

MTA Transportation Supervisors Convoy Firefighters to Southland Wildfires

By FRANKLIN A. HOLMAN

(Nov. 5, 2003) It wasn't an ordinary drive from one familiar place to another. This drive had a mission – to take firefighters to the California wildfires.

And on the journey to the wild blazes – in places that included Devore, Hisperia, Porter Ranch and San Diego – a volunteer group of MTA transportation operations supervisors would witness scenes like nothing they had ever seen before.

"It was eerie looking, unbelievable," said TOS Marty Brower, who was assigned to the Lake Arrowhead fire. "It looked like a volcano."

"It was black as far as you could see in both directions," said TOS Tom Lapatka, describing the fires burning in the mountains east of San Diego.

Volunteering to drive the buses in addition to Brower and Lapatka were TOSs Robert Nedelcoff, Devinder Pal Singh and Frank Cecere from the San Gabriel Valley Sector office, along with TOSs David Castillo, Collis Harrison and Anthony Salcido of West Hollywood Division 7.

'A little nervous'

"We were anxious to go, a little nervous, because some of us don't drive on a regular basis, so we had to be extra careful," said TOS Nedelcoff. "We are all qualified and capable, but you get nervous when you do something you haven't done for while."

The news broadcasts from the

Into the Flames

Photos by LASD Deputy Eric Jaime



Fire line leaps across mountain road ...



... as MTA convoy transporting firefighters, below, negotiates approach to hot spots in the San Bernardino mountains.



TOS David Castillo and Field Equipment Technician Sean Dunning, above, at base camp

devastated communities didn't discourage the supervisors from their mission of driving the firefighters to the hot spots.

"I was glad I was able to do something, because I saw what was going on – that the fires were getting worse," said Brower. "I was pleased to support the firefighters."

"Everybody was willing. Even though they had the day off, they wanted to go and do what they could to help and assist," said Yvonne Brewer-Smith, San Gabriel Valley Sector assistant transportation manager. "They were willing to put their lives in danger in order to help."

for the San Bernardino fire areas, below.



The convoy to Lake Arrowhead included an MTA bus, cars driven by Sheriff's deputies and sometimes a fire truck. When the vehicles reached Highway 15, they found the road blocked to normal traffic, but police waved them through.

"Where the 15 and 215 merged, I was in awe about how much flame I was seeing and how much burn I had just seen," said Brower. "Everything was burned up to that point."

Swirling ash and smoke

Meanwhile in San Diego County, swirling ash and smoke from the raging fires were making driving challenging for the TOSs as they negotiated the winding mountain roads. Some were as close as 50 yards from the flames.

"The smoke looked like mushroom clouds in the sky," Lapatka said. "It was incredible how much ash was falling down."

Overhead, helicopters shuttled between a lake and the fire, bombing the flames with water. "It was an exciting drive," Lapatka said. "Sometimes the spray would get on the windshield."

As they neared the scene of the fire, tension rose among the firefighters.

"The firefighters were ready to take off, to get goin'," said Lapatka. "You could see the fires burning and all the guys were paying attention. They knew they had their work cut out for them."

Once they had delivered the fresh crews to the Lake Arrowhead and San Diego fires, and had shared a meal with the firefighters, the MTA supervisors had to complete their journeys by driving busloads of worn-out crews back home.

"The firefighters were dead tired," said Brower. "They were falling asleep on the bus. One guy set his gear across the seat and used it as a bed, and he was out."

"As the fire fighters got off the bus they thanked us, but I said, 'I'm the one sending you into harms way, so thank you.'" Lapatka said.

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