

Report Assails Tactics Used in Malibu Blaze

■ **Safety:** Inexperienced commanders put fire crews in harm's way, analysis says. It also cites other errors.

By ERIC MALNIC
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Poor leadership and judgment—not simply the uncontrollable advance of raging flames—have been blamed by fire officials for the injuries 10 firefighters sustained in last October's destructive brush fires in the Malibu area.

An "entrapment analysis report" drawn up by a team of experts from four fire departments that battled the blaze concluded that firefighters from the Glendale Fire Department and the Los Angeles City Fire Department were placed in peril by an inexperienced group of commanders who failed to recognize the danger of the situation.

Contributing to the problem were radio communications breakdowns, failure to place lookouts in positions where they could keep track of the fire, failure to train firefighters thoroughly in the use of protective fire shields and failure of some of the firefighters to wear all their protective equipment and deploy their shields.

Fire officials declined to discuss the report Thursday, saving all comment for a news conference scheduled for today.

The report, dated Jan. 22, was drawn up in an effort to avoid mistakes such as the ones that left Engine 24 of the Glendale Fire Department and Engines 17, 10 and 4 of the Los Angeles City Fire Department trapped in front of a rapidly advancing wall of flames in the Malibu Bowl area of Corral Canyon on Oct. 22.

Glendale firefighter William Jensen, 53, was the most severely injured, with burns over 70% of his

Please see MALIBU, B6

METRO

MALIBU

Continued from B1

body. After 16 operations to implant skin grafts and treat his wounds, Jensen was finally released from the burn unit at Sherman Oaks Hospital in February.

Two other Glendale firefighters and two Los Angeles firefighters suffered lesser burns, and five Los Angeles firefighters were treated for smoke inhalation.

The report by the two municipal fire departments, the California Department of Forestry and the Los Angeles County Fire Department—which was in overall charge of battling the blaze in the rugged Santa Monica Mountains—noted that "some chief officers with little or no wild-land fire experience were requested to serve as division supervisors."

On the second day of the fire that had begun Oct. 21 near Calabasas, wind shifts suddenly sent flames sweeping up the steep face of Malibu Bowl.

"The south-facing hillside in the bowl had been preheated by the sun, was full of brush . . . and was very steep," the report says. "The hazards of each of these factors individually were recognized, but the combination, along with the tremendous intensity of the fire, was not recognized."

Unaware of the danger, field commanders ordered Los Angeles Fire Engines 17, 10 and 4 to deploy along a midslope road directly ahead of the fire. No one from any of those trucks was positioned to "scout" the advancing flames, the report says.

As the fire moved rapidly up the bowl toward ridge-top homes, the captain commanding Glendale Fire Engine 24—which was stationed

alongside the Los Angeles engines—left his observation point to supervise protection of the homes. No lookout was posted. And because someone had left a microphone open, the Glendale captain could not talk by radio with other units in the area, several of which could have warned of the advancing fire.

As the flames rushed suddenly up the slope, the men from Engine 24 soaked eucalyptus trees and brush with water from their hoses in an effort to halt the advance.

"This tactic was ineffective," the report says. "Engine 24's captain felt a blast of heat followed by a rain of embers. He ordered his personnel to abandon their hose line and run."

The captain and one firefighter dashed up the slope. But Jensen held his position, covering the escape of the other two with a spray of water from his hose.

"He emerged from the smoke between 15 and 20 seconds later," the report says. "He was obviously seriously burned." Two other men from Engine 24 were burned as well.

A few yards away, Los Angeles' Engine 17 attempted to flee, but its escape was blocked by a traffic jam of other vehicles trying to get away.

"The fire then blew up over their engine with explosive force," the report says. "The Engine 17 captain held his brush jacket against his window to cut down on the radiated heat."

A firefighter seated behind him "climbed over the engine compartment for relief from the intense heat of the fire, which by then was engulfing the road behind them and impinging on the rear of their [truck,]" the report continues. "The captain saw in his side mirror

that Engine 10 behind them was being overrun by fire."

The motor on Engine 10 stalled from ingesting the heavy smoke. Trapped in the searing heat of the fire that engulfed them, the four men on board were only able to open one of the aluminum blankets each carried as protection. Three crawled under it; the fourth—the captain—was only able to get his upper body under the shield.

From there, the captain radioed for help. Men from Engine 17, stationed nearby, grabbed a hose and fought back through the flames to rescue their companions. Two men from Engine 10 were burned and two others suffered smoke inhalation. Amazingly, no one from Engine 17 was seriously injured.

Several hundred yards down the road, Engine 4 stopped to take on water at a hydrant when it was overrun by flames. Although the motor stalled, the driver finally was able to restart it and drive to safety. Nonetheless, three of the crewmen suffered smoke inhalation.

All the injured firefighters were flown by helicopter to the UCLA Medical Center within 50 minutes. The four most seriously burned were later transferred to the burn center in Sherman Oaks.

"This report is an important first step in re-energizing efforts to prevent future wild-land firefighting injuries," Los Angeles Fire Chief William Bamattre, Glendale Fire Chief Richard Hinz and county Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman wrote in a cover letter. "Changes will be made, training will be reemphasized, procedures and policies will be analyzed and greater sharing of fire-line safety material will occur."