

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Rock Creek Fire	Incident Date & Time: 07/28/1939 @ 15:45
Incident Location: Orovada in Humboldt County, Nevada	Incident Size: 4,500 acres
Type of resources involved: Civilian Conservation Corps crew	# of Fatalities/injuries: 5 fatalities
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire is historically significant ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The Rock Creek Fire started at 11:15 on July 28, 1939 from a lightning strike. The point of origin is located approximately five miles southeast of Orovada, Nevada. As soon as smoke became visible, Kirk Studebaker, the store owner in Orovada, called the Paradise Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp to report a fire. Firefighting was one of the many duties that CCC crews performed, but they were not specifically set up for immediate initial attack response. It took some time to identify a Foreman and a roster of enrollees to respond to the fire. At about 12:45, CCC Company 1212, with 23 men on-board, began rolling toward the fire. The camp was located on the opposite side of the Santa Rosa Mountain range from Orovada so it took almost two hours for the crew to arrive on scene.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>Company 1212 arrived at the fire about 14:30 and drove to the end of a two-track road running along Rock Creek. At this point, the Crew Foreman, Wilbur Timmons, divided the 23 person crew into two squads. Timmons took one squad and he placed Earnest Tippin in charge of the second squad. Tippin's squad was directed to approach the fire from the west, going to the bottom of the fire. Foreman Timmons believed the bottom of the fire would be safer for the less experienced Squad Boss Tippin. Timmons had briefed Tippin in the truck as they drove into the fire. Timmons gave a direct order to <i>"keep the men in safety."</i> The squads rapidly assembled, departed the truck parking location, and headed to the fire. Timmon's route continued up Rock Creek another half mile then followed a ridgeline that headed out to the north edge of the fire. Tippin's route followed a dry drainage west out of Rock Creek toward the south edge of the fire.</p> <p>As Squad Boss Tippin's group progressed up the dry drainage, four crewmembers started to fall behind. Sometime between 15:15 and 15:30, Tippin and five of his crewmembers reached a ridge at the head of the dry drainage. The fire was backing downslope into the wind to the north of their location. Tippin began giving a briefing to this first group, before the trailing crewmembers reached his location. Just seconds after the briefing was done, the wind abruptly shifted from the west (upslope) to the east (downslope) and increased to more than 40 miles per hour. Witnesses in Orovada noted that a thunderstorm had moved over the area at about that time.</p> <p>Tippin's squad now had fire rapidly moving toward them. He gave the order to head back to the truck. The four crewmembers who were still hiking up saw Tippin and party hiking back toward them. They immediately turned around and began running back toward the truck. Tippin then heard the fire picking up intensity, turned and looked again, and gave an order to run. As they dropped down into the drainage, the fire was outflanking them along the ridge and smoke probably hindered their orientation.</p> <p>By 15:30, Tippin's squad was in an urgent retreat back to Rock Creek where the truck had been parked. The four crewmembers that did not make it to the briefing were running over the ridge into Rock Creek and down to the truck. Tippin and the five remaining crewmembers were being driven steadily deeper into the drainage. The fire was closing in on them from behind, pushed by the strong downslope winds. In his haste, crewmember George Kennedy broke an ankle running in the drainage. Tippin and crewmember Walter James immediately turned back to help Kennedy <i>"arm in arm"</i> continue his way downhill. Meanwhile, Frank Barker and Richard Powers collided with each other. Powers was able to get up and continued running. Barker was unable to continue after the collision. At this point, Tippin and James were faced with the dilemma of needing to help Barker as well. It is estimated they had already carried Kennedy almost a quarter of a mile. It is not certain what transpired in the next few minutes. Powers was the only witness and this was his description of what he remembered before he left the four crewmembers behind him. The fire eventually overran Kennedy and then caught Tippin, James, and Barker. They were found grouped closely together about 300 yards farther down the drainage from where Kennedy was found. Powers kept running and survived.</p> <p>Meanwhile, crewmember Frank Vitale split from the group and ran north into Rock Creek. His vision was very poor and a later report indicated his eyeglasses were broken and he did not have them on this fire. This may explain why he did not run directly to the truck. Instead, his body was found approximately 300 yards north on a slope above Rock Creek. All the surviving crewmembers ran down the Rock Creek Road until they were picked up and taken to a local ranch. From the time of the wind shift to the time the survivors reached the truck was estimated to be less than 30 minutes.</p>	

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Two other crews from Paradise CCC Camp arrived at the fire about 1800 and Richard Powers led them back on the search effort for the unaccounted crewmembers. Only George Kennedy was found before darkness suspended the search. Several CCC enrollees were left to guard his body until morning. The bodies of Earnest Tippin, Walter James, Frank Barker, and Frank Vitale were located the next morning when the search resumed.

Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:

This was referred to as a “*sagebrush fire*” in all the CCC documentation. As such it would be a nearly continuous fine fuel bed which, by late July in the Great Basin, would mean that most all the vegetation had dried enough to be available to burn.

The wind shift was almost certainly a result of thunderstorm downdraft winds.

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Language in the CCC investigation witness statements suggests that “*sagebrush fires*” were regarded as routine events relative to more complex timber fires, reflecting a mindset that may have underestimated the dangers of sagebrush fires.

Approaching an active fire edge through unburned fuels during the burning period is extremely hazardous.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

Earnest Tippin and Walter James were awarded posthumous Certificates of Valor by the National Director of the Civilian Conservation Corps in recognition of the sacrifice they made in their heroic attempt to help their injured crewmates.

This was the fourth major tragedy fire that the CCC program suffered in a four year span (1936 Chatsworth Fire in New Jersey; 1937 Blackwater Fire in Wyoming; 1938 Pepper Hill Fire in Pennsylvania; and 1939 Rock Creek Fire in Nevada). Following this event the CCC program was much more restrictive in how the federal and state firefighting organizations were able to utilize the CCC crews. This actually pushed the US Forest Service to begin exploring how to staff its own firefighting crews. The agency’s first full-time organized crew experiment and the first smokejumper trials both occurred in 1939.

The investigations by Civilian Conservation Corps and the US Forest Service both put forth a couple notable recommendations:

- Individuals should be screened to insure they are physically fit prior to being assigned any firefighting duty.
- Hosting agencies and camp managers needed to provide better quality training and documentation of training.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.nwcg.gov/wfldp/toolbox/staff-ride/library/rock-creek-fire>
<https://ccclegacy.org/home.php>
<https://livingnewdeal.org/projects/rock-creek-fire-monument-orovada-nv/>
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1939/07/28/rock-creek-ccc/>

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center offers an excellent site which provides information on many wildland incidents.
[Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center’s Incident Review Database \(IRDB\) \(wildfire.gov\)](https://www.wildfire.gov/)

This summary page was proudly provided by:

Jim Cook & Kurt La Rue

September 2023



**Rock Creek Memorial Site
Northern Nevada US Highway 95**

THE HUMBOLDT STAR
DECEMBER 12, 1939 1:3

BRUSH FIRE VALOR IS REWARDED.
National CCC Head Issues Awards To
Victims Of Blaze.

Certificates of valor have been issued by Robert Fechner, national director of the Civilian Conservation Corps at Washington, D.C. to Ernest R. Tippin and Walter James, two of the five youths who were burned to death during the Orovada brush fire on Friday, July 28, of this year in the costliest disaster in Humboldt county history.

GIVEN CERTIFICATES.

The announcement was received in Winnemucca today in a special dispatch from Alexander McQueen, supervisor of the Toiyabe national forest. Certificates were issued to Tippin, a project assistant for Camp Paradise, and Walter James. Both were enrollees in Company 1212, Camp F-5, Paradise Valley.

The awards were made in recognition of the act of valor in attempting to save an injured member of their party. At the inquest into the boys' deaths and government investigations, it was found that Tippin turned into the fire in an effort to save the lives of two others while James also sought to save the lives of other firefighters and in doing so was burned to death himself.

POSTHUMOUS AWARDS.

The awards were posthumous and were presented to the parents of the two boys. Tippin made his home in Oswego, Kan., while James made his home in Ridgewood, N.Y.

Other boys losing their lives were George J. Kennedy, New York City, N.Y.; Frank W. Barker, Brooklyn, N.Y.; and Frank J. Vitale, Brooklyn. All were enrollees at Camp Paradise.