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Sappers adapt and overcome to fight wildfires in Alberta

June 26, 2023 - MWO Kyle Ho, 1 Combat Engineer Regiment

Members of 1 Combat Engineer Regiment (1 CER) have been busy supporting Alberta Wildfires to protect Albertans from the wildfires raging across the province.

On May 15, the firefighter Incident Command Post (ICP) in Fox Creek was evacuated as the wind shifted unexpectedly. The town of Fox Creek and surrounding areas had fallen under imminent threat from the wildfire just as 127 Squadron (127 Sqn) arrived.

As a result, 127 Sqn was forced into a temporary shelter in the Air Cadet Hall in Whitecourt.

Major Tyler Ye, Officer Commanding 127 Sqn, linked up with Alberta Wildfires to discuss the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) capabilities and plan for fire containment until the very last moment before the ICP was forced to be evacuated.

Within eight hours of settling into the Air Cadet Hall, 127 Sqn leadership was involved in the Alberta Wildfires planning cycle while others conducted various recces in the area for suitable bed down locations and contracting for their essential needs. The camp construction started on the same day.

On May 17, the main force from 127 Sqn was committed to help contain the fire alongside the Alberta Wildfires firefighters.

Troop commander Captain Trenton Klimack explained changes were needed in how 127 Sqn attacked the fires.

“The gridding and mopping techniques we learned and employed in Drayton Valley were not immediately applicable because the entire area here is hot,” he said. “In the new areas we first had to run the hose down the edge of the black and wet everything down before we could start mopping for hot spots.”



► *As the 127 Squadron convoy approached Fox Creek, Alta., the smoke from the wildfires was unmistakable.*



► *From a closer distance the smoke from the fires threatening Fox Creek, Alta., loomed over the town.*

The smoke produced from the fire limited visibility to less than 50 feet in some areas. Poor air quality made breathing difficult, causing added fatigue for the sappers on the ground. The ash from the burning trees started to fall from the sky, with some embers able to travel several kilometres to start a new fire. Some of the trees started to “candle,” with flames shooting out from the ground on the side of the road. The heat could be felt through the doors and windows of the vehicles as they drove past. The engineers had to be pulled off the fire line multiple times because the risk of fire hazards was too great to be managed.



The Incident Command Post in Fox Creek, Alta., amidst the smoke blanketing the area on May 15. The smoke from the burning forest reduced the visibility in town and surrounding area.



Sappers from 127 Sqn worked diligently under the guidance of the firefighters to mitigate the risk under these hazardous conditions.

Sergeant David Burr, the military police detachment commander, explained just how dangerous the situation was.

“I was patrolling the route to the task site, and I saw the fire burning all the way to the edge of the road,” he said. “I asked the nearby firefighters to deal with the fire before it cut off our egress route.”

For the next few days, sappers were assisting firefighters building defences around the town by laying out hoses and soaking the ground using nearby Losegun Lake. Some of the “candles” were too dangerous for ground crews to attack directly, so sappers had to call in helicopters with water buckets to suppress the flames.

With support from the sappers, Alberta Wildfires started to gain ground due to combined efforts with soldiers from 1 CER, but the wildfire situation still did not look good. A dozer guard along the Virginia Hill Road was established and used as the last defence because the wildfire was expected to rapidly expand toward the town of Whitecourt due to strong northwesterly winds.

In their new bed down location and the new ICP, 127 Sqn spent over two and half hours on the road daily between all the key task sites which compressed the work and rest cycle.

It took three days until the base camp construction was finally completed by the rear party consisting of fewer than 10 people led by Warrant Officer Matt Wilks, the squadron Quarter Master Sergeant. The squadron consolidated in Camp Whitecourt and a more sustainable battle rhythm was established. By this time, the heavy smoke cloud from the Fox Creek fire, 100 km away, covered the sky above Whitecourt and the burning ash started coming down. People were asked to stay indoors or seek shelters for health-related concerns.

After days of maintaining the fire guard surrounding the Fox Creek, Mother Nature finally lent a helping hand, sending a thunderstorm with heavy rain on May 22. The low-pressure weather system brought between 50 and 80 millimetres of heavy precipitation, which suffocated the fire for the next 48 hours, followed by three more days of lower temperatures that significantly reduced the fire behaviour.

Bad weather does not mean days off for 127 Sqn, however. Under the guidance of Alberta Wildfires, sappers from 1 CER conducted patrols to extinguish hot spots in preparation for the eventual flare ups once the temperature warmed back up.



Lieutenant-Colonel Ben Schmidt (left), Commander Operation LENTUS 23-01 Land Task Force, visited the site to talking with Warrant Officer Cedric Bentley (middle) and Captain Trenton Klimack (right).

The rain washed out the ground underneath the burning trees, making them unstable. Sappers could hear the trees falling in the distance as they were working in the woods. Sappers were told not to lean on any trees to avoid accidentally toppling unstable trees.

Thanks to the efforts of all the firefighting agencies and the CAF, the number of daily hot spots was reduced to only five from a high of 50 earlier in the deployment. Prior to the expiration of the original Request for Assistance (RFA) from the Province of Alberta, Brigadier-General Steven Graham Commander 3rd Canadian Division, paid a visit to 127 Sqn to assess the situation on the ground in-person and show his support and appreciation to the sappers.

On May 28, the RFA was extended by two more weeks. As the situation stabilized, sappers from 1 CER were relieved in place by troopers from D Sqn from Lord Strathcona's Horse (Royal Canadians) on May 30. Members of 127 Sqn returned to Edmonton and prepared to support the next RFA.

Selfless soldiers like Captain Jacques Pecora were integral to 1 CER being able to mobilize quickly and deliver the desired effects on the ground on short notice. Even though he recently returned from Operation UNIFIER in Poland, he immediately volunteered to be a part of this operation.

"I joined the CAF to serve this country and help Canadians in times of crisis," he said. "The effects our sappers have achieved on the ground and the appreciation shown by the people from the town of Fox Creek are powerful rewards on their own. I am sure Sappers from 1 CER are ready to respond to any follow on RFAs in the near future because this is who we are and what we do."



Corporal Sarah Mackay is ready to go on the fire line for the day.

Fighting forest fires is no longer 127 Sqn's task for now, and the squadron will be reformed back into three different squadrons as soldiers return to 1 CER from international missions.

Fox Creek still stands today because the joint efforts between Alberta Wildfires, Fox Creek's municipal firefighters and 127 Sqn. Every soldier deployed on this operation is proud of their impact and achievement throughout Op LENTUS 23-01.



Sappers hose down the ground to prevent the fire from spreading over the fire guard.



Master Corporal Alexis Russelo mobilizing her section for the upcoming task.



Members of 127 Squadron needed to wear respirators when outdoors due to poor air quality.



Flames shooting up from the ground up the length of a tree in a phenomenon known to firefighters as a “candle.”



A firefighting helicopter pours water on trees that had “candled.”



Warrant Officer Matt Wilks led Whitecourt, Alta., town officials to conduct an environment assessment at Camp Whitecourt.



An unstable tree with its damaged root system.





Sergeant Guillaume Brindamour walked the line during the heavy rain falls to inspect the wood line for hot spots.



► Caption



► Caption



Sappers clearing the way to gain access to the hot spots.



Sergeant David Burr was on hand to conduct escort and route opening tasks.



If left unattended and unmonitored, hot spots can flare up against and continue to spread.



Sappers laid hoses for up to nine kilometres in length along the Virginia Hill Road to protect the town of Whitecourt, Alta.



Sappers working in the black (burn) zone to extinguish the hot spots.



Master Corporal James Dodds splitting logs and fallen trees to gain access any hidden hot spots.



Corporal Taralyn Cook delivers medical treatment to Sapper Collin VanOordt.



Captain Jacques Pecora with the medical evacuation helicopter taking off in the background.



Soldiers from 127 Squadron, 1 Combat Engineer Regiment, with their attachments ready to be redeployed back to Edmonton.

