

TESTIMONY OF BUEL B. HUNT

Taken at the Scene of Tragedy,

Hauser Creek Fire

October 8, 1943

Question: What is your full name and address?

Answer: Buel B. Hunt, 1473 Coolidge, San Diego.

Q. Your present position?

A. Training Officer in connection with the Cleveland Forest.

Q. How long have you been working for the Forest Service, cumulatively for this and other Forests?

A. I started to work in November, 1932, and I don't believe I have missed more than a month's work, outside of when I was going to school.

Q. You are a graduate Forester?

A. Yes, I had about five years of school.

Q. All of your experience has been in Southern California and your fire experience in country and type of cover similar to this?

A. Yes.

Q. Will you begin from the time you came down from Camp #2 to the place you parked your cars and tell us in narrative form just what action you took, why you took it and also give us the personnel, the number of marines, that were in the group, the marine officers that were with them and any other Forest Officers that were with you?

A. Gunner Wright was in charge of the marine detail. I have never gotten it straight whether it was Sergeant or Corporal Beckwith and Corporal . . . It has slipped my mind right now. Stewart.

We had to find a place to turn the trucks around, so we went to the flats on the side on the far end down here. We could see the Ole crew working at the lower end on the line down there.

Q. The down-stream side?

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

- A. Yes. Then, when the crew was all turned around and coming back up, we met the Lockett men coming down the road, so we had to pull off to the side of the road in various places and let the Lockett men by.
- Q. May I interject here and ask when you took over the contingent of Marines were there any formalities? Did they report to you as their Fire Boss, so to speak, or crew leader? Did they introduce themselves?
- A. Well, I knew them from previous fires.
- Q. You knew the gunner, you mean?
- A. Yes, and the two corporals, too.
- Q. He told you he was in charge of the crew? They knew that they were to come to you for directions?
- A. Yes, sir. After we had passed the Lockett men, we came up here and unloaded the men right along in here on the road and told Gunner Wright to have this Corporal Stewart, I guess his name was, go with Jack Herndon, the other Forest Service man, and I told Herndon to start constructing a line up the bottom of the draw here with the intent of backfiring.
- Q. Buel, how far from the mouth of this draw was the fire approximately? Will you indicate where you could see the fire when you started working?
- A. As I remember, it was across the top of this ridge and up in that general direction. Of course, it progressed as we worked.
- Q. Was it burning down that rocky ridge?
- A. It was running from the other side and working down there, so I figured we had a lot of time.
- Q. How many men did Corporal Stewart have with him?
- A. Approximately one half of them--50 men. He was to handle the men down the canyon from where the fire was and across the base of the canyon.
- Q. His sector was from where the truck was to the base of the hills. Is that correct?
- A. Stewart was to come up here making his line to Jack Herndon.
- Q. What determined your strategy in starting cutting a line on an indirect attack rather than getting right to the fire with a direct attack?

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

A. We had learned on our previous fires this season that we had met with greater success with making indirect attack where we could cut a shorter line and make it easier for the men to work.

Q. Your objective was to cut this line and then what?

A. To fire it out. To meet the main fire.

So Jack Herndon started working up the canyon and I asked Gunner Wright to have the other corporal take these men and be responsible from where . . . for posting them along the road and falling in behind Corporal Stewart and be ready for firing that out when he was ready to do it.

Q. From then on what happened?

A. After I had seen that they were posted down there, I started following up here behind Corporal Stewart and Jack Herndon. About that time Jack was working over the top of this ridge here.

Q. His line came up over this ridge?

A. Yes. I had intended for them to go up the bottom of the canyon here, but after seeing what they had done, I figured they had done a pretty good job of picking this locality. They had come up over the ridge rather than come up through the heavy bushes.

Q. Are we approximately on the line here?

A. Yes.

Q. In other words, the line started there and came up here where we are?

A. Yes. It didn't go along the shoulder, but right along the bottom where the path is.

Q. Maybe you can make some of these points on the map?

A. Jack was working on up this way and when I reached this point I thought, well, I would go on up ahead to see how they were coming and determine what we had in the way of line to cut in that draw. So I went on up the canyon. I had asked the radio operator to go on up on the point up there and he was to stay at the head of the group of men for communication and we were to have a radio behind.

Q. The radio man was supposed to be up on that rock up there?

Q. You didn't see him.

A. No. He was up on the point where the big rock is.

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt. cont'd.)

Q. He was a marine?

A. Yes. Then we, while Jack was working in here directing operations of the men, I went up on the canyon. I went up to about that far ridge where all the rocks were and I didn't see any marines any further up than that so I came back down to see about firing out down below here. I figured it was about time to start firing out because that ridge was a logical ridge to start firing out, to work back from, as far as I could determine then.

On the way down, I stopped to ask for some of the fellows to clean up some of the brush in here around the rocks just above those big rocks. You see that dead oak tree sticking out there? I think it was just about there, right below. I asked them to remove that and stack it down behind.

Then I came on down the canyon and I omitted to say, when I was going up, I met this Corporal Beckwith right in here some place, and asked him to send some men down to trim this tree up in here and make a secondary line right around in here. I was a little worried that it might possibly spot over here. Then I went on down and got about where that group of light rocks is down there and went to where the fire was coming over this little ridge.

Q. This little low ridge or the rocky one beyond?

A. I believe it was coming up over this little ridge here. So I just took it for granted that it had swept clear across the bottom then I went back up the canyon here and I hollered to the men to come on down and get out here, right in here. So the men all started coming down and we had gotten about where the men are waiting there now, and it was too hot to go on out.

Q. Had the fire crossed to this side?

A. Yes, it had already gone around. It had swept all the way across when I went down the first time. It was pretty big in that high brush and rocks, so we got down to about just below this tree and it was too hot to go on down so I told the men to come back in here to where these rocks are.

Q. Was that approximately right in here, behind this curved bank?

A. Yes, sir, right at the base of that curved cliff here. I told the men to get down and get behind the rocks, and as it got hotter and my hair caught on fire, I told the fellows to lie down on their faces. I don't know whether my hair was really on fire or just singed, but it was awfully hot. - So I told the men to lie down on their faces and cover up their heads.

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

Q. Was Gunner Wright with you?

A. No, he was not up in here any time. He was down below.

Q. Who was in charge of the marines with you?

A. Corporal Stewart and Beckwith.

Q. Were they in a close group with you?

A. No, I didn't notice either one at any time down below here.

Q. You say Gunner Wright and the Corporals were both up ahead of you?

A. I am not sure if Corporal Beckwith was ahead of me or not. Gunner Wright was down below when I passed him earlier.

Q. How many, approximately, of the marines were in your group close enough so that you knew they were safely taken care of at the position that you had detailed them in?

A. Oh! I should judge about 40 or maybe 50 men.

Q. Where was Jack Herndon at the time the fire came over?

A. When I started down the canyon, Jack was on top of this ridge, the first time, above this cliff watching all the time. As I came down the canyon from above the first time, I tossed him a back-fire flare and told him that when I hollered to touch this piece off up above here.

Q. Then you don't know exactly where he was when the fire went over you people here?

A. At one time, in the earlier part, we were watching for a way to get out, but he went above me shortly afterwards. I was afraid all the time that somebody might try for a break through the fire and I knew it was too hot.

Q. Are you satisfied that Stewart and Beckwith understood your instructions to come back and get into safe places?

A. I don't know that. I hollered to them. Whether they heard me or not, I don't know. I knew a majority of the men heard me.

Q. Was the fire making considerable roaring?

A. I don't believe it was. No.

Q. Was the canyon pretty well filled with smoke interfering with the visibility?

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

A. I couldn't see beyond those rocks up in there. They were passing the word back along the line hollering to come on down.

Q. As far as you know, how far up the gulch where any men stationed?

A. Just around the corner from the large rocks.

Q. Up around that little bend up there?

A. Yes.

Q. Hunt, as I understand, you and the group of marines came into this cliff here until the fire went over?

Q. Did they stay there during the intense heat or didn't they?

A. I saw a few of them running up the hole there but there was too much smoke I couldn't see.

Q. After they had gone down to the base of this little cliff?

A. Yes.

Q. Was there any noticeable confusion or yelling?

A. Not particularly. There was a certain amount of excitement, of course. There wasn't any hysteria of any kind. We had seen one or two men taking off in the brush over here. That was when the fire was coming up from below here, and I didn't think they had a chance in there so we hollered to them to come back, and they came back.

Q. They did!

A. Yes.

Q. Did they get out or come back?

A. As far as I know they all came back. I didn't see any going over.

Q. Was Herndon with you?

A. Yes, he was for a while.

Q. Was he there when the fire passed over you?

A. I had hoped the fire would sweep over that slope there without getting in here.

Q. Did you have to stay there while it burned up on this point immediately across from us?

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

A. Yes.

Q. Did the South shoulder go out before this one did?

Q. At approximately the same time this point was burning?

A. Yes, it was burning on both sides when this burnt in here. I think this burned here at the same time this far point was burning over there.

Q. Did the fire loose any rocks on you?

A. There were lots of embers but no rocks on us that I saw.

Q. Then, after the fire passed over, what happened?

A. Several of the fellows wanted to rush right down the canyon but we held them back and waited for it to cool. I tried myself and a couple of marines to go down but it was still too hot and we tried up here but it was still too hot over the top from the hot brush down here.

After things had cooled down for a while, I told the men to try coming up here on the bank and a couple of the fellows got through down there and they were going on out, so I started back here figuring I could help some of the worst ones.

I helped one marine who said his back was pretty badly burned. I helped him up over this ridge here and down over this point here, but it was still too hot to go into the gulley. It was still too hot to go on the top so I got in front of him to shield him from the heat. I was still too weak to go up the bank, and finally I managed to lift him up, and we got up here to where about the line was highest and we waited there until the line had cooled down some until he had revived himself a bit, and then I helped him on down the canyon to the road.

Q. Did you come on back after you had gone to the road?

A. I helped the fellows on the road and I tried to get down and help the boys get some drinks and I found I was pretty weak. I had started up here and got about as far as those first rocks and knew I couldn't make it and I wouldn't be much good. I knew the other corporals were in there. Walter Birch brought the hose down into here, so I went back down to the road and stumbled down to the road and passed out a couple of times down there from shock, or exposure, or something. Then I told the corpsman that he was in charge as far as I was concerned--in charge of the men.

Q. What corpsman?

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd)

- A. The corpsman was the pharmacist with the marines, and he had a large number of bandages, triangular bandages, in his kit so I helped bandage the men as much as I could.
- Q. When you went back, did you see Gunner Wright again?
- A. Yes, he was there.
- Q. The marines took charge from then on in getting their casualties out of the canyon?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Did you know if there were any fatalities in the group that were with you?
- A. No. I don't think so. All the men were out when I left but after I got to the road I was told that there were still a group of men on top and I learned that three of them had been burned.
- Q. When you went up the canyon to pull the men out, you said you had called up ahead to them? Did I understand that you had heard them repeating the message to each other up the line?
- A. Yes.
- Q. What vehicles were on the road at the mouth of the gulch?
- A. I know my pickup was right around the corner there and I kind of get mixed up with what happened afterwards in there. I knew that there was a couple of tankers down below but I don't remember really.
- Q. How did the marines come down to Fire Camp #2? Did they walk there or come in trucks?
- A. There wasn't any Camp #2 then. They came down in trucks and turned around in there and brought them into here.
- Q. As far as you could see, then, the fire started across this little gulch by spotting or continuous spread?
- A. I thought it came by continuous spread but it came so suddenly that I couldn't see how it could come . . . I am not positive whether it was a spot or whether it was continuous.
- Q. Was there a great deal of smoke?
- A. Yes. I was down in the gulley most of the time. At the time that was evidently taking place, I was down inside of the canyon.



(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

- Q. As far as you know, how far was Corporal Stewart with that group of men?
- A. They were in that last group of rocks up there; in that area we can see from here, I believe it was. Of course, they may have made some progress in the time that I came down. You see, there was an interval of time in there.
- Q. What was the wind direction at the time?
- A. I couldn't say what the wind direction was but I know where the draft was. It was pulling up the main canyon.
- Q. What I was trying to tie in about the wind . . . When it spread, had the wind changed from the time the men came in? As I gathered so far, the wind was gradually working this way right along.
- A. It was on an angle upslope approximately parallel to this draw down here. It had more or less jumped sideways across the draw.
- Q. It swung about 45° from the initial starting point?
- A. Yes, it was about this way and in order to make this sweep, it must have made an angle about like this.
- Q. Approximately Southwest?
- A. Southwest. It was from the Southwest and then it went just about from the West.
- Q. What was Gunner Wright supposed to be doing with his men?
- A. Gunner Wright was not given any details by me except that he was in general supervision of all the marines.--the way they had always worked at previous fires--we gave the orders to the two corporals and Gunner Wright was boss, sort of, over the whole thing.
- Q. Then he didn't have any duties in the canyon?
- Q. Gunner Wright was with the marines on this east line?
- A. Yes.
- Q. His duty was to be in general charge of the marines on this East line?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Did you have any men strung out down the West end of the gulch?

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

- A. Yes. I had told Gunner Wright to have Corporal Beckwith's men strung out in that direction and I presumed that that was what he was doing. He must have been doing that when he was down there.
- Q. He probably would be firing there if that had been successful here?
- A. I had planned firing down the canyon where I had figured on firing out the canyon first and then carrying from the road down here.
- Q. Which would have kept the South side from burning?
- Q. The break of Cottonwood Canyon, did it happen now or subsequent to this?
- A. That was the next burn--the next day.
- Q. At any time did any of the crews start setting any fires to attempt to backfire?
- A. We hadn't done any yet but later I learned that Jack did set one spot up there. I learned it this morning.

SUBSEQUENT TESTIMONY OF BULL B. HUNT

Taken at the Descanso Ranger Station

HAUSER CREEK FIRE, October 8, 1943

- Q. I think the point we wanted to clear up was the exact conversation you had with Gunner Wright. There seems to be just a little question as to the distribution of the men with delegates of authority by Gunner Wright. Can you clear that little point up? What went on during the time you were unloading your men and outlining to Gunner Wright what you wanted them to do?
- Q. Did he turn his men over to you in any formal way? Did he come up to you and say he was in command of the men?
- A. I didn't ask him. I knew he was in charge and I didn't have to ask him. I didn't go back to him every time and ask him--and tell him what to do.
- Q. In your testimony you gave me the impression that you figured that Stewart and Beckwith had more authority than the command of merely a truck crew. Did you have such an impression?
- A. Yes, I did.
- Q. Did you get that from Gunner Wright?
- A. Yes.
- Q. How did he convey that to you?
- A. I believe I asked him at the start how we could divide the men up. That's the way I remember it.
- Q. Did you have any understanding with him that the truck driver of each truck was supposed to be responsible for each truck?
- A. I had been with them once before this fire--up at the Oasis Fire at Laguna--and in that particular situation under these various men who I understood were corporals. They wore these hats with the bill on there and there were two men.
- Q. You assumed from that insignia that they were in command?
- A. Yes.

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

- Q. In the progress of the work, you gave them directions assuming that they controlled a fairly large group of men?
- A. Yes, I thought they were each in charge of fifty men.
- Q. Herndon was under the same presumption, too?
- A. Yes.
- Q. Did you and Gunner Wright have any discussions about what you were going to do? Do you remember discussing that with him?
- A. No, we didn't.
- Q. You told him what you were going to do and as far as that was concerned that was all there was to it? He made no comments on the location of the line?
- A. No.
- Q. Did you make the suggestion that Gunner Wright leave the mouth of the draw and come up where the men were working?
- A. No, I didn't ever give any instructions to him at all because I assumed that he would be watching over all of the men in much the same manner as I was, but he was in charge of the military men themselves and I was in charge of the type of work they were doing.
- Q. You directed your instructions definitely through those two men, Beckwith and Stewart?
- A. Yes, you see there wasn't time to make any more contacts with Gunner Wright and I only made comments with the other two men.
- Q. Did they accept those instructions and obey them and carry them out?
- *Answer?*
- Q. Was there ever any direction as to the possible use of the tanker and running the hose line up the draw?
- A. I was told they were too far away. They were down on the flats when we came up.
- Q. On the far west line of the fire?
- A. Yes.
- Q. There was no tanker at the mouth of the canyon until Davis brought it up, and he got it below and he brought it down, according to Davis's testimony, and actually cooled the fire down so that the first ten men got out with more ease.

(Testimony of Buel B. Hunt, cont'd.)

- A. Didn't the first ten men get out before the fire crossed over?
- Q. Did either of those men have hand tools--were they working men or were they here and there with the rest of the men?
- A. I don't remember whether they had tools or not but they were going back and forth giving commands to the men.