



Event Type: Tree Strike

Date: August 27, 2020

Location: Woodward Fire,
Point Reyes National Seashore,
California

Tree Strike Story, Observations Worth Noting, and How We Move Forward

*Instead of safety, let's think about varying amounts of risk
that we either accept, control, transfer, or avoid.*

Summary

On August 27 on the Woodward Fire, part of a Type 2IA Crew was victim to a large tree falling onto them. Two of the firefighters were immobilized and transported to a nearby hospital. One firefighter was treated and released the same day, while the other firefighter was released the next day. Both are expected to make a full recovery.

Narrative

At Drop Point 7 (DP7), during the morning breakout briefing for Division T, the DIVS reminded the resources to review IWI protocols just in case. He realized that would prove difficult to achieve due to a report from the night resources of a spot fire outside the containment lines. After breakout, the conversations and coordination continued for DIVS T as there was much to be accomplished for the day.

One of the tasks for Division T was to hold the fire west and above the Bear Valley Trail Road. The road runs along the creek at the bottom of the drainage. The vegetation was generally thick with large trees of varying species of deciduous and coniferous. One tree species, the Bay Laurel tree, was numerous in the area. A peculiar trait of this tree makes it a concern: its exposed roots and multiple trunks make it a significant hazard for burning and falling. In the drainage, a few of these Bay Laurel trees had burned out bases and had toppled. Many were still securely standing.

The Type 2IA Crew, along with part of an Engine Task Force, took action to contain the spot that was on the east side of the road. Fire began to aggressively climb a large Douglas fir tree, frequently dropping fire brands. This became a great hazard and concern to the crew. (See Figure 1 on page 4.)

The crew split and began to construct handline up both flanks of the spot fire. Line production was slow due to a great deal of brush and downed logs. The crew accelerated line construction to avoid firefighters becoming potential targets from falling limbs of that large fir tree.

Tree Crashes onto Crew

Someone suddenly yelled out: "Tree!"

Two trunks of a Bay Laurel tree located above the fir tree had snapped and came crashing down.

Collin, a digger, only had time to slide down the hill a couple feet. The upper most branches of the tree covered him. Another digger, Shawn, located close to him, was pinned to the ground by branches. He was hollering in pain. Collin struggled to get to him; Shawn then began to convulse.

Closer to the sawyers, Victor heard the tree trunk crack. He saw the tree coming down on top of him and only had time to crouch to brace for the impact. The tree accorded him down to the ground. It knocked the wind out of him as he struggled to breathe. He then called out: *"Everyone OK?"*

"No," Nate, the digger below him, responded back. Covered with tree branches, Nate was complaining of pain in his neck and shoulder.

***DIVS T heard others yelling in the background
and knew it was serious.***

Two 'Red' Patients

The crew's overhead rushed to their impacted crewmembers. With increased concern for falling limbs, the overhead instructed crewmembers to go down to the road. Overhead grabbed the saws and sawed out their two injured firefighters.

The nearby Marin County engine personnel extended hose and doused the increasing fire activity and cleared the tree limbs while their medically trained personnel treated the injured firefighters.

Meanwhile, at DP7, DIVS T was continuing to give instructions to various other resources when he heard a call out on the radio: *"Heads up, heads up, heads up!"* A few seconds later, the Engine Task Force leader called him direct to report that a tree had fallen and they had unknown injuries. DIVS T heard others yelling in the background and knew it was serious.

At 0910, DIVS T called Woodward Communications ordering an air medical evac for two "Red" patients. DIVS T remained the communication link between the Task Force Leader and Woodward Communications. DIVS T used another local Marin County firefighter at DP7 as a scribe.

The two injured firefighters were quickly stabilized, packaged, back-boarded and brought down to the road. They were transported in the bed of pickups to DP7. Because the air was not suitable for flying, they were placed into ground ambulances and taken to Marin County General Hospital.

The first firefighter patient, who was upgraded to "Yellow", left DP7 for the hospital at 0930. The second patient was upgraded to "Green" and left at 0942. The Code 3 (Lights and Siren) ambulance transport escorted by California Highway Patrol to Marin County General Hospital took approximately 35 minutes.

'Defuse Session' Held for the Crew

Even though many on the crew were still quite amped up, the crew somberly walked back to DP7. Once there, the National Park Service agency administrator and a Marin County Fire official talked with the crew to assist them in processing this event. It was then decided to take the crew to a hotel, let them refresh and then reconnect later that evening to continue the "Defuse Session".

A California Highway Patrol officer joined this Defuse Session, that was held later that evening at the hotel. The crew found this time and place much better for a rich discussion.

Observations Worth Noting

Strike-Tree Analysis

The Bay Laurel tree had an exposed multiple root base with two main trunks that were 14- and 36-inches in diameter. The base of the trunks looked to be somewhat burned out but were relatively stable—judging from the broken wood. It appears that a leaning trunk of another nearby Bay Laurel tree located farther uphill broke and fell onto the “strike tree”—breaking the two trunks, causing them to fall onto the crew. (See Figure 2 on next page.)

Medical Response

Due to resource order UTFs (Unable to Fill), there were very few assigned medical personnel on the fire. It was very fortunate that the majority of the firefighters from the local Marin County Engine Strike Team were experienced paramedics, they were working nearby, and were able to respond immediately and transport within minutes of this accident.

Some fire personnel, who were responders to the accident, felt the need to stand down for the remainder of the day and benefited from their own Defusing Session held later that day.

Hazards

Resources of Division T were aware that the fire area was full of many hazards—steep ground, brushy vegetation and many snags.

Communication

Because DIVS T was from out-of-region, he found that his scribe, a local firefighter, very effective as a local jargon translator (i.e. MGH – Marin General Hospital).

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How Can We Improve?

- ❖ Both the IMT and key elements of the Division T resources found their AARs to be useful in improving their IWI and Medical Incident Report (MIR or 8-Line) understanding and proficiency.
- ❖ Expect the unexpected. Many firefighters said that they would do more practice sessions in dealing with an IWI.
- ❖ Discuss and practice IWI response within the IMT early in the assignment as well as the MIR within the Division early in the assignment, especially if you have resources that are unfamiliar with the MIR. It will provide all parties involved with a common picture.
- ❖ “This is a dangerous job” now has a new meaning to a few resources. Be honest with yourself and your friends and family. Some people may find the *Preparedness Guide for Firefighters and Their Families* useful. <https://www.nwccg.gov/sites/default/files/docs/eb-preparedness-guide-for-firefighters-and-their-families.pdf>

Moving Forward

The following is credited to Dave Williams, USFS R1 Risk Management Officer/NR Team 5 SOF2(t):

“Safe” is defined in Webster’s dictionary as: “Free from harm or risk.”

That would make “safe” very difficult to achieve in everyday life and all but impossible to achieve in our line of work. Instead of safety, let’s think about varying amounts of risk that we either accept, control, transfer, or avoid.

Our decisions should be based on how important our mission is and how much risk we’ll need to accept to pull it off. Let’s be honest, there are times it not only won’t be safe, it might be downright dangerous. We need to be aware and be prepared for that.



Fig 1. The line construction began.



Fig 2. A nearby tree broke the trunks of the strike tree.
The strike tree trunk is on the right side of the photo.

This RLS was submitted by:

**Tony Petrilli, Boise NIMO Safety Officer (and friends),
assigned to USFS Region 5 for Risk Management Officer assistance.**

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