

# Pain-Wracked Fire Victims Proud of Green Berets



**CONFIDENT** — Edward Cosgrove, 22, who says "we're still the best."  
Times photos

Two months ago they were 25 young, strong and healthy men. Some looked forward to attending college or starting new careers. One was about to be married.

But all that was halted—for 11 permanently, for others indefinitely—by a sheet of flame that lasted only 20 seconds.

Most of those who lived now have bodies scarred by a crazy quilt of healing flesh and grafted skin. Some have hands swollen twice normal size and virtually paralyzed by the raw pulp that slowly heals into flesh. A few have red scars on their faces and parts of ears burned away.

Three remain in "critical condition," a simple phrase that fails to convey the constant pain, endless weeks of immobility, constant attention by physicians and hospital workers—and a chance they may yet die.

But, despite their tragic losses to their mortal enemy — fire — the proudest possession of the El Cariso Hot Shots remains their green berets, the symbol of the elite reputation the crew from the Cleveland National Forest in Riverside County had earned as firefighters.

(Last month, on the hottest Nov. 1 in history, a brush fire raged above Sylmar, sending 730 patients fleeing from two hospitals and blackening 2,100 acres. By late afternoon, firemen were gaining control and it looked like another routine Southern California blaze. Then a freak fire storm flashed up Pacoima Canyon, trapping the U.S. Forest Service's 25-man El Cariso Hot Shot crew. Eleven were fatally burned—the worst disaster among professional firefighters in local history and, in terms of human loss, second only to the 1933 Griffith Park fire that killed 29 county welfare recipients. Times staff writer Art Berman tells the story of survivors of the recent disaster.)

Listen to Ed Cosgrove, 22, of San-  
te, who lies in a hospital bed re-  
covering from burns on the face,  
hands, elbows, and legs:

"We're still the best in Southern California. All the old guys (former members) are coming back. And we're getting more applications than ever."

The top portion of Cosgrove's right ear is burned away. But he placed his green beret at a jaunty angle and repeated with cocky confidence:

"We're still the best. You'd better believe it."

Cosgrove, who was transferred to the San Diego Naval Hospital this week, was one of 11 most seriously burned survivors (up to 50% burned) who were treated in the highly regarded but crowded and grim looking Burns Ward of General Hospital.

He was among four men recently transferred to the naval hospital, which is nearer their homes and better equipped for therapeutic care. Four men remain in General Hospital, three in intensive care and one recovering satisfactorily.

One man, Carl J. Shilcutt, 26, of Yorba Linda, died five days after the fire. The 11th man, Gordon King, 30, the crew chief, has been released from the hospital.

Before leaving General Hospital, Cosgrove recalled the horrible

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**STILL SMILING**—Jerry Smith, 19, who was burned on hands and face.

# FIRE SURVIVORS

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moments that killed 11 of his buddies.

"We were strung out in a line, moving down the canyon, cutting a fire-break. All of a sudden, I could hear Gordon hollering, 'Get up to the safety zone.' And here came the fire.

"Some of the guys tried to run, but there was no time. As soon as I felt it on my back, I just hit the ground and took real shallow breaths. It's breathing in the heat that kills you. It burns the lungs. I just flattened out and covered my head.

"I don't know how I lived."

The men on either side of him died.

Jerry Smith, 19, who smiles brightly despite the burns on his face and hands that kept him semi-conscious for two weeks, credited his survival to another crew member, Joe Small, 24, one of those recently transferred to the naval hospital.

"I was writhing around on the ground as the flames came over," he said. "Joe hit me on the back of my head to quiet me. Then he carried me to a cool area."

## Gasses in Canyon

Smith, still recovering in General Hospital, said gasses had built up in a small brush-filled canyon below the fire fighting crew and "It just all exploded."

"It wouldn't happen again in a thousand years," Cosgrove added.

Smith, of Riverside, hopes to be released as an outpatient early next year and would like to return to Riverside City College, where he already had a semester, to study math and art.

Cosgrove, an Army veteran and son of a veteran fireman who died of cancer last August, hopes to be married soon.

"I was supposed to be married Nov. 26," he said, "but I was in surgery instead."

Rich Leak, 19, of Vista, is another El Cariso Hot Shot who was recovering satisfactorily in General Hospital. He was transferred Tuesday to California Hospital. His father is a civilian fire captain at Camp Pendleton.

Leak's hands, arms and legs were burned. But when asked if he needed anything, his concern was for others.

"They need more nurses around here (General Hospital)," he said. "These nurses are working like crazy. They're underpaid

and overworked."

Leak hopes to leave the hospital early next year and possibly return to Palomar College, where he had three semesters.

"That was my 28th fire in two years," the handsome young man said. "This was a busy summer. We'd been all over the western states. We only had about 10 days off all summer."

At \$2.05 to \$2.30 an hour, the firefighters were earning \$100 to \$130 a week. Most were employed by the Forest Service only for the summer-fall fire season.

"The day we were burned," Smith noted, "was supposed to be a day off."

Smith was only on his second fire when he was burned.

He said one lesson learned by the tragedy is that "wearing gloves should be mandatory."

Dr. John Winkley, who heads the Burns Ward, agreed.

"All of them should have been wearing gloves and a protective jacket," said Dr. Winkley.

Dr. Winkley said garments provided a surprisingly good protection against the flames. But in the absence of gloves, some of the most crippling injuries were to the men's hands.

The burns were treated with the newest method, applications of silver nitrate solution of sulfamylar, Dr. Winkley said.

Skin grafting was started immediately.

## Skin Used as Dressing

In some cases, skin from dead persons was used as a temporary, and highly effective, burn dressing—a point which brings a particular anguish from Dr. Winkley.

"It is not easy to get permission from relatives of recently deceased persons to take skin from the cadavers," said Dr. Winkley. "We had to have skin flown here from a tissue bank at the Bethesda, Md., Naval Hospital."

As a result, General Hospital officials are contemplating the establishment of a skin bank.

Dr. Winkley said he was surprised at the progress some of the young firefighters have shown. He credited it to their youth and good condition.

Their spirit might have played a role, too.

As Ed Cosgrove put it when asked if he wants to fight another fire with the El Cariso Hot Shots:

"You'd better believe it."