

Lake Valley: Angora Fire – a helpless feeling

Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News this month has been running several stories leading up to today's 10th anniversary of the June 24, 2007, Angora Fire.



The Angora Fire spreads rapidly through the forest.
Photo/LVFPD

By Kathryn Reed

“In the firehouse it was a quiet, somber mood. Everyone was really tired and we were all really sad. It was our local fire district. We were wishing we could have done more, but knew it was totally out of our control. It was

*a helpless feeling.” – Capt. Mike Mosca, Lake Valley Fire
Protection District*

Mosca wasn't supposed to work on June 24, 2007. He was camping with his family at Fallen Leaf Lake.

He and then Battalion Chief Joe MacAvoy had been mountain biking at Scott's Lake that morning. Siren, after siren wailed in the not so far distance. Coming down the trail into Meyers they saw the plume of smoke. It was black. Structures were on fire. The two had never pedaled as fast as they did that Sunday afternoon.

Mosca was dropped off at the station, while MacAvoy secured Mosca's family.

But there was no time for MacAvoy to save his own house from the destructive Angora Fire.

“The first two engines in Angora got to a vantage point to see the fire. They called the battalion chief to evacuate this neighborhood,” Mosca said.

Mosca had only been a captain for a few months at that point. That day he was an engineer – meaning he was driving the fire truck. Making the sharp left on Lake Tahoe Boulevard at Angora Creek it was impossible to see anything.



The sky was orange for days and nights as the Angora Fire raged. Photo/LVFPD

“Trees were torching up like Christmas trees. You could hardly see the road,” Mosca told *Lake Tahoe News*. “By Coyote Lane and Eagle Ridge you could hear the fire. It was like a freight train. Already houses were on fire. Spot fires thrown by the houses on fire exceeded our span of control. There was nothing we really could do.

“We got the engine out of those streets and pulled back to station 5 near Boulder Mountain to see what the fire was doing. When we saw it making a run through the neighborhood above Lake Tahoe Boulevard we went in to see what houses we could save.”

Most of the 254 houses that burned that day did so in the first eight hours.

Air suppression that first afternoon wasn't possible because the winds were so high.

"When it's that hot and intense and crowning the radiant heat is so intense you can't get within several hundred feet of the fire front because it will just burn you up," Mosca said.

Those who fought the fire that day were wondering how many people died, and how many they might know. After all, this was a locals' neighborhood, with most houses occupied by full-time residents.



The remains after the flames moved on from the neighborhood. Photo/LVFPD

Miraculously no people died, though some animals perished. In

fact, there were only minor injuries to firefighters. People for the most part obeyed orders from law enforcement to evacuate. Friends called friends. It was a community looking out for one another.

“It was amazing what law enforcement did. They knew where the disabled and elderly in the community were and they got them out,” Mosca recalled. “And they didn’t have safety gear. They were in summer street clothes.”

The fire was out in less than a week, having consumed about 3,100 acres – mostly U.S. Forest Service land. For the local firefighters after the first day they were no longer in control. On a fire of this size and nature the state and feds take over. The local guys are told to resume their regular duties.

“It’s hard when they come in and say ‘we have it from here and go back to your station’. But there is also the understanding they have an unlimited amount of resources and the command structure to run a giant scale event,” Mosca said.



Lake Valley firefighters on the Angora Fire in 2007.
Photo/LVFPD

That didn't mean Lake Valley, or even surrounding departments, stayed in their stations as the fire kept burning. They were in the neighborhood, especially the Lake Valley firefighters. They sifted through rubble, they listened to those who lost everything, and to those who wondered how and why their house survived.

They, too, though, were devastated.

Ten years later, about half of Lake Valley's employees are veterans of the Angora Fire. It's a physical and emotional memory with many lessons that are passed on.

Not long after the fire a counselor came in to do a critical incident stress debriefing. Attending was optional.

"We sat in a circle, talked about things, what we saw, what we did, what we felt," Mosca said. "Guys cried, some were quiet."

"One of the things the counselor said when we were in the group is one of the biggest problems is with our job we go in and we fix things. People call us because they are having a really bad day and we fix it. When we get a call and there is nothing we can do it is hard to deal with."

About half of the two dozen Lake Valley employees live in Meyers or South Lake Tahoe. They hear the tone and they go to work. They did it that Sunday and they keep doing it, never knowing if it will be the next Angora.