in the history of the Crew.... nor did many know the career paths so many of them would follow.

This issue continues in highlighting the careers of both a supervisor and a "Lifer"....this time from one of the Crews' middle years.

Several of the guys provide personal versions of a fire that the Crew had to travel the furthest to fight...The Walsh Ditch Fire on Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Your history lesson will cover the Crews' identity seeking process, from the pine tree patch to the Phoenix and a few detours along the way for flavor.

Enjoy the Hot Summer Edition! You're Newsletter Guys

Meet Larry Sall As An Old Man Now

Mike and Sandy McGeragle interview 4 May 2010

Mike was the LTHS Crew Foreman in 1974, 75, 76 and 77

I started with the Forest Service "The day out of High School with the Oak Gove Hotshots". I grew up in Delmar in San Diego County, California… a surfer kid but I wanted to be a Forest Ranger since about third grade. A family friend, Hesper Mac Millen, was a county health officer and his area included the Angeles NF, He knew Ed Lundgren who was the FMO on the Arroyo Seco RD. I was hired sight unseen… paper only… I reported to the Shots and was handed my gear- Wow! An orange fire shirt! Wow!!! This was June 1963 and never got smart enough to leave… I guess!

Much later when I left Little T Shots I became an Electrician for the District and Forest level for 21-22 years here on the Stanislaus NF. We bought a house in Sugar Pine and started on the Miwok RD (originally running the Recreation crew). But they needed someone for Facilities so they paid me to complete the college courses in Electrical Construction. In about two years I was part of a Forest Facilities Crew. We had great guys on that crew and we could tackle most anything. It was a lot of fun. I loved it. I also wore the District Range Tech hat as well as a couple of other hats. Range Tech was just a matter of going out and counting the cows on the grazing allotments.

I've been a Logistics Chief on Type I teams from '87 and continued, off and on, as an AD Log Chief on Type I & II Teams since I retired in 2000. I'm now with the Murphy, CA Fire Department. I'm on a Team primarily as Ground Support Unit Leader. It pays very good money. About three times what you get as an AD and it pays portal to portal. "So it's like, do you want to stay? Yeah! I'll do whatever you want!" I thought about becoming an electrical contractor but never pursued it.

We went to Little T Shots in '74 and left during the Marble Cone Fire in late '77. Dick McCombs drove up to take my place and I drove whatever vehicle he drove up in back the District. We made the swap right there on the Marble Cone Incident. Coincidently, this was also around the same week that Walt Sniegowski decided to depart Fire and start a new chapter in his life. Funny thing is, as soon as I arrived at my new job I was sent to the Hog Fire!

<Sandy> "Well, one thing we've talked a lot about with our kids is we may have never been financially rich, we've lived paycheck to paycheck, but the Forest Service was a wonderful life and the kids will never lose that. You know, it's been really nice. I still talk to my girlfriends down south and it's so awful in the cities now. It's just terrible. So glad that we made the move to Northern California"

As I said I started on the Oak Grove Shots in '63. Had no idea I was getting into fire! No idea at all! I started on a Sunday, which were Training and Safety Days. I remember setting through an orientation while the crew did morning PTs. I was drag McLeod and within a few months worked up to lead McLeod! Buy the end of the season I was on a Pulaski which was just- Wow! I've really advanced far!
I was a GS 3 and we worked 15 hours a day, 8 hours plus 7 hours standby. So we were there, from 0700 in the morning, with boots on, until 2000 at night. We had the barracks of course and we were fed in the mess hall. We went to quite a few fires traveling in an open, stake side truck. We would crawl into paper sleeping bags to keep from freezing to death on those long, nighttime drives back from fires.

The next year, '64, I was at Red Box, (which is an Engine (aka; Tanker) Station) with some wild and crazy guys. Bob Hensley was the Foreman (Captain). Bobby Carr was the Tank Truck Operator (Engineer). In those days you worked a full 180 days so we would go into January or so, regardless of late fall rains. That put us into early '65 when another friend (Mike Heath) and I hitch hiked around Europe for about four months. Had a lot of fun bumming around Europe. I didn't really plan on coming back, but that summer I went to work for Tony Romero at Chilao Flats Station as his TTO. Larry Boggs, Pete Trujillo and I shared the overhead barracks which was part of the office. Pete was the Hotshot Superintendent and just as gnarly as could be! Tony didn't want me there at all, yet we got along great.

I did some college classes over the winter and was the TTO at Chilao again for the ’66 season. Tony left Chilao mid-season and Monte Parrot was the new Foreman. It was July of ’66 that I got a 25 and 1 appointment. Essentially a year round appointment because you only needed to take one day without pay per year. That winter I was on the District Trail Crew.

Sandy and I met between my two seasons at Chilao. I was sharing a $50 per month apartment in Pasadena with three other guys. We each paid $12.50. Late one night there was a knock on our door. It was midnight or something like that wasn’t it Sandy?

<Sandy> Oh, it was more like two or three in the morning…

Anyway, it was Sandy and another girl who was friends with one of my roommates. He woke me up and said something like, “Hey, go talk to this girl! Me and the other one will be having fun in my bedroom.”

<Sandy> My girlfriend’s parents didn’t care what she was doing so I thought, “I’m in heaven here. I don’t need to worry about anything. It was funny; they lived in a little motel that was run down and due to be torn down. It was right across the street from Bob’s Big Boy on Colorado Blvd. It was unbelievable. The funny part was there were all these little murals everywhere. And we realized they were painted on the walls and they hung these frames around them. It was so funny. And typical guys, there weren’t any dishes or anything like that in the kitchen so they ate whatever they heated up, right out of the cans or the pans!”

And we lived at Bob’s Big Boy!

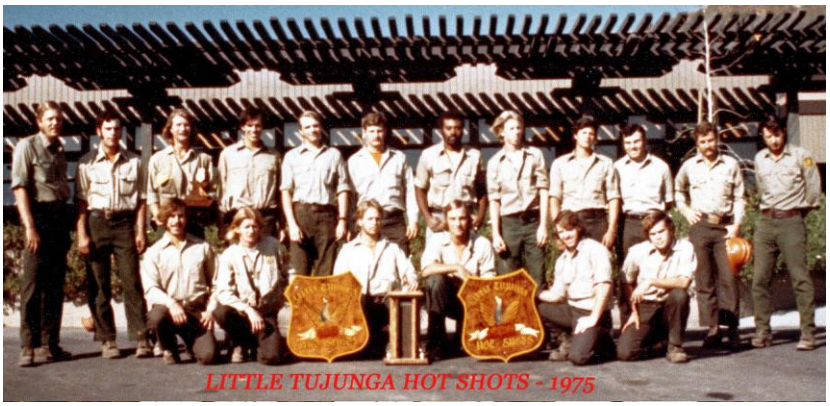
<Sandy> “That was right after Mike’s birthday in late February ‘66. We dated, got engaged in May and married in November. Dawn came along four years later and Chris came two years after that.”

After we married we lived in Montrose for the last six months of our time on the Arroyo. In ‘67 I went to Chantry Flats and worked for Bill Johnson, again as a TTO and Sandy and I moved into an apartment in Sierra Madre. I don’t remember going to many fires that summer but Chantry was a neat place. Around this time I was putting in for Patrol (Fire Prevention Technician) vacancies. Bill was friends with Woody Hite, on the Mt. Baldy RD. After a quick three months at Chantry we moved to East Fork Station and the Patrol position in September of ’67. This is when we began living in government houses. In ’72 I transferred to the Coldbrook Patrol and we were there for ’72 and ‘73.

Our kids were born while at East Fork, Dawn in 1970 and Chris in ’72. Chris was only a couple of weeks old when we moved to Coldbrook Station at the end of March. The East Fork house was a nice two bed room that between us, and the District, was well kept. The Coldbrook house was the old “B” style home said to have been built in the ‘30s by the CCCs. It was a very nice home, old but very nice.

There were six or seven of us FPTs on the District. In the winter we formed into a multi-financed crew doing trails, engineering and such. Patrol was a neat job. I don’t think they even have patrols anymore, do they? We got to know Walt Sniegowski and his wife, during our time on the Baldy. He was the Rincon Patrol from ’67 and we worked closely together. In ’70 Walt went to the Tujunga District to be the Foreman on the brand new Little Tujunga Hotshots and helped Rod Wrench start-up that crew. In February or March of ’74 he called to see if I had put in for Foreman on the Little T Shots. I got there before the crew came on but all the hiring was completed. That year that LT Shots went to a 30 man Inter-Regional Crew. We organized into three 10 man modules, A, B & C. Guys from other Forest came to LT for the training and experience… just like Redding Shots had been doing for years. I think we even had some Congressional referrals. The next year the Forest Service re-thought the size of HS Crews and all Hotshot crews were standardized to 20 plus the Superintendent.

Of course Walt was the Superintendant in ‘74 and Rich Lang and me where the Foremen. Ron Emiterio was the Assistant Foreman. Ron and I had our 18 guys on the bus and Rich had his 9 guys on a stake side. Gosh, we went to a bunch of fires in ’74. Every week we had a big fire.



Then in ’75 we were fire going from the first, now as a 20 man crew with you and me and everybody on the bus. In August things really got interesting with the Lake Hemet Fire, Pacoima Fire, Flat Fire and in November with the Mill Fire. By comparison ’76 was kind of slow until September when we and five other Region 5 Shot crews flew to Michigan for the Walsh Ditch Fire.

I have fond and fairly good memories of my time with LT, except the ’77 season is a blank for me. (Sandy was busy trying to sell our mobile home and get our family moved up to the MiWok Ranger District). I don’t remember much about it or the guys except that we went from fire, to fire, to fire. “Man that was the days we put fire out”. Now a days, they just play, they can’t commit anybody, they only fight fire in the daytime, no night shifts. If you do go out at night, you’re just an observer. Things have sure changed.

Mike and Sandy at a party

Celebrating retirement in Cabo

<Sandy>. Well, one nice thing is every where that we‘ve lived we have loved it. East Fork and Coldbrook were wonderful places to start our family. When we went to Little T we lived at the mobile home facility and we were able to buy our own first home… a double wide mobile. After that we were able to buy a real house in Sugar Pine. We’ve always been a Forest Service family and I think we lived it in the best of times. As the kids grew older the Forest Service changed. It’s not family oriented any more. There are no family social get togethers. It’s really sad because that’s how the kids grew up. They knew everybody and everybody knew them.

The only thing we got a little of tired of was the snow in Sugar Pine in the winter (way too cold to work outside). After we retired we decided to move to Angeles Camp and we built our dream house in 2004 to escape the snow… But we’ve had snow down here every year anyway (it just seems to follow us)!

The McGeragle Estate

Remember the big Open House we threw in ’75? We did tree felling and bucking demos, Pulaski races, we had apparatus and equipment displays, Smokey Bear flew in on a helicopter… And we had cake!

<Sandy> That Open House was so much fun! Listening to Dave Herrand and Mike throwing out names and telling their stories rings bells in me. Some of those kids, the Hotshots, were always at our house. Because we had the little ones, we were the mom and dad and they were the kids that had left home for the first time. They were young and they needed that family atmosphere. One Thanksgiving we had a bunch of them over for turkey dinner because they had nowhere to go and fire season was still going. We enjoyed doing those kinds of things. Looking back we wouldn’t change a thing.

The McGeragle kids Chris & Dawn at Little T open house 1975

Mike and Sandy we’re interviewed by Dave Herrand

IN FLIGHT EMERGENCY, 1976

A study in Contrasting Recollections

By Walt Sniegowski and David Herrand

(Walt) The telephone rang in the upper hotshot office. The Forest dispatcher, Bob Underwood, asked to speak with me. Immediately I got this awful feeling in my gut… You see it was raining in southern California and the fire danger was down to zero. Could it be possible that they would end fire season early this year? After all, it was already September and the rumors of budget shortages were floating around.

Bob asked if the crew would like to take a fire assignment, but that it came with "conditions". For you readers, Bob Underwood was my long time fishing partner, as well as quite a practical joker. Both of us were fond of single malt whiskies and on occasion would enjoy one or two. I was certain that Bob might have already had several at lunch or breakfast.

I'm sure my reply was something on the order of "why don't you go and take a flying F____!!!" Realizing he was very serious I asked about the "conditions". Bob stated we had to agree to stay for two weeks; had to leave all of our tools at home; and we were authorized administrative leave to go home and pack "essentials". The "essentials" were identified as follows: raingear, rubber boots, heavy jacket, long johns and a warm sleeping bag. To go on a fire!!!!

The fire we were told was burning on the Seney National Wildlife Refuge on Michigan's Upper Peninsula (know by most as the *UP*). Named the *Walsh Ditch Fire*, an escaped Rx fire, it had been burning since July during a rare drought. Burning in what was normally a swamp, this fire was the first extra period incident (more than one shift) that the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) had experienced in more than 45 years. They needed help and R5 would rotate in 6 crews at a time for two week shifts. We would supplement the state crews which had been unable to complete the tasks.

A Forest Service charter aircraft was ordered out of Boise. It would pick up Mark Linane and the L.P. 'Shots at Goleta, Larry Caplinger and Texas Canyon along with us at Burbank, and then Ron Regan and the Del Rosa 'Shots at Ontario. Two Cleveland N.F. crews had other travel arrangements.
To say the crews were excited would be an understatement. Making such a long trip is unusual and we were looking forward to some fun and fellowship on board- sharing the stories, etc.

(David) This was back when the Forest Service was beginning to get into "Total Mobility". Going out of Region wasn't so unusual but going as far as the Mid-West was. So we were excited to get this assignment. Plus, 1976 had been a relatively slow fire season for us and our frustration deepened with significant rain in September. This fire assignment was sure to beat the project work we were doing up in the bone yard while wearing raingear! (Or so we thought. But that's for another article ☺).

I remember the aircraft being a Convair 580… actually a very good airplane, with two big turbo prop engines and a pressurized cabin capable of carrying some 45 or so passengers and their belongings. It was an ideal aircraft for carrying two 20 person hand crews and their gear. We boarded at Hollywood Burbank with the Texas Canyon Hotshots.

Our stewardess wore a nametag indentifying her as *Bambi*. Bambi was an attractive, dishwater blond with big hair and single so far as we knew. I think all the California 'Shots and Jumpers knew of Bambi. With a slender figure she looked pretty good in the cute dresses that stewardess wore in those days. Since most of us were single it was inevitable that we guys would maneuver into talking with her. But we each learned, in our own turn, trying to talk with her beyond two or three lines was frustrating. It wasn't that Bambi was unfriendly. She was just confusing… and it wasn't clear to us if it was our fault or hers. She was our stewardess after all; and we sort of looked up to her, or thought we should.

We loaded our gear in the late afternoon and boarded for the flight. CWN contracts didn't include anything more than one can of chilled soda-pop per passenger so Bambi didn't have a lot to do as far as food service. But we never left home without *C-rations* so that's what we took for an in-flight meal. The first leg would take us to Denver were we would stop for fuel, some impromptu stretching exercise and a midnight candy bar.

I never could sleep on an airplane. I grabbed my usual window seat when we took off and resumed our flight east. It wasn't long before we starting passing through a band of sever weather over the Great Plains. I watched, in the illumination provided by flashes of lightning, as ice would build up on the starboard wing. Repeatedly it would build up to a point… then suddenly most of it would flake off. I was trying to figure out if it was flaking off of its own weight or if the pilots were activating some kind of a de-icing boot when a really big flash of lightning bathed the wing in a brilliant, white light.

I didn't think too much of this and simply waited for the next flash. Then I saw the wing in a strangely dim light. Apparently the pilots had turned on some kind of exterior light that shined out across the wing. There didn't appear to be much ice but it looked like the propellers on that starboard engine had stop spinning. I couldn't believe what I was seeing, rubbed my eyes, and looked again. Was I just seeing things? Maybe I was dreaming. Then a flash of lightning confirmed it. The pilots must have shut that engine down! "Why", I wondered. "Well, they will probably start it back up right away" I thought. Then the exterior light went off and with each subsequent flash of lightning I saw only stationary props.

I looked around the cabin at 39 other sleeping firefighters and one sleeping stewardess in her special seat way back in the tail. We all had our boots off and most had removed their nomex shirts and seat belts. I thought about walking back and waking Bambi. "Bad idea," I thought. Instead I woke the firefighter next to me and told him that we were flying on one engine. Clearly irritated to have been waken, he opened his right eye looked out the window and mumbled, "Oh, they do that to save gas" and immediately went back to sleep.

I'm embarrassed to admit I actually pondered this for a few minutes. Searching the slide show in my mind I couldn't explain why a two engine airplane with over 40 souls on board was flying on one engine for this considerable length of time. I was an Army paratrooper for crying out loud! I had spent many dozens of hours cramped in four engine turbo props or four engine jets boring holes in night skies. Those Air Force boys never shut down any engines to save any stinking gas! The worst part was I didn't have a parachute on tonight!

(Walt) Well it was fun until about midway thru the flight! We were seated at the front of the plane and most of the guys were catching a few Zs. One of our crewmen called over to me, said smoke was coming out of the right engine, and the propeller was not turning. (Note: this is a two engine plane). Also waking up at this time was our cabin attendant, *Bambam.* She proceeded to run screaming and pounding on the cockpit door. We got a bit concerned.

(David) It was past time for action. Mike McGeragle, the crew foreman was seated directly in front of me. I woke him and told him what was going on, suggested we wake the crew, and get them booted-up. Shaking off his sleepiness he immediately grasped the situation and agreed. We woke those within arms reach and ordered, "Boots, nomex and seat belts, pass the word". One by one the firefighters came to life. Grumbling sleepily, they none the less passed the word, turned on their reading lights and slowly began to comply. Soon the Texas Canyon 'Shots were doing likewise and Bambi was waking up.

Then the pilot came on the cabin speakers and asked Bambi to come up to the flight deck. She obediently strode up the aisle and disappeared behind the door to the nose of the airplane. Within moments she reappeared looking shaken. Throwing her arms up she shouted, "We're all going to die! Fasten your seat belts and put your heads between your knees!" With that she ran pell-mell down the full length of the aisle, threw herself into her seat, strapped on her seat belt, grabbed a pillow into her lap and buried her head into it!

Picture if you can, 40 young men, now wide eyed, each looking over their shoulder at Bambi with their jaws hanging open. Suddenly 80 boots were laced at light speed, nomex shirts were donned in a fury and 40 seat belts snapped tight almost in unison.

(Walt) A short while later the pilot came into the cabin area and briefed the crews. He stated the engine was possibly struck by lightning and was turned off to prevent fire from occurring in it. He further informed us that the aircraft was entirely capable of flying on only one engine if necessary and that in about 15 minutes we would be landing in Sioux City, Iowa. A replacement aircraft would meet us there and we would continue on our way. He returned to the cockpit and closed the door.

(David) In stunning contrast to Bambi's above described "announcement" the pilot comely announced over the cabin speakers that we had apparently been hit by lightning and the alternator on number two had burned out. He continued that the procedure was to shut the engine down and land at the closest suitable airport. In another few minutes he advised us we would proceed to, and land, at Sioux Falls, Iowa. While we were try to figure out why in the world we were over Iowa… indeed if Iowa even had a Sioux Falls, he came back on and corrected himself- Sioux Falls, South Dakota!

(Walt) It took longer than the aforementioned 15 minutes- it was closer to one hour. All during this time we constantly shifted our attention from the good engine to our watches, and back again. The only sounds heard emanating from the crewman were an assortment of prayers and the rattling of beads. There were no atheists on board.

(David) We flew on long enough to enter the first light of dawn. Descending, we eventually caught sight of the airport and began to fly a left turning pattern around the area at about 3000' above ground. Our imaginations ran wild. Were we burning off fuel? Were we giving them time to foam the runway? Through all of this I would occasionally look back to Bambi only to see that her head was firmly buried in her pillow. "At least it was light now and the sever weather had dissipated or moved on," I thought.

(Walt) As the flaps were lowered on approach the only thing I can recall was reading the airport name on the main terminal building- Sioux Falls, South Dakota!!! Reflecting back on my knowledge of geography I don't believe that Sioux City and Sioux Falls are all that close together. I also asked myself why the main airport building was called "terminal"- but I decided to let it go.

(David) Finally the pilot announced we were going to land. We descended slowly through some more orbits then turned on final and made the smoothest landing I ever experienced in a fixed wing airplane! As anti-climatic as this was Bambi then simply rose from her seat, combed her hair with her fingers, smoothed her dress, opened the door and stood by as the mobile stairway was rolled into position!

We got off the airplane and were standing around wondering if we should start unloading our gear when the pilot and co-pilot emerged from the airplane and came down the stairway. The senior pilot was a mature and very distinguished looking black man. I will never forget how calm and collected he looked in his impeccable black coat and tie uniform. I will probably never know if those pilots simply messed with poor Bambi's head that night.

(Walt) Because we had no landing permit for Sioux Falls we were told the crews could not use the terminals facilities. We considered passing the hat to purchase one, but instead, all crewmen, with Buck knives at the ready, convinced the rent-a-cop cum airport security that it was in his best interest not to screw with us. Shortly we (or perhaps more so our cash) were royally welcomed into the terminal where we ate and drank all that was available. Several hours later, singing our crew song, we boarded the replacement aircraft and continued on to the assignment.

Respectively assembled and edited by David Herrand.

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A FIRE LIKE NO OTHER, WALSH DITCH 1976

By Walt Sniegowski with Mike McGeragle, David Herrand and Monte Satern

We landed in Marquette, Upper Peninsula (UP) Michigan during the peak of the fall foliage season. The entire countryside was resplendent in shades of reds, oranges and yellows.

The fire was being run by a team from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Although Michigan has a history of large fires this generation of DNR folks had never been tasked with a fire of this size and duration. There was no pre-planned fire organization. Most of the crews on scene were state crews from the northeast and south. They came on 30 day contracts. Showing up about the same time as we did was an overhead team from the Boise Interagency Fire Center to take over management of the fire.

(David) This thing was essentially a mega grass fire. Despite frequent T-showers and wet fronts the UP was in the midst of a severe drought. The fire was burning on ground that was normally open marsh and timbered swamps. The fire would rip through the dead grass that had grown on the dry marsh and swamps. And I mean, at times, it RIP!

Roaring in out of the open the first tree stand it would bang was replacement conifers which stood on ground about 1 foot higher than the grassland. It would crown big time through the conifers until it got into the hardwoods which stood on ground another foot higher... called "ridges" by the locals. The fire would crown a bit into the hardwoods but quickly drop and become, first a running, then a smoldering ground fire. It was on these two foot high "ridges" in the shade of the hardwoods that we attempted to stop the thing.

Adapting to the local ways took a little time and patience. First they only worked one shift a day. They don't fight fire at night- it's too dark and they don't have any "lanterns"- headlamps to the rest of us.

The daily briefings were experiences to remember. We met in a facility which we immediately nicknamed the "revival tent". Each morning the individual crew leaders and overhead shared their previous day's accomplishments… usually to a boisterous round of applause. It was not unlike "show and tell" back in grade school.

We would get a daily pep talk, safety briefing, and fire behavior prediction. We learned new fire behavior terminology: scorch height in the hardwoods, peat moisture content and new measures of rates of spread- furlongs per fortnight, I believe. Keep in mind that it was raining off and on most of the time and very soon snow flurries would begin- but the peat continued to burn.

(David and Mike) We both remember the locals called this northern "peat" *Moon S--t* or *Loon S—t.* It is a spongy mixture of decaying vegetation and hair like root tangle knitted together with a weird white membrane. One day we were mopping up with assistance from a couple of DNR, one man pumpers. These "engines" were basically large, military surplus pressure washers mounted on 1 ton trucks. These rigs carried maybe 200 gallons of water and 50' of high pressure hose with a nozzle that resembled a Thompson Machine Gun. The DNR guys would literally cut the Moon S—t up with the thin, high pressure straight stream. This was hydraulic mop-up on steroids.

The day before we had constructed direct handline through the hardwoods. Originally our "California style" method involved a four-step process. First a 10 foot wide cut, which due to the wide spacing of trees was the easy part. The cut was followed with a 3 foot wide, 6 to 10 inch deep grub and scrap down to the spongy Moon *S—t* which was shot thru with masses of tree roots. This was by far the heaviest scrapping any of us had ever encountered. The really fun part was then chopping and digging a trench 1 shovel width wide down to the water table. What we ended up with looked like an 18 to 24" deep meandering irrigation ditch. The fourth step was, of course, mop-up.

We only did this labor intensive method for one or two days because it didn't even begin to work. When we came back out the following mornings our "mopped-up" fire had crept over our ditch like it wasn't even there! So what we accomplished was nothing more than stupid little canal wondering aimlessly through the burn! The DNR guys got a big laugh out of us California boys!

I remember Mike and I asked one of them, "What is this stuff and what does it take to put it out?" He reached down and ripped a handful of it up. Then said something like, "You boys think you can put *Moon S—t* out? Watch this". He rolled it into a ball in his hands and squeezed it, just like a sponge, until a drop or three of water dripped out. Then he fluffed it out and began blowing on it. No lie, with only a few puffs it began smoking and sparking. A few more puffs and it erupted in open flame!

We realized there were long fingers of smolder deep within the *Moon S—t.* It was impossible to find the fires edge. We adapted by minimizing line construction and instead mop lining. If you kept after it day after day you would eventually get it. Of course this was some two decades before handheld heat sensors.

Because of the constant rain and predictions of snow it was necessary to construct what would eventually be known as "Visqueen City". Huge rolls of black plastic were brought in for protective shelters. Each crew was allotted time to erect its own camp. Armed with hand tools and chainsaws we constructed the Michigan equivalent of the "swamp' from the series M*A*S*H. Complete with directional arrows to tropical paradise (home) our camp contained fire rings, clothes and boot drying racks and benches around a community fire. The roof was sloped to allow runoff (something other crews failed to do). Proper drainage was installed as well as proper ventilation for the warming fires.
A couple of paper sleeping bags, several blankets and a trash bag full of leaves (pillow) made for quite cozy lodging.

The DNR constructed central dinning area had no seats. Didn't matter. It rained so often they wouldn't have gotten much use anyway. We ate standing at chest high plywood tables where you ate as fast as possible, shielding your paper plate from the constant rain.

The UP was experiencing a jobless rate north of 60%. An effort was made to help the economy by hiring lots of local help. They robbed the place blind (especially food and tools). If it wasn't nailed down- it was soon gone. Our crews were required to leave a man in camp each day to watch over the hotshots' property.

(Mike) The Walsh Ditch Fire, to me was just a fun, fun fire. That was the good ol' boys, in the "revival tent" and we tried every, with the black plastic sheeting, every type of construction method there was. Over time we figured out the only thing that worked was the Tepee! It would rain every night... it rained every day!

But, man that fire would not go out! I remember them telling us when we first got there, "You boys with your fancy pants, shirts and fire shelters, you ain't gona to put this fire out." Wait I minute! Were Hotshots of California, we put fire out! Two weeks later we were reduced to whining, "We can't put this fire out!"

(David) The Walsh Ditch Fire was a real eye opener and as for unique adventure it nearly pegged the needle. But the suppression work was incredibly labor intensive and frankly, by the second week, boring. As the days progressed the fatigue accumulated on the guys. You would think a fire on flat terrain would be easy. I mean our guys were in excellent shape, and soldiered on like always… but in two weeks they were fried. The poor quality and limited variety of the food didn't help. The cubic calories burned were more than the guys could replace.

Fire camp was established in what was normally a swamp… so we named it "The Swamp"! The place looked like a ramshackle mining boomtown straight out of a bad Hollywood western (including trash cans full of empty booze bottles and apparently the presence of one or more prostitutes, although I have no first hand knowledge of either ☺).

We were directed to a far corner of The Swamp and told to make shelters for ourselves. The six R5 crews dispersed into the woods and each constructed a somewhat isolated little bedroom community. This was like a suburb to the main camp and, no surprise, became known as California or Little California.

Camp construction and improvement never completely stopped. Local thieves prowled camp so we left a different guy in our camp each day. Besides providing security the *in camp guy* would improve camp and restore the fire wood supply. After a few days our camp was a well laid out creation of relatively dry, snug shelters, multiple warming fire pits ringed by low benches and drying racks. It became a real home away from home. It really helped moral to come off shift each evening, wet and tired, to crackling warming fires. Had we stayed another two weeks I think we would have even finished he log cabin we started.

A memorable event occurred on one particularly heavy, rainy day. About mid morning an alert was sent out over the crew radios. The message was *"Olly, olly in free. Everyone return to fire camp".* It was raining so hard that the overhead feared the crew vehicles would mire down in the swamp.

Upon arrival in camp I joined the crew for lunch while Mike McGeragle went to timekeeping to close out our workday. When asked by the DNR timekeeper why we stopped the crew's time at noon, rather than the usual six pm, Mike pointed to the storm raging outside the tent. Her remark, "Not your fault it rained"!!! They paid us for the full day.

(Mike) I remember we came in early one day because it was raining cats and dogs and the creeks were rising. I stopped our time at noon. The timekeeper asked me "Well what have you been normally working"? I said, "Oh, 12 to 15 hours". "Then put that down. It's not your fault it rained" she replied!

On one particular cold day, the Service Chief came out on the fireline to see if our lunches (locally made) were adequate. I made a joking remark that hot soup and coffee might be a nice addition. Starting the next day, and for as long as we remained there, thermoses of hot soup and coffee showed up as regular as clockwork.
Any suggestions for needed equipment or supplies at the daily shift briefings quickly became a reality. Mark Linane asked for and got fireline explosives. He was soon blasting fireline through the swamp as well as "holes" where helicopters with *Simms buckets* dipped out water to make their drops.

Others asked for and received *sky cranes, dragon wagons, Bombardiers, muck plows,* etc. Cost apparently was never a concern.

(Mike) The classic to me was the DNR guy, probably the Line Boss or something. He was out on the line with us and called in a fixed wing drop. Radioing the aircraft he said, "I'm waving my orange hard hat" I mean the whole country is orange with fall leaves! I laughed so hard I thought I was going to die!

But they had laughs on us too. The first day we, all six Region 5 crews I think, were sent out to cut a "shaded" fuel break, through the hardwoods, along a backcountry road. We cut 60 or 70 feet wide for well over a mile. Did a real good job. Late that day one of the good ol' boys showed up and said, "You dumb idiots from California. The only trees you left are the Paper Birch… which is the tree that burns the best!"

Then there was the chainsaw thing. They purchased 30 or 40 chainsaws and just handed them out still in the boxes. Like handing out candy. No record keeping at all. I remember we got 10 brand new saws out of it. It was like, WOW!

(David) A lot of those DNR guys had never seen a fixed wing retardant drop. I remember this one guy, probably the same guy that waved his orange hardhat, called in a drop. We were trying to figure out what he was dropping on. After the drop one of us, I think it was me, asked him, "What in the world are you dropping on?" He said, "I just had to see me one'er them borate drops. Sure was the purrteest thing I ever seen!"

It got boring out there in the second week… not from lack of work… the monotony and futility of it. But being Hotshots we kept after it. Some of those state crews were horrible. I remember one crew came out there and slept every day, day after day. They didn't even break open their tool bundles.

One day Ed White (Texas Canyon 'Shots) and I needed some recreation. We got to heaving Pulaski's over our heads in a hatch throwing contest. In short order we were consistently sticking Pulaskis into the side of one of the few large conifers. Each round we took a couple of steps back until the range was too much for us. I think Ed won but I really don't remember.

At the end of two weeks we were told they wanted two crews to stay and four would be released. Straws were drawn. I don't remember what two crews drew the short straws. The crews staying would move into cabins… something like a Boy Scout or church camp. We helped get the cabins outfitted.

(Monte) On the last day we set up some barrack space for the crews that were staying. We hauled mattresses and beds from a truck into the rooms and assembled them. Then we were told that they were for the other crews and that we were to go back to our camp and sleep on the ground in our plastic tents again. Upon hearing that news, one of our guys fell to the ground and began to flop around in the dirt and babble about loving to sleep in the dirt. Our host was not impressed.

(Mike) We ate one meal at this new camp. It was prepared by totally different people… it was way better then what we had been eating for two weeks.

All during my hotshot career I have always felt that our crews have received (and probably deserved) a bit more "attention" than have others. But the Michigan experience was like no other (if you could discount the weather). Our reputations certainly preceded us. The performance ratings and letter from our Division Supervisor, Howard Weeks and the entire BIFC Team were very special. We almost hated to leave but that would be a small lie. I use the word almost, because when it was time to leave, only four of the six crews would be released. We would draw straws. The two "losing" crews would move from "Visqueen City" to winter quarters in the local schoolhouse. They would remain for an additional week.

As the bright lights of Manistique, Escanaba and Munising faded from the cabin windows, deep inside I was honestly quite glad that I had drawn the "long" straw.

One last part of the story remains to be told. On the night of our departure a group of overhead and crewman met around the campfire and we developed the Michigan equivalent of the *13 Situations that Shout Watch Out*. Our new efforts of satire of sorts had lots of individual inputs. But I would be remiss if I didn't give special credit to supers Ed White, Gary Glotfelty and Ronnie Smith. The complete listing may have been lost to posterity. Listed below are a few taken from a very old memory- but you readers will get the feel for the groups efforts.

<u>13 Situations that Shout "GOLLEE"</u>

- You are on a muck plow with unburned peat between you and the main fire.
- You cannot see the main fire but are in communication with Tennessee #3 who can.
- The BIFC Team is being released and the DNR will take over the fire again.
- It is starting to get dark and you don't have any lanterns.
- The area has 60% unemployment and new fires are breaking out everyday.*
- The DNR is attempting a frontal assault with Bombardiers.
- Scorch height in the hardwoods is expected to reach 8 feet.

Hoping to get keep the gravy train going- locals continuously kept setting new fires. Paper sleeping bags stuffed with leaves was a favorite device. Somewhere in the deep woods

Walt Sniegowski, September 1976

Tools of the period

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY!!!!

What did a Forest Service firefighter earn on a big fire in 1976 and what would they earn in 2010?

The Little Tujunga Hotshots where assigned to the *Walsh Ditch Fire* for the full 14 days of one pay period. Sunday, the first day of the pay period, 12 September thru Saturday, 25 September 1976. Our days off were Wednesdays and Thursdays.

80 hrs Base Pay with 16 hours of Sunday Differential (SD) is a given. So the question is always; how much Overtime (OT) and Hazard Pay (HP) did timekeeping approve?

Mike Vradenberg provided an earning statement documenting that in 1976 a GS-4 step 1 grossed $4.32 per hour ($8985.60 per annum). Reviewing Mike McGeragle's FIRE TIME REPORT for the Walsh Ditch Fire here are the gross earnings calculations for a GS-4 step 1:

Base pay:	80.0 hours @ $4.32 =	$345.60
SD:	16.0 hours @ +10% =	$6.91
OT:	121.0 hours @ +1.5% =	$784.08
HP:	144.5 hours @ +25% =	$156.08
	TOTAL for GS-4 step 1 =	$1292.67

However! There is a possible problem! The timekeeper for this block, Cindy Dillion, made two entries for the 21st… One for 8 hours (showing a lunch break) and another entry for 4 hours… both entries without HP. This was the "It's not your fault it rained" day. Did Finance deny HP or is this their mistake? Is it too late to file a claim? ☺ Assuming no mistake the above total stands.

For	GS-3-1 -10% or	$1163.40
	GS-5-1 + 10% or	$1421.94
	GS-6-1 + 10% of GS-5 or	$1564.13

If a Forest Service firefighter went to the Walsh Ditch Fire in 2010 he or she would earn 340% of the above figures or:
$5687.75 for a GS-4 step 1.

Documentation provided by Mike Vradenberg and Mike McGeragle.
Figures by Walt Sniegowski.
Edited by David Herrand.

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A Lifer in a Family of Lifers --- Steve Reed By Walt Sniegowski

What do you want to be when you grow-up? This was a question you would not have heard around the Reed household. If there is ever such a thing found as a firefighter gene, then this family certainly carries it.

Born and raised in the San Fernando Valley, Steve Reed is the son of Wallie Reed, aka Captain Reed of Los Angeles County Fire Camp 9. (A little additional history, Wallie started the Camp 9 crew in 1970 therefore both his crew and ours are celebrating 40 Year Anniversaries.)

Following graduation from Granada Hills High in 1973, Steve accomplished absolutely nothing significant. Rejected by his family, L.A. County Fire, the military and K-Mart, Steve applied for a job on the Tujunga Ranger District. Although he fell some what short in his interview, Rod felt obligated to hire him because Wallie's Camp 9 crews had been doing some fuel-break work on the district and he could use him as a bargaining chip when Rod needed something from Camp 9. So the hiring was, in reality, a quid pro quo event.

On his very first day of work, Steve promptly put a Pulaski into his knee during a line construction practice exercise. To date this is the worst project accident that the crew has experienced. Several stitches and a light-duty doctor's notice landed Steve and reassignment to the station mess-hall and KP duty. It was here that Steve learned to peel potatoes, scrub pots and pans and clean grease traps. These valuable lessons undoubtedly prepared Steve for is future career with the Kern County Fire Department. Steve spent both the 1974 And 1975 seasons on the crew; 1975 was probably the busiest season ever for the crew and Steve handled squad boss duties as well. Being in the right place at the right time, Steve got to go on the infamous Walsh Ditch Fire with the crew.

In 1980 Steve was promoted to the assistant Hot Shot Foreman and then in August the crew was promptly disbanded. (Note: We are still looking into a possible connection). Steve finished the 1980 season on the Bear Divide Engine, working for Henry Smith. (Editors Note: Long time Big T Engine foreman Henry Smith gave up his Studebaker fire engine and moved to Bear Divide to be closer to home.) On Steve's last day, and in virtually his last minutes of work, the engine crew was dispatched to a fire in the Saugus District. Dave Bailey (72, 73) relieved Steve on this fire to allow him to report to the Kern County Fire Department. In October 1980, after five weeks at the fire academy, Steve was appointed as a "suitcase" fireman. Filling in at stations from Kern River Canyon to Ridgecrest, China Lake and points in between, Steve was also dispatched to fires in the BLM and Sequoia National Forest response areas. Steve also served on a Type I fire team; Kern County was the first local agency to become involved in the incident management system.

Steve ran the Kern County Hot Shot Crew at Lake Isabella for four years. Today that crew is better known as the Rio Bravo Hot Shots, the only County Interregional Hot Shot Crew in existence. Hoping to add valuable breadth of experience to his curriculum vitae, Steve decided to gain "metro" experience being reassigned to Station #73 in downtown Inyokern (I know, I couldn't find it on the map either). Very shortly Steve will pull the plug and retire from his engineer position at Lake Isabella Station. Wife Patricia has already done so from her career as a registered nurse.

The Reeds have two children, Rebecca, who just graduated from CSU Bakersfield, and Andy, who is…would you expect anything else, also a fireman. Rebecca just received her degree in education and Andy just graduated from the fire academy this year. Andy (born on the night of Grandpa Wallie's retirement party) spent ten seasons with the Rio Bravo Hot Shots and has recently been assigned to the Oil Dale Station as a fireman. He looks forward to the day he can supervise the Rio Bravo Crew. Wallie offers the following insight regarding the Reed family legacy, if Andy retires with thirty years of service, then the Wallie-Steve-Andy connection will span over one-hundred years of dedicated fire service. But to continue…brother Ron is crew foreman at LA County Camp II in Soledad Canyon, and a cousin has recently retired after forty-one years, reaching the position of District Chief.

Steve described his family as active in sports and the great outdoors, living only a short distance from Lake Isabella, the Reeds can be found fishing, wind surfing and kayaking. Theater plays and films are rainy day activities. Summers can find them hiking and fishing in the Bridgeport area of the Eastern Sierra. (Seems like half the crew is doing the same thing—how come we don't run into each other?)

Other notable accomplishments include the restoration of historical buildings at the Cannell Meadows Board Station on the Sequoia National Forest and an unguided canoe trip down Utah's Green River with family and forest service friends. Anxious to begin the next part of their lives, the Reeds have purchased a GMC pick-up and a 25' travel trailer. With the children grown-up and graduated, they plan on heading out into the sunrise/sunset.

Will they follow in the footsteps of other great adventurers? No, not Lewis and Clark or Daniel Boone, but the likes of Jack Kerouac in "On The Road", John Steinbeck "Travels with Charlie" or William Least Heat moon "The Blue Highways".

Only time will tell…stay tuned—

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An Identity Crisis

On July 1st, 1970, the LTHS Crew members were issued some less than flattered "jell-o mold" style hard hats. Unhappy with our appearance and after a considerable amount of horse-trading by Rod, we were able to obtain a sufficient number of metal, Bullard hard hats—the fashion statement of the day. We then proceeded to paint them in the light metallic blue color of the Tujunga District. The problem was, we looked just like any other district employee and this would just not do. Seeking our own identity, we came up with our own crew color, "International Orange". We made this choice, first because no other Angeles crew was using it, and secondly, there just happened to be a case of "international orange" spray paint left in the storage locker and Rod liked it because it matched our fire shirts.

To the hard hat was added the FS Angeles NF Shield and some gold and black crescent stickers, spelling out Little Tujunga Hot Shots. (Note: Carefully observe the spelling of the words. Hot Shots is printed out as two separate words—just as first written way back in the 1930-40 period. We are one of only a small handful of the 65+ Hot Shot crews existing today that have remained historically accurate on this point.) Rod Wrench is responsible for this. Also look at the crew patches and vest embroidery—they too are historically accurate.

The next step in the identity seeking process was to design a patch that could be worn on khaki work shirts and the orange ball cap. Rod's design was a modification of the Forest Service pine tree badge, but with the LTHS and Crew 5 embroidered on it. (See the newsletter heading for an example). The crew then purchased Filson vests and an oval patch was designed and sewn on. At the time we couldn't find anyone to embroider the name directly onto the vest. All of the above mentioned changes were a start in the identity process, but we were far from satisfied.

The next change involved embroidering the crew name directly onto the Filson vests the next year. This was done in San Bernardino by the same folks that did Del Rosa's. The lettering was done in Old English script. What followed close behind was the same orange ball cap with the letter "T" ironed-on in Old English script as well. These "ideas" lasted a couple of seasons.

The next version involved the use of military insignias. We purchased pins at military surplus sores and applied them to our ball caps. The motivation for this was "General" Dick Gaspari at the fire warehouse. We had been "detailed" there for a considerable time period, reconditioning fire tools, testing and rolling fire hose and performing other duties as assigned.

The crew was pretty top heavy in "brass"; we had lots of sergeants, lieutenants, captains, etc. We even had our own chaplain who led us in daily meditation. Walt held the highest crew rank—Bird Colonel. Only three crewmen were N.C.O.'s. We had a lot more Chiefs than Indians (Native Americans to be politically correct!)

It is now 1974 and we are still unhappy with our identity. A crew decision was made to hold a contest and crew members were asked to submit their designs or ideas. The crew would then attempt to reach a consensus on the final design. The winner would become superintendent for a day, receive a case of beer, and would go down in LTHS history for his efforts.

Crew members looked everywhere for ideas: other crews, comic strips, tattoo parlors, head shops, etc. Entries submitted included cartoon characters, psychedelic renderings, Greek and Roman gods of fire, burning bushes, etc. The Zig Zag man was an early favorite (submitted by one of the stoners).

The final choice, however, was unanimous. Greg Vanstone submitted a full color oil painting by his artist mother. The painting was a rendering of the mythical bird—the 'Phoenix'.

From that point forward, the "bird" was worn on the ball cap and a black colored Phoenix was silk screened onto orange t-shirts. This became the crews' semi-official work uniform.

Danny Hinojosa, a very talented artist and crewmember, painted two wooden plaques with full color phoenix designs. One was attached to the rear of the crew bus; the second plaque was completed and hung on what would be known as the "Wall of Honor" in our day room. Danny then proceeded to paint, in full color, emblems of all the R-5 Hot Shot crews existing at the time. I am told the "Wall" remained until the crew was disbanded.

In hindsight, the choice of the Phoenix for the fire crew emblem was most appropriate, considering the following facts revealed in a recent computer search. The phoenix has Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Egyptian and Native American counterparts. The "bird" is known as Feng Hung, Ho-oo, Firebid, Benu and Yel, respectively. The phoenix is a mythical creature with an longing for immortality, reported in some citations as having a lifespan of 500, 540, 1,000 and even 12,994 years. The shortest reported period was from 1974 to 1980.

If injured, the Phoenix can heal itself—its song can make the Sun stop and listen, and it is strongly connected to peace, healing and resurrection. Only one Phoenix can exist at one time. At the end of its life, the Phoenix builds a pyre nest of aromatic branches and spices. Cinnamon and myrrh (as in gold, frankincense and myrrh) are mentioned, but I'm sure sage and chamise were used as well. After the pyre nest is ignited, the phoenix arises three days later—from a single red egg. (Note: In photos, observed by this author, the color appears closer to international orange than it does to red.)

Considered the king of birds, the Phoenix always flies far ahead and to the front of all others. The Phoenix lives on dew (pour out your water, boys!), kills nothing and crushes nothing it touches. The Phoenix represents great beauty, vision, power, grace, virtue, prosperity and deathless inspiration. Recently the Phoenix was elevated to new heights by author J.K. Rowling in the saga of Harry Potter. The Phoenix is a symbol of the Japanese royal family. It appears on the coinage of the late Roman Empire, as a symbol of the eternal city. In 1782 the Phoenix was first depicted on the great seal of the United States of America. (Note: This was changed to the Bald Eagle in 1902.)

If the Phoenix symbol is used to decorate a house, it is believed that loyalty and honesty will be found in the people who live there. Therefore the same must hold true for those many firefighters who have adopted the Phoenix as their own crew symbol.

THE END

That's all folks, and Smokey wishes a "Happy 40th Anniversary to All LTHS GOONS"