

SECTION II. FIRE

5. TRAIL BY FIRE

John Ahlman stood on the southwest corner of the athletic field, a 50-yard dash away from the ocean. He was a 17-year-old student at Santa Barbara City College. Looking up toward the mountains, he could barely make out a thin curl of smoke in the clear sky. “The weather was pretty warm; you could imagine that if a fire took off that day it could be pretty significant,” says Ahlman. “I jumped in the car and started listening to the radio, driving home as quickly as I could.” Hot afternoon winds quickly whipped the nascent flames into a conflagration. On the 22nd day of September 1964, the blaze began that devoured 120 square miles of Santa Barbara front country, backcountry, and city, including almost the entire Rattlesnake Canyon watershed. The Coyote Fire was not fully controlled until October 1st.

Ahlman desperately wanted to help. He had fought his first fire six months earlier, a violent blaze whose fire winds spawned a tornado at nearby Carpinteria’s polo fields. That day, he drove to the scene, grabbed a tool out of the back of a Forest Service vehicle, and began to work alongside the crew. “I just tried to blend in,” he says, figuring he would be banished if they knew his age. The fire was kept small and cinched his desire for a firefighting career. Ahlman graduated from high school that June, enrolling in City College until he was old enough to apply to the Forest Service. When the Coyote Fire broke out, he was still underage.



Rattlesnake Canyon after the Coyote Fire, September 1964.
All fire photos courtesy of Mt. Calvary Monastery.

Soon after he reached his parents’ home, his best friend’s mom, a Red Cross volunteer, called to ask him if he could help. “That was our segue into getting involved,” says Ahlman. “We shuffled food and water to the firefighters on the line for several days. I was cutting classes to make that happen.” They ran many trips all the way from the eastern edge in Coyote Canyon to San Marcos Pass over ten miles northwest – a vast perimeter. “We were mostly on our own, without a schedule,” he says. “It was a big area to cover. We worked almost day and night until we practically collapsed. We were pretty well tired out.”

Ahlman remembers the excitement as well as the exhaustion. “We could see this thing was going to get big before it got smaller, and we saw fire trucks from all over coming in to assist, much as you would today. It was overwhelming and pretty spectacular.”

The fire, eventually traced to a car’s faulty exhaust system, began near the intersection of Coyote Road and Mountain Drive, then a sparsely populated foothill area and now pocked with scores of homes whose owners relish the close-in rural lifestyle. The city fire alarm sounded at 2:03 p.m. The department responded by dispatching engines, water tank trucks, and squad cars. The U.S. Forest Service and the adjoining Montecito Fire Department also sent engines, squads, and pumps.

They quickly laid lines and hooked to hydrants, but twelve-mile-per-hour winds blew the flames across Coyote Road, and then jumped Mountain Drive as well. The fire blew over the top of Montecito Engine 1 and Squad 1, injuring four firefighters and scorching their equipment.

“Those guys were burned early on in the fight. It was Dave Powell, Jack Staniforth, John Felix, and Fred Cota. The fire raced up out of the canyon and their rigs were positioned in a manner that they just got caught. There are photos of them standing there in a kind of pugilistic position,” says Ahlman, gesturing with his hands like a professional boxer. “Their hands were swollen like gloves. Some had facial burns as well. Unfortunate as it was, they were extremely lucky not to have perished. They all went back to work and completed their careers.”

Now a Santa Barbara City Battalion Chief, Ahlman works in an office that has the contagious energy you expect to find at a fire station. When I arrive at the parking lot in the rear of the station, he greets me warmly and we weave among polished red fire trucks to the back door. We maneuver through long vinyl-floored hallways, emerging into a large public office with a congenial front office staff. Immediately past the reception desk is Ahlman’s office.

As I get settled, I take in his features: a fit-looking Nordic figure, slightly barrel-shaped, and silver hair framing a tanned face. Despite the chilly day, he sports a short-sleeved white shirt tucked into dark trousers, pinned with a polished badge. Pairs of crossed bugles decorate each lapel: silver and gold, for the ranks he has attained. The gold badge also signifies his chief rank.

Not infrequently, the normal buzz of activity emanating through his open door spikes several decibels as a high-low alarm sounds. A garble-voiced intercom barks announcements, but I can’t make them out. Ahlman deciphers them while continuing to talk to me. Usually he dismisses them, but occasionally he picks up the phone to confer with someone. As he talks, his small

gray-blue eyes register the lightness or gravity of each call. They have a tarnished twinkle of someone who has witnessed sadness but still very much enjoys his every-day life.

I glance around, smiling at the sight of a Dalmatian mug nestled among metal files cabinets. Notices and calendars cram a bulletin board along with a small public relations poster and certificates from various completed courses. A TV/VCR sits surrounded by training tapes below a calligraphy sign: “Courage is not lack of fear, it is acting in spite of it.” Dozens of binders with labels such as “Injury and Illness Prevention” stuff a bookcase.

Ahlman hangs up the phone and shakes his head, smiling broadly. “I should have retired already, but I really like the job. I work with great people, so it’s hard to just pack it up. It’ll be tough even when I feel like I’m ready.” He recently celebrated his 31st anniversary with the city; now he’s one of those senior guys completing their careers. “As miserable as it can be – there’s a lot of awful things you have to do – when I measure it out I think I’ve made a difference.” The Coyote Fire was his unofficial initiation.

In the first few minutes of the fire, the opportunity to quash it decisively blew past. The firefighters proceeded down Mountain Drive, trying to get ahead of the flames.

“The sundowner winds – evening, gradient winds – are as violent as any you can imagine. It’s due to the ocean versus land temperature changes,” says Ahlman.

“The four huge things that drive fire are topography, wind, humidity, and vegetation. We have a pretty varied front country here, and the chamise and other heavy fuels that haven’t burned for a long time create havoc.” In the Coyote Fire, “the crews seemed in control of the direction at times, but when the winds changed, suddenly whole neighborhoods came into danger again and again.”



Battalion Chief John Ahlman at the fire station.