

Reflections: La Tuna Fire
by
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La Tuna Fire: LAFD CERT on duty to serve; delivering water, snacks, and dinner to the Firefighters on structure protection up and down La Tuna Canyon Rd, just north of Sunland and beyond. Base camp at Hansen Dam, LAFD CERT manned the front entrance, directing traffic for apparatus from all over the region, ensuring a drop zone for the constant stream of water and pizza donations, and safeguarding a smooth transition for cars, trucks, flatbeds, fire apparatus, and law enforcement personnel entering and exiting the camp. LAFD CERT also assisted with hauling ice, tables, chairs, and providing a work force with anything that was asked of us.

It is a privilege to work the CERT Call-Out Team. I don't take it for granted and I'm grateful when I get to serve. The enthusiasm starts the moment I throw my uniform on, lace up my black boots, grab my trustworthy green CERT go-bag, and sling my badge over my head. That feeling lasts the entire time I'm behind the wheel of my car as I drive toward the fire station.

Riding passenger in HU59 has a prideful feeling to it; it's our service on wheels. We bring it to them, our LAFD Firefighters. HU59 is the battleship ready rig that has been expertly transformed to provide much needed relief to our Firefighters on a prolonged major event; iced water and Gatorade, granola and nutritional bars, chips and other high calorie snacks. To cool down there's iced neck towels, misting fans, and a few Igloo containers of ice strapped down to prevent the tops from popping off and dumping the ice. All these details created by our tireless Coordinator leader in West Bureau, Carl Ginsberg.

The last time I was on a brush fire in HU59 was in West Hills. It was the first time being deployed to a brush fire and what I witnessed on that fire time and time again was the absolute generous spirit of the Firefighters with one another. It inspires me still.

I was compelled go to the La Tuna Fire, knowing as I left early Saturday morning to meet my Bureau Coordinator, Carl Ginsberg, that I might not be returning home until the early hours of Sunday morning. The La Tuna Fire was much

grander in scale. But it was no match for the Community that it threatened. The La Tuna Fire paled in scale to the the impressive generosity and caring I observed by Firefighters and the Community.

The weather was already too hot for an ordinary day and I knew it was going to be harsher near a brush fire. The air was baked and smoky as we neared our first stops on La Tuna Canyon Road. We came offering cold water, snacks, and a “stay safe” to the Firefighters in Engines who had taken up structure protection up and down the long road. Ash was everywhere, and got whipped up without much effort. It was on the road, the vehicles, in the air, and in my nose. I remembered my mask and put it on.

On La Tuna Canyon Road, we stopped at what looked like a dog kennel to offer water to the dozen or so helpers who raced to evacuate the animals. One woman approached us, clearly agitated, asking if we heard if houses were burning on her street. We didn't know so we couldn't tell her anything. Cages of barking dogs dotted the driveway and front entrance of the facility. A large Doberman Pincher stood erect in one cage as if he was ready to race should the cage door be opened. A flurry of people ran to and from the property to a line of vans and trucks waiting to take their cargo to safety. There were a half-dozen small dogs, hoisted into a van, their cages on top of one another, all mad at the mass of chaos around them. A bulky fluffy dog, with a dingy white coat, tried to keep his footing on the steel wet cage as he was gingerly lifted into the back of a truck. His hind legs gave out on him giving him more cause for alarm when he lost his balance.

On the corner of Sunland and La Tuna, two LAFD EMS Captains worked double time, manning their rig, the radio, the traffic, and the growing donations that had started to accumulate all around them. Palettes of water and Gatorade were piled so high the bulk of it started to resemble the leaning tower of Pisa. A small depot of supplies: water, Gatorade, chips, muffins, cookies, pizzas were in abundance in the back of a flatbed truck parked besides the LAFD Suburban. A teenage girl, holding two bags of bright red apples, walked up with her family, whose hands were also full. Their donations were added to the bounty in the back of the truck. I was intent on keeping my energy up and opted for the red delicious apple, rather than some sugary life-me-up. That teenage girl had no idea how sweet and perfect that apple was in the stifling heat and rank smoke. I'll never forget how refreshing that apple tasted in the moment.

We were only with the EMS Captains for a few minutes, but in that time, cars honked their gratitude as they drove by. One woman in a beaten down blue car waved her arm out the window, giving thumbs up to the LAFD EMS Captain's service, as she yelled something encouraging.

At base camp in Hansen Dam, there was a steady stream of cars pulling up at the check point with cases upon cases of water. Every pizza joint in the area wanted to drop off a few dozen pies. Shakey's cheese, Little Caesar's pepperoni, the works from Dominos. It was a carb nightmare, if you ask me. One person had a load of dog food to donate. We only had Firefighters and Base Camp Warriors setting up shop, so we sent him on his way to the Hansen Dam Equestrian Center.

At one point, Capt. Erik Scott stopped me and asked for my help to lift the spirits of the camp. I was flattered that he entrusted me with that kind of responsibility, but I respected his judgment and followed. He directed me and a Red Cross volunteer to start handing out popsicles to everybody, including the Command Post attendees. A little pressure?? Well, I did my duty, making my way through the camp handing out popsicles to the heat weary Deputy Chiefs, Battalion Chiefs, Captains, City Officials, and any other Official that got in my way.

I ended my popsicle give-away at the LAPD Command Post thinking, no way, no way are they open to popsicles; not the LAPD at base camp at Hansen Dam on the La Tuna Fire! No way! I was prepared to be sent away when their enthusiasm barred me from retreating. They were totally into the uplifting popsicle bonanza give-away! As I was leaving, one of the Officers said he was going to eat his popsicle in his car because there was no way he was going to get caught on camera eating a popsicle at the Command Post. I laughed so hard at his honesty. It did seem like an awful juxtaposition for him. I'm sure he would've had a lot of explaining to do had a picture of a popsicle eating LAPD cop gone viral.

I swear Hansen Dam was a Kripsy Kreme that just happened to turn into a base camp because there were white cartons of Krispy Kreme donuts from one end of camp to the other end. I have no idea how I avoided that fried sugary softness hitting my lips during the time I was there, but I did. I guess perspiring to the point your clothes have rings of sweat visible to the naked eye doesn't ingratiate your taste buds to food void of substance.

Late Saturday night we had to stop at a La Crescenta community room to feed dinner to five Strike Team Leaders. We rolled into the parking lot and were greeted by a gracious group of young kids who were eager to help us off load cases of dinner using their dolly. I never saw such a wonderful and welcoming sight. But that was just the beginning of their kindness.

After finding a much-needed bathroom with lighting and a real sink with running water to wash my eyes out, I entered the community room to check out their community spirit. (I also heard they had real hot food on hand) The moment I entered, the women in the room started applauding. I looked around to see who their applause was for, only to embarrassingly discover that it was directed towards me. They were applauding me for being the first woman they saw that was a member of the fire fighting force that were saving their homes. They thought I was a Firefighter. I'm sure I blushed because there was a line of tired Firefighters just to my left, quietly eating dinner. I waved off their applause and gratitude, telling them that I wasn't a Firefighter, but a volunteer for the Firefighters, just like them. Well, they didn't accept that and continued showering me with thanks. I did tell them that I've seen women do the LAFD proud, working fire lines, hauling hose, and leading crews to protect lives and property.

As we were leaving the La Crescenta community room, I was urged to take a wet towel, chilling on ice near the door, to use around my neck. It was a perfect ending on one of our last stops for the night. It reminded me of that perfect apple, just twelve hours earlier. Both were delicious and refreshingly kind and generous.