

. A Trucker's Ride Through Wildfire

A raging Utah wildfire sent this trucker on the ride of his life.

• by: Cathy Free

An Eerie Scene

The clock on his dashboard told him it was half past noon, but Fred Gonzales thought it might as well be midnight. "What's going on here?" he asked himself, turning on his headlights and shifting his 40-ton semi to a lower gear. Leaning over the steering wheel, Gonzales squinted to see the highway through the windshield. A wall of thick black smoke was closing in -- he could barely make out the yellow road markers on Utah's Interstate 15.

A quick check of his side mirrors revealed the same eerie scene behind him. There was no way he could turn around now; he'd have to keep moving. Suddenly, through the haze, he saw a bright flash of orange light. A wildfire was roaring down the mountain to his right, exploding in front of him and igniting the road. Wind from the inferno shook the cab and caused the 53-foot trailer to sway. Smoke seeped in through the vents. The trucker slammed the gear lower still. My God, he thought, this is it. I'm going to burn up and die right here on the highway.

Ever since his dad let him tag along on road trips as a toddler, Gonzales had been fascinated by big trucks. There was something magical about sitting up high, watching the sun rise and set along a new ribbon of highway. But in 1992, when he entered the independent trucking business after doing everything from shearing sheep to manufacturing neon signs, it took him months to get used to the long hours alone.

Now, at 49, with his two kids grown, he'd come to love the routine. He would kiss his wife, Ernestine, goodbye and head out twice a month, transporting everything from cookies to newsprint. During lonely moments, he'd call Ernestine on his cell.

For this particular trip, the Fort Collins, Colorado, big rig operator had picked up a load of liquid swimming pool chemicals near Salt Lake City. Grabbing a cup of coffee to go at the truck stop where he'd spent the night, he glanced at his watch; it was 7/7/07. My lucky day, he thought. There wouldn't be much traffic on the interstate on a Saturday morning; he'd be able to drop off his haul in Rancho Cucamonga, California, by the end of the weekend.

Rolling south on the freeway, Gonzales noticed a thin layer of haze wrapped around Utah's Wasatch mountain range. It was going to be a hot one. He turned up the air-conditioning, then tuned into his favorite satellite radio channel, Blue Collar Comedy.

Three hours later, just beyond the small town of Fillmore, he saw something unusual. About a dozen fire trucks were parked along the opposite side of the interstate, and firefighters were standing next to the fence, looking west. Are they practicing maneuvers? Gonzales wondered. He hadn't heard anything about a wildfire on his CB radio. He spotted smoke in the distance to the west, but it looked like it was several miles away.

As cars passed him on the right, Gonzales shifted to a lower gear to make it up the steep grade ahead. The higher he climbed, the more the blue sky disappeared. Smoke began to spread across the freeway like fog. A mobile home stopped suddenly directly in front of him, forcing him to swerve into the right lane with his heavy load. "What the hell are you doing?" shouted Gonzales. The smoke was now dark and thick. He'd driven in whiteouts before, but a blackout at noon? This was a first. Slowing to 25 mph, he strained to see the highway in front of him.

Seconds later, there was a loud whooshing sound, "like somebody turned the furnace on," Gonzales recalls, and his truck was ablaze. Flames lapped at the tires and leaped from the air breathers and axles. Fire and wind raged all around, snapping juniper trees and incinerating the sagebrush. If the truck stalls, I'm toast, Gonzales thought. There was no choice but to keep driving.

Ride Through Hell

Fueled by dry cheatgrass, the Milford Flat fire had been sparked by lightning the day before and now spread quickly across the high desert. More than 500 firefighters were working around the clock to contain the blaze, but it continued to grow. Within days, it would become the largest wildfire recorded in Utah history, consuming 363,000 acres of mostly empty rangeland. On the hot afternoon of July 7, just as Gonzales was creeping up the hill outside Fillmore, the worst happened: Wind gusts of 48 mph moved in, sweeping the fire across the freeway. The blaze consumed several structures and narrowly missed a gas station.

Trooper Chad McWilliams was umpiring a Little League baseball game on his day off when his cell phone rang. "The fire has jumped I-15," the dispatcher said. "We're calling everyone in to help shut down the freeway from Scipio to Beaver." That's an almost 100-mile stretch, thought McWilliams.

He hurried home to get his patrol car. Driving north of Beaver toward the junction of Interstate 15 and eastbound I-70, he spotted what appeared to be a large thunderstorm directly ahead. That's all we need—more lightning, thought McWilliams. He felt a chill when he realized the enormous clouds were actually plumes of black smoke. Pulling over, he joined Trooper Chuck Collings in diverting traffic off I-15, away from the fire. He looked at his watch: It was almost 12:30. At the height of lunch hour, he needed a flashlight.

"C'mon, c'mon, don't cut out on me now!" Gonzales held tightly to the gearshift and kept his foot steady on the throttle. He found that if he kept the truck in fifth gear and didn't go any slower than 25 mph, he could still move ahead, even with his engine on fire. Flames danced all around him. Sort of like driving through hell, Gonzales thought. Although the diesel fuel in his tank was less volatile than gasoline, his cab was made of fiberglass. He could feel the heat radiating from the floor and door, and figured the fire would burn its way through the cab in a matter of minutes. Coughing and struggling to breathe, he forced himself to keep his cool.

Gonzales glanced at a photo of his wife that he kept in his rig. You've got to make it home to Ernestine, he told himself. He wanted more than anything to call her and tell her that he loved her, but he was afraid to take his eyes off the road.

The flames were almost hypnotic as they raged on the mountain and along both sides of the highway, towering above his truck. Only 15 minutes had passed since Gonzales started up the smoky hill, but it seemed like an eternity. Warning lights lit up across his dashboard. The engine would stall at any second.

Then suddenly Gonzales could see more of the highway. Was it over? Whether I'm through it or not, he thought, I've got to get out of this truck. Hitting the air brakes, he swung his rig to the edge of the interstate, turned off the engine and flung open the door. The handle seared his palm like a cattle brand. Ignoring the pain, he jumped to the hot pavement and ran full speed through the haze in his thin T-shirt and shorts. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the entire cab of his truck was now ablaze.

Gonzales was coughing ash when a brown minivan with California plates screeched to a stop next to him. A man rolled down his window. "Hurry, get in!" he told Gonzales. Two small children sat in the backseat, their eyes wide with fear. Their mother was at the steering wheel, trembling.

"Climb in back with the kids, ma'am. I'm a truck driver," Gonzales said. "I can get us out of here." He hurried to the driver's side, jumped in and floored it. He drove 65 mph through the smoke, which once again showed no sign of letting up. After about 12 miles, Gonzales saw police lights flashing at the junction of I-15 and I-70 ahead. He pulled to the side of the road, and Trooper McWilliams rushed over with his flashlight. "You've got to keep moving!" the officer barked.

Gonzales got out and explained that his truck was behind in the blazing fire. The trooper agreed to let him stay put. "But you'd better get back on the road," McWilliams told the couple.

After he thanked the pair and they pulled away, Gonzales realized they hadn't exchanged names. He wished they had. In his years on the road, he'd stopped plenty of times to help stranded motorists who'd been in accidents or were caught in bad weather. "Thank God somebody cared enough to stop for me," he told McWilliams.

The fire was now concentrated on the left side of the interstate, but McWilliams realized there might be other motorists trapped between closures, unable to drive through the smoke. Gonzales offered to help direct traffic while the trooper drove his patrol car into the haze, eventually escorting several people to safety, including the couple who'd stopped their motor home in front of Gonzales. They'd taken refuge under an overpass to ride out the flames. Others weren't so lucky: Farther up the road, Rex Redmon, 68, and his wife, Mary Ann, 65, of Rowland Heights, California, were hit and killed on their motorcycle by a driver who couldn't see them in the smoke.

Later that afternoon, McWilliams took Gonzales to see the still-smoking remains of his truck. The \$40,000 Peterbilt, with its custom massaging-action seat, was a complete loss. Thankfully, he had two other rigs at home, "but this one was my favorite," he says. After checking into a motel room in Beaver, the exhausted trucker collapsed on the bed in his sooty clothes and phoned his wife.

Two weeks later, Gonzales again traveled through central Utah, this time in his 2002 Freightliner. As he approached the steep grade outside Fillmore, he was struck by the charred fields and trees stretching for miles. At the curve in the road where his cab had caught fire, the interstate was streaked with black ash. Turning down the comedy channel, he drove up the hill in silence, just grateful for another day on the highway.