

1980

**SUMMARY REPORT  
FATALITY OF  
FRANKLYN C. KNAPP-SMITH**

**AUGUST 11, 1980**

**CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY  
SANTA CLARA RANGER UNIT  
REGION V**

**FIRE ACADEMY**

**SEPTEMBER 1980**

On Monday, August 11, 1980, Fire Captain Franklyn C. Knapp-Smith died in a vehicle accident while fighting a fire in the Santa Teresa Hills in the City of San Jose. Firefighter Trainee David Hirschman suffered a broken arm, (3) broken ribs, and back injuries

#### FIRE LINE CONDITIONS

Weather:	Temp. 79	Wind W 14 (estimated)
Fuel:	Grass Oak Woodland	
Topography:	Steep w/slopes in excess of 50%	
Final Size:	45 acres	

#### FINDINGS

At 1347 hours, San Jose City Fire Department requested mutual aid on a wildland fire bringing a CDF response of four engines, one dozer, and a SFR I. On the southern flank of the fire, Dozer 5448 (an HD6), Engine 5463 (a Model #5) and Engine 5466 (a Model #10), driven by FC Knapp-Smith, encountered steep terrain and heavy smoke. Dozer 5448, started constructing line downhill toward a San Jose F.D. hoselay at the bottom. 5466 was advised that a road was accessible at the bottom of the hill, so they, and 5463, moved down the dozer line burning out remaining fuel as they went. As the engines neared the bottom of the hill they found that egress was blocked by a deep concrete canal. At this time, the south flank of the fire was contained and the dozer had already gone back up the hill. With some difficulty, 5466 and 5463 turned around on the hillside and started driving back up the dozer line with 5466 in the lead. Because of the steepness of the slope, 5466's fire hose fell out the back and had to be picked up. As 5466 began to slip in the loose soil of the dozer line, Knapp-Smith drove to the unburned grass adjacent to the dozer line and continued up the hill. As the slope increased to 49%, all wheels started slipping and the engine died. Knapp-Smith attempted to restart the engine with no success. When asked by several firefighters if he wanted the chock blocks down, he replied, "No". 5463 stopped in the dozer line about 50 feet behind 5466. Knapp-Smith asked 5448 to come back down and pull the engines back up the hill.

Approximately 14 minutes later, the dozer stopped about 16 feet above 5466 and the dozer winch cable was attached to the engines towing eye. Firefighter Hirschman remained in the rear seat of the engine, surrounded by hose. The dozer operator engaged the winch and took the slack out of the cable. As the cable came taught, the dozer engine started to lug so the operator disengaged the dozer clutch. At the moment the cable came taught, the brakes were released on 5466. The engine immediately started rolling downhill. The rapid downhill movement of the engine pulled the winch cable completely off the drum. The engine traveled backwards over 400 feet and struck the concrete canal at a speed estimated in excess of 40 mph. At the time of descent, neither occupant was wearing a seat belt and only Hirschman was wearing a hardhat.

EMT I's from CDF and SJFD were on the scene within 90 seconds. Both victims were taken to nearby Santa Teresa Hospital. Captain Knapp-Smith was pronounced dead upon arrival at the hospital.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FIELD

1. Reaffirm that CDF fire equipment is not designed to be operated on slopes exceeding 40%.
2. MI Section 2304.1 states "Each supervisor is responsible for carrying out the policy and purpose of the Department safety program.". Supervisors will "See that personal safeguards and safe clothing are provided and used for hazardous work".
  - a. Reaffirm that CDF policy (MI 2637.5) requires wearing of seat belts at all times when operating or riding in a motor vehicle.
  - b. Reaffirm that CDF policy (MI 2637.7) requires use of chock blocks for off-road parking.
  - c. Reaffirm that CDF policy (MI 2342.3) requires "All personnel will wear the standard issued safety helmet or an OSHA approved fireman's style helmet while engaged in, responding to, or returning from fire suppression activities.
3. Standard CDF winching hand signals, as found in Handbook 1190, should be memorized and used by all CDF personnel.
4. All CDF vehicle operators should be totally familiar with the contents of the Handbook 2620 for every piece of equipment they operate.