



# 2022 Local HEROES

## Firefighters tackled the Bolt Creek Fire for weeks in grueling smoke

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contributing writer

**SNOHOMISH COUNTY** — The Bolt Creek Fire was neither the state's largest nor deadliest wildfire of 2022.

It was, however, the most significant.

For the first time in memory, flames threatened cities in western Washington state, polluting Puget Sound air for weeks and causing residents to evacuate homes in Index, Baring and Skykomish. Hundreds of firefighters from multiple agencies united for a long slog.

"Western Washington isn't used to having a fire like that," said Don Waller, Snohomish Fire District 4's fire chief and an initial incident command team manager at Bolt Creek. "It had a lot of pieces that were unique."

For one, though flames lapped close to civilization the fire burned mainly in an area inaccessible by road. District 4 utilized a converted military surplus vehicle it bought last year to reach the blaze.

For another, the tinder on the west side of the Cascades presented special challenges.

"It's a lot different than the east side, which has lots of smaller trees and brush," said Marcus McGee, a District 4 firefighter who was one of the first on the scene. "This was a lot of heavy timber."

There was also a large



Photo courtesy Bolt Creek Fire Information webpage, a government page

Firefighters of multiple agencies worked tirelessly to control and divert the Bolt Creek Fire away from residences.

amount of duff — an understory of fallen leaves and decomposing soil.

The duff would simmer then heat up, exploding the root balls of plants. This caused several trees to fall across U.S. 2.

"If anything this was an eye-opening experience for everyone in the Puget Sound basin," said Peter Mongillo, public information officer for Snohomish Regional Fire and Rescue headquartered in Monroe. "We need to treat fire carefully."

Bolt Creek ranked as Type

2 wildfire on a 1-4 scale from biggest to smallest. It was the largest fire to creep this close to the Puget Sound basin, and it was human-caused.

While firefighters from Sky Valley District 5 fought flames on the front lines, behind the scenes hundreds of fire-behavior experts, weather forecasters and firefighters from as far as Florida and Chicago set up a command post at the Evergreen State Fairgrounds.

"It takes a lot of people to fight these fires," Mongillo said. "They'd work 15-, 16-,

17-hour days, and sleep in tents, making sure the firefighters had everything they need."

Though the Bolt Creek blaze did not result in casualties, experts warn it's a harbinger of summers to come.

Fires throughout the western United States are getting larger and spreading closer to cities, Waller said, and Snohomish County needs to be ready.

"Part of the problem is that people don't feel like there are fires here," Waller said. "We need to educate the public better. We have to put as much money, resources, and effort into wildfire preparation as the east side (of the Cascades) does."

One step all home and business owners can take is to make a defensible space around their property, Mongillo said.

Plant green grass, which does not burn easily. Cut vegetation away from homes and buildings. Clear rooftops and gutters of pine needles and other potential combustibles.

"When the smoke's in their back yards, it gets people more involved," Mongillo said. "(Bolt Creek) is a sad reminder that we have to take precautions."



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## Two lineworkers saved someone in peril

Snohomish PUD employees Tommy O'Brien of Snohomish and Bill "Greeny" Greenfield of Sultan received Governor's Lifesaving Awards during the annual Governor's Industrial Safety and Health Conference held in September in Tacoma.

In early January while working to restore power after a winter storm, they had observed a woman struggling in snowy wet conditions to deliver a gas can to a family member needed for the generator in an off-grid property near the town of Index where she was staying. She had attempted to drive up the muddy hill but slid back to the bottom of the hill. They put snow chains on her tires and tried it again, but was still unsuccessful in driving up the hill.

O'Brien and Greenfield offered to drive the woman to the top of the hill. She walked toward them, making it about 150 feet before she began to struggle. Falling in the knee-deep snow, she tried to crawl to higher ground but soon gave up, laying in the snow.

Recognizing a serious situ-



Photo courtesy Snohomish County PUD

Tommy O'Brien of Snohomish (left) and Bill Greenfield of Sultan hold their awards won at the Governor's Industrial Safety and Health Conference held in September in Tacoma.

ation, O'Brien ventured out to rescue the individual while Greenfield worked to turn the utility vehicle around so they could all descend the hill. O'Brien found the woman lying in the snow exhausted and having lost both her boots in the snow and mud.

He tried to lift her from under her shoulders, but she could not hold herself up.

O'Brien ultimately dragged the person out of the snow while she held onto his back. O'Brien returned the woman to her car. She changed into dry clothes, and he helped her warm her feet. The

woman regained feeling in her feet and was able to safely drive back to her space.

"I am incredibly proud of the heroic actions that Bill and Tommy took to rescue this woman from a life-threatening situation," said John Haarlow, General Manager/CEO for the PUD in a news release. "At the PUD we value the health, safety and well-being of our employees and communities above all else. Bill and Tommy demonstrated our safety culture that day by going above and beyond to save the life of one of our community members."

The PUD noted in a press release that in addition to receiving extensive safety training from the PUD, Greenfield and O'Brien are both skilled outdoors people who possessed the knowledge and skills to assess and respond to the situation. Both men didn't hesitate to use their training to save a life.

— Tribune staff

## Reserve a seat for the American Red Cross Heroes Breakfast on Dec. 8

Individuals who have shown great courage to save a life or given of themselves to help another person or their community will take center stage at the 27th annual breakfast held by the local American Red Cross called the Northwest Washington Heroes Breakfast.

The event will take place on Thursday, Dec. 8 at the Tulalip Resort Casino, 10200 Quil Ceda Blvd., Tulalip. The doors open at 6:30 a.m. and the program begins sharply at 7 a.m. The event should

conclude by about 9 a.m.

The registration cost is by a donation amount of your choosing.

A way to get to the registration link is at [www.redcross.org/local/washington.html](http://www.redcross.org/local/washington.html)

On that page, people can nominate heroes for an award as well.

For questions, call 206-305-4167 or email [NWevents@redcross.org](mailto:NWevents@redcross.org)

The Snohomish County branch is headquartered in Everett at 2530 Lombard Ave.

### Others who won state honors

- Carlos Sevilla of Lake Stevens; Eric Roberts; and Scott Barton of Lake Stevens: For delivering CPR and using a defibrillator on someone who collapsed at the county dump.

- Matt Tannahill, Arlington; Jeff Mikeska, Lynnwood; Colton Ward, Everett: For reacting to a highway crash scene and pulling two people out of a van and controlling its fire.