

Prologue

A year ago, I saw a man go up in flames. Our helitak crew was fighting the Pozo Fire in the Los Padres National Forest in Central California. That morning, we dropped onto a remote ridge on Black Mountain. Our job was to cut a control line along the flank of the fire burning in the valley below. We struggled to clear a three-foot wide break through thick brush on the side of the mountain.

Without warning, the wind changed direction and a firestorm with a ninety-foot wall of flames roared up the canyon at us. In a heartbeat, the oxygen was gone, hot smoke and ash filled the air, and we couldn't breathe. Our entire crew was caught off guard.

It was every firefighter's nightmare. The heat was staggering. The brush was an inferno. Trees weren't burning, they were exploding. Trapped on rugged, steep terrain, we had no time to deploy our fire shelters. Our only escape was to climb back up the fireline to our safe zone. We shouted warnings, dropped tools and daypacks and clawed our way up the side of the canyon.

We had sixty seconds to escape the firestorm, which was nearly upon us. I felt the radiant heat on my neck and wrists, and I knew I would die from breathing superheated air before I burned to death. I looked back and saw TB, our Captain, for a few seconds before he disappeared behind the wall of fire. If he cried out, I couldn't hear him. The roar of the blaze was deafening. Jake, Luis, and everyone else in the crew made it to the safe zone. TB perished.

ONE FOOT IN THE BLACK - A Wildland Firefighter's Story - Kurt L. Kamm

In a state of shock and anguish, we were pulled off the fireline and airlifted back to the incident command post. We received medical treatment and were sent back to Los Angeles. Our physical injuries were minor, but each of us struggled to cope with the death of our Captain. It hit me hardest because TB was my mentor, my substitute father.

We went out on stress leave and the Los Angeles County Fire Department sent us to see their psychiatrist for a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing.

Fighting a wildland fire is dangerous business and entrapment is always possible. At least once in every firefighter's life he fights for survival and thinks the unthinkable. The Pozo Fire, one for the record books, started July 23, 2001 and burned 149,000 acres. It occurred the year after I came to California to escape a lifetime of abuse and neglect from my real father. My struggle to survive his mistreatment continued long after I recovered from the events on Black Mountain.