

'We had 3 minutes to save their lives'

By Amy B Wang, Arizona Republic

The command that blared from the radio was one Gary Dahlen had never heard before, not in all his years piloting helicopters over wildfires.

All available helicopters prepare for an emergency launch.

He hardly knew what to make of it. "I was thinking maybe structures were threatened," Dahlen said later.

He was waiting at a helicopter base in Placerville.

Just uphill, where the American River's south fork cuts a knife-sharp slash through the forest, the King Fire had been exploding up the canyon walls and beyond since Sept. 13. Now, two days later, the airborne and ground attack on the fire was under way.

Dahlen had been out doing "bucket work" all morning, picking up water in the bucket that dangled from his yellow Bell 205, dropping it onto the flames in the forest below. At midday, he returned to the base to refuel and await orders. Then he heard the unusual radio call.

He quickly climbed into his flight suit, then into his seat.

As the helicopter's turbo engine whined to life, someone from the fire command staff came sprinting toward the aircraft, reached in and punched latitude-and-longitude coordinates into Dahlen's GPS.

That was when he learned the emergency: It was a shelter deployment.

A crew on the ground, somewhere in the steep wilderness beyond the base, was stuck in front of the fire. Deployment meant the crew had unpacked their fire shelters, blankets of reflective foil and insulation, and prepared to climb inside them.

For a firefighter, deployment is a last resort. Some firefighters inside shelters survive, as the flames roll past them. Some do not. In 2013, the Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona overtook 19 firefighters, members of the Prescott-based Granite Mountain Hotshots. Realizing they were trapped, the firefighters deployed their shelters. None survived.

In the cockpit of his helicopter, Dahlen looked at the coordinates on his GPS. The long line for his water bucket was still shackled to the airframe. But the trapped crew was 10 miles away. He lifted the Bell into smoke-dulled afternoon light and headed toward the flames.

Read the whole story