

One of my concerns was budgeting the 600 gallons of army gasoline we were allowed per month. As needed for firefighting and for the projects, the "tech service" also had a gas supply.

The mail cost me time and effort daily. Many were the letters from parents for me to answer, plus official communications. Nearly all letters and reports were prepared for the captain's signature. I remember the morning report, the strength return, the sick book, long distance calls report, the requisitions, the inspection reports, and many more that were in the daily routine.

My letter to my grandparents, dated September 28, 1938, told how I had been engaged in unusual incidents some few days before. The fire alarms had sounded while I was finishing my lunch and in 12 minutes we were rolling, 40 men on 2 trucks with fire clothing and equipment. I had some company supplies plus first aid kits. Arrangements were made for 90 "bag lunches" to follow in a small truck. We had a long ride on the backs of the open trucks. We reported to a forestry office in a little town some 40 miles south of Riverside. There we picked up more firefighting tools and two forest rangers and again headed south. The two foremen with us had the really tough job of staying right with the men on the firelines. They were middle-aged men and they deserved all the protection and rest possible for their arduous job ahead. Therefore, I rode with the first "suppression crew" in the lead truck up in the wind. The second suppression crew followed closely, both crews singing lustily a good part of the way. People on the roads knew where we were going and usually gave us a cheer as we passed. We went clear across Riverside County and headed into the rough back country of San Diego County and then began to smell the smoke. By that time, two other suppression crews had joined our column. They were "vets" -- war veterans of World War I who were CCC enrollees. They were enrolled under a special authorization for unemployed veterans. We drove through heavy smoke for some 30 miles before the head ranger turned us up a mountain road towards the fire. The "vets" continued to the other side of the mountain.

The "fighting 50's" went to work on a fire that was creeping through heavy brush down the side of a small mountain and was within 300 feet of the outer buildings of a ranch home. The rancher could not seem to be able to decide whether we should save his pump house first or the "privy." Fighting fire in dry brush takes know-how and a lot of sweat. No one had time to listen to the worried rancher.

My job wasn't very hard. I just issued the tools and supplies as needed from the trucks, including the rather formidable-looking brush hook, which is an important tool. I also manned spotlights on the trucks as the sun went down and the light was needed up on the fire line where the men were cutting a firebreak. I had to make frequent roll calls to make sure that men were not getting lost. I was able to supply the box lunches which finally caught up with us. My trucks were right under a steep wall, about 1000 feet high, as rough and rocky as one could possibly imagine, also thick with brush. It was necessary to use axes and hooks to get up to the fire. Up near the fire, balancing was tricky and it was so rocky there was no dirt to throw on the flames.

Three miles of trail were cut and patrolled that night, working from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m.

One scene was as dramatic as any in the movies or on a stage and sound in the hills at night carries almost as it would on a stage. The men cutting the trails wore miner's lamps on their caps, making it easy to keep watch on them. The glow of the fire and chance illumination from the spotlight I was controlling focused attention on a boulder big enough to weigh a ton. It had been disturbed or undermined in its resting place and was teetering forward from the wall of the canyon directly over a drop of about ten feet, a spot in which one of our enrollees was working. One of the enrollees, "Big Nick" (6 feet, 3 inches, 198 lbs), was next to the rock. A foreman yelled and Big Nick jumped against the side of the rock. I am certain he saved the life of the boy below. As it was, the boy let out a yell that scared me. They brought him down with the skin of his forearm somewhat raked by the boulder that had literally "just skinned" by him! Big Nick had deflected that rock just enough, a fast reaction!

It was cold at the trucks but up around the fires the boys worked in shirtsleeves. We only had a small sector of the fire that covered some 5000 acres on three slopes of the low range, according to the fire wardens. At 6:30 a.m. we were able to leave our sector of the fire, having saved the ranch and all of its buildings, except the "backhouse."

We rode 45 miles further towards San Diego, over the switchbacks until the ocean came into view, then down into a valley and up again, over a range crest and into a small valley of about 800 acres. That picturesque valley was high in the sky, its lowest point some 3000 feet above sea level. Like an old dead volcanic crater that had become very fertile, it was a big cup, green with plenty of water. This toy valley's only ranch was a beauty, with several orange groves and a water reservoir, the latter area making a superior location for the fire camp, although some 28 miles from Elsinore, the nearest town and telephone. Our tired crews were happy to see the fire camp.

From the fire camp, where smoke was thick, we could occasionally get a glimpse of some of the widespread fires. About 35,000 acres of wild brush country had been burned over at the time we arrived. That rough country was largely mining and hunting country. It did, however, contain quite a number of cabins and small ranches wherever water had been located. Today much more is under irrigation. There was only one dirt road. It washed out for three months of the year but was deep with dust like the whole county at the time of the fire. By 10:00 a.m. we had a hot meal and flopped under a big rubber tree to sleep.

The nearby field kitchen was a busy, noisy place, serving 450 hungry firefighters as the crews came in, usually 20 at a time, and at all hours of the day and night. I inherited the fire camp officer's job, relieving somebody who had been on it without sleep for quite some time. My mess was resupplied by radio calls through the forestry service system to a supply warehouse in the vicinity of San Diego. My job included the resupply of clothing, shoes and gloves. I had to assist the rangers in keeping track of equipment and their crews as they came into the camp asking for assigned sleep locations and for food. They washed in the

available irrigation supply. There were first aid and sanitation concerns. Particularly troublesome was the matter of keeping track of names and crew assignments so that nobody would get lost.

So much of San Diego County was afire that we found that two other fire camps as large as ours had been established on mountaintops some distances on the other side of the major blazes. One of the other camps was staffed by military personnel from March Field and another by prisoners from state prisons. Perhaps for the first time, parachutists were used to drop down and extinguish spot fires. They came from the Army's March Field troops. With my field glasses, I watched a distant canyon about four miles long blaze out in six minutes, generating following winds that made a roaring blaze.

After some five days and nights, the fire was contained and we were able to start back to our base camp. Just as we left, fire crews arrived from a CCC camp at Lompoc, California. They had been riding a long way in open trucks.

It seemed a long ride to our home camp where we arrived at 3:00 a.m. with nearly all the firefighters asleep on their uncomfortable wooden benches in their open trucks. Needless to say, there was no reveille bugle call that morning. There was a clannish sense of comradeship and pride generated among those who had "been on the San Diego County fire."

As I recall, the men were glad that the day following the return from the fire was a Sunday, because Sunday normally was a day of rest except for some emphasis on sports. Customarily, a truckload or two of enrollees would be accompanied to a nearby church by one of the foremen. Sometimes a visiting Army chaplain or local clergyman held Sunday service in a tree grove near camp or in the mess hall. Sunday noon meal was always a little better than average, actually very good. The men, in uniform, always stood while the captain said grace on Sunday. Prearranged, a number of guests were welcome. Of course, they paid for the meal (50 cents) as did all the staff members for all meals.

I was introduced one Sunday to the lady friend of a visiting lady friend of one of the foremen. Apparently, she was noted for her friendliness, because I took an enormous ribbing about her from the technical service foremen at the next mess the next day. All I was able to get said in defense of the nice lady and our platonic evening date was scoffed at in such a way as to make my face very red. The captain said later that the foremen must like me or they would not have honored me with so much attention!

Failure to leave his bunk until noon one Sunday and failure to appear in presentable uniform cost one enrollee a captain's reprimand and a detail of four hours of extra duty to be spent watering the grass in the newly landscaped area of the camp. A short time after his hearing with the captain, both the captain and I were urged by the first sergeant to look out the office window to see the culprit performing his extra duty. There he was, conforming to his orders. He was holding the spray nozzle of the water hose while seated on a folding chair, enjoying a Sunday afternoon sunbath. The captain's grin was partly hidden as he sent the sergeant out to remove the chair and replace the