

‘It’s something you never want to see again’

By Kristina Goetz

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Half a mile beyond the nearest home, three white Prescott Fire Department pickups rolled up the south side of Yarnell Hill, into the wasteland.

The area had been heavy desert brush, scrub against endless piles of granite boulders. Now, only the boulders and a lone cactus remained.

The fire that swept through the day before had been so hot it cracked the granite, shearing off pieces of superheated stone. It left the earth baked and crumbling.

And as the fire barreled forward, it burned over 19 firefighters, killing them all.

In the hours that followed, fire investigators took photographs, collected evidence and prepared the bodies. A small group of firefighters stood watch through the night.

Just after daybreak Monday, the pickups rolled to a stop, and a 12-man crew emerged. They were there for a changing of the guard.

Across the yellow police tape, firefighters could see their comrades’ axes with spade heads, used for digging firelines. They saw water bottles and burned chain saws, abandoned when the firefighters took cover under their emergency shelters.

“It was a hot, hot fire,” said Prescott Firefighter Mark Matthews. The land looked “naked,” he said. “That was hard to see. And then you had to see all the body bags.”

Nineteen body bags, already tagged and numbered, lay in three rows.

It was time to carry the men off the mountain.

On Sunday, June 30, flames had already eaten nearly 1,000 acres across Yarnell Hill, and firefighters from Prescott and elsewhere fanned out to protect people and property.

The Granite Mountain Hotshot crew was working on the south side. Matthews and his partner, Conrad Jackson, were on the northwest side, setting up a sprinkler system in case the fire got close to a house.

Matthews had been with the department since 2001 and filled in a couple of times on the Granite Mountain Hotshot crew when they needed help. Jackson had been with the department for 12 years and had been a member of another team, the Prescott Hotshots, back in the 1990s. He’d also filled in on the Granite Mountain crew.

As the men worked, Jackson started hearing from family and friends who asked if something might have gone wrong on the fire. He didn’t know.

“With today’s technology, you start to get text messages and phone calls saying, ‘Hey, I heard this. You’re on the fire. What are you hearing?’” Jackson said.

He listened more closely to the chatter on the two-way radio for clues, but the rugged terrain blocked some signals, allowing only fragments of conversations to come through.

The Yarnell Hill Fire already had an incident commander. But then someone called for a Granite Mountain incident commander. That didn’t make sense because there was no Granite Mountain fire.

But Jackson knew what it meant.

“If there’s two incident commanders on the fire, it means there’s an incident within an incident,” he said. “I’ve been doing this 20 years. Something transpired. You just don’t know the gravity of it.”

The fire had been making a run to the north that afternoon, he said, eating up turf in Peoples Valley, when a thunder cell coming in from the north abruptly pushed a wall of fire south.

“Anytime there’s a thunderstorm, you’re going to expect erratic winds,” Jackson said. “Anybody who’s been around a monsoon shower here knows what it’s like. ... So there was a significant change in the fire behavior. And we started catching wind that something had transpired. But there was nothing definitive. We couldn’t make phone contact with anybody who had a definitive answer for us. So even as we came back into the main camp that night, we still didn’t know definitively.”

There were conflicting reports. One said no firefighters were injured. Another said an entire crew was gone.

That night, a task-force leader met them

between their post on the fire and base camp at Hays Ranch Road. He told them there were 19 fatalities. But he didn't say who. Once they arrived at base camp, Matthews finally realized the gravity:

The Granite Mountain crew on the other end of the fire had been in what firefighters call a burnover. Everyone caught in the fire had died, 19 in all.

As the fire burned, the Prescott firefighters regrouped. There was talk of pulling out everyone from the department.

But Jackson and Matthews wanted to stay, to collect "the boys."

"Anytime there's a tragedy, a fatal tragedy, it's tradition that," Jackson said, his voice breaking, "your own family comes and gets you."

"I don't want strangers going in and getting them out of there," he said. "I want to be the one that gets to go in there and get them out of there. It's a horrific honor to go in and do that."

Jackson said he whispered in as many ears as he could. He couldn't be sure what would happen.

"Every investigator that's doing their investigation, they want to have control of that scene. They want to know who's coming and going and impacting their scene. And I respect that. We all respect that."

But he knew someone would have to bring the bodies down the hill. "We wanted to be in that group," he said.

Early the next morning, he got the call.

He wasn't sure who granted the request or why. He just got word they were going.

Twelve men would be allowed on the mountain. Eleven would be from the Prescott Fire Department.

One would be from the Chino Valley Fire District: Capt. Dan Parker. His son, Wade Parker, was one of the 19.

After the burnover, a bulldozer had plowed a path half a mile up the hillside, the fresh desert earth stark against the blackened hill.

On Monday morning, that track led the three pickups to within about 30 feet of the fire crew.

The recovery crew, still in their yellow fire gear and hard hats, emerged from the trucks and approached the scene.

Some walked up to each man to say a silent prayer — or goodbye.

Jackson was grateful the men were already in body bags because he knew that would have been an image "you can't get out of your head."

"It was devastating," Matthews said. "There wasn't a dry eye."

Prescott Fire Department Wildland Di-

vision Chief Darrell Willis called the 12 together in a circle. They listened as he recited the 23rd Psalm.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want ...

"I'm pretty sure everybody was on a knee — or two," Matthews said.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou art with me ...

"It was beautiful," Matthews said. "We wanted to hear that at that time."

Two firefighters walked up to the body bags and unfurled American flags that had been brought to the scene.

"We draped those flags over each and every boy," Matthews said.

Then, eight firefighters, four on either side, stood in salute at the back of each truck as the other four men carried their bodies.

"It's not something you practice," Jackson said. "It's definitely not something you ever want to have to do."

But Prescott firefighters had been to New York after 9/11 and modeled their ceremony after one the FDNY held for firefighters whose remains were recovered from the Twin Towers.

As each body was placed in the back of the trucks, the men rotated.

"All of us participated in the honor line, and we all participated in moving our brothers," Jackson said.

It was hard for him to think.

"You almost have to go on autopilot and just work your way through it because all I'm thinking about is every moment I had with those kids," Jackson said. "And to me they're my kids. ... To see something so tragic happen to my own kids, I feel like any other father that has lost a son."

Three pickups made four single-file trips to take the bodies to the waiting medical-examiner vans at the bottom of the mountain. First six bodies. Then another six. Then another six. And finally one more trip for the remaining man.

"We transported them every step of the way after that, draped," Jackson said.

Matthews choked up when he recalled the moment.

"We knew these young men, these kids," he said. "And they were the cream of the crop. You couldn't ask for better guys. It was tough, but I was glad I was there. I was glad I had the opportunity to honor them in a small way and bring them back down. I'll never forget it. I'll never forget it. It's something you never want to see again."

At last, the firefighters were ready to descend for a final time. On the one cac-

tus that still stood, they placed a black T-shirt.

The shirt carried the logo of the Granite Mountain Hotshots.

Matthews recalled what Division Chief Willis told the group.

“He said, ‘I don’t know how long this will be here, but this is the best we can do right now.’”

Jackson and Matthews were part of the long procession following the white vans that took the 19 firefighters’ bodies to the Maricopa County Medical Examiner’s Office.

“I think Conrad and I said maybe five words to each other on the ride down there,” Matthews said. “We were just thinking and remembering these faces that would flash up in front of us because we worked with these guys.”

Jackson taught a fire-science course at Prescott High School from 2000 to 2006. Travis Turbyfill and Andrew Ashcraft had been his students. And he knew a handful of the others from passing them in the hall. Because they were minors, they couldn’t participate in live fire exercises, but Jackson had showed them how to pull hose and watched them perform drills in the high-school parking lot. He taught them how to rappel and oversaw their practice extrication exercises in broken-down cars.

“Andrew was always smiling, always smiling just happy, a happy-go-lucky kid. He was just good to be around.” He had a “grin from ear to ear.”

Travis loved the fire-science course so much he came back the next year and served as Jackson’s teaching assistant.

“He became my right-hand man,” Jackson said.

Long after graduation, both young men went to their former teacher for advice or to practice interview questions. Even after they were picked up by the Granite Mountain crew, they still called him Mr. Jackson.

“You can tell what era they met me from as to whether or not they would call me Conrad or would say Mr. Jackson,” he said. “If they ever went to Prescott High School, they surely called me Mr. Jackson because that’s how they were raised. They’re locals. That’s how they do it.”

In the truck as Phoenix drew closer, the faces and memories kept coming. Every now and then, Jackson took out his handkerchief.

“And I knew what he was doing,” Matthews said. “I’m trying to keep my eyes on the road, trying not to tear up so I can see that road and get us down there all right. It was a long ride.”

As the pair pulled into Phoenix, people were lined up on street corners, cheering, holding banners and saluting. Some simply stood still.

“There’s not a dry eye in the vehicle from Wickenburg to the Capitol,” Jackson said. “That’s a long way to cry.”

As the vans turned onto Eighth Avenue, they crossed under arched firetruck ladders that held a fluttering American flag.

One by one, the vans arrived at the Medical Examiner’s Office. There, the 19 bodies would be unloaded.

And there, firefighters from other departments stood in uniform, waiting for another changing of the guard.