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Tuesday, Daily ENTER

Forestry flags lowered in memory of firefighter

United Press International

State and federal forest agencies in Southern California lowered flags to half staff yesterday in memory of a young fire fighter who died of burns suffered in battling a Riverside County conflagration.

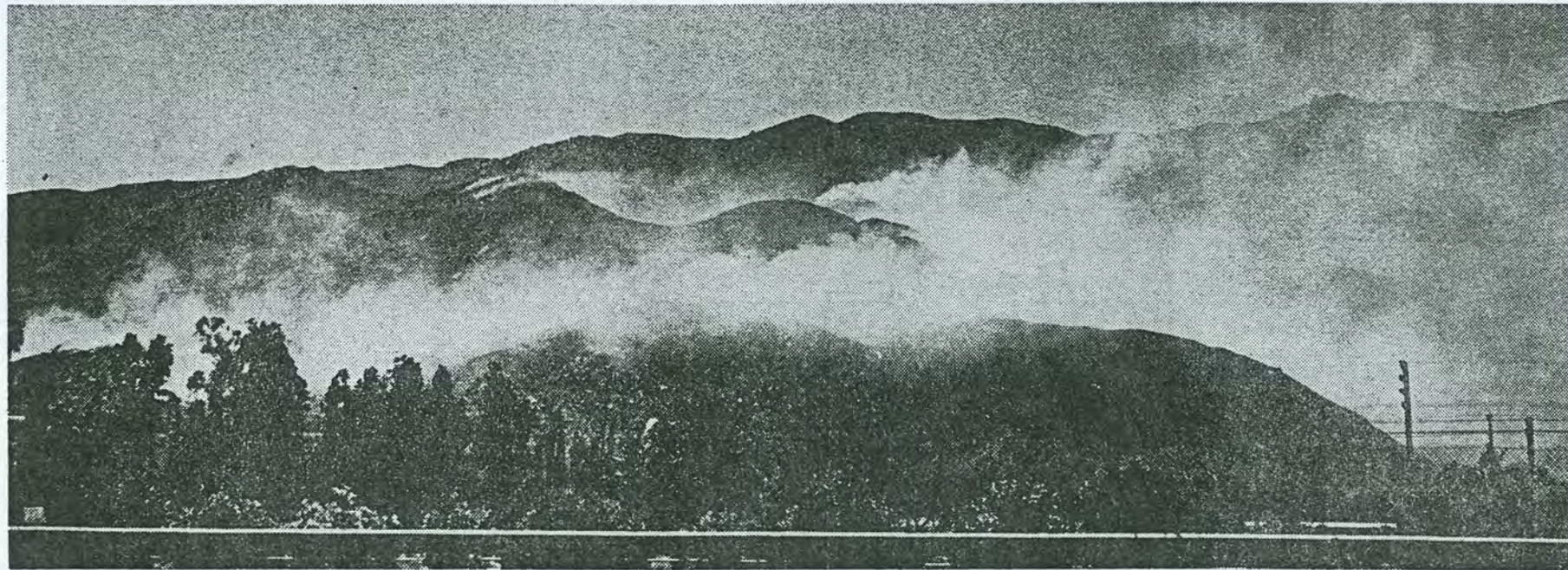
Robert Miller, 21, of the U.S. Forest Service, was leading a four-man squad in the San Jacinto Mountains south of Banning when he was trapped by the flames from the 600-acre blaze.

He was burned over 90 per cent of

his body and succumbed Sunday night at Loma Linda Hospital. His had been the first crew at the scene.

In all, five major brush fires during the weekend kept 1,000 men busy. All were contained or controlled by Monday.

The National Weather Service forecast gusty north to northeast winds last night spreading to the northern deserts today, and over much of Southern California by tomorrow.



A fire which claimed one life Sunday sweeps through brush in San Jacinto Mountains near Banning. (Staff photo by Ross Hubbard)

Fire that took life of young firefighter may have been set

BANNING — Investigators probed the blackened brushland in the Banning-Idyllwild area yesterday where they suspect arson caused a fire that burned 589 acres and claimed a firefighter's life.

The fire was brought under control by 8 a.m. yesterday, but fire crews continued to patrol the area, watching for a possible flare-up.

"A large group" of arson investigators was combing through the area, a U.S. Forest Service spokesman said. Arson was suspected because the fire apparently started in two different places.

Late yesterday the forest service offered a \$500 reward for information leading to the arrest of an arson suspect in the blaze. Spokesman Jack McCurnin

asked any area residents or passing motorists to contact him at the State Division of Forestry at Perris if they noticed anyone suspicious on the Banning-Idyllwild Road, approximately six miles south of Banning, between 9:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. Sunday.

A spokesman at the Perris office said late last night that the investigation is still continuing.

If an arsonist is caught, according to a spokesman for the Riverside County sheriff's arson squad, he could be charged with murder as well as arson because a man died in the fire.

ROBERT MILLER, 21, of Banning, is the U.S. Forest Service fireman who was trapped by flames and burned to death while leading a crew of men operating a tanker truck.

No details will be available on Miller's death until an investigation is completed, forest service officials announced.

According to an unofficial source, Miller was burned when he failed to escape wind-fanned flames that had outflanked his crew, which was laying a hose. Two members of the crew made it to safety.

A helicopter picked up the reportedly conscious fireman and flew him to Loma Linda Medical Center, where he died at 6:39 p.m., Sunday.

He had been stationed at the Vista Grande Fire Station near Banning.

Dying winds and a cooling trend helped ease fire danger yesterday, officials said, after an outbreak burned some 1,400 acres over the weekend in four Southern California counties.

An investigation also continued at Little Tujunga Canyon, near Los Angeles, where a fire burned 410 acres. A careless smoker may have started it, officials said.

Officials warned motorists and campers to use extreme caution, however, saying fire danger is always at its worst in the fall. Devastating fires erupted in Southern California last year in late September.

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