

La Tuna Fire

By

Chin Thammasaengsri
South Bureau Coordinator
(HU 114 driver & crew member)

I don't live in the valley, but I work there and have since 2008 at CBS Television in Studio City. About 1330 Hours, I heard radio station KFI-AM begin doling out the first reports on what would become the La Tuna Canyon Fire. It wasn't long after that I got a call from my CERT Hydration Unit 59 partner, Carl Ginsberg, telling me that he had been dispatched to the fire and was on his way. I checked in with Captain Winn not long after and found that I was needed on HU114 out of Van Nuys Airport.

I left my office at just after 1500 Hours and made my way to Van Nuys. I carry my "call out bag" with me at all times and that day was no different. Upon making it to Van Nuys, I met up with my partner, CERT member Rachel Black. She did a lot of the preliminary work of getting us signed in and prepping the rig for "take off." Captain Winn told us to report directly to LAFD Station 74 in Tujunga. It wasn't long before command (headed by BC Kepner) gave us our first & continuing assignment which was to head into the hills and start hydration for the crews who were already on the lines. The area we were assigned to was filled with twisting, narrow, and even dirt roads. Hiding in all of the nooks & crannies were engine & rescue companies who were either actively fighting the fire or working "spotter duty." Rachel and I serviced them all and would do so multiple times over the next two days. We ran up and down those roads so many times that we quickly knew the area as if it were our own neighborhood. We serviced not only LAFD companies, but ANY firefighting unit in the area. During our time out there, we saw crews from Cal Fire and L.A. County, but crews from other cities like Vernon, Alhambra, Burbank, Glendale, and others were creeping around as well. On the night of our first day out there, we returned to Fire Station 74 for a restock and found the DONATIONS FROM THE COMMUNITY already pouring in. We saw everything from pizzas to sandwiches along with what would become pallets of water & Gatorade. The water & Gatorade would be the "winner" for us because it kept us fully stocked and we were able to keep going into the hills and hydrating almost infinitely. Rachel and I "called it a night" at just before 0200 Hours on what had become Saturday morning.

On Saturday morning, she and I met up again at Fire Station 114 @ Van Nuys Airport at 0900 hours. We got HU 114 stocked and ready to roll. This time, as per Captain Winn, we reported to the IC at Hansen Dam Recreation where we got our orders for the day and handled some things he needed us to handle from that location. However, we were sent back to Fire Station 74 for the bulk of this day to work with BC Kepner. We resumed our duties of running hydration into the hills, BUT we started getting requests from crews for "other things" like granola bars, Fig Newtons, and the like. Upon our return to Fire Station 74, we talked it over with BC Kepner and we decided to take some of those donated items (which now FILLED the kitchen and part of the apparatus floor) and roll them into the hills. Rachel and I got creative and ALTERNATED our runs with one being for hydration and the other being for foodstuffs. Trust me, this was a HIT with the crews in the field. In many cases, we had MORE than just foodstuffs. We gave out sunblock, baby wipes, and things they really wanted and needed. We even helped the crew of Fire Station 98 "take a load off" by transporting them and their gear up the mountain roads from one point to another. As the day wore on, we were recalled to Hansen Dam where we joined HU 59 & Carl Ginsberg at the IC. Captain Winn wanted the HU units (59 & 114) to now do food runs to the various strike teams out in the field. I was amazed to see our colleagues from Long Beach CERT on scene, but it was a welcomed one. They swarmed our rig and before we knew it, it was filled with boxes containing 97 meals meant for the crews out on the lines. Our assignment was to head out to the 210 @ La Tuna Canyon Road and meet "Division Mike" & "Division Zulu" for meal distribution. We found Zulu, but Mike was "off radio" and it took a lot of looking by the IC to finally raise them. Eventually, they got their meals, but it meant two trips by HU 114 to make it happen. By the way, being the ONLY vehicle racing up and down the 210 freeway is both COOL & CREEPY at the same time, especially when you see the fires burning all along the hillsides above you.

And what about us, the crew of HU 114? We were like the rest of our CERT colleagues. We worked hard and we were the last to be rested or take food...by our own choice. Captain Winn was quite hard on us to be reasonable about how long we were working and eating. In hindsight, it was a pair of hard & grueling days, but we got a lot of satisfaction seeing the happiness in the crews we met. They were hot, tired, and sweaty. However, when they saw us, they were like kids in a candy store especially since we brought along a variety of goodies each time. It was a huge pleasure to work this incident. I can tell you that many members of the CERT team worked many more days than I did and I salute them all. It was our chance to serve the city we love AND (self servingly) show the

people of this city the power of what volunteer responders can do. I hope it inspires more people to take and become part of the CERT program. As for us, I hope we see more duty like this because we lived up to that idea of being serious “force multipliers” for LAFD on this one!