An Interview with Jimmie Rocha

San Diego, CA

March 23, 2023

NMFSH Accession No. 2021.074.053

[00:00:05] James Wall: Could you tell me when and where you were born?

[00:00:08] Jimmie Rocha: I was born on January 2, 1966, in St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, California.

[00:00:18] James Wall: And you'd said that you didn't spend any more time in Santa Monica after that?

[00:00:21] Jimmie Rocha: No. I came off of a ranching family of the south end of Kern County [California], and my grandmother lived in Culver City-Palms [California]. And I guess at that time in life when the mother was about to have a child, she went down to see mom and stay there until the child was born. And then we went back up to the Hill where I had three older sisters.

[00:00:47] James Wall: Just you and three older sisters?

[00:00:51] Jimmie Rocha: Yes.

[00:00:52] James Wall: Bless her heart. So, when you were growing up, did you have any time, did you spend time in the outdoors? Did you love it? What did you do for fun?

[00:01:04] Jimmie Rocha: You know what, I spent my entire time in the outdoors. We lived in the Hill country there on the south end of Kern County. And from as young as I can remember, I was always roaming around the sides of the hills playing and wandering. I spent very little time inside. And I think that probably is what led to my thirty-six-year career. I enjoyed being outside all the time.

[00:01:33] James Wall: I think you're not alone on that. I think a lot of these guys would be happy to spend most of their time outside and especially on the fire. So how did we get to the hotshots?

[00:01:49] Jimmie Rocha: Well, actually it's an interesting career because where I grew up, I probably should have ended up working on the Los Padres National Forest, but I ended up actually starting my first season when I turned eighteen, I worked as a seasonal for the Kern County Fire Department. And then my sister was working for the Forest Service on the Sequoia National Forest out of Kernville [California], which is about two hours away from where we lived. And I put in an application in over there, and I was actually picked up. Instead of with the Forest Service, I got an offer from the Bakersfield [California] District of the BLM. They were working that year with a pilot program of half Bureau of Land Management employees, half Forest Service employees on the helicopter out of Kernville. And I took that job for my second season. And at the

end of that season, I transitioned over the next year to--that program went away--and I went back to a strictly Forest Service crew. And I stayed on the flight crew over there for four years.

[00:03:07] **James Wall:** Wow. So, you were up in the air starting out on the Helitack. Or was it a Helishot or a Helitack crew?

[00:03:16] **Jimmie Rocha:** It was a flight crew. It was a 15-person flight crew was the initial plan. At that time, most of the fires that we flew were lightning fires on the Kern Plateau was our bread and butter that we had. So that led me into--after five years there with them--my last year I got picked up career conditional for the Forest Service and I went and became the roads end FPT, a Fire Prevention Technician, a patrolman at that time, and probably one of the most enjoyable jobs.

Once again, I was by myself. I had a patrol unit, got to travel. At that point in the Forest Service, it wasn't the process you have now where you go to classes to become a crew boss, and then you had to do a task book to become a crew boss. Back then you went to crew boss in Fire Business Management, and then the forest basically, when they decided you had been to enough fires and doing stuff, you went, and they gave you your red card as a crew boss. And I can still remember getting the last assignment that they gave me as kind of like a trainee crew boss. They called up one day and they said, "You're going to go to Fort Lewis, Washington and you're going to be taking the military to the fires in Yellowstone in 1988."

And that was one of the first times that it was used--of using the military on large fires. They had used them back before there was a lot of fires. They just picked up crews of the military. But we actually went up and did a training program with the military, and then we flew to Montana and spent over a month with them. There was no fourteen days, no twenty-one days. At that time, you just left, and when you came back home. It was kind of like in 1987 when we had the siege in California. We left Kernville and we didn't come--we left in July, and we didn't come back home until October. I mean, our checks were basically in the mailbox just sitting and that's when we came back. So that part of my career was very formative for me. I got to do what I refer to as kind of the old Forest Service, not the Forest Service that kind of exists now. I came in it at the end of an era.

[00:06:01] **James Wall:** If you could remind me the years of this trajectory. So, you start out, your first, first, first season, you were seasonal…

[00:06:09] **Jimmie Rocha:** For the Kern County Fire Department. That was 1984.

[00:06:11] **James Wall:** Okay.

[00:06:13] Jimmie Rocha: And then 1985, I went to the BLM on the helicopter out of Kernville. And then from the years of 1986 to 1989, I worked for the US Forest Service, the last year being a patrolman for them. And like I said, it opened up—it was a very eye-opening experience for a kid in his early ages. I mean, I had the opportunity—I don't know if I'd call it an opportunity—but I went to the 1985 earthquakes in Mexico City [Mexico]. We sent three helicopters and the crews with them to Mexico City for the relief efforts on that. It goes back to the old Forest Service motto of in your job description as "other duties assigned."

I mean, I had no training in urban search and rescue. Urban search and rescue teams didn't exist at that time. And I found myself at the Juarez Hospital [Mexico]. Since I knew how to run a chainsaw, they figured I knew how to run a K-12, which was the thing that would cut cement and rebars. So, you've got a nineteen-year-old, twenty-year-old kid inside of a collapsed building running a K-12, cutting rebar and cement, trying to get in to people along with the French firefighters. If you look at the entire thing, I've had a truly blessed and colorful career of this stuff that I've been able to do along with my hotshot and career that came later on in life.

[00:07:56] James Wall: So, 1985, you were just starting out, or 1986 is when you got into the full-blown Forest Service gig. So, this was the beginning, in other words, as sort of your full Forest Service group is going to Mexico, responding to that earthquake.

[00:08:12] Jimmie Rocha: Yellowstone in 1988.

[00:08:15] James Wall: You went to Yellowstone in 1988?

[00:08:16] Jimmie Rocha: Yes.

[00:08:18] James Wall: Let's talk about that in a minute. Wow. So, the ICS team, was that the model when you went to Mexico or was it just—do we go down to Mexico, here's your hotel. Figure it out.

[00:08:36] Jimmie Rocha: Well, it all transpired really—I mean, interesting, it was almost the end of the season that year. We were getting ready to have our end of the season crew party. We were out deep pitting meat, and the phone rang out at the Helibase out there on the outside and we were outside drinking beer hanging out, and my foreman calls. And then at that time, they weren't superintendents; they weren't captains, they were foreman. And he says, we need to pack up and be ready to go tomorrow morning. We're going to Mexico. And you've got a whole bunch of drunk

nineteen-year-old kids. And they're like, “Yes, right, whatever,” and click down the phone and go back to doing what you're doing.

And I think he called two more times, and I think random people hung up on him. And finally, he pulls into the compound, had some few choice words to say to us. And there was a group of extremely hung-over, flying out at sunrise to March Air Force Base to load up in a C-5 with the three other helicopters. It was us, Keenwild, off the San Bernardino, and I can't remember who the other helicopter was now. I just remember those two.

So, you load up on this C-5 with three helicopters, three trucks, twenty-five of us, and a whole bunch of MREs, which were just coming out at that time. When I originally started, we were still using C-rations from Vietnam that came with cigarettes inside of them and everything else. I mean, that's what we had. So, the MRE was a very new thing. Basically, landed in Mexico City. Someone met us from the State Department. I believe he was from the Drug Enforcement Administration. They loaded us into these armored suburbans, roared us downtown to the Sheraton.

We checked into the Sheraton. I was on the 12th floor stepping through in the hallway with cracks, looking down like six floors, they said, “Here's your room, get some sleep.” They came back, got us in, load us up and took us to the Juarez Hospital. And we pretty much worked from them straight on until they decided—they didn't end up using the helicopters. And they ended up bringing down, the three Region Five hotshot crews that traded out. In fact, JT would've been one of those guys with Texas Canyon and Vista Grand. And I think it was El Cariso was the other one that came down. And then we came back home. So, there wasn't—back then, there wasn't a lot of communication on what things were doing. I mean, you were like, people told you to load up, you left.

[00:11:38] James Wall: After that, you never hung up on a foreman again. If somebody told you we're going to some weird place, you'd be like, we're obviously going.

[00:11:48] Jimmie Rocha: We're obviously going there. And I mean at that point there that had never been done with Forest Service crews sending them out of the country.

[00:11:57] James Wall: I’m sorry how long were you in Mexico for that?

[00:11:59] Jimmie Rocha: We were there about ten days.

[00:12:01] James Wall: And you were cutting rebar.

[00:12:03] Jimmie Rocha: Cutting rebar and cement with a K-12 because I knew how to run a chainsaw.

[00:12:09] James Wall: Well, clearly, this was in the early days of incident response teams and stuff like that.

[00:12:14] Jimmie Rocha: Well, at that time in the United States, there was only one urban search and rescue team. And it was Metro Dade in Florida, run by a guy by the name of Doug Jewett. And the only other guys that were there with us was the Marseilles Fire Department [France], which actually are the military in Marseilles. And those guys were a combination of ship firefighters, structure firefighters and wildland firefighters all mixed into one and had this rescue and they brought them from France.

[00:12:51] James Wall: So, motley crew?

[00:12:52] Jimmie Rocha: It was.

[00:12:53] James Wall: Interesting. Well, that's an interesting place in time to find yourself. And then an interesting way to start out your career in the Forest Service. And you said your last year that you were on this 1986-1989, that Forest Service gig that you were a patrolman. Is that right? In law enforcement?

[00:13:13] Jimmie Rocha: No, at that time the LEO [Law Enforcement Officers] was just barely coming into play. Our AFMO [Assistant Fire Management Officer], and one of the engine captains had just barely became law enforcement officers. They'd been to FLETC [Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers] and they carried the guns. In fact, the engine captain just kept his in the locker and he never really used it. The AFMO was a little more into the law enforcement deal, and he carried his gun with him and stuff. But at that time, it was strictly the fire patrolman. You had to be a single resource boss--you had water with you. The Roads End FPT was my unit that I was responsible for from everything, from signing the enforcement of forest regulations to anything else that happened along the way. You were it. There was no LEOs at that time really. They definitely weren't out in cars like they are now patrolling and doing everything else of being the forest cop.

[00:14:27] James Wall: Wow. So how long did it take? You said three years or so, or five years to get your permanent?

[00:14:35] Jimmie Rocha: Two years to get—let's see, 1985, 1987, at 1987, I got my permanent, which at that time was a 13-13.

[00:14:45] James Wall: Thirteen paychecks out of the year, right? And the other thirteen is if we have money.

[00:14:49] Jimmie Rocha: If we have money or on call. Which that leads to, I mean, you go back to the old Forest Service stance there. I can remember drinking beer in my off time. I mean, that's kind of what we did: ran around and drank beer. But the Assistant FMO at that time, a wonderful individual, probably one of the people out there in the world that I owe my entire thirty-six-year career to, because in my younger days, might've been a little bit wild. And the Forest Service wanted to fire five of us for bar fighting there in the little town we lived in. And he went into the district ranger in the FMO, and he goes, "These kids are all wild kids." He goes, "But they're all going to turn out okay." And he was actually right.

I mean, we ended up with—one guy ended up as a special agent for the Forest Service. One guy ended up as the chief of the Lemoore Naval Air Station Fire Department [California]. One's still working in recreation as a recreation officer. One ended up as an engine captain retiring from Bakersfield City. And I ended up retiring as a hotshot superintendent. So, `he was right. But back to the thirteen-pay periods on call, there used to be a payphone in the bar where we used to drink. And I can remember him in there answering the phone from the fire clerk. And they had had piles get out up on top of the high country and turn around and looking at us when we were all drinking in there and laid off and just going, "You, you, and you are back to work."

And it's like, "But we're laid off." He goes, "No. These are your thirteen call when needed period periods and you guys are all going back to work." And then we went back to work chasing piles there. I think Dan may have been part of that problem up there chasing the piles that we went to get. But for…

[00:16:52] James Wall: What does it mean to "chase piles?"

[00:16:54] Jimmie Rocha: Well, they'd lit piles and then it had got warm, and the stuff had all got out and started creeping through the forest and they had acres burning. And so, we went back and laid hose and cut line for a week and corralled all this stuff up, and then they laid us back off again.

[00:17:10] James Wall: So, at the end of that, they would come in and say, "Alright, you're fired again." And we'll rehire you whenever we feel like it."

[00:17:16] Jimmie Rocha: And we'll rehire you in spring. Yes.

[00:17:20] **James Wall:** Now, back then though, the idea was that during fire season, you'd make so much overtime that if you had to, and you were good at saving money--which not everybody was--you could coast through the winter or be a ski bum or do whatever.

[00:17:35] **Jimmie Rocha:** I think most of us at that time, I mean, when we got laid off of the thirteen-pay period, some of us there for a while, we all had other jobs we went off and did. Be it extra help work, mending fences and that type of stuff. My roommate buddy that worked with me on the crew, he had a wood cutting business, so he used to cut wood and then we'd split it and sell it for the wintertime and stuff. And then eventually, I got to the point of wandering around. We weren't kind of the globe-trotting group that's out there now of making your money for all winter long, then getting off and going to Chile and stuff for the winter. I think we were a little more homebase causing havoc.

[00:18:28] **James Wall:** Now, did you almost get booted out for one bar fight or just for a season of bar fights?

[00:18:36] **Jimmie Rocha:** There may have been a season of bar fighting. A season of bar fighting, getting thrown out of the Forest Service compound, the barracks.

[00:18:45] **James Wall:** Did you ever see a, or take part in a bar fight between two different hotshot crews? I mean, were the rivalries bad when you start out?

[00:18:52] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh, yes, they were. I've been to places where you're standing off against other crews.

[00:19:01] **James Wall:** What was the big rivalry with your crew that you were on? Was there another nearby squad that you all just didn't like as much?

[00:19:08] **Jimmie Rocha:** Actually, it was us--usually with the BLM engine crew that lived in our barracks with us. That was usually the number one that we were rolling around with. And then the one we almost got fired for, that involved, what about three different crews there. But yes, it was a fun time.

[00:19:37] **James Wall:** Now, what was the source of all this? It seems like for a certain amount of time, none of these hotshot crews seemed to be able to get along with each other. And a lot of them, somebody said, maybe it was Dan that said that in the late 1970s or early 1980s, they had tried, and they were making progress, but they had to get all the sups together and say, "Hey, knock it off." And they finally started chilling out.

[00:20:01] Jimmie Rocha: Yes. Everybody was extremely proud of the colors you wore. That was your identity of who you were.

[00:20:16] James Wall: And what was the logo? What did you all wear in your crew?

[00:20:21] Jimmie Rocha: Actually, we had a--which was kind of an off deal--but when I was on the helicopter, it was the spotted owl because that was one the spotted owl was getting really big eating things, and it was a bit of a dig about the spotted owl.

[00:20:37] James Wall: So, it was ironic because everybody hated seemingly the spotted owl. It was the party crasher for a lot of timber people. And you were just saying you're the black sheep of the family or something?

[00:20:49] Jimmie Rocha: I don't think we were the black sheep of the family of the thing. At that time, you got to remember, timber was big. Fire was a small supporting function at that because all of our project work and everything we did was supporting timber--be it thinning or planting trees, choking gophers, other duties assigned.

[00:21:15] James Wall: And tell me more about the district that you were on. Were you known as part of the--what did they call them? Brush monkeys or the people down--somebody told me the Southern California hotshot crews, if you were up north, they would call the Southern California people brush monkeys or something like that. Because you weren't seen as fighting fires on a big forest, that it was kind of more--

[00:21:48] Jimmie Rocha: Well, you got to remember, at that time I was on a flight crew at that time. I wasn't on a hotshot crew. You know anybody, we still even though we were across the range there, we didn't consider ourselves brush. I mean, the brush was anything south of the Tejon Pass when you got down onto the Angeles-San Bernardino-Cleveland-Los Padres. Those were the brush people. We went from the grasslands to grass with brush mix into tall timber. We were at on the Kern Plateau. We weren't the north woods folks.

[00:22:33] James Wall: When did you know that it was time to move down more on the ground level and leave the helicopter or leave the air operations?

[00:22:43] Jimmie Rocha: Actually, I would've still probably been with the Forest Service if it wouldn't have been for the Consent Decree.

[00:22:51] James Wall: What happened there? I know what it is, but how did it affect you?

[00:22:54] **Jimmie Rocha:** You know what happened there was, at that point, there was a large exodus of probably ten-year or more employees when the dissent decree came in and they were going to the Kern County Fire Department. And I mean, those guys were all--there was a group of guys that were probably about ten years older than me that were my mentors, basically, in my career. And I ended up working for a grip of those guys for my entire career until they retired. And some of them are still some of my closest friends of those guys. And so, it was kind of a natural progression. I wasn't unhappy with the Forest Service, by any means. It was just kind of a natural progression of the consent decrees happening, come down to the county. I took the test twice and got hired and went to work for Kern County.

[00:23:50] **James Wall:** So, a lot of your mentors and bosses and stuff like that, they were resigning or were they being pushed out?

[00:23:56] **Jimmie Rocha:** They were basically resigning because they weren't—it's interesting because they were all doing jobs they liked, but they saw the writing on the wall at that point that they were no longer going to advance in the job. And even my job, it was like my job was a 13-13 Patrolman. And the next year after I left, the gal that got my job, they gave her the appointment was they bumped it up to an 18-88 and a higher GS grade.

[00:24:36] **James Wall:** And so, a lot of folks, and not just probably you, but a lot of people stepped down and went to other assignments, other places, left the Forest Service. And that was Region Five, right? So, that was the Region Five's Consent Decree. Although it did have ripple effects across the country.

[00:24:51] **Jimmie Rocha:** It had ripple effects, right.

[00:24:54] **James Wall:** And so, a lot of women coming into the agency at that point and people being pushed out. So, at that point, what year was that that you decided, "All right, we're not moving up. Let's get out."

[00:25:04] **Jimmie Rocha:** It was early part, the latter part of 1988, early part of 1989. I got hired in April of 1989 with the county.

[00:25:17] **James Wall:** Had you gotten enough years to be vested in the retirement program?

[00:25:23] **Jimmie Rocha:** I had a little bit in it, yes. Not much, but a little bit of it.

[00:25:28] **James Wall:** Alright, 1988-1989. And so where did we go after that?

[00:25:33] **Jimmie Rocha:** So, I went to the Kern County Fire Department, which lower, the southern end of the Sequoia National Forest is in Kern County. I grew up in Kern County. So, it was a natural progression down there. And went there, and that was another wonderful opportunity. I got to do everything I pretty much ever wanted to do in life there. And kind of due to the fact that those guys that left before me opened up doors for me within the fire department. I loved the structural side of fighting fire. I loved rescue. The only thing that I was not--I signed on to be a fireman, not a doctor--so medical aids weren't my deal.

I was—within my first year—I was still on probation there, and they were breaking fires there. And those guys had been there four years before I came along. And just by their association from there, I went into the heavy equipment program with the county. I still remember being on probation and them pulling me out of a cover engine assignment going, “Hey, you're going to go push dozers.” And at that time, the fire department was still very paramilitary ranked, and they're like, “Why are we having a probationary fireman? He shouldn't be allowed to do this.” And it's like those guys going to bat for me saying, “Well, we know what this guy can do. We've worked for him. He has a good background in fire.” So, I worked in the road crew program there with dozers, pushing dozers.

Then we went into another combined deal with Bakersfield BLM, and I went back into aviation again, working there until 1998. And then the overhead on Rio Bravo Hotshots was changing again. At that point, they weren't nationally recognized. There was a lot of rift on Kern County using the word 'Hotshot' on their trucks. And the old guard of all these guys that you talked about earlier that didn't want to see a local government crew in the Forest Service arena of a hotshot crew. It was very impure in their thoughts. And I went over there in 1998, for five years as a foreman.

[00:28:00] **James Wall:** What is it with the hotshots and just the--because I've heard that, is that, how do I put that? The phrase, they're not hotshots, right? So, CAL FIRE’s not hotshot or the inmate crews obviously aren't hotshots in their eyes. And I don't know about local fire department, but did you hear that often?

[00:28:22] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh, yes. Often and all the time.

[00:28:25] **James Wall:** Essentially, if you're not Forest Service and you're not on a specific Redding type crew, did that have any sort of chafing effects of bad blood with the local versus Forest Service?

[00:28:37] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh, local versus Forest Service. But you've got to step by the barriers that had to be broken. It wasn't just us. I'm sure when you talk to Jim Cook and--well, you haven't done Anthony or anything in here. But those Park Service crews, when they first came on, they were looked down upon, and they weren't really in the club or whatever you want to call it, the Mafia. Then you had BLM showed up on the scene. They had the same growing pains that we had, but by the time I got there, and we started trying to go for the national recognition on it, they were already in the club, so it was like, "Oh, man, we really can't have you around. You need to go back to chasing foxtail fires where you belong, and you don't there."

It was not an easy process by any means of getting certified. In fact, Dan Kleinman is the guy that came and certified the crew when we got our national recognition off of Fulton. And Dan was always very supportive of the crew and stuff. But it was a lot of years of going out, putting your nose to the ground, taking the shitty assignments, and to get to where we were when the crew was disbanded in 2018.

[00:30:08] **James Wall:** And what would be a shitty assignment?

[00:30:11] **Jimmie Rocha:** You would have crews, established hotshot crews, it would be like they would burn—they would get the choice assignment. Rio Bravo, you'll go back here and take a look at burning fence posts or you'll hold for us. And those were all things we lived with, and we didn't belong. And it took a lot of years, but we left at that point, at the end, we were one respected crew out there in the world that had got the good assignments, went all the places.

[00:30:50] **James Wall:** Now, when you are a local crew, so you have to go through this working your way up to get certified. And then after that, you can fight fires alongside Forest Service crews, BLM crews, Parks, and all of that on these big fires. Are you making similar money or are they paying you a different wage because you're local?

[00:31:17] **Jimmie Rocha:** See, and that was part of the deal, and then that's what made that work so well. At that time, we followed all of the federal guidelines, the certifying process, the qualifications. And that's one of the deals that we put in there as a stipulation in our MOU with our agreement with the Sequoia [National Forest], which was our sponsoring agency, is that we would be hours worked and hazard pay just like a federal crew. We would not be where the state and local governments of California. Not to be confused with later on when Utah picked up—when Alaska picked up their state, recognized hotshot crews, which still work hour-for-hour that we wouldn't be portal to portal. And that was a big deal. It'd be like, "Oh, you're out here. You can work two shifts getting paid portal-to-portal." And it'd be like, "No, I'm just like you."

[00:32:18] James Wall: What does it mean to get paid portal-to-portal?

[00:32:19] Jimmie Rocha: That means you go from the time you get the phone call for a fire assignment till the time you come back home. You're getting paid the whole time. So that's one of the things that we put in there, that we weren't going to do that.

[00:32:38] James Wall: And that had to be negotiated for every local crew at the forest level, essentially.

[00:32:43] Jimmie Rocha: At that point, that we were the only local crew at that point of a county agency.

[00:32:48] James Wall: So, you were kind of the first crew to do that in terms of fighting for those benefits?

[00:32:53] Jimmie Rocha: Yes.

[00:32:54] James Wall: And who led the negotiation process on that?

[00:32:57] Jimmie Rocha: That was my superintendent and me and the other foreman of how we were going to do that to make it marketable. If you can't go to fires, you can't be a hotshot. And if you can't go across the state lines, you can't be an IHC.

[00:33:15] James Wall: And who was your supervisor at the time?

[00:33:17] Jimmie Rocha: John Smith. And he was another ex-Forest Service employee that had came over.

[00:33:23] James Wall: John Smith. That is quite the common name there. John Smith.

[00:33:32] Jimmie Rocha: John Smith.

[00:33:33] James Wall: John Doe.

[00:33:34] Jimmie Rocha: And that's what he ran by all the time was John Doe.

[00:33:37] James Wall: Oh really?

[00:33:37] Jimmie Rocha: Yes.

[00:33:39] **James Wall:** Wow. The culture within the Rio Bravo within that crew, it sounds like there's a bit of like that your identity as a wildland firefighting squad. It's not Forest Service and it's not BLM. It's its own sort of thing. Is that accurate?

[00:34:02] **Jimmie Rocha:** Yes.

[00:34:03] **James Wall:** And did you have any traditions or things like that or sayings or gear that you would wear to separate yourself so that it's like, "All right, you know that when this helmet or this uniform or whatever, that that's the Rio Bravo crew and they are kind of their own squad?"

[00:34:23] **Jimmie Rocha:** Well, I think the biggest thing which separated us, and when you talk about it that way is—I wanted—especially when I took over in 2003 as the superintendent, I wanted us to blend with the other—at that time, there was only eighty-nine hotshot crews in the nation, not the 111 that are out there now. So, instead of wearing blue pants, which is inherently within there, we wore Nomex Green like everybody else. And then we wore a royal blue T-shirt, which I always used to refer to, and the boys, we always used the handicap blue because we were always on the handicap. We were always having to prove ourselves and prove our worthiness to be hotshots. Being a hotshot is a very proud thing. It truly is. I identify more as—when people ask me what my occupation was, I was a hotshot. Not a fireman, I was a hotshot.

[00:35:41] **James Wall:** Well, you were doing the same work. As you said, getting paid the same wage, doing the same work. The only thing that was different was beneath the surface of whatever architecture classification, the government that you're working for. Now, of course, today there's many more local units that are getting involved in the wildland firefighting. Is that right?

[00:36:04] **Jimmie Rocha:** Yes. So, when I retired, I was actually on the National Steering Committee for the IHCs representing state and local government. And at that point, we had us; Utah State Forestry had two crews; and Alaska had one. And both of the Arizona crews had went away. One was Granite Mountain for their obvious demise. And then Ironwood, which was North Tucson Fire Protection. They went away shortly after the RNL Bill. So that dropped the other two. So, we ended up with just the Utah or Alaska and us. And there's been others that have tried, and they've never been able to make it through the process for whatever reason.

[00:37:04] **James Wall:** So, it's still tough to get into that architecture. Now, when was the Granite Mountain situation? Not too long ago, right? But you must have been either close to retiring or retired, right?

[00:37:18] Jimmie Rocha: No, I was still working. That's another whole story that comes into my career. When Granite Mountain was burned over, I was still running the crew of Rio Bravo. And I received that afternoon, I got a phone call that a crew had been burned over in Arizona. They didn't say what crew it was. I had some buddies that were, I knew they were going to that fire, Arroyo Grande Hotshots [California] with a real good friend of mine, Mike Hickey on it as the superintendent. And I was worried about him and ended up getting--his truck got broke down in Phoenix, so they weren't there that afternoon.

And so went about the day. That night, I think we were on an extended standby for fire weather. And got a phone call, it was the next morning, from Steve Gage, one of the assistant fire directors out of Boise [Idaho]. And he goes, "Are you available to come out for the investigation?" And I said, "Well, yes, I need to look and see if I can get some things in place." One of them seeing if my number one assistant is willing to take the crew and then someone probably ought to call my department and see if it's okay if I can go do this. So, I think it was sixteen hours after the incident, I was wheels up headed to Phoenix [Arizona]. I'm not sure how long I was going to be gone doing that.

And that ended up probably for about the next two years of my life, in and out of going back to the crew and then having to pick up and work on that entire document of the RNL deal. And that, to this day, still follows me. Got some believers out there of what we did. Got some people that accused we were part of a gigantic cover-up. It definitely changed my life. I had a love and a passion for the job, but after that, it probably made it a little harder for me to—I had remarried and had another child late in years—it made it probably a little harder for me to leave. Came out of there for a little while where I thought probably the best thing for me to do is go drive a bread truck instead of that. So that was definitely a life changing moment for me there of a year now in Granite.

[00:40:21] James Wall: Are you on an NDA or something like that with the investigation? Can you talk about the investigation generally?

[00:40:24] Jimmie Rocha: Oh, yes. I can talk about anything you want with it.

[00:40:28] James Wall: Sometimes people go, "Oh, I've signed a settlement," or something.

[00:40:31] Jimmie Rocha: Oh, no.

[00:40:32] James Wall: On certain fires.

[00:40:35] **Jimmie Rocha:** I did sign one of those, though. We can go back to that, about signing a secret clause.

[00:40:40] **James Wall:** The call that came for you, why did they want you specifically down there? Is it because you were also on a local crew, or you were supervising a local crew?

[00:40:50] **Jimmie Rocha:** Yes, that was exactly it. Actually, that was my first thing to Steve that I said was is, "I think there's a lot of other people out there in the nation that are probably a lot more qualified than me to go do this." And he goes, "No. Tom Harbour," who was the Director of Fire and Aviation for the Forest Service, "Wanted to have you because you're local government and you can give a different perspective. And since this truly is actually Arizona State asked the Feds to come in and do the investigation. So that's why you're the guy we're picking."

[00:41:28] **James Wall:** So essentially, on this investigation, they had different people from different places, and essentially you were the voice of representing the local hotshots and hotshots in general.

[00:41:37] **Jimmie Rocha:** The hotshot community and hotshots in general. But I had with me on this deal. I have lifelong friendships with two of the guys that were on that team, Jay Kurth who's now NIMO IC, and he was the Wyoming Hotshot. He was there with me doing the fire part of it. And Tim Foley, who was doing fire behavior on that, and he's the old Pike Hotshot superintendent. So, it wasn't like I was alone doing this entire, I had two other old well-respected hotshot superintendents with me. But my job down there was basically to do all things hotshot, was my key component for being there.

[00:42:30] **James Wall:** So, you're wheels up, wheels down. How long after the burn over were you there?

[00:42:40] **Jimmie Rocha:** I was there sixteen hours after it. Probably at twenty-two to thirty-two hours, I was out walking the lone survivor through the burn over deal. The packs were still on the ground. The burnt saws were still on the ground. Everything was there. And we were basically interviewing the lone survivor of what happened that day.

[00:43:07] **James Wall:** That quick?

[00:43:08] **Jimmie Rocha:** That quick.

[00:43:09] **James Wall:** I think today they're focusing a bit more on getting people some therapy after things like this. Or maybe they aren't but that's changed a bit. But what did that survivor, how were they?

[00:43:28] **Jimmie Rocha:** He was in a state of shock. That's all he was in, was a state of shock. And he had a kid that had been a squad boss on Granite and had left Granite Mountain that season to go work at the dump because he had decided he didn't want to hotshot anymore and he was going to stay home and take care of his wife and kid and not be on the road so much.

But the interesting deal on that was that they had--another good friend of mine came out--Johnny Clem off of the Klamath [California] came out with the CISM [Critical Incident Stress Management] team for that. And they were trying to take care of Blue Ridge and some of the other, the Prescott folks that were there off the forest. But even that, I mean CISM and peer grouping and stuff, was just getting the beginning part of its role on use. And you look at that and some of the key players that started in the CISM, and peer group guys were hotshots. Some of them, I'm not really too sure if I wanted them to show up as my person to give me a hug when I came up and do the stuff. They were pretty on the edge, but they believed in the mission and were full hard into it for a lot of years as some of those guys.

And I've got friends now that are on the hotshot crews that are still going out and doing the peer stuff and leading on the edge of that. Danny Breuklander off Texas Canyon [California], Brian Anderson off of Bear Divide [California], Josh Acosta off of Fulton [California]. Those guys, not only are we knuckle draggers in the ground; they've taken that on as [racks?] [unclear] [00:45:36]. We can teach monkeys how to fight fire, cut line. But we've evolved into something else.

[00:45:47] **James Wall:** So, you got there. All this stuff is still on the ground. It's fresh. How do you piece together what happened when you have one survivor and then forensics essentially, right? So, you're dealing with the forensic people; you're dealing with the survivor. How do you put that together?

[00:46:08] **Jimmie Rocha:** So, what it all trends fires in the end there is we ended up with a long list of people that we had to interview. And as you interviewed, be it the operations or be it the structure protection person, to the IC, to the ASM, the lead plane guys and everything, you slowly but surely build on post-it notes across the wall, a timeline of conversations and note taking. And you slowly build this thing to the best of your ability to when you have to write the report of the sequence of events, and you try to collaborate everything.

It was a learning experience, but it was also very long and took more of a toll on us than I think we all knew about it. Because when you talk to--Jay Kurth and I just talked this winter, and we were talking about things. And basically, it's been, I don't know how many years now. Sometimes I think I just put Yarnell back in the back of my head and don't think about it. It took a chunk out of us.

[00:47:35] **James Wall:** I think that's the forgotten side of tragedies, is the investigators. It's emotionally draining to do that type of work and to piece together the tragedy and things like that. How long did it take to get a accurate, or not accurate, but for things to begin to, you see the way the string goes between the two post-it notes and you start to come back and you see a general picture of what sort of went down on that fire.

[00:48:07] **Jimmie Rocha:** It's probably three months that it did. And then we were going back and forth meeting in different places, trying to come up with the draft, the timeline, putting all the components of—there's guys working on the fire behavior part of it. There was guys working on the training side of it, of pulling all of the training records for the crew, their inspections of--you ended up with other leads of other people you needed to interview. So, it was drawn out. It was a process, and I can't really come up with the exact number of how long it took to actually put out a written product on the thing.

[00:48:55] **James Wall:** And this whole time, you're away from home, essentially.

[00:48:58] **Jimmie Rocha:** I'm away from home. And then I would come back, and I'd roll back into wherever the crew was, catch them whatever fire they would be on. We'd be on night shifts sometimes burning and stuff. When I was supposed to be asleep during the day, I'd be on phone calls or meetings with think-tank groups or whatever you want to call it, where we'd be talking about timelines and different things.

I can remember at one time during the course of it, I was in Boise, and we were working on interviewing—we'd went up there to interview—they finally let us interview Blue Ridge Hotshots, and they were on a fire up out of Boise, and we were there. And my wife obviously heard on the phone there that I was getting there. She packed up the dog, the kid and everything else, and came up and stayed with me up there because it had got to the point where she basically wasn't seeing me anymore.

And at that point, God, I wouldn't even want to be a hotshot now, in the mid-2000s, we were already doing a hundred-hundred and ten days a year gone from home. You were lucky if you had two days off in August on a hotshot crew. I think looking back in records, I think it was like four years in a row, I had somewhere in the middle of August

off for two days. But then you go back, and you look at in 1987, I left town in July and came home in October.

[00:50:39] James Wall: The problem of the hotshot lifestyle already is that it has basically become an itinerant life for chunks of the year, like you're on the road. And where is home? Home is wherever you're at that particular time.

[00:50:57] Jimmie Rocha: And it's a totally separate life. You're living a totally separate life. Your wife and your child. She's running an entirely different operation at home that no longer really basically you exist in anymore.

[00:51:10] James Wall: And when you come back, you have to get to know each other all over again. And sort of reforge chemistry.

[00:51:17] Jimmie Rocha: You look at it there, you're home in the wintertime, but you're not really home because I guarantee you, for the entire winter months, one week a month I was gone either at a meeting or a class for the entire winter. So, I can see now where the guys are now that are running twelve, thirteen, some guys I think have hit fourteeners in a season.

[00:51:45] James Wall: I don't know how they do it.

[00:51:46] Jimmie Rocha: I don't know how they do it. Plus, I'm getting too old.

[00:51:51] James Wall: But even still, nowadays you're just out. You're out and about. Was there pressure from anybody to not solve—obviously they want you to figure out what happened—but in this case, what I know about this, and we've interviewed somebody, I think in Missoula, Barry Hicks, I think, worked on a consulting group or something that was trying to do a report about Granite Mountain. And I don't remember everything he said. But the general gist of it was because this was a local crew, because it was Arizona State, state fire was funding a lot of it, that there was a lot of—the Forest Service doesn't want to be blamed for a fire if they can avoid it at any cost—that that's not a good look for them. Was there anybody being like, "Okay, so it was definitely these guys. It was definitely Arizona." Was there pressure to form a narrative? Did they give you latitude to come up with that?

[00:53:00] Jimmie Rocha: And this has been the thing that's haunted us for years. I get nasty phone calls from people. They want me to finally admit the conspiracy of the great cover-up that I'm part of. And that was the first report where they decided they were not going to make it a learning experience instead of assigning blame. So that's haunted us that that report is completely fake because it was supposed to be written in a

learning type format. And so, folks now always go with, “This was a conspiracy theory, that we've covered up the deal."

Do I believe out there, someone knows what happened that day? Yes, I believe someone knows what happened that day. Did they come forward to us and tell us what happened that day? Well, the main characters, the nineteen that could give us the definitive answer, they're all dead. The one survivor for whatever his reason, he has his reasons. Other people have other reasons I think of protecting the dead. I think one day, the answers will come out. But I know for a fact I wasn't part of a conspiracy that covered anything up. I was just a guy trying to get a job done that I'd been assigned.

[00:54:35] **James Wall:** God, what an impossible position to be in. The one survivor, I'm assuming he has a lot of reasons to not talk because he probably is afraid of getting blamed for it himself and being liable.

[00:54:47] **Jimmie Rocha:** I have no idea. I know I've had people call me and they go, “So you talked to Brandon. Did he tell you?” And it's like, “No.”

[00:54:59] **James Wall:** How many times did you get to talk to him?

[00:55:01] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh, I probably talked to him ten times over the years.

[00:55:06] **James Wall:** And in the scope of the investigation several times?

[00:55:09] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh, I did probably, going back with him on different things, probably five times.

[00:55:15] **James Wall:** And how did it affect him as you saw it over the years?

[00:55:22] **Jimmie Rocha:** Doing my cutout deal. I'm surprised that the man probably hasn't killed himself by now with survivor's guilt. I give him high credit for it.

[00:55:36] **James Wall:** To be the only one on that burn over. Geez. So that's two years. It must've felt like a decade of work. How does it wrap up? Did you get to a point where, like you were saying, there's one person; everybody else is dead. We are bumping up against a brick wall here of we've got evidence, here's what we've got. And they just told you to wrap it up? Or did you guys come to the conclusion that it was over?

[00:56:11] **Jimmie Rocha:** No, we got to the point where we had two leads, or you might call ICs of the operation. One was from the Forest Service that Tom Harbour assigned, and the other one was a gentleman that came from Florida Forest Service that

Arizona assigned there. And we sat in a room, and it was like, we are at the point where we need to write the report, and this is all we're going to get. And then there was the big debut, or whatever you want to call it, of the report that came out with all the pomp and pomper with that. And to be honest with you, after that, I pretty much clammed up on the whole thing. People were always like, “Will you come in and talk to us about Yarnell and tell us what happened that day?” I go, “I'm not talking about it. And if you're looking for an answer of what happened that day, I don't have it.”

[00:57:08] **James Wall:** Did that affect you just as much as it affected them?

[00:57:10] **Jimmie Rocha:** Yes.

[00:57:14] **James Wall:** Do you still want to know what happened?

[00:57:16] **Jimmie Rocha:** Yes, I'd like to know what happened. I think I know what happened. I've played that scenario over in my head so many times that the conversations that the superintendent and the assistant have, and I've had those same conversations with my lead foreman that worked for me for years. I know the outcome that we would've had that day.

[00:57:40] **James Wall:** But you've got two different sort of entities, the Florida guy and the Forest Service, Tom Harbour’s team, coming together in the same room having to then agree on a narrative for the report.

[00:57:55] **Jimmie Rocha:** Correct.

[00:58:02] **James Wall:** So obviously, that's like a jury coming together. You have to figure out a consensus. And there's different voices in the room.

[00:58:10] **Jimmie Rocha:** The gentleman from Florida that was representing the state, I never felt there was a political agenda or any kind of agenda coming from the state with them. He was a top solid guy. In fact, he sent his son out to work with me for two seasons to give him his, as he called it, his experience in the West.

[00:58:37] **James Wall:** And what was the Florida guy's name?

[00:58:39] **Jimmie Rocha:** Jim Carroll.

[00:58:40] **James Wall:** Jim Carroll. Now why was this the only report that wasn't a learning experience?

[00:58:50] **Jimmie Rocha:** It was labeled a learning experience instead of a report that comes out--all the old reports used to basically come out and say with the tens and eighteens that "he," or "that person broke rule number two; they broke rule number seven. They broke rule number eight." If you go back and look at the old fire case fatality training studies, that's where it gets to the back end of the report. You go to the Loop fire or the Romero fire, and you get back to the findings, and it's like, "They broke this one, they broke that one, they broke this one. They didn't follow this one of the thirteen watch-outs back in the old days, or the eighteen."

So I think there was some people out there, and you may see an individual that comes through your room here that if you broach this subject, you will get his take on it of why we didn't have something that said the eighteen here, the ten over here were broken.

[01:00:06] **James Wall:** Everybody's got an opinion on this one. It seems to be that one that people can't let go. A lot of people can't let go. But I guess you have to at some point. And so, moving past that, so that two-year job—essentially at that point is it just you? You said everybody that you worked with on that investigation probably had some toll taken.

[01:00:35] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh, I'm sure. Yes. We had some lovely ladies that were in there as our training specialists, as our chief-of-staff. And I guarantee you that that took a toll out of all of us.

[01:00:56] **James Wall:** Why do you think these things keep happening? A lot of people say it's always going to happen, it's going to continue happening. It's like planes are going to keep crashing. We will keep having burn overs. And miscalculations happen. Would that be sort of the general idea is that even though with technology and new training, you can't eliminate human error and that that's essentially, and with climate change and stuff, fires are getting worse?

[01:01:33] **Jimmie Rocha:** You can't. It'd be a perfect world. If we could go out to say the fires, we're not going to have trees falling on us, we're not going to have rocks coming down, we're not going to have unexpected fire. I look at a course of a thirty-six-year career from the time I started working when I was eighteen and to the day I walked out when I was fifty-three-fifty-four-years old, fires became a totally different beast. Shoot, if you went to a 500-acre fire in my younger years, you were on a big fire. You go to a fire that was 20,000 acres later on in the mid-1990s, that was big. You talk about fires now. They run 20,000-50,000 acres in a day in the timber run across the top of the Sierra Divide. Those things just didn't happen before.

[01:02:25] James Wall: And how fast they move now with invasive species and drying out and all of that.

[01:02:29] Jimmie Rocha: You talk to guys. I talk to guys now and they talk about, "Jimmy, we show up on fires," and some of that stuff that happened in Northern California, he goes, "It has nothing about us being hotshots. All we're doing is trying to keep ourself alive and trying to move people out of the way. It has nothing to do with firefighting."

[01:02:45] James Wall: How do you put out a, or how do you contain 100,000-acre fire? You can't. You just have to pray for rain and snow. But in the scope of that investigation, did you see logic? In other words, you're a firefighter. You're trying to figure out what people were thinking and doing. Could you put yourself in that situation and say, "Okay, something was a mistake." But I've made that mistake. Or were there moments where you're like, "Who can explain why somebody went here or there?" Have you seen those things?

[01:03:26] Jimmie Rocha: I've seen those things. We all make mistakes. We all err. What I look at in my career is I was blessed to have an overhead staff with me that were never ever afraid to go, "Hey, boss, maybe we ought to take a look at this." Or one of my squads like, "Hey boss, how about we make a cup of coffee right now?" It'd be like, "Oh, we've hit." And that was one of the big things on our crew was when in doubt, stop and make a brew.

[01:04:11] James Wall: When you were a supervisor of Rio Bravo, and you had a fire that was complex and all of these things, did you have instances where your crew steered you off of, like you were just saying, where you might be about to make a call that could be the wrong call? And did you want your crew, in other words, to speak up and correct you?

[01:04:34] Jimmie Rocha: Oh yes. There would be times where I would be occupied with 3,000,228 things and we'd be going down a path over here this way. And either Sean or Davey or Sidle, or Andy, they'd come up and they'd go, "Hold on a second. We need to look at this some more." And it'd be like, "Oh, let me step back from my 20,000 feet here and let me see what you guys are looking at." And then go, "Oh yes."

[01:05:05] James Wall: So, Granite Mountain, being what it is, but you were also working through the South Canyon fire. Not there, but you were in firefighting at that time, right, 1994?

[01:05:15] **Jimmie Rocha:** In 1994, up until Granite, that, and Thirtymile for people of my age was the defining fires. The big fire, the "uh-oh" fire that happened to these guys getting trapped. Because then you go back behind that, you've got Dude and you've got Battlement Creek and everything else were behind it. Those were the big ones the books were written on. And now, for the generation of firemen now, it's Yarnell.

[01:05:49] **James Wall:** I think the thing, while I've interviewed people that were on the investigation in South Canyon, people who were around it, and then just folks who were fighting fire around the same time adjacent to it. And what they say, and maybe this is something that's, I don't know. They said one of the things about South Canyon that spooked people is that while we knew that this was a good crew, this was a really experienced crew. And those guys, it was thought, couldn't do that. That this was so odd and didn't make sense. And so, it could happen to anybody at that point. Of course, it always could. But what was it about South Canyon that freaked people out? Because the way people talk about it, it's almost as if they're still kind of a bit spooked by it. Do you remember when you heard about it, the news?

[01:06:48] **Jimmie Rocha:** Oh yes. I was in the road yard with the dozers at that time when that came through. And then I had friends there that were part of the investigation, part of the IMT. One of the guys over there next door had an organized crew off the Angeles there. I had friends that were in that area at that time. For guys of my age, I think it had been so long, I think, since anybody had been burned on that magnitude and that many guys trapped that it was probably like, how could this happen? But then you go back, and you look at it and there was a whole bunch of indicators there. If things would've went right and someone didn't say something there, I think you could have prevented that entire incident and it happening too.

If you would've had the weather report that got through that said the cold front was coming in; if you wouldn't have just listened to the engine captain that said you couldn't get out the bottom, when you can really get out the bottom and get around that sheer cliff that he said was down there. So, if all those guys would've came in from the bottom and just started cutting from the bottom and anchoring and flanking back to the basics like Lynn Bittison [phonetic] [01:08:06] said, you may not have ever had that afternoon that happened.

I see how incidents like that drive people to try to make things better. Because if you look at Tony Petrilli, who was a smokejumper at that time, he was on the lunch spot there. And Tony spent the rest of his career, and I don't know how he did it, going to fatality after fatality and burn over after burn over with MDC up there working on the fire shelter. He was even part of the Yarnell investigation. And Tony was burned on that. But he dedicated the rest of his career trying to make things better out of it.

[01:09:00] James Wall: Wow. Well, I wouldn't want to be his shrink. He's making his money. It being chalked up as a learning experience, what was the lesson of Yarnell that you saw?

[01:09:25] Jimmie Rocha: The lesson that I took from--that history repeats itself, once again. Look at people, because if you look at a lot of the players in Yarnell, a lot of them were on two other burnover fires with fatalities in them in the courses of their careers. So, I think going back to Paul Gleason and everything there, being a student of fire, I think we really need to look at that because history continues to repeat itself. You stop and look at it. Yarnell isn't that far away from the Dude Fire. It's in the same mountain system. Guys that were in the Incident Management Team that were running the Yarnell fire were on the Dude Fire. Those same guys that were on the Dude fire were on the Battlement Creek fire in Colorado as young superintendents and firemen and stuff.

History repeating itself is one of the biggest things. We can't prevent the tree coming down and smacking one of our guys. We can't predict the rock that's going to come loose and take the guy in the center of the chest. But if you're not studying fire and looking at footprints of fires that are happening in your area and stuff, it's going to catch you one day. Because they happen same place, same deals. And we go back to the same places year after year after year after year. I don't know how many times in a thirty-year career I've gone to the same chunk of dirt, found the same set of lines.

[01:11:15] James Wall: Have you ever been back?

[01:11:17] Jimmie Rocha: Back where?

[01:11:18] James Wall: To Yarnell?

[01:11:19] Jimmie Rocha: Yes. I went back for the initial staff ride. Went back with, which was kind of an interesting deal, went with Tom Harbour and the NLAC group and all the regional fire directors before the Yarnell staff ride went back there. So yes, I've went back with the National Hotshot Steering Committee when we did the Yarnell. So, I've been back three times. And guess what? Those bushes are growing back.

[01:11:50] James Wall: Really?

[01:11:51] Jimmie Rocha: Oh yes.

[01:11:52] **James Wall:** Can you still see in your mind's eye when you go back, you can sort of lay out what you saw that day? I guess it never really leaves.

[01:12:01] **Jimmie Rocha:** That'll always be with me. I've taken you to a darker deeper, not like stories of days of old.

[01:12:12] **James Wall:** Onto a lighter note. Well, at some point that did end. And then so that way, you decompress, you get out, and go do anything else, something else. You're driving a bread truck is what you said.

[01:12:23] **Jimmie Rocha:** But then I went back to my day job as a hotshot. I never went and got the job as a bread truck driver.

[01:12:27] **James Wall:** Oh, okay. You thought about it though.

[01:12:28] **Jimmie Rocha:** I thought about it.

[01:12:29] **James Wall:** It was like that; I could get out.

[01:12:30] **Jimmie Rocha:** I could get out of this. Yes.

[01:12:32] **James Wall:** This would be a time where nobody would blame you for leaving. And so, you went back into it, huh?

[01:12:39] **Jimmie Rocha:** Yes.

[01:12:41] **James Wall:** How much longer did you work as a Sup on the Rio Bravo?

[01:12:49] **Jimmie Rocha:** That was 2000, and Max was born--almost another seven years. Out of my thirty-six years there, I spent almost nineteen years on Rio Bravo. So, good chunk of my career was there.

[01:13:12] **James Wall:** And those seven years, now, the post-Yarnell years, every fire you're going on, are you a bit more cautious? Are you looking at it in a different way of—from a risk standpoint? Like everything you're saying, fires seem to be getting—the one overriding thing, everybody's like I don't know how you could be a hotshot today because the way the fires are getting are out of control and they're not making sense anymore in the way they move.

[01:13:44] **Jimmie Rocha:** I think I kept doing the job. I don't think the job—my tactics never changed. I did business the way I did business. I think probably there with

me is it was probably more of the tug of having to answer the phone and leave my family I think was probably the bigger part of it. But doing business, that stayed the same. It was just harder to leave.

[01:14:11] James Wall: It adds up, I think. And for a lot of guys that I've interviewed, hotshots, that's what happened. Because they would say, being a supervisor is the best job in the world. Of a hotshot crew, they love that job. Everybody seems to have had a great time doing it. Love the people. But then when they retire, it's either because their body's failing them or not in the same shape. And/or the family and being away adds up. But has the Forest Service paid any attention to that aspect of it, of how the hotshot work affects families and the mentality of people that are working for them? Are there resources in place of, I guess they've made the crews a little bit bigger, right?

[01:15:03] Jimmie Rocha: Well, they're slowly working on that.

[01:15:04] James Wall: They can shuffle a few people out when they need to?

[01:15:07] Jimmie Rocha: Yes. They're going to the twenty-five with some of the crews and stuff. I think they're trying, in all honesty, to work towards maybe a better home life balance maybe. But I think the squirrel's out of the cage and they're a little late on it, both with the mental health and the quality for these guys. As much as I would like for things to get better for them, I think that it'll never change. It's government.

[01:15:43] James Wall: The wheels of bureaucracy have moved, churned pretty slowly.

[01:15:45] Jimmie Rocha: Slowly.

[01:15:48] James Wall: So, when you did retire, what is a retirement like when you're a hotshot? Because it seems like just from being around here, that it's a good crew. I've never seen a Forest Service culture, I guess it's a subculture of the Forest Service, quite as tight as this one. Is there a changing of the guard for the person that's going to replace you? Is there some kind of way of sending somebody off when they're a supervisor and they're ready to ride off into the sunset?

[01:16:23] Jimmie Rocha: I don't know. The going away party, I guess, would be the biggest thing for it, when you finally retire and your peers and people show up to reminisce, and I think probably seeing all the other guys over the course of years that worked for you that show up, or don't show up, whichever one they may be. But like I said, I was blessed. I had some kids that came to me at eighteen years old and stayed

with me until they were in their thirties. I think I went five or six years where I didn't hire a guy.

[01:17:08] James Wall: That's pretty rare.

[01:17:08] Jimmie Rocha: We were having so much fun and roaring along and living the dream. It truly was a magical period in my life been in.

[01:17:24] James Wall: Is there anybody from your Rio Bravo crew days that's going to be here?

[01:17:30] Jimmie Rocha: No. They're all out wandering.

[01:17:34] James Wall: What about retiring itself? If there's one thing hotshots are not good at, it's retiring to the sidelines. After all, it feels like almost going to war. A lot of people come back and it's hard to get that comradery and the juice of it all. Did you have a easier time or transition to settling down after the dust settles?

[01:18:00] Jimmie Rocha: Probably not. But still tracking fires, looking at fires, watching fires, wondering why this isn't happening over here. But I'm really lucky too, as I've got a couple of the—well, I take that back. Lynn's over there next door. Lynn worked for me twice. But I'm lucky that, as I say, I have my office door open in the garage at the house, and I have Lynn and Corey, they come by and other folks that come by and sit and talk. And I think I'm just telling stories and having a good time but they tell me that they're learning and coming for advice.

[01:18:44] James Wall: That might be the enduring legacy of the hotshots is that, from my perspective, I've done over a hundred interviews now of Forest Service retirees. And there's a gap between the other parts of NFS and those crew, those people and today's generation. In other words, I don't see them hanging out at reunions. There's not young district rangers. Maybe there is, but it doesn't seem like as close knit as the hotshots. And somebody said, was it Dan? Dan said the thing about, he's like, he could go anywhere and if I'm a hotshot and you're a hotshot from whatever crew, you got a place to stay that night. So that does seem to be a really good thing about the hotshots.

[01:19:35] Jimmie Rocha: I think of Lynn, now that you brought it up there when I should have answered that because you asked if anybody from the crew's here. I think of her more as one of my kids because they were my summer children.

[01:19:47] James Wall: Supervisors often, they don't call them employees. They say that these are one of my kids.

[01:19:57] Jimmie Rocha: If you truly had a passion about being a hotshot superintendent, it was a threefold deal. You were there to provide for the mission. You were there to take care of your kids and bring them back home. But you also, I had wives and kids that I had to take care of on the outside when we were gone. And since I was single through a good chunk of that, my lead foreman's wife was almost the de facto--if you went to the military, the military family officer takes care of the families when troops are deployed. So, she was always my, so and so's having a bad time taking care of over this, the water heater's broken, or the kids are sick, or someone's died. And Rhonda was always the one that was, "Rhonda, we need to send flowers. You need to take care of this." And she was always taking care of the folks at home. And she was lovingly known as the den mother by those guys.

[01:21:18] James Wall: I think there's a Rhonda in every hotshot crew in every part of it. And one of the things we do is interview Forest Service wives. And I always said that you could get a PhD by calculating the amount of money that the Forest Service has saved by having free labor provided by wives over the years, answering phones, doing really, just filling in the gaps where needed. All right, ready for the lightning round, and we'll get you on to Randy's thing eventually.

[01:21:51] Jimmie Rocha: Okay.

[01:21:52] James Wall: He's now on his way out.

[01:21:54] Jimmie Rocha: He's on his way out.

[01:21:55] James Wall: He's got to figure that out. So at least he'll have you guys there to tell him how it goes. Although he's working, right?

[01:22:02] Jimmie Rocha: He's working. Yes.

[01:22:03] James Wall: I called him. He said, "I'm starting my new job today." I said, "I'm sorry, is this the right person I'm talking to here?" And then Charlie Caldwell's still working. He's 87 years old.

[01:22:13] Jimmie Rocha: Like I said, I've got a 10-year-old boy, so I stay busy.

[01:22:16] James Wall: Yes, I hear you. Who is a favorite boss of yours? Favorite mentor? Somebody that you can't see your career panning out without, who shaped your career?

[01:22:30] Jimmie Rocha: Probably two guys. Nick [unclear] [01:22:33] the Assistant Fire Management Officer in my younger days on the [unclear] [01:22:37] Ranger District. And Stan Stewart. He passed with cancer, but he was the Superintendent of Los Padres Hotshots. And then he was Foreman there since the mid-1970s. Probably those two people. I thank Nick for the career that I had, the thirty-six years that I had. And he was a very, an old-school Vietnam veteran that worked for the Forest Service and probably installed probably some of the best work ethics that I had in me.

And Stan, the man terrified me because my assistant foreman worked with Stan on LP [Los Padres, California], and actually, his girlfriend, Deanne Shulman, who was the first woman smoke jumper in the US was the other roommate of them. And Stan used to come over and drink beer in the bar with Willie and the man terrified me in all deals. I remember walking out of a fire in the Ventana Wilderness, and I had to go with Stan, had to ride in a truck with him. The man intimidated you that much.

[01:24:12] James Wall: Was he just a big dude or was he a silent dude?

[01:24:14] Jimmie Rocha: Silent dude that just did not suffer fools real well. He's the guy that gave me the name of Strummer.

[01:24:27] James Wall: Wait, explain this nickname.

[01:24:30] Jimmie Rocha: I work over in the Kern River Valley. That's my rock pile over there that I defended forever. And he lived in Santa Barbara, worked on LP down there in Paradise on the LP. So, he referred to anybody that lived in the mountains basically as a "hillbilly strummer". So that was his always deal. When he'd see me, I was like, “Oh, hello, Strummer. How goes over there in banjo land?” That was his trademark deal anytime he called me on the phone. But I, with him, looked up to that man. He was a hotshot's hotshot. And there's been some other guys that are out there that are hotshot hotshots. And sadly, some of them are no longer on this earth.

But he was one of the guys, when I took over the crew, we were still fighting the battles of being accepted by that private club that without me knowing, was mentoring, and testing me in my job. And I got to him one day and it scared the living daylights out of me. And I'm a grown man, man. I had two kids. I was in my mid-thirties. And we were on a fire, and I asked--I'd been a superintendent for three years--and Stan and I were sitting at a intersection up there on the [unclear] [01:26:03] there on the by Horse Meadow.

And I wanted to know how I was doing as a superintendent because I didn't want to fail running a program and being known as someone, just a buffoon out there running

around. And being competent, accepted by my peers--I wanted to know how I was because that group was so tight. I used to call them the Mafia. Those guys, those older California sups, I had called them the California Mafia, and it was like, eh, I'm never going to be in the Mafia. I have to fight these guys all the time. And I asked Stan, I go, "Stan, I'm going to ask you a question. And I know you'll give me a straight answer. I know you won't fluff it." I go, "How am I doing running this crew? And what kind of product is the crew putting out when they're showing up on fires?"

And he sat there for a little while and he sat there and he goes, "Eh, Strummer." He goes, "You're doing all right even though you live in banjo land." And he goes, "I like when you show up on fires." Because he goes, "You get out, and you go to work, and you do a good job." He goes, "I can't say that about everybody." And that man from that day when we had that conversation, I don't know if it was my final exam or what it was, but it opened up the door with the rest of the Region Five old-school guys that Rio Bravo was accepted into that fraternity.

And that man, from that day on, I would get random phone calls from him, and he would give me advice. And he would do it in oddball ways. There'd be a fire coming down. He was retired at that point, battling his cancer. But I could still remember one day, fires coming down into Santa Barbara, down by then the front country off the Camino up there. And he calls me up and he's like, "Eh, Strummer, how you doing today? I know you're over here in the front country." And it's like, "Yes." He goes, "I know you're a terrible baseball player." He goes, "Hopefully, your catcher's mitt's working well today."

The man was telling me to be heads up and have my head on his swivel because fire was going to come down off the hill. To me, they were priceless moments. That's why I do what I do with the association here. He was one of the founding members. I'm doing it to honor him.

I've always had that theory out there in life. People go, "What makes you a good superintendent? What made you be able to run fires well when things were falling apart—did you read it in a book? How did you become the supervisor you are?" And I always say, I go, "Over here, I had a list of supervisors that I worked for that were really, really bad. And I told myself, I'm not going to be that person. And then I had people that were really, really, really good in the world of what they did. They were human, but they were really good of what they did."

I can't be Stan Stewart. I can't be identical to that man, but I can take some of what he had, what the Jim [Boketus'?] [01:29:47] had out there, the Kenny Stevens', the Dennis Monahans and stuff of those guys and bring. I can't be them, but I can take bits and

pieces of them and not do what the bad guys did. And I think I can whittle my way through life.

[01:30:04] **James Wall:** Well, you're standing on the shoulders of other people in your career. And it's interesting though, the little moments, this is something that I've seen in these interviews, like Jim Cook, there's a little moment that has a big impact, but they don't necessarily see it as that. They see it as doing the job. And a story he told me, and maybe he's told you this story, but he had just started as a supervisor. I think it was his first big thing. And it's on—who is above him on that fire that day was Charlie Caldwell. And at that point, Charlie was like "Charlie Caldwell", and he was all…

[01:30:48] **Jimmie Rocha:** Charlie "Studwell?"

[01:30:48] **James Wall:** Yes. But Jim was all nerves and stuff. And he was like, "Oh God, I'm going to screw this up," and all. And a big moment for him was he didn't have to find Charlie, that Charlie came and found him and said, "I'm Charlie, and we're working together and we're going to have a good time. And if you need anything, you come." So, all that. And he told Charlie about it, and Charlie, oh yes. And so, to him, it might have been just a way of being a good boss or being a good dude, but to Jim, it made all the difference in the world.

[01:31:22] **Jimmie Rocha:** But that's not the way that worked back then. It was you had to--and that's what happened is Charlie had looked at him and watched him and had decided that he was—because those guys didn't come looking for you. I could still remember with Stan walking down a—before I used to only get growls from him and stuff. And it would be like, I remember walking on the El Dorado in the middle of the night. And all I remember is walking by the man. And all I got was, in the dark, he had two of his squadies with him, and we passed on this walkway. And he's like, "What's up, Strummer?" And it's like, I go, "Man, that guy just talked to me. This is bizarre. What's going on here?"

[01:32:09] **James Wall:** He obviously had a different strategy, but everybody has a different management strategy. But it's interesting that over the time, he cracks a bit. He lets you in a bit more and then at some point your hand gets stamped. Like you had said, and things start to open up. So how long ago was that he left, that he passed?

[01:32:30] **Jimmie Rocha:** You're terrible with me for years here. See that was 2000 and—shoot, I didn't even want to give you a year there.

[01:32:44] **James Wall:** Yes, fair enough. Well, let's move on to the other side of the coin. So maybe Lynn, but you had mentioned her, but were there people as you went on

where you got to be the Stan Stewart to their career, where you got to see them develop that you really enjoyed working with?

[01:33:02] Jimmie Rocha: Oh yes. There's been, God, a whole bunch of characters that were squadies and foreman now that are superintendents. Danny Breuklander off of Texas Canyon, because I was good friends with his boss, Lumpy John Armstrong.

[01:33:22] James Wall: Why'd they call him Lumpy?

[01:33:24] Jimmie Rocha: It comes off of a story, man, when he worked on LP when he was about eighteen. I imagine it probably had something to do with a bar at Paradise Store. And I'm guessing maybe the guy got into a fight and got some lumps on him.

[01:33:37] James Wall: I see. But he wasn't a lumpy individual. He was a fighter.

[01:33:41] Jimmie Rocha: Yes. Oh, heck, he was a fighter. JT's son, Josh Thomas, he's a foreman now in Bear Divide, a wonderful guy to watch. Both Lynn and Corey, her husband, who's a superintendent at Breckenridge, I've got to watch them grow up in fire and they're doing really well. Brandon Davis that's over there, worked on Dalton Bear Divide. He works for Orange County now. These are guys at all I got to watch that were squad bosses, foreman and stuff over the years morph into wonderful people.

[01:34:26] James Wall: If you had a really bad fire, a really complex fire, there's one person you could take with you, it was just fire behavior, right? The feel, the instinct. The hotshots talk about that you needed a level of instinct to really read a fire. Who would you take with you?

[01:34:48] Jimmie Rocha: Can I take two?

[01:34:49] James Wall: Sure.

[01:34:50] Jimmie Rocha: Actually, I have to take three.

[01:34:52] James Wall: Yes.

[01:34:53] Jimmie Rocha: I'd take Stan, Lumpy, and Frank Esposito.

[01:34:59] James Wall: Frank Esposito.

[01:35:00] Jimmie Rocha: Long time. He's passed away now. He was the superintendent of Bear Divide. I'd take those three guys with me.

[01:35:09] James Wall: What about Frank would stand out in that crew?

[01:35:15] Jimmie Rocha: Frank's level-headedness, experience. I always called him a hotshot's hotshot. His experience and his knowledge, there traveling with it. But probably with Frank, just his calmness through the entire thing as we kind of wandered through whatever this bad situation is. Because I've sat in safety zones for whatever reason, I've been in and had fire go around just left and right. And I've watched some of these guys just sit, and it's just another day at the office. Not bravado, just they've done it.

[01:36:04] James Wall: Yes, coolness. That's what they used to say about [unclear] [01:36:07] Civil War, an old history thing is Ulysses S. Grant. They used to say he had "four o'clock in the morning courage," which is that you could wake him up at four o'clock in the morning and tell him that his left flank had been turned and he would be as cool as a cucumber. That level of just focus. And it's interesting how it translates to everybody.

Well, last question's always, what does it mean to you to be a hotshot? How did it change you as a person? What does it mean to you now that you can't be prosecuted for anything you could possibly say, and you can say what you want? What do you feel about the hotshot life?

[01:36:53] Jimmie Rocha: I think it was probably the most defining moment of my entire career. Like I said, I got to do a lot of different things, a lot of stuff. But taking the group of kids that I did through that nineteen years and the places we went and the things we did, we did a lot of good work out there for the public. Some of it they saw; some of it they didn't. And I got to watch a whole bunch of kids grow up that to this day, wherever they're at, doing whatever they do in wandering in the world, they still come back and say that was the best time in their life up to this point of what we went out and did and the people they were with.

We didn't always get along. We argued like any family, but I don't think there's been an argument and where might have been where sometimes where some guys didn't talk to each other for six months or a year. But I know for a fact, as soon as someone turns on one of us, doesn't matter who's mad at who, we'll go with the guy that's wearing the Rio Bravo blue. And doesn't matter if we're mad at each other, we're going to be mad at the other guy across from us. That's how tight that is. I may be mad at that guy, but that guy over there mad at you, that means I'm mad at you too.

[01:38:25] James Wall: Sounds like family.

[01:38:27] **Jimmie Rocha:** It is.

[End of Interview]