

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Fireline Construction: Chainsaw Cut to Hand

Date: July 8, 2017

Location: Whittier Fire,
Los Padres National Forest

“When you step back and objectively look at what we do on the side of the hill with a chainsaw, it is incredible that this type of thing doesn’t happen more often.”

Saw Program Coordinator



Photo is representative of the terrain and fuel loading conditions at the accident site.

Tool handle placement is intended to provide scale.

Swamper 1 was taken from the line to the hospital where he underwent a four-hour surgery to reattach tendons and repair the damage to his hand.

BACKGROUND

On July 8 the Whittier Fire started near State Highway 154 and Lake Cachuma on the Santa Barbara District of Los Padres National Forest. The fire grew quickly and exceeded Initial Attack. Burning in very steep and rugged terrain, the Whittier Fire was resistant to control. A Type 1 Incident Management Team was ordered.

On July 18, a Hotshot Saw Team member engaged in fire line construction suffered a chainsaw cut to the hand. This Hotshot Crew had been cutting indirect fireline for several days using four Saw Teams in heavy brush. All crew members were helping with the swamping.

The Saw Teams on this crew alternate duties of cutting and swamping to provide training and experience to both team members.

Saw Team 1 had worked together all fire season. Both Saw Team 1 members were fully trained, qualified, and carded. Sawyer 1, a three-year crew veteran, was probably the best sawyer on the crew. While Swamper 1 was new to the crew, he had proved early-on that he was strong, fit, and able to operate on the lead Saw Team.

“We train weekly for these types of medical emergencies and events. It is embedded in our training.”

Crew Superintendent

NARRATIVE

The initial plan on July 18 was to go indirect and burn out when conditions became favorable. However, the fire behavior became less intense and tactics changed to direct line construction.

The crews on Division Yankee were getting close to tying-in the direct fire line. Their cut was almost complete. Saw Team 1 was responsible for putting in the initial cut, setting the line, and creating “keyholes” or “pockets” for the cut brush to be placed.

Saw Team 1 tied-in their section of line, stopped to refuel and swap sawyer/swamper positions—as they were running tank for tank. Squad Leader 1 asked them to turn around and work back toward the rest of the crew (a common practice).

He Realized it was a Serious Injury

“I felt like we got a second wind and we were working fast,” recalls Sawyer 1, “because we had just tied-in the line and we were now working back toward the rest of the crew.”

While Swamper 1 was pulling brush, he felt something touch the palm of his right hand and realized it was the guide bar and chain. He immediately pulled back and held his hand. *“I didn’t want to look and hoped it was just a nick,”* he would explain later. The Sawyer could not see his Swamper’s hand because it was obscured by the thick brush.

When Swamper 1 saw blood on his hand and his cut glove, he realized it was a serious injury and sat down.

Medical Emergency Declared

Squad Leader 1 heard a loud scream. He turned back to see Swamper 1 holding his hand with his glove ripped open.

Sawyer 1 called for a medical emergency response and to start an EMT to his location. He immediately applied direct pressure to Swamper 1’s wound with a maxi-pad.

The EMTs were on scene in moments and began administering bleeding control measures. The rest of the crew began widening the handline to accommodate the hoist operation at a small bench 20 yards from the accident site.

Meanwhile, Squad Leader 1 declared a medical emergency over the radio to Captain 1 who relayed the information to the Yankee Division Supervisor. It was determined that a helicopter hoist would be the most appropriate method to get Swamper 1 off the hill.

The EMTs were on scene in moments and began administering bleeding control measures. The rest of the crew began widening the handline to accommodate the hoist operation at a small bench 20 yards from the accident site.

Hoist-Capable Helicopter Called

The Incident Management Team—in the middle of handling another medical emergency on the fire for a heat-related illness—initiated a response for this new medical incident that included the dedicated hoist-capable helicopter. This helicopter lifted off the ground less than ten minutes after the call came in and had Swamper 1 on board and in route to the hospital in less than 30 minutes.

Swamper 1 was taken from the line directly to the hospital where he underwent a four-hour surgery to reattach tendons and repair the damage to his hand.

He is expected to make a full recovery in six to nine months and hopes to return to the crew and get back on a Saw Team.

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“I felt like I was really taken care of every step of the way, from my Crew EMTs, to the helicopter ride, to the people at the hospital—all the way around.”

Swamper 1

LESSONS

Highlights

- ❖ The Hotshot Crew response to the injury of one of their crew members was rapid, organized, and effective. Their training worked.
- ❖ The Incident Management Team’s Incident-Within-an-Incident (IWI) protocol was highly effective.
- ❖ Having a dedicated hoist-capable helicopter assigned to the incident was critical to getting Swamper 1 medical care in a timely fashion.

Questions

- ❖ Do we work too close together/too fast during line construction?
- ❖ Are there real/perceived pressures to produce during fireline construction?
- ❖ Why are we constructing handline and operating chainsaws in steep, rugged terrain that is difficult to walk in—let alone run chainsaws?
- ❖ Is the chainsaw the right tool for such brush cutting and line construction?
- ❖ Why don't we have a dedicated hoist ship on all wildland fires?

This RLS was submitted by:

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