

AFC Firefighter Faces Massive Inferno

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Jimbo Robinson was one of 25 Alabama Forestry Commission firefighters who traveled to Georgia to assist our neighboring state in the worst wildfire campaign in that state's history. At the close of the six-week campaign, the AFC had sent a total of eight, four-man firefighting crews (seven men served in two separate details – Robinson among them), one arson investigator, and one payroll clerk to assist the Georgia Forestry Commission, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the USDA Forest Service on fires that totaled over 500,000 acres. This assistance was provided under the Southeastern Fire Compact, a mutual aid agreement between the Southern states and other natural resource agencies.

A veteran firefighter's voice softens when he recalls a moment during a frantic bid to save his life and those of fellow foresters battling a massive blaze in south Georgia.

James "Jimbo" Robinson was surrounded. He entered the fire zone to put in breaks – dirt lanes – to halt the march of the blaze. Suddenly, he was closed in by an inferno with flames growing from five feet high to more than 50 feet. Pushed by the wind, they were advancing at him and four other men from both directions.

He didn't know if he was going to make it out alive.

"Right before it (the fire) blew over, there is a point in there when you don't know if you are going to make it," the Chambers County firefighter said.

When Robinson entered the battle zone south of Waycross, Georgia, conditions weren't that bad. But things changed quickly for the firefighter sent by Alabama officials to help.

A fellow (AFC) firefighter, Todd Taggart, was watching from afar. He said that after Robinson drove his bulldozer into the woods, a column of smoke, or plume, several acres wide developed.

Taggart said all of a sudden the bottom dropped out of the plume, leaving firefighters on the ground with almost no visibility.

At that point, word went in for everyone to pull out. But Robinson got turned around. He could barely see the front of his bulldozer. Then he and several Georgia foresters found themselves in a life-threatening situation.

Robinson credits his training for preventing a tragedy.

The men used their equipment to dig deep into the ground to make sure onrushing flames wouldn't find anything to burn near them.

That extra time may have made the difference.

With work on the safety zones finished and the flames approaching, the Georgian firefighters hit the ground and hunkered down. Robinson stayed in his cab. The flames, some now reaching 100 feet high, leaped over the men, Robinson said. Hoses hanging on the side of Robinson's bulldozer melted.

But he was happy to be inside. He was ready, if the situation deteriorated, to jump out and put up a fire resistant tent.

"It was so hot in the bulldozer that your fingers would burn if they touched the doors," he said. "My windows didn't bust. But if they had, I would have jumped out and deployed my shelter."

Now back in Alabama, the father of two still has memories of that particular blaze earlier this summer.

"It's hard to believe how hot, and how much wind the fire created," he said. "We were in the wrong place, at the wrong time."

Unfortunately, the fires that ravaged thousands of acres in Georgia could easily break out here, Robinson said. The ground is just as dry. "Usually, in the end of summer, you have dry spells," he said. "But when you have normally green grass and bushes start to burn, you are dry."

Robinson, 36, is almost counting on fighting fires this year in Alabama similar to those in Georgia. "It's just a matter of when," he said. "The question is, will we be ready?"



Photo by Brigetta Giles

In addition to fighting wildfires in Georgia this year, the Alabama Forestry Commission's Jimbo Robinson also worked on several western wildfire details in 2006.

Robinson, who was working on a bulldozer with a cab, was able to push dirt, brush and trees a few moments longer than his counterparts who were exposed to the smoke on their machines.