



## 'Last-ditch' shelters saved Tahoe firefighters

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SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. (AP) — A patchwork of small blazes exploded into an inferno, surrounding the two young firefighters. Separated from the rest of their crew and with trees turning into matchsticks all around, they had seconds to act.

They raced to a meadow, flung open the thin, heat-resistant emergency shelters all wildland firefighters carry, and threw their bodies on the ground. It would be nearly an hour before U.S. Forest Service officials working the wildfire near Lake Tahoe knew the pair survived the searing gases and heat.

"It's a last-ditch measure for survival," incident commander Rich Hawkins said of their decision to deploy the shelters Tuesday after a backfire jumped a containment line. "They were in their tents for 25 minutes wondering if they'd live or die, and most people can't imagine what that would feel like."

The two men's identities have not been revealed because the Forest Service is investigating the incident, a standard procedure whenever firefighters use the shelters since they are supposed to be reserved for the most extreme life-threatening situations.

Firefighters are trained to avoid entrapment. But fires can behave erratically, and when faced with a wall of fire and no way out, they're drilled in how to survive within an 8-foot-long space that looks like the foil wrapper around a burrito.

The shelters, which can't withstand direct flames, must be deployed in textbook fashion to stand a chance of working. Find an area as far from fuel as possible, ideally rocky, bare soil. Throw chain saws or anything that can ignite far away. Unfurl the shelter. With hands protected in leather gloves and feet in leather boots, hook into the straps at the shelter's four corners. Flop down, feet toward the fire, face pressed into the ground where the air is cooler.

Then, hold on in unbearable heat while hoping the oxygen holds out, until the fire passes by.

"When fire goes over you there's a tremendous amount of energy, of heat, flames going over you, and it generates its own wind," said Matt Mathes, U.S. Forest Service spokesman "There may be some smoke creeping in. It's very loud, very hot, very uncomfortable."

Many firefighters caught in similar situations as the two Tahoe firefighters haven't survived, even after expertly covering themselves with the aluminum-and-fiberglass shields. Those who have describe a horrific combination of panic, unbearable heat and a roar that drowns out all other sounds.

"He said it was like being run over by a freight train," said Steve Emhoff, whose son, Jason Emhoff, was badly injured but lived through the 2001 Thirtymile Fire in Washington state. Four other firefighters perished inside their shelters during the fire.

What happened that day remains the subject of dispute, but what is known is that a group of firefighters got trapped on a dead-end road while trying to put out a blaze that was originally thought to be comparatively benign.

The trapped firefighters planned to ride out the fire, thinking it would miss the spot where they had sought shelter.

Instead, the main arm of the fire leaped a canyon, while a second flank bore down on them. Jason Emhoff and others were watching from a rocky embankment next to the road when the terrain exploded all around them.

Although they deployed their shelters, heat traveled through the loose rocks as if going up a chimney while they were cupped inside, Steve Emhoff said.

Exposed to temperatures that reached over 500 degrees, Jason Emhoff suffered burns over 40 percent of his body. He lost some use of his hands, forced to grip the sides of the shelter without leather gloves, but eventually returned to the Forest Service to fight fires.

Rebecca Welsh, a member of the same Naches, Wash.-based squad, saved herself and two unequipped civilian campers she was able to squeeze into her shelter. Welsh, 21-years-old at the time, suffered second degree burns because she couldn't fit entirely in the crowded tent.

Fourteen firefighters deployed their shelters that day in Washington State. Ten lived. Four died, engulfed in a heat wave estimated to have reached nearly 2,000 degrees.

"It's changed his life," Steve Emhoff said of his son, who does not like to discuss his ordeal.

The area where the Tahoe firefighters were trapped Tuesday, just southwest of the lake, also was supposed to be safe.

The day before, to block the advance of about five large spot fires, crews had bulldozed fire lines and intentionally ignited the space inside the lines to starve the advancing fire of fuel, said Hawkins.

But one tree, too green to light up, remained. The following day, when the wind picked up, embers from the backfire set the tree ablaze. It started throwing off sparks, which landed beyond the area protected by the fireline, Hawkins said.

A crew of five Forest Service firefighters, including the two men who would become trapped, charged into the area to mop up the new flare-ups. But the small fires proliferated, merged, and roared into flames that may have reached 1,400 degrees and drove the team apart, Hawkins said.

Split from their colleagues, they found a meadow, yanked the shelters from their packs, popped them up and crawled inside — all in probably less than 30 seconds, and without losing radio contact with the three firefighters who escaped in a fire engine, Hawkins said.

The metallic structures reflected the heat of timber burning around them, and a good seal with the ground kept enough oxygen inside the tents to allow them to survive until it was safe to step out, he said.

"When we die in a fire, we die long before the flames consume us," Hawkins said. "It's the superheated air that destroys your lung tissue. It's a terrible way to go and it's our greatest fear as firefighters, that that's how we die."

Two woman firefighters finally approached the shelters to say it was safe to get out, prompting a "Yes!" from one of the trapped men, who emerged uninjured, the women reported to Hawkins.

They were taken to the hospital as a mandatory precaution for any firefighter exposed to great heat and smoke, but were released, Hawkins said.

"It's a wonderful moment for all firefighters when the people you think might have been lost are found," Hawkins said.

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