



DODGING FLAMES AND GUIDING THE MEDIA

By Mallory Fites, Student Assistant, Communications

On Oct. 21, 2007, after seven minutes of the Harris Fire burning, Matt Streck, the San Diego Unit's Fire Captain/Information Officer, was dispatched to the fire.

When he arrived at the scene during the initial attack of the fire, the fire was rapidly growing and spreading, with extreme fire behavior driven by strong Santa Ana winds.

"It was very impressive to see how fast it was going," Streck said.

Part of his job that day was to inform the media and create a safe environment for journalists to do their job without interfering with fire operations.

"This was one of the first times the media actually listened and followed instructions because they were impressed by the fire's behavior," he continued, "The media listened, they would move or leave when told."

Two hours later, while escorting the media around the Harris Fire, a burnover occurred to four firefighters on engine 3387, while evacuating residents in the Potrero and Tecate areas.

Streck told the media, "Stay where you are at and you'll be safe." Being close to the accident he went to see if he could help.



All eighteen immigrants were taken to the hospital with various burn injuries and they all survived.

Despite the best efforts in getting people to leave their homes, some chose to stay behind. Streck said, "Our employees risked their lives including fire engine 3387 to save people who had been warned to move but didn't."

After the fire siege Streck reflected on the media coverage, "There are always going to be people who look to criticize. In this case, so much good work was done by everybody. Not just CAL FIRE, but all the agencies working together."

"Ask anybody who was there first hand. I saw great firefighters and I saw our employees risking their lives to save people."

Getting to the burnover was difficult because the fire seemed to be consuming everything in sight. "At one point the smoke and flames were so bad my truck actually started to stall out," he said.

He quickly pulled out his air filter which had partially been melted and was full of corroded carbon and smoke. He got out of his vehicle with helmet and gloves on and felt somebody pushing him from behind.

That person was Mother Nature, sending howling gusts of winds. Next thing he knew his helmet flew off and embers flew into his face burning his eyelid.

He then drove through the flames to the fire station where the burned CAL FIRE firefighters were being taken care of. He soon learned that the burned firefighters were being transported to a local hospital.

He also heard great news: the fourth firefighter whom he believed was dead, was actually alive and being rushed to the hospital.

Just when he thought he might be able to stop and take a breath, there was a large number of burned victims coming from the hills. Eighteen immigrants had been taken to the burn unit where he was.



upper left: Fox News Reporter Geraldito Rivera interviews Mike Mohler, Riverside Unit fire apparatus engineer, about the status of the Harris Fire.

above: CBS Evening News host Katie Couric talks to Riverside firefighters for her show's coverage of the wildfires.

