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A Bird's-Eye View

"It appears as though we have a couple of wildfires," the pilot announced over the intercom as he began the descent into Ontario International Airport. "One on the horizon off to our left, and one in the foothills on our right."

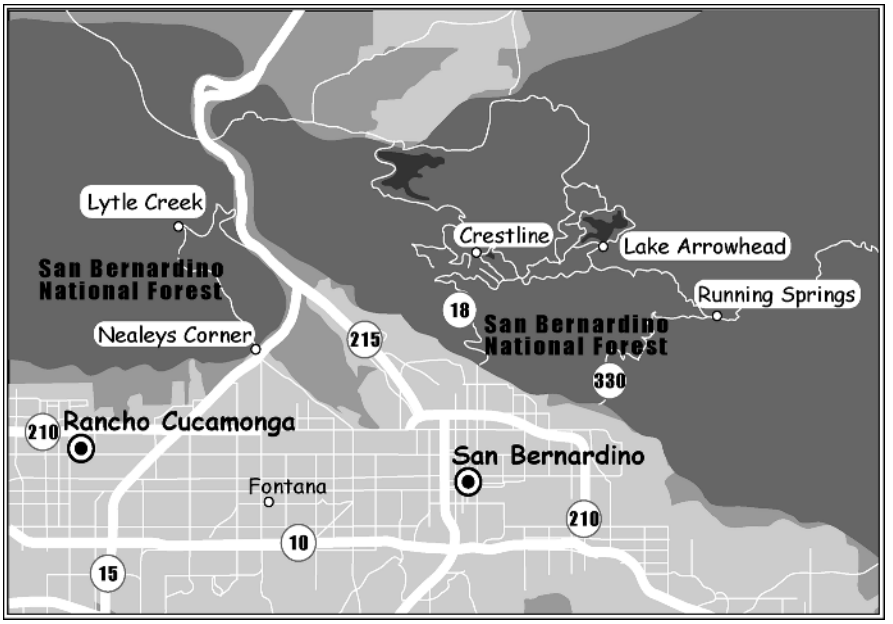
Sitting in a window seat on the right side of the commercial airplane, Rancho Cucamonga fire chief Dennis Michael squinted as he looked out upon the bright afternoon of Tuesday, October 21, 2003—a day that would be remembered as the beginning of the most devastating fire siege in California's history.

With a clear view of the round peaks and steep canyons of the San Bernardino Mountains, a sixty-mile range running east and west between the Mojave Desert to the north and the heavily populated San Bernardino Valley to the south, Michael subconsciously searched for the world-famous resort communities of Lake Arrowhead, Crestline, and Running Springs nestled among the ponderosa pine and Douglas fir trees on the mountaintop. The quaint little towns served as weekend getaways for millions, but after a severe five-year drought, a massive infestation of bark beetles, and a hundred years of effective fire suppression by the fire service, the forest that engulfed the prominent neighborhoods had been turned into a powder keg. An estimated twenty million

dead trees littered the San Bernardino National Forest, putting the area's various firefighting agencies on edge all summer.

Unable to spot a smoke column in the high country, Michael pressed his head against the glass and panned his eyes thousands of feet down the steep, south-facing slopes to where the timber gave way to an unruly mesh of brush along the foothills. Encroaching up into this brush he could see the northernmost reaches of the valley communities of Alta Loma, Cucamonga, and Etiwanda—the three of which had incorporated in 1977 to form the city of Rancho Cucamonga. Thankfully, Michael saw no sign of a wildfire in the foothills. The last thing he needed after a two-week vacation with his wife was to find a blaze creeping up on Rancho Cucamonga's back door, threatening his city.

Waiting for the pilot to change course so he could catch a glimpse of the fire, Michael studied the grid of streets below. Back when he'd been hired as a grunt fireman in 1976, Rancho Cucamonga's main north-south arteries had led up to citrus groves and vineyards that sprouted from the soil along the foothills. But as he was promoted up the ranks, through fire engineer, fire captain, and battalion chief, finally becoming chief of the entire department in 1984, the root structures of the citrus groves and vineyards had been replaced by the cement foundations of



housing tracts and mini-mansions. Expansion was healthy for the city, but the direction in which it had expanded made Michael's job ever more difficult. Gazing downward, he could see the nearly perfect row of houses that marched to the east and west across the foothills. The residents who lived along this northern row could sip coffee on their back porches while watching wild animals traverse the slopes leading up to the San Bernardino National Forest, yet when they wanted the hustle and bustle of the city they only had to drive a few minutes south. These residences, along with the ones built smack-dab in the middle of the urban/wildland interface farther up the mountainside, were considered dream homes to those who lived in them, but to Michael they were a disaster waiting to happen.

During Michael's two decades as chief of the Rancho Cucamonga Fire Protection District, the homes in the northern part of the city had been the number one target hazard in the community. To prepare his department to combat wildfire, he sent many of his officers and firefighters to classes being offered by the U.S. Forest Service. They used the opportunity to strike up relationships with battalion chiefs in the Forest Service and the California Department of Forestry (CDF) in an attempt to break down the barriers that had for so long existed between their agencies. Back in the early seventies, such a feat would not have been easily accomplished. Boundaries had been drawn firmly in the ground, and seldom did firefighters from different departments communicate with one another on the fire line, often resulting in confusion and a mismanagement of resources. But with hundreds of homes in the Rancho Cucamonga Fire Protection District located in the urban/wildland interface, and with fires in the foothills only getting larger and fiercer due to years of fire suppression, Michael needed all the help he could get. Stubborn pride was not something his city could afford.

Luckily, maintaining bonds with the wildland agencies came easier in Rancho than in most cities, simply because they always trod in each other's backyards. When a fire broke out along the foothills, all three agencies routinely turned up. The Rancho Cucamonga Fire Department (RCFD) had the responsibility of guarding a sliver of grassland that skirted along the northern edge of the city. Just north of that boundary began a long, narrow strip of land known as a State Responsibility Area (SRA), in which CDF watched over the vegetation while RCFD protected any improvements such as structures and utility equipment.

CDF then turned the wildland responsibility over to the U.S. Forest Service at the boundary of the San Bernardino National Forest, which started low in the mountains and carried up to the top of the 8,900-foot Cucamonga Peak towering over Rancho Cucamonga. In a different time, it wouldn't have been uncommon for agencies arriving on scene to back off if a fire wasn't burning in their jurisdiction, but after ten years of communication and interaction, the commanders from the different agencies now knew each other's faces and what to expect from one another, which eliminated much of the tail-sniffing that could occur out on the fire line.

Michael truly believed that his department's willingness to mesh with the wildland agencies would save their community in the years to come. There had, however, been skeptics of the bonds his department had forged. To someone who didn't worry about the homes stranded out in the dry sea of vegetation in the foothills each and every night, it might appear as though the RCFD had gotten the short end of the stick in the mutual aid agreement because most fires occured outside of their jurisdiction. After all, fire had a natural tendency to climb uphill. In fact, it traveled uphill seventeen times faster than it did along flat ground. In addition, the foothills typically received onshore winds out of the southwest. So if a fire broke out north of the city, both the topography and the wind typically pushed the flames up and away, across the SRA and then up into the San Bernardino National Forest, leaving Rancho Cucamonga unscathed in the flatlands.

But history had proved that just because a fire abandoned the foothills for higher elevations didn't mean that it wouldn't come back down in the subsequent days. The Myers Fire of 1970, the Summit Fire of 1980, and the Texas Fire of 1988 each started down along the foothills and then climbed upslope toward the higher elevations. The fires would have remained there, brewing around the forest until extinguished, but the arrival of Southern California's infamous Santa Ana winds, dry winds that come off the high desert usually between Labor Day and Thanksgiving, had drastically changed their course. With fifty- to seventy-mile-per-hour winds pumping out of the northeast, the three fires had clawed their way back downslope, across the foothills, and then out into the flatlands, throwing hundred-foot flame lengths overtop of the firefighters who had emerged to battle them. From the satellite photos Michael had reviewed, the path of the three fires resembled an

EKG, moving up and down the mountain under the competing winds, nuking everything in their path until all the fuel along the foothills had been consumed or the northeast winds abated.

Numerous fires had burned deep into the once unpopulated foothills of northern Rancho Cucamonga, and if such a fire were to be relived, as Michael was certain would be the case, the city would not get off as easily as before. Despite the lessons taught by history, an overwhelming amount of development had moved into the burn zones of the three fires. For over a decade now Michael's department had worked side by side with CDF and the Forest Service to protect those homes, and together they had become masters at suppressing the majority of wildfires in the foothills during initial attack, but after they had hit every blaze hard with aircraft, hose lays, and hand crews, the chaparral along the front country had grown thick and unstable. It stretched for miles and miles without any breaks. Michael had ensured that each new home in the urban/wildland interface was built to retard flame, the outside walls plastered with stucco and the roofs covered with tile, but for those who had witnessed the ferocity of the Texas Fire when it laid siege to the foothills, there was little doubt that when the next big fire broke under Santa Ana winds, homes would be lost.

Rancho Cucamonga could not escape the fact that in the near future Mother Nature would collect the debt owed her; this Michael knew for sure. He just hoped it wouldn't happen on his watch.

As his flight made its final approach into Ontario International, Michael finally caught sight of the wildfire the pilot had pointed out. It brewed in the chaparral one mile east of Rancho Cucamonga, just above the neighboring city of Fontana. He'd been a little worried when he'd heard the words "fire" and "foothills" mentioned in the same sentence, but now that tension began to fade. It was 4 P.M., and judging by the size of the smoke column, the fire had probably been burning for an hour and a half. Both the Forest Service and CDF had most likely been hitting it since shortly after it started. With the drought and the millions of dead trees up on the mountaintop, neither agency waited to confirm the authenticity of a fire before sending out resources. When a call came in to dispatch of a possible smoke column, they got aircraft, engines, and hand crews rolling to the scene. On more than one occasion this summer, an armada of firefighting personnel and equipment had descended upon a group of campers roasting burgers at a late-afternoon barbecue.

There was not much to worry about. As usual, the winds blew out of the southwest, pushing the fire away from the valley toward the SRA. For the rest of the afternoon, aircraft would pound the various flanks of the fire with water and retardant. In the evening the temperature would drop and the relative humidity would rise, slowing the fire's upward advance. It would give hand crews from the Forest Service and CDF time to cut line around the fire, box it in. When Michael arrived at headquarters the following morning, he would undoubtedly hear stories from his management-level firefighters like Ron Mayfield, Mike Bell, Jim Dague, Mike Costello, and Dave Berry, all of whom were probably helping out with the brush fire at this very moment, even though the fire had little chance of affecting their city. They'd crack jokes about how they'd helped defeat a wildfire while he'd sipped a beverage in a plane thousands of feet above.

Michael breathed a sigh of relief, but a little tension remained knotted in the back of his neck. The one thing he had learned over his long career fighting fire was never to take a blaze lightly, no matter how inconsequential it might seem. The area in which the fire currently burned had been the breeding ground of many devastating fires in the past, including the Summit Fire of 1980, but those former monsters had all shared a secret ingredient—the Santa Ana winds. Although Michael hadn't studied the weather data since before he left on his vacation, he could see an inversion layer holding the smoke close to the ground, suggesting that the northeast wind would not peek its head around the corner anytime soon. It was certainly Santa Ana season, but the majority of wind-driven fires they had experienced in the past had occurred in November and December. He told himself to relax, that everything would be fine, but something about the brightness of the afternoon continued to irk him.

"Welcome home, honey," said his wife as she fastened her seat belt.

Michael smiled, a part of him enjoying the mild dose of adrenaline coursing through his veins as he looked down upon the fire. It would be hard to step down from the helm of the Rancho Cucamonga Fire Protection District, but his decision had already been made. In September he had announced to the city that this would be his last year. It had been a good ride, filled with many victories and just a few regrets. But regrets made in the line of firefighting were the kind that you carried with you for a lifetime. The deep, lasting wounds rarely had to do with the loss of

homes or property—those could be replaced. Even the most gung-ho firefighters eventually realize that it is impossible to save every structure. No firefighter, however, came to work prepared to deal with the loss of life. The city's last fire death, which had occurred ten months earlier, involved an eleven-year-old girl trapped in a home over on Malachite. The house was well involved with fire when Rancho crews arrived, and despite an aggressive attack that left one firefighter injured, they couldn't reach her in time to save her life. Michael could still remember the look on his men's faces when he arrived on scene. The incident had cut deep into the organization, and he never wanted to experience such tragedy again.

When he'd announced his retirement, he had told his wife that the one thing he wished for more than anything was to be able to make it through this final season without a major incident that stirred up controversy and made him feel as though he had failed his community at the tail end of his watch. He'd begun the year on edge, but after months passing without a disaster unfolding, he started to feel as though his wish might be granted after all.

"I guess it's back to reality," he said to his wife as the plane touched down.

"Is the fire going to be a problem?"

"I don't foresee it being a big problem for Rancho," he said, shaking his head uneasily. In his mind, however, he knew that if forces couldn't get the fire boxed up in the next twenty-four hours, the entire area could be in danger. "Let's just pray that it's not going to be."

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Point of Origin

At 2:13 P.M. on October 21, 2003, the U.S. Forest Service, the California Department of Forestry, the San Bernardino County Fire Department, and the Rancho Cucamonga Fire Department began receiving reports of a grass fire in Area 37A, a long, narrow section of foothills above northeastern Rancho Cucamonga and northern Fontana. The various dispatch centers contacted stations throughout the area and ordered them to respond. Within seconds, troops began to roll.

Forest Service captain Bud Berger, based out of Station 37 in eastern Rancho Cucamonga, saw the smoke the minute his engine hit pavement, and he raced with his crew toward the top of the Hunter's Ridge housing development, which reached precariously out into the grasslands. He'd navigated Engine 37, a 4 × 4 monster of a truck that carried hand tools, hose, and a surplus of water, down the streets above Fontana dozens of times to reach Hose Lay Hill, a brutally steep ridge close to the fire's current location that his department used for exercise and drills. But today the commute took longer than normal. Dozens of bystanders clogged the streets, both in their cars and on foot, turning the drive into an obstacle course that took ten minutes to complete.

Still, Berger was the first to arrive on scene. He parked his engine by a massive water tank at the top of Foxborough Drive, the northernmost street in the subdivision. After spending a few moments surveying the

fire, which currently worked hungrily toward the toe of the mountains in the grasslands off to his left, he contacted Forest Service dispatch. He informed them that the fire was roughly two acres, moving at a moderate rate of speed to the northeast under southwest winds. As a captain, he had the authority to bump the fire from a first alarm up to a second, which would increase the amount of resources being sent, but he didn't feel the need to do so. Judging by the resources the various agencies had sent to initially attack fires all summer, a fleet of engines and hand crews was most certainly heading his way, ready to leap into action the moment they arrived. He did, however, advise that aircraft should be sent. Ordering helicopters and airtankers outright was out of the question, simply because the fire currently burned on the SRA. Aircraft was costly, and the agency that placed the order was expected to foot the bill. Until the fire began edging in on the forest boundary, it was CDF's responsibility to get machines buzzing overhead. CDF would also be responsible for sectioning the different flanks of the fire into divisions and assigning incoming resources to them.

Berger didn't plan to wait around for such organization to occur. During his thirty years with the Forest Service in the San Bernardino area, he'd fought dozens of fires in this exact location, most notably the Texas Fire of 1988. The hillside faced the south and received a large amount of sun, making the vegetation naturally dry and flammable. An occasional fire was necessary to clean out the dead and dying brush, but with so many homes having edged out into the urban/wildland interface, the fire service had swooped on each and every fire the moment it started, contributing to the dense and combustible chaparral now clinging to the mountainside. On a day such as today, with the temperature in the nineties and the relative humidity down to 8 percent, they had to be swift in their attack. The fire yearned to reach the hillside where it could get firmly established and gain both ground and speed. If that happened, they very well might have another Texas Fire on their hands. Berger studied the weather reports nearly every morning, and this morning he had seen high pressure building, which meant that the north winds could be lurking just around the corner.

Time was of the essence, and Berger wasted none of it. Once he had talked with dispatch, he spent a few moments studying the fire behavior and the terrain. This was the part he loved most about firefighting, the reason why he'd turned down numerous promotions over the