

The 2003 fire season: remembering those who have fallen

by Doug Newbould

It is an easy thing to grow numb. All you have to do is watch the news, listen to the radio or read the newspaper on a regular basis. Death and destruction assail our senses every day. There is a human condition that can result from overexposure to sensory stimulus. Some call it information overload, others desensitization. Whatever it's called, repeated exposure to the words, the imagery and the sounds of destruction can numb us to human suffering and environmental catastrophe.

The 2003 wildland fire season has been just another in a series of newsmakers. The headlines have almost daily, trumpeted the latest casualties and property losses. Words like firestorm, holocaust and conflagration are tossed around like ping-pong balls in a lottery machine. The "Halloween Fires," so far, caused the deaths of at least twenty people and destroyed thousands of structures in southern California. Restoration will cost billions. Before California, there was devastation in Oregon, in Montana and in New Mexico.

But there is one piece of information that seems to be missing from the national news stories. Have you heard how many wildland firefighters died in the line of duty this year? I haven't. So I searched several wildland fire management websites and came up with a list of twenty fallen firefighters through August 2003. I know at least one firefighter died in California since then.

Another twenty wildland firefighters perished in the record fire season of 2000. From my perspective, I

don't think this information is making it into the national consciousness. Perhaps the same can be said about the structural firefighting community. In 2002, ninety-nine firefighters (80 structural and 19 wildland) from 36 states gave their lives in the line of duty.

Lest we forget these fallen heroes, there are two national firefighter memorial sites. The National Fallen Firefighters Foundation has developed a beautiful memorial park in Emmitsburg, Maryland, about an hour and a half drive north of Washington, D.C. They conduct a national firefighter memorial service every year. This year's memorial was Sunday, October 5th. For more information you can visit the website at: www.firehero.org, or you can write to: Post Office Drawer 498 / Emmitsburg, MD 21727.

The second memorial is located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. The Wildland Firefighter Monument honors "the men and women who fight our nation's wildfires." You can learn more about this monument and the firefighters who have died in the line of duty at: <http://wffoundation.org/monument.html>.

Let's do our best to honor those who give their lives to protect ours.

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