Pain-Wracked Fire Victims Proud of Green Berets

Two months ago they were 25 young, strong and healthy men. Some looked forward to attending college or starting new careers. One was about to be married.

But all that was halted—for 11 permanently, for others indefinitely—by a sheet of flame that lasted only 20 seconds.

Most of those who lived now have bodies scarred by a crazy quilt of healing flesh and grafted skin. Some have hands swollen twice normal size and virtually paralyzed by the raw pulp that slowly heals into flesh. A few have red scars on their faces and parts of ears burned away.

Three remain in "critical condition," a simple phrase that fails to convey the constant pain, endless weeks of immobility, constant attention by physicians and hospital workers—and a chance they may yet die.

But, despite their tragic losses to their mortal enemy—fire—the proudest possession of the El Cariso Hot Shots remains their green berets, the symbol of the elite reputation the crew from the Cleveland National Forest in Riverside County had earned as firefighters.

(List last month, on the hottest Nov. 1 in history, a brush fire raged above Sylmar, sending 730 patients fleeing from two hospitals and blackening 2,100 acres. By late afternoon, firefighters gained control and it looked like another routine Southern California blaze. Then a freak fire storm flashed up Pacoima Canyon, trapping the U.S. Forest Service's 25-man El Cariso Hot Shot crew.

Eleven were fatally burned—the worst disaster among professional firefighters in local history and, in terms of human loss, second only to the 1933 Griffith Park fire that killed 29 county welfare recipients.

Times staff writer Art Berman tells the story of survivors of the recent disaster.)

Listen to Ed Cosgrove, 22, of Santee, who lies in a hospital bed recovering from burns on the face, hands, elbows and legs:

"We're still the best in Southern California. All the old guys (former members) are coming back. And we're getting more applications than ever."

The top portion of Cosgrove's right ear is burned away. But he placed his green beret at a jaunty angle and repeated with cocky confidence:

"We're still the best. You'd better believe it."

Cosgrove, who was transferred to the San Diego Naval Hospital this week, was one of 11 most seriously burned survivors (up to 50% burned) who were treated in the highly regarded but crowded and grim looking Burns Ward of General Hospital.

He was among four men recently transferred to the naval hospital, which is nearer their homes and better equipped for therapeutic care. Four men remain in General Hospital, three in intensive care and one recovering satisfactorily.

One man, Carl J. Schilecutt, 26, of Yorba Linda, died five days after the fire. The 11th man, Gordon King, 30, the crew chief, has been released from the hospital.

Before leaving General Hospital, Cosgrove recounted the horrible

Please Turn to Page 3, Col. 1

STILL SMILING—Jerry Smith, 19, who was burned on hands and face.
FIRE SURVIVORS

Continued from First Page

moments that killed 11 of his buddies.

"We were strung out in a line, moving down the canyon, when we came to a break. All of a sudden, I heard a lonesome howl. "It's just like that, and here came the fire."

"Some of the guys tried to run, but there was no fixing it. I looked back, right at the back of my head. I just hit the ground and took real shallow breaths. It's breathing in that heat that kills you. It burns the lungs. I just flattened out and covered my head."

"Don't know how I lived." The men on either side of him died.

Jerry Smith, 19, who survived, says he was amazed by the burns on his face and hands that kept him semi-conscious for two weeks, during which he survived to another crew member, Small 24, one of those recently transferred to the national forest service.

"I was breathing around on the ground as the flames came over," he said. "Joe hit me on the back of the head and had to knock me out. Then he carried me to a cool area."

"I wouldn't happen again in a thousand years," Cosgrove added.

Smith, 23, of Paradise, Calif., hopes to be released as an outpatient early next year and would like to return to Riverside City College, where he had already a semester, to study math and art.

Cosgrove, a Marine veteran and son of a veteran fireman who died of cancer last August, hopes to be married soon.

"She's supposed to be married Nov. 26," he said, "but I was in surgery in the hospital."

Rich Leah, 19, of Vista, is another El Cariso Hot Shot who was recovering satisfactorily in General Hospital. He was transferred Tuesday to California Hospital. His father is a civilian fire captain at Camp Pendleton.

Leah's hands, arms and legs were burned. But when asked if he needed anything, his concern was for others who were working like crazy. "They're underpaid and overworked."

Leak hopes to leave the hospital early next year and possibly return to Puyallup College, where he held three semesters.

"It was my 36th fire in two years," the handsome young man said. "It's been a busy summer. We'd been working in the eastern states. We only had about 10 days off all summer."

"At 2.30 a.m., the firefighters were earning $100 to $150 a week. Most were employed in the forest service for just under a year."

The day we were burned," Smith noted, "was supposed to be a day off."

Smith was only on his second fire when he was burned.

He said one lesson learned by the tragedy is that "wearing gloves should be a rule." Dr. John Winkley, who heads the Burns Ward, agreed.

"A lot of them should have been wearing gloves and a protective jacket," Dr. Winkley said. "We've ordered some."

Winkley said garments provided a surprisingly good protection against the flames. But in the absence of gloves, the severe burns and injuries were to the men's hands.

The burns were treated with the newest, most effective applications of silver nitrate solution of sulfanilic acid, Dr. Winkley said.

Skincare was started immediately.

Skin Used as Dressing

In some cases, skin from dead persons was used as a temporary, and highly effective, burn-dressing, when asked if he was a particular anguished from Dr. Winkley.

"It is not easy to get permission from relatives of recently deceased persons to take skin from the cadavers," Dr. Winkley said. "We had the skin from this tissue bank at the Bethesda, Md., Naval Hospital."

A number of General Hospital officials are contemplating the establishment of a skin bank. Dr. Winkley said he was surprised at the progress some of the young firefighters have shown. He credited their youth and good condition.

Their spirit might have played a role, too.

As Ed Cosgrove put it, "These young people are working like crazy. They're underpaid and overworked."