

Firefighters return from most intense fire

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The North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District's two Daves - England and Zaski, knew they were in for a big-time fire-fight when they were waved onto Interstate 15 north of San Diego.

"It was kind of eerie, driving our engine down, we were the only people on this huge interstate," England said. The firefighters got the call to aid Southern California on Sunday, Oct. 21, and left at 8 p.m. for the fires. They closed in on San Diego in the early morning of Monday, Oct. 22.

Just miles outside of Escondido, Calif., Zaski noticed a smoke-cloud headed their way.

"We pulled over the engine and everybody got out and geared up. There were fires burning on both sides of the road as we headed toward Escondido," Zaski said.

The images they described are stark. Winds blowing tiled roofing off McDonalds buildings, Starbucks coffee stores burning to the ground.

"I thought, what are we getting ourselves into?" England said.



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What they got themselves into was the Harris fire, a titanic blaze that consumed 90,440 acres, 211 homes and damaged 250 others in southern San Diego County. The Santa Ana winds clipped along at an average pace of 50 mph, sometimes gusting to 70 or 80 mph. Over 1,000 separate fire agencies descended on Southern California to fight the Harris fire and up to 14 active wildfires in the area.

"The winds blew so hard that it would pick up embers that felt like gravel when they hit your face," Zaski said.

England, Zaski and their crew were stationed on the Harris fire for 72 straight hours. They subsisted on MRE's - military-style food rations, and bottled water.

"We'd catch naps here and there and take little breaks around 3 a.m.," Zaski said.

The two have over 50 years of firefighting experience between them and both agreed this was the most intense fire they had ever seen.

"There was smoke everywhere, 360 degrees around you," Zaski said.

"Whole hillsides and canyons would burn in minutes, we learned never to turn our back on this fire, it was unlike anything I've ever seen before," England said.

Both saw the Angora fire in South Lake Tahoe this summer.

Another first for the pair was a need to retreat to a safety zone. The safety zones are swaths of land flattened by bulldozers a couple hundred yards wide by a couple hundred yards long. On Oct. 23, the NLTFPD crew on which England and Zaski served were fighting a fire in a Lyon Valley, south of San Diego. The blaze grew so intense the crew needed to pull back to the safety zone to wait for it to pass over.

After that, the crew came back to camp in Temecula, Calif., for six to seven hours of sleep and recovery.

"We got rest and relaxation for a bit, we got to eat and call our families. It was important to stay in touch with them, with a fire as windy and dangerous as this, to let them know we were OK," England said.

The fire crews had to lay out their sleeping bags across the grass because the hotels were filled with evacuees.

"People were apologizing to us that we had to sleep on the grass, but we were actually kind of glad. We've been to Elko and all across Nevada where you have to sleep on dirt, so we were fine with grass," England said.

They were treated to breakfast in the morning and sent to another fire around 7 a.m., sack-lunch and water in hand.

Whenever the crews had down time, they reported back to the administration at the NLTFPD offices to apprise them of their status.

Assistant Chief Greg McKay also went down to fight the fires, though he was on a different crew than Zaski and England. His crew left in the morning of Monday, Oct. 22, and got home around midnight on Halloween. They were stationed west of San Diego on the Poomacha fire.

"We saw a show of shows there," McKay said. He was referring to a burn-off, a controlled burn by the firefighters meant to slow the advance of a major fire. The monitored fire burns fuels in hopes of choking off a larger one.

"It was amazing. Fire crews were shooting rockets onto fuel-islands to burn them out. You'd hear a series of explosions and see them criss-cross across the sky. That went on till about 4 a.m. the first night I was there," McKay said.

Defensible space, or the lack thereof, determined the fates of many homes.

"In a windy fire like this good defensible space doesn't always mean you're in the clear, but it sure helps," England said. "There's a night and day difference between good and bad defensible space, though. Some houses we knew would be OK because their owner did such a good job with creating defensible space, it made our job a lot easier because we could just move on to the next house."

Zaski agreed. "One house we went to had a eucalyptus tree next to it, and if we didn't keep water on it, the tree and the whole house would go up in flames. If the defensible space was good we didn't have to worry for a little bit," Zaski said.

The firefighters were greeted with cheers and thanks on their off-time and their way back home.

"We'd see people giving us thumbs-up, telling us what a great job we did, to tell you the truth, it was a little embarrassing because we were just doing our job," England said.

McKay said the firefighters who went out to dinner in San Diego didn't pay for a thing.

"We'd sit down and the waiter would tell the guys their food was already paid for. The guys said that was OK, and they had their own money, but the waiter said it was already paid for and we didn't need to worry. It was like that all week for the guys, the people were so grateful," McKay said.

Zaski and England came back to Incline Village on Oct. 29.

One crew, led by Division Chief Norb Szczurek, is still in Southern California, as is the Slide Mountain Hand Crew No. 2. McKay expects Szczurek's crew to return early this week, and the hand crew by the end of the week.

[BACK](#) 