

EVEN YOU CAN PREVENT FOREST FIRES

Ever wonder what State Trooper Charlie Hanger felt like when he learned he'd made world history with that misdemeanor arrest? Or if you are like most people, do you just wonder, "Who's Charlie Hanger?"

How about if you knew that it was **Oklahoma** State Trooper Charlie Hanger? That ought to be enough for any *cop* to start figuring it out. Yes, he's the guy who arrested the suspect in the worst act of domestic terrorism in U.S. history--the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building. Funny/sad how we remember the wrong name from that tragedy.

Anyway, there was Trooper Hanger doing his "routine" (read "dangerous") job, "merely" enforcing traffic law, when he discovers a "simple" handgun possession violation and safely arrests and books the suspect. All without having any way of knowing that the suspect had just killed 168 people.

Crescenta Valley Station Deputy Eric Matejka has an idea how Trooper Hanger felt. It was during one of our Red Flag seasons from Hell, when the expected natural fires are dangerous enough without throwing arson into the mix. At 2053 hours on a hot September night, Deputy Matejka was flagged down by a citizen who reported a 1/4 acre fire along Angeles Forest Highway.

After calling for the L.A. County Fire Department and requesting back-up, Eric was joined by Deputies Brian Tibbett and Mike Carney. They spent the next hour handling the "police" aspects of a fire call--traffic and crowd control, ensuring access for firefighters, assisting as needed, etc.

After going 10-98 (finished with assignment/call), Deputy Matejka noticed an apparent deuce (DUI suspect) on the southbound Angeles Crest Highway approaching La Canada-Flintridge. It was all there in "silver-platter" condition--the really bad driving, the lag time in pulling over, the smell of alcohol, the slow, slurred speech, the bloodshot and watery eyes, the soot in his ear..... Wait a minute. Soot? Hmmm.

"So, where are you coming from?"

"Oh, I just got off work, and I was "styling" with my "Captain Morgan" in the midst of nature."

"Been any farther north up the Crest?"

"No, just that turnout you saw me leaving from."

"Seen anything unusual while you've been up here?"

"Nope."

Deputy Matejka radio'd Crescenta Valley Station unit 122 Deputies Tibbett and Carney to swing by. They both immediately recognized the suspect and his vehicle as having been at the fire an hour ago.

Now, does anyone need a road map to tell where this is headed? But there is still plenty of work to do to bridge the gap between p.c. (Probable Cause) to hook (arrest) and conviction/hard time.

Eric patted the suspect down and felt a hard object. "What's this?"

"I don't know."

"Mind if I look?"

"No, go ahead."

"Well, well, it's a gas lighter."

The evidence kept mounting, but it didn't come on a silver platter like the deuce did. This arson evidence took attention to detail and thinking.

In the suspect's car: an open emergency road kit *with only one flare*; a map book with the page leading to the National Forest foothills *torn out*; a June, 2004, San Gabriel P.D. citation *for trash can arson*; and on the suspect's hands: cuts and tree sap.

Throw in some helpful witness statements about a "looky-loo" at the fire who looked just like the suspect, and some lies he was trapped in by Sheriff's arson investigators Mark Cofield and Gary Washington, and the gap between the hook and a few years at the "license plate factory" was bridged. *

If not arrested, this suspect would have gone on getting his kicks threatening life and property on a massive scale. As fate *might have had it*, he would have caused a fire that would kill several people and create havoc with nature, wiping out much of recreational Southern California and destroying watershed. More tragedy might later result during fatal and destructive winter floods and mudslides in what was to be the second rainiest season in L.A. history.

Or not. Thanks to these observations by Deputies Matejka, Tibbett and Carney, we'll never know what was averted. And thank heavens, and these deputies, for that.

