

Nineteen firefighters die battling Arizona wildfire

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On Sunday, a wildfire that had been caused due to lightning this past Friday took the lives of 19 members of an elite firefighting team based in Prescott, Arizona. The crew, known as the Granite Mountain Hotshots, had been battling a fire in nearby Yarnell, about 80 miles north of Phoenix. The circumstance represents the single worst fire-related tragedy since 1933, when a California wildfire took the lives of 29 firefighters, and the largest loss of life involving such responders since 341 individuals perished in the events of September 11, 2001.

The crew had been battling the fire since Friday, when the extremely hot and dry climate prevailing in the region was hit with a lightning storm, creating a massive inferno, causing hundreds of Yarnell residents to vacate their homes. The team had been fighting to extinguish the blaze on Sunday when a sudden windstorm caused the inferno to rapidly increase in size, from 200 acres on Sunday to over 8,000 a day later. All but one member of the crew perished.

The firefighters were members of a highly trained unit that regularly endures grueling preparation courses in order to maintain their abilities to combat such infernos. Their webpage describes them as being “routinely exposed to extreme environmental conditions, long work hours, long travel hours and the most demanding of fireline tasks. Comforts such as beds, showers and hot meals are not always common.”

“We grieve for the family. We grieve for the department. We grieve for the city,” stated Prescott Fire Chief Dan Fraijo, who related that the sudden tragedy has severely undermined the city’s ability to defend itself in the face of the fire. “We just lost 19 of the finest people you’ll ever meet,” he added.

Mike Reichling, spokesman for the Tempe Fire Department, when asked by reporters if the fire

appeared to be contained, stated “Not very. Right now we have zero containment,” adding that the blaze “brought down half of the town of Yarnell. It has decimated that town.”

As of Monday, Yarnell and other surrounding communities had been evacuated, with dozens of homes in the town already engulfed. That number is set to increase, as local officials are predicting that more than half of the town’s 500 homes may burn due to a lack of means to put out the blaze.

The southwestern region of the United States is currently engulfed in extremely hot temperatures, with some areas exceeding 120 degrees. In Las Vegas, Nevada the temperatures have already claimed at least one victim and forced the hospitalization of over 40 more. Temperatures in the region currently are on average ten degrees hotter than at other comparable times.

The wildfire’s ability to claim the lives of over a dozen highly skilled professionals brings to light the increasing instances of extreme weather resulting from global warming. The outbreak of the blaze was just days after a Colorado wildfire claimed the lives of two individuals and incinerated nearly 500 homes. (See, “Worst wildfire in Colorado history destroys hundreds of homes, kills two”.)

The year 2012 was the hottest year the United States has experienced, the average year-round temperature being 55.3 degrees Fahrenheit, with nearly every season setting record highs. The National Forest Service (NSF) has reported that wildfires today consume nearly twice the acreage as 40 years ago.

Similarly, according to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), eight out of nine of the US’s worst fire seasons have occurred since 2000.

President Barack Obama noted the tragedy while on a

diplomatic tour of Africa, calling the men who lost their lives “heroes—highly skilled professionals who, like so many across our country do every day, selflessly put themselves in harm’s way.” The statement was nearly identical to the remarks given on other occasions, and will be met with similar indifference by him in the future in terms of providing tangible assistance to those affected by such incidents.

In recent decades, items such as the NSF’s Hazardous Fuels Reduction Program have been pared back, having less funding today than in 2001. The program lost nearly \$80 million as a result of last March’s federal “sequester,” which had been jointly administered by the Obama Administration and Congress. In the coming months, the Obama administration plans to further exacerbate this by slashing another \$120 million from the program, virtually halving its resources when compared to just a year ago.



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