

# 7-10-85 Fires + Fire Protection In the smoke-filled darkness, firefighters win one battle

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SUMMIT — Firefighters made their stand at Summit Road in the dark of early morning today, waiting for the massive brush and tree fire that was crawling, at times leaping, toward them through the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Holding the line would be a necessary victory in containing the fire, stopping it from roaring down fuel-rich Soquel Canyon and into more-populated areas.

A line of fire trucks stretched east along Summit Road from Loma Prieta School, the point the fire would reach sometime between 2:30 to 4 a.m.

Traffic backed up at times, as heavy trucks packing bulldozers and fire engines felt their way through the smoke to a place in line.

The flashing lights of the fire trucks, CHP units and sheriff's cars

carved swatches of white, yellow and red in the smoke-clogged air.

The roar of engines, the beeping of backing trucks, the voices of men giving calm commands and other voices crackling across radio frequencies, sounded a chorus to the massed effort.

The burnt air caused tears and gave lungs a workout.

A red half moon hung in the eastern sky.

The firefighters waited.

They had come here from Tuolumne County, Ebbetts Pass, Salinas, Monterey, Fresno, Clovis, Mountain Ranch, from the state disaster force, Pacific Grove and Carmel-by-the-Sea. And, from all Northern California stations and firehouses.

They waited.

Down the road, Loma Prieta School stood protected by a task force of men and fire trucks from Marin County.

An hour before, it was feared the school would be the next burn victim when a firebreak cut by Eureka loggers and their heavily equipped bulldozers was jumped by flames.

A dozen engines roared into the schoolyard and parked along the road nearby.

The waiting intensified.

At about 1 a.m., the glow of the fire, like an early sunrise, began to color a backdrop for the school's low silhouette.

In flashing instants, broken walls of flame rose up behind the buildings as heat exploded dead trees and downed wood.

But then, the fire quieted. Firemen at the rear of the school doused the creeping carpet of fire and the school was safe.

Even the neon bits of dropping embers on the school roof caused no fires.

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## Summit standoff

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"The best thing going for that school is its composition roof," said Ed Weiss, city of Clovis fire division commander.

At 2:40 a.m., along the firefighting line on Summit Road that stretched east past Mountain Bible Church, a fire captain left his crew for a closer look.

As he made his way down the soft incline toward the curved line of burning bushes and grass that was steadily moving to meet him and his men, the captain said, "This is where we're going to hold the line."

Shortly, at different points and times along the line — in an eerie twilight of blazing brush and emergency lights — fire and firefighters met.

Here and there, the fire won a toehold into Santa Cruz County.

But only for a moment.

Those small outbreaks drew quick notice and the firemen were on them like starved cats on a mouse. "That's when we really kicked its ash," one firefighter said.

By 3:30 a.m., helped by relatively calm weather and nighttime humidity, the men had won.

Back at the Department of Forestry's Burrell Station on Highland Way, Branch Manager Dave Dituri said, "It gave them a tussle out there tonight."

Outside his command head-

quarters, a fire was working its way down the mountain, a tree at time. It had been working hard all night.

Forestry fireman Dan Walters said it would take a long time because fire travels slower downhill.

"When it gets to the road, we'll just put it out," Walters said.

Dituri said the victory on Summit Road was the penultimate step in stopping the fire from spreading its fingers into more of the county.

The final victory could be today when firemen and bulldozing loggers from around the state try to box off the fire along Loma Prieta Avenue and the ridge that runs above the road.

They'll have to defend a 120-foot wide swath of cleared land.

If that line holds, the fire will be contained and the only work left will be to cut an interior line at a westward area where "the fire is inactive," Dituri said.

He said if the line holds in the Loma Prieta area and along Summit Road "that's about the same place a fire like this was stopped in the last week of July in 1961, the oldtimers have told me."

Dituri said, "In the Loma Prieta area we'll have the help of helicopters and air tankers and hopefully fresh crews. But it's tougher in daytime. The heat and lower humidity. You can't always tell what will happen."

He promised, "We're going to give it hell today."