

~ **First Place NMW 25 Nonfiction Prize (tie)** ~

**Ralph Ryan**  
*Wildfire Hellfire*

*It was late November in Southern California, prime time for the Santa Ana winds. Those of us in the wild land firefighting business called them the “Devil Winds.”*

We’d been called to a fire on the Mt. Baldy Ranger District, on the Los Angeles side of the San Gabriel Mountains. On this night our ten-man initial attack Forest Service helicopter crew was forced to travel by ground carrier. The “Devil Winds” were blowing at 60 mph plus, creating Red Flag Warnings and closing the National Forest to public use. Nonetheless, we were psyched up in anticipation, boasting an attitude of “No Fear.” Wild land firefighters are a unique breed and our crew prided itself with the “Can Do” attitude. We weren’t cocky, we were confident and loved to fight fire.

As we turned onto Mt. Baldy Road, we got a close up view of our enemy. Flames whipped wildly into the night sky showering red embers down like rain along the wind’s path. The red glow dwarfed the darkness, illuminating everything below it. Harold, our foreman, told us to tool up and wait while he and John, our assistant foreman, checked in with the Incident Commander. We rushed out of the carrier grabbing our tools. Adrenaline coursed through my veins. My muscles tightened with strength and my mind reached a state of full awareness. I was ready and eager for combat.

The Ojai Hotshot crew from the Los Padres National Forest joined us. Harold came back and pointed to where the fire was cresting the ridge and ordered, “Listen up; we need to stop the fire from burning down that ridge into the village. Our crew and the Hotshots are the only hand crews available, so we’re going to get up there and cut some hot line. Two volunteer fire engines will patrol this road in case any spot fires start below us. Any questions?”

The roar of the fire answered.

“OK,” Harold shouted, “Lets go.”

We began cutting a six-foot wide fire line. My chain saw screamed into the night. Sweat poured off me as I unrelentingly laid chain to brush and oak just before they exploded into flames. I was overcome with a sense of empowerment from stealing the life from the fire as its heat burned on my face. My addiction to fighting wild fires was driven by this intensity and it kept me coming back year after year.

Each time I refueled, I’d look down the line and see the progress. It appeared as though a mini-freeway was under construction; every piece of brush was gone. A cloud of dust hovered over the crew as they scratched down to bare earth with their hand tools. A procession of headlamps swayed in all directions. Half a mile down the slope the lights of the engines patrolling the road were visible.

Our goal of cutting the fire off before it reached the village seemed attainable, but suddenly the weather changed. A strong up-slope wind developed and it eddied onto itself at the ridge top raining hot embers back down the mountain. The gears of our line-building machine came to a grinding halt. No voices were yelling back and forth. Tools went silent.

A frightening roar filled the air and thirty sets of eyes watched in horror as a trail of glowing embers traveled over our heads and settled in the unburned brush below us. I saw little flickers of flames coming to life and strained to hear the sound of water pumps from the engines below. Harold yelled into his radio, "Crew 7-Charlie to the Engine Company on Mt. Baldy Road, come in." There was no reply. He tried again, "Crew 7-Charlie to the engines on Mt. Baldy Road, *do you copy?*" The radio remained silent. Harold was furious and screamed, "ANSWER YOUR GODDAMNED RADIO!" He paced tensely past me a few times with a haunting look. His facial muscles were drawn tight and the veins on his forehead were bulging. He looked like a trapped animal. "What the hell are they doing down there?" he said to no one in particular. I didn't say a word; my eyes were glued on the spot-fires below.

Pushed by the strong up-slope wind, the small fires erupted into a solid wall of flames. They danced wildly over one hundred feet above the brush. I stared in disbelief as contorted fingers of flames completely separated from the fire and whipped above the brush. I pulled out my instamatic camera and took a few shots before the reality of our situation slapped me hard.

We were trapped with no escape route.

I'm thinking we're all going to burn to death until Harold screamed, "Get into the burn and get them off your backs."

The order moved down the line. I watched in a hypnotized state as bodies disappeared into the burned area. He was ordering us to deploy our fire shelters, those little aluminized tents designed to offer some protection against radiant heat, and intended for life-threatening situations only. Deployments were so rare I used mine as something of an expensive pillow. Now it was every man for himself. Superheated air began to burn my nose and throat, and the roar of the fire was so loud I couldn't think straight. I stumbled past John, realizing it's now or never to get my shelter out. I kicked aside as much of the hot embers as I could before ripping the tab off my fire shelter cover. In a matter of seconds, it was open and flapping wildly in the wind. Glancing over to John, I could see he was having trouble with his tab; it had broken off, making access difficult. He yelled, "Does anybody have a knife?" Looking around and then back down at the flames he realized nobody was paying attention to him and frantically began shredding the plastic with his fingers. I struggled against the wind to get my boots around the anchor straps at the bottom corners as my hands slipped into the upper corners. I fell to my knees, pausing a second to confirm that John had his opened, before falling to the ground.

I managed to anchor one corner of my shelter with my web-gear allowing one hand to be free. The fire was sucking the oxygen out of my tent and pulling at my lungs. With my free hand, I dug a small hole in the ground and placed my bandana in it. Frantically, I poured water on it and buried my face in it. Cooler air filled my lungs. Riding on the searing wind, I heard a voice fading in and out. It was Keith's and he was singing....

***Oh, the weather outside is frightful  
But the fire is so delightful  
And as long as you love me so  
Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow...***

As I'm thinking the poor guy has just lost his mind, a distinct smell began to fill my shelter; I recognized it as Nomex, the chemical used to treat our fire clothes. The radiant heat was baking the chemical right out of my clothing. This catapulted me into sensory overload. My mind was

reeling. Why? Why is this happening? What did I do to deserve this? Yet the rapid acceleration into the unknown continued. I raised my head to the sound of rain pelting my shelter. Curiously, I looked up to see orange and yellow light flicker through every crease and seam of my shelter and I realized it wasn't rain; it was red-hot firebrands raining down on me. The head of the fire announced its arrival at my feet with a rumbling vibration so intense it felt as if a freight train were passing over me. The sound was deafening. It intensified to the point where I thought I was going to be crushed to death. Lying in blind submission was more than I could bear; I went into a fit of panic. I wanted to get up and run, but I was only able to push out a defiant, lung-draining scream expecting it to be my last expression in life.

My body began pulsating. I felt like a naked heart pounding on the dirt. I struggled to control my heartbeat, fearing I was going to explode from the inside out. Visions of my parents and siblings flashed before me. My girlfriend beckoned me to her side with her beautiful smile. I repeated over and over again, *please God don't let me die like this, I promise to be a better son, a better brother; a better boyfriend. Just don't let me burn to death... please!*

My fear intensified, time seemed distorted, for all I know it had stopped. Reality came as fragments of my past and I felt myself slipping deeper into despair. A familiar sound pulled me out of my personal hell. It was Harold screaming, "Is everyone alright?"

Life as I wanted it to be returned with every reply. I realized the worst was over. Sheepishly, I raised a corner of my shelter only to see smoke and low flying embers shooting by. I pulled the shelter back down to regain a sense of security. I was safe and wasn't ready to face the outside world. I wanted to stay in this womb-like cocoon forever.

Harold's voice rang out again. This time it was closer and he was swearing, "Those worthless sons-of-bitches." More reason, I thought, to stay right where I was. He was seething with anger and yelled, "Get out of your shelters and line out."

I stood up slowly, keeping the shelter wrapped around me to shield myself from the blowing smoke and embers. I was thinking we should've stayed under longer, but Harold was being driven by his rage. John and Keith emerged with hollow eyes looking as though they had lost the power of thought. Like zombies, we formed a single line and followed Harold out. The once impassable brush field below us was reduced to smoldering stumps.

Ash rose from our pounding feet, choking my lungs and stinging my eyes. We stumbled down the fire line to solid pavement. Our once enthusiastic "Can Do" attitude was crushed. We walked in silence down a road cluttered with ambulances and fire trucks. We were given a wide berth by the crowd that had gathered. By the sheer number of ambulances, I was thinking the Incident Commander had written us off as a body recovery mission. Harold marched us to the first aid station where he immediately went to the command post to get answers to the questions all of us were asking. Where were the engine crews responsible for anchoring the road? And where the hell are they now?

Harold's voice boomed through the staging area. I couldn't make out his words, but he was livid. A few minutes later he returned and said, "The bastards fell asleep. They've been pulled off the fire. A bus is coming to take us to the main fire camp in Glendora."

News of our ordeal spread quickly through the camp. The servers in the chow line couldn't look me in the eyes as I shuffled past. I was beginning to think we had done something wrong until I was cleaning up at a wash station. The little mirror above the basin revealed a strained face cloaked in black ash. The whites of my eyes were hellfire red leading into a piercing blue. My own face frightened me.

The Village Fire burned over 100,000 acres. It beat us into the ground, but only temporarily did it take away our fighting spirit. The main lesson I learned was how quickly the attitude of "No Fear" can be transformed into an intense, life changing realization that to "Know Fear" is far more empowering.