A Conversation with Ray Chaney

The headquarters of The California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection in southern San Diego County lacks the grandiose façade of some government buildings. The front entrance is through a glass door barely distinguishable from the other openings along the plain walls of the single-storied structure. When entering the reception office there's a sense of modesty to the place. On the walls are a few large photographs of CDF planes dropping red fire-retardant, ground crews fighting orange flames; lots of orange flames. Otherwise, the environment is unassuming. A long central hallway accesses various offices and conference rooms with chalkboards and a few tables and chairs; a perfect place to find unsung heroes.

Battalion Chief Ray Chaney came out to meet me and we walked into one of the conference rooms to talk. A CDF veteran of twenty years, Chaney was destined to fight fires. "My dad was a firefighter."

As one of the first to witness the fledgling Cedar fire spread its terrible wings, Chaney was in a unique position to see the fire develop. He was also instrumental in saving hundreds of lives.

"I'd run a few scenarios estimating how a fire would move if it started in Cedar Creek, so I had a good idea about which way it would go. I drove down to Barona Mesa, just south of San Diego County Estates when the wind hit. The hills started exploding. I projected the fire's path and realized it would be heading straight toward the Barona Casino. I grabbed a sheriff's deputy and we raced over to Wildcat Canyon."

"What time was that?"

"There was no time that night," he answered. "It was probably around 12:30, but I can't be sure. Everything happened so fast."

Chaney blocked traffic from entering the canyon and then drove down to a car racetrack just north of the casino. "There were about 75 to 100 people on site getting ready for Sunday races. I found the track manager and told him to get everyone out of there immediately, making sure they headed north, not south into the canyon. We circled the track and announced the same thing on the truck's PA system."

After making sure the racetrack evacuation was going smoothly, Chaney blasted down Wildcat Canyon Road toward the casino. He glanced into his rearview mirror and saw the fire cross the road behind him. He was ahead of it by only a few minutes. "As I drove, I thought about what would happen if people panicked at the casino and tried to outrun the flames. The image of that 'highway of death' scene from the Gulf War, where hundreds of vehicles and bodies were strewn for miles, entered my mind. All it would have taken would have been one car crash or just traffic backing up trying to get down the road. When the flame front hit, there would have been no escape. The only hope I could see was to have everyone shelter in place at the casino and wait it out."

Chaney stopped in at the nearby fire station, briefed them of the situation, then ran into the casino and told the manager they needed to talk quickly, privately. "You've got about 10 minutes before a 100 foot wall of flame hits this place. If anyone leaves here, they're going to die. Secure the exits. Do not let anyone out."

The large golf course would provide an excellent buffer for the buildings, but the parking lot posed a problem. It was Saturday night and the lot was filled with cars. All it would have taken to ignite one of the vehicles would have been a few embers

entering through an opened car window. One would ignite another. “I told the officers to patrol the lot. If any vehicles caught fire, they had to put them out, fast!

“Despite the speed of the fire, the driving Santa Ana winds were relatively moderate. With faster winds, you can more accurately predict where the fire front will go. The topography plays a more important role with moderate winds. Instead of the fire going straight over hills, it moves around them. (fig. 3-5)

“The front split in two after hitting San Vicente Mountain with one section moving toward the racetrack and the other through Featherstone Ranch. The casino area got hit with the Featherstone branch first. It was a pretty deadly one, two punch. When the first wave came it was like an orange tornado with millions of swirling embers. Plastic fences around the casino were melting and burning trees were falling onto the roadways. It was impossible to see.”

Further down the canyon, deputies were trying to evacuate residents, but the fire was moving so fast and the homes were so dangerously dispersed it proved impossible to reach everyone. California Highway Patrolman Joe Jones, a decorated veteran of the Gulf War, was one of those who tried to save as many as he could despite the overwhelming risks. He later told Chaney over a cup of coffee that the Gulf War was lightweight compared to what happened in Wildcat Canyon that night.

“Somewhere between 2:00 to 3:00 a.m., 33,000 acres burned,” Chaney said. “You do the math. The real heroes of this fire are the deputies and other emergency personnel who drove down those narrow roads trying to reach people. A lot of them

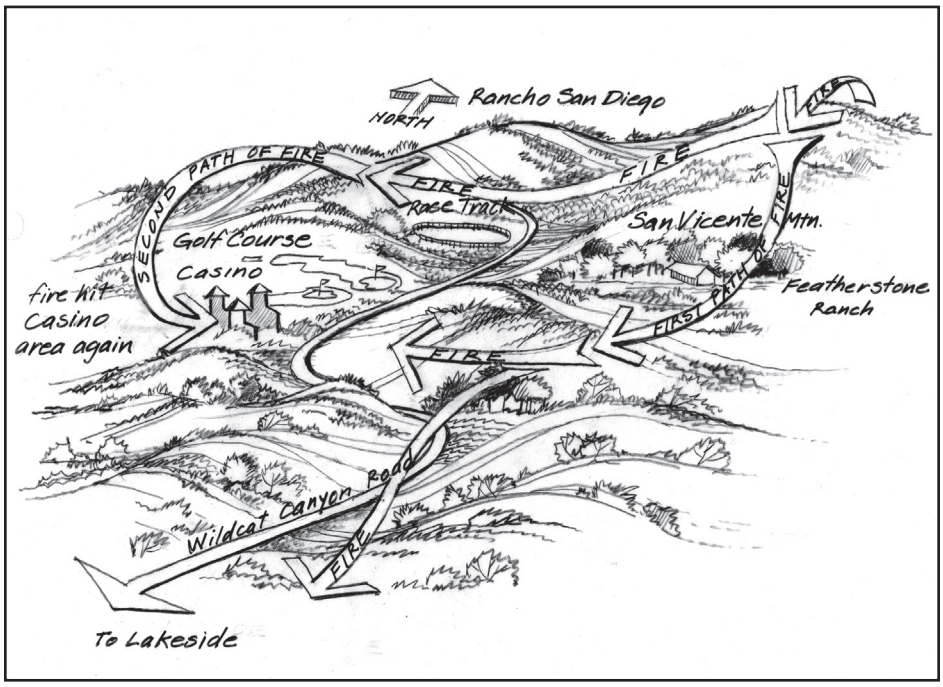

Fig 3-5 Path of the Cedar Fire Through Wildcat Canyon, San Diego County.
Artist: Stephen L. Halsey

were not familiar with the area and only had maps to go by. Taking the wrong turn in Muth Valley toward San Vicente Reservoir would have meant certain death. When you can't see because of the smoke, getting lost and disorientated is an easy thing to do."

Chaney organized additional search, rescue, and suppression efforts with other emergency personnel in the area as he drove down Wildcat Canyon himself. "Visibility was almost zero so I had to drive by watching the white line down the center of the road. At one point a wire from an electrical pole slapped across the hood of my truck. I immediately lifted my hands off the steering wheel so I wouldn't get fried. As the wire slid off the back, it became pretty clear that since I was still alive, the thing wasn't hot. I checked to make sure everyone with me was okay, and then kept going. Hand crews ahead of me were cutting the burning trees that had fallen across the road. In all my years fighting fires, I had never experienced anything like this. The speed, the violence, the intensity; it was unprecedented."

Chaney showed me a moving computer graphic demonstrating how fast the fire moved. It rolled forward like spilled red paint. The speed at which it traveled between 6:00 to 8:00 a.m. toward the Scripps Ranch community was phenomenal. Ray pointed at the western edge of the fire front. "The fire here was pretty much done by 10:00 a.m. Good thing the winds stopped when they did. Clairemont and Pacific Beach would have been next."

"Do you think anything more could have been done to save those people in the canyon who died," I asked him.

Ray shook his head. "It was moving so fast and those homes were so deeply embedded in wild areas with only one way out. There just wasn't enough time."

One of the suggestions Ray offered to help prevent fire casualties in the future is the construction of community protection zones. "Bulldoze a 10 to 20 acre patch within at-risk communities and create a park with lots of parking space. Everyone understands and knows the pre-evacuation plan and everyone goes to the park when a wildfire threatens. There could be a wireless phone there and families could call and tell us their status. 'I'm here with my three kids and ten of my neighbors.'"

Ray turned off his computer and told me he had to go. "We're building a pool and my wife and I are meeting with the contractor."

"You got kids?"

"Yeah, little ones."

Maybe future firefighters, I thought to myself.

On the way out, Ray showed me some fire education pamphlets he was working on. "People just need to know. They need to understand fire is part of living in southern California. They should have a little poster on their refrigerator with a list, 'A fire is coming at you—what are you going to do?'"