

Firefighters from Fire Station 4 board MTA bus and take a seat for long, but air-conditioned, ride to Hesperia.

MTA Provides Drivers and Buses for Wildfire Relief Efforts

By GAYLE ANDERSON and FRANKLIN A. HOLMAN

(Oct. 29, 2003) The sun could barely be seen poking through its curtain of smoke and fog at the Fire Academy in Elysian Park, but six MTA buses were lined up at dawn to transport some 50 firefighters and equipment to the front lines of the 45-mile blazing fire that rings the Los Angeles region.

The MTA buses were recruited to deliver the firefighters to a three-day assignment at various command posts set up to battle the fire, said Tom Jasmin, Bus Operations Control manager. The buses return in the afternoon with an exhausted crew of firefighters coming off their three-day duty on the front lines of the fire.

The fire, which has charred hundreds of thousands of acres in an advancing wall of flame, is a formidable foe.

Today, an army was preparing for battle: Some 50 firefighters from 10 fire stations, escorted by a squadron of sheriff's deputies, were loading onto a convoy of MTA buses operated by a contingent of MTA supervisors and support staff. Each transport would be accompanied by a field equipment vehicle from the Regional Rebuild Center.

After the fire chiefs had drawn the battle lines, San Gabriel Valley Sector Assistant Transportation Manager Yvonne Brewer-Smith huddled with operators to deliver the assignments: two buses would head out to Hesperia; two others would head south to San Diego. Two more buses would return to North Los Angeles Division 3 to stand by on-call.

MTA is sending diesel buses, instead of CNG coaches, to San Diego since diesel refueling stations are more accessible there.

Transportation Operation Supervisors Marty Brower, Robert Nedelcoff, Devinder Pal Singh, Frank Cecere and



MTA leads convoy of firefighters to San Diego and Hesperia hot spots.



Above, SGV Assistant Transportation Manager Yvonne Brewer-Smith delivers the roll call and assignments. Below, firefighters board bus with gear.



Tom LaPatka from the San Gabriel Valley Sector office, along with TOS's David Castillo, Collis Harrison, Anthony Salcido of West Hollywood Division 7, are tapped for the mission.

On Tuesday, MTA transported some 120 firefighters and their equipment to the communities suffering from the wildfires.

TOS David Castillo was operating one of the buses sent to the San Bernardino fires.

"We were sent straight up the mountain to the Rim of the World location," he said. "At one point we passed a wall of fire that had just broken through. Low-flying planes were dropping loads of fire retardant around us. It was a disaster area like I've never seen."

Buses marked "firefighter transport" convoyed along with fire trucks and Sheriff's deputies' cars to Porter Ranch, Simi Valley and Lake Arrowhead. Field Equipment Technician Sean Dunning also joined the group so that mechanical difficulties could be dealt with immediately.

"This task is in support of the fire fighters and the communities we serve," said Jasmin.

The buses departed from North Los Angeles Division 3 and, although they passed ATU picketers, there were no protests.

Union leaders support

"The picketers and union leader Neil Silver are in full support of transporting fire fighters," said Jasmin. UTU General Chairman James Williams also gave his approval to the effort.

MTA has frequently aided in civil emergencies in the past by driving relief crews to disaster scenes such as the Los Angeles Riots.

"Responding to this emergency is the same, except that supervisors are taking care of business because of the strike," said Jasmin.

Until the fire is extinguished, MTA will aid firefighters in their efforts to put out the blaze by transporting them to the communities that need help.

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Above, Firefighter Chip Molloy, chief staff assistant at OCD, left, and Fire Chief John Quintanar, right, flank SGV's Yvonne Brewer-Smith and BOC manager Tom Jasmin to map out deployment. Below, Fire Station 4 firefighters await orders.



PHOTOS: GAYLE ANDERSON