

Air Force

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76th Helicopter Squadron battles Buellton blaze

by Captain David Eidsmoe
76th Helicopter Squadron

9/15/2006 - **VANDENBERG AIR FORCE BASE, Calif.** -- The 76th Helicopter Squadron here responded to a call from the Santa Barbara County Fire Department Saturday to aid crews fighting a fire near Buellton.

The squadron assisted firefighters from the California Department of Forestry and Santa Barbara County in containing a wildfire, which burned for two days.

The fire began around 2:30 p.m. Saturday near Highway 101 north of Gaviota Pass. The squadron was asked for assistance around 4:30 pm. An hour later, a 76th HS aircrew had a fire-equipped helicopter airborne, and by the time they reached the fire, it had spread to over 150 acres.

After checking in with an orbiting OV-10 command and control aircraft, the 76th's helicopter worked in with two other firefighting helicopters and fixed-wing air tankers, dropping water and retardant on the flames.

The air and ground crews battled the blaze for two days.

"It was impressive to see how pilots from such diverse agencies can work together in a challenging and dynamic environment to get the job done," said 1st Lt. Chris O'Connor, the mission's co-pilot. It was also his first firefighting mission.

At its peak, the firefighting forces included ten engines, three air tankers and three helicopters, which stretched local firefighting capabilities.

"Vandenberg plays an important role in the local community, and our contribution to local missions like this is a vital link between this nation's military and its citizens," said 1st Lt. Devin Sperling, co-pilot for the mission.

The 76th HS's Saturday and Sunday finished firefighting missions with a total of 3,500 gallons of water and retardant being dropped on the flames.

The cause of the fire remains under investigation.