

UNSOLVED WITH STEVE GREGORY EPISODE 204

TRANSCRIPT

SEGMENT 1

Announcer

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere on the iHeartRadio app.

Steve Gregory

On any given day in Southern California, hundreds of investigators are working more than 10,000 unsolved cases. That's 1000s of friends and families who have lost loved ones, 1000s of people who got away with a crime, and 1000s of murderers who still walk the streets. Killers who may be your neighbor, go to your church, or could be dating a close friend. For the next two hours, we'll highlight cases that have gotten cold baffled investigators or just needs that one witness to speak out. This is Unsolved with Steve Gregory.

Our Crime Fighter Series continues. In this episode, we look at the work of arson investigators from the United States Forest Service. Russell Tuttle is a law enforcement Captain based at the Angeles National Forest headquarters in Arcadia, California. He tells us about how investigators were able to determine the origin, the cause, and those responsible for the Colby Fire of 2014.

Captain Tuttle

So Colby Fire was kind of a an unusual fire in that it was a January fires a winter fire. You know, normally we have our weather pattern that comes in and we get our rains cold weather, the humidity really climbs, the higher elevations, we get our good snowpack in and at the time, we had one of those at the time, unusual shifts. You know, the temperature increased, the humidity really dropped, we started getting some Santa Ana winds coming in and really drying things out. And it gave us more of a late summer early fall weather pattern but just in January.

Steve Gregory

So you were already on alert because I know you folks are always looking down as far as possibly always projecting. So you knew that you had conditions for fires to happen. Wildfires, brush fires, whatever you knew you had the right conditions for that.

Captain Tuttle

Right, we have very good relationship with the weather service and their predictive modeling. Our fire side of the house is very in tune with looking at what is that not just you know, one week to week out, but what's the next four months and six months look like for the long range predictions to kind of make sure that they're positioned and ready for any event that may happen playing on the probabilities.

Steve Gregory

So let's go to early morning of January 16, 2014 - When the fire was first spotted.

Captain Tuttle

So early that morning, Angeles dispatch received a notification that there was a report of a fire, Colby trail area, Glendora Mountain Road area LA County responded. We started a full brush response going up that way. And it was confirmed, fire burning smoke showing a triggered a much more fireside responding and to address the fire. And then also the local police departments and Sheriff's Department were out there to start evacuations for the community in the residence right there in the foothills.

Steve Gregory

Was this a fast moving fire? Do you remember?

Captain Tuttle

Um, I don't remember if it was fast moving in a relative speaking but it was in a moderate it was claiming and starting to really get itself established pretty quickly.

Steve Gregory

And at this point, do you recall how close or how close the fire was to homes.

Captain Tuttle

Initially it was a little bit of a distance away. But as with the winds picked up and the fire activity, it really started moving and pushing down. And anytime you're dealing with residential areas, you always want to air on the side of caution and give yourself more time than what you think you need when it comes to asking people to evacuate and get out of harm's way. Especially that early in the morning. Most people are not even close to awake.

Steve Gregory

I'm talking with Captain Russ Tuttle at the US Forest Service. And Captain, before we start getting too deep into the fire itself in the investigation. I do want to ask kind of a random question. How do you name fires?

Captain Tuttle

Usually their names I know. But I want you to tell people usually they're named based on the geographic location where it's reported at. In this case it was reported near Colby Canyon Trail, hence the name

Steve Gregory

and who gets to decide the fire?

Captain Tuttle

The ordering point the dispatch center who's sending out the resources and is the point of contact for the fire will name it.

Steve Gregory

So I had heard once is that the first person on scene got to name it.

Captain Tuttle

That used to be true. A number of years ago, that was true, and some unfortunate choices and names were used for some fires. And and that practice was stopped pretty quick.

Steve Gregory

You have any examples of those?

Captain Tuttle

I don't know the exact one. I remember one of the stories rumors I heard was the Coors Light fire, the bud light fire.

Steve Gregory

Okay, I can understand that

Captain Tuttle

Relatively small fire that, you know, right kind of gained more attention than they thought it would. But ever since then it's the dispatch center who names and then they keep track of the name so that if one is reused, if it's reused in the same year, they'll add a two or three to the end of it.

Steve Gregory

All right, right, exactly. Or if it's a complex fire comp, exactly, which is described what a complex fires.

Captain Tuttle

So a complex fire is just a group of individual fires in close proximity to each other, that look like or have burned into each other. So for instance, a couple of years back, we had the Fish Canyon fire, the Reservoir fire and the Dam fire, off of Highway 39. In close proximity, they all looked like they were getting ready to burn into each other. And so they established it as a complex to that it's managed as one fire instead of having multiple fires managed in the same area, it helps deconflict and improve the safety.

Steve Gregory

Right? And also to it a lot of it could have to do with or does it have to do with management?

Captain Tuttle

Very much. So a management, it helps with your resources, assigning what apparatus or what hotshot crews need to go to what area and it cleans up the whole process.

Steve Gregory

Okay, so back to investigation. At what point since you're on the law enforcement side of the Forest Service, do you automatically roll to every fire?

Captain Tuttle

We try to, we have a lot of fires on the Angeles. So we have the law enforcement officers and special agents who are trained as fire investigators. And then we also have the Fire Prevention and Control side of the fire organization, who are also trained as fire investigators. And then between all of us, helping each other out, we get to the fires and do the investigations.

Steve Gregory

Because it's typically in my experience in covering fires, it's a you don't really know, your primary function and goal is to protect property and in lives, yes, or not in that ordered lives and their property. But so you're not you don't go out to a fire saying, Okay, this is an arson.

Captain Tuttle

No, in fact, we get out to the fire. The number one thing to do is figure out where the most likely spot is that it started. Because you want to protect that area from anybody walking through it, driving through it dragging hose through it, and you want to keep it as isolated as possible. When we're doing fire investigation, the things we're looking for are delicate and very small. And so once you figure out kind of the most likely area where the fire originated from, then you're going to look at who who owns the dirt. Right? Is it all Forest Service? Is it on county land? Is it within a city or municipal jurisdiction? Is it Department of Water and Power? We're talking about LA County, because that all influences what agencies come in and who the lead investigator is going to be. And we have, you know, agreements with the county and all up and down the state with CalFire outlining how that works

Steve Gregory

More with Captain Tuttle but first I want to tell you how you can contact the Unsolved team. If you're listening on the iHeartRadio app, just simply press the red microphone and record your story idea tip or comment or press #250 on your cell phone and say the key word "unsolved". That's #250 And the key word "unsolved". More on the investigation of the Colby fire but first, this is Unsolved with Steve Gregory on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 2

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory, and this is Unsolved. If you're listening on the app, you can send us a tip about a case a story idea or a comment about the show, just tap the red microphone on the app and record your message. I'm talking with Captain Russ Tuttle an investigator with the US Forest Service based at the Angeles National Forest HQ in Arcadia. Captain Tuttle is going in depth on the Colby Fire of 2014. Before the break, Captain, you were just about to get into sort of the mechanics of of your area. But when your law enforcement folks show up to a fire, and about how you approach it. So on the morning of January 16, 2014, when did you realize that you had an investigation on your hands.

Captain Tuttle

So any fire that we respond to that is not obvious, beyond reasonable doubt to be caused by mother nature.. Lightnings - If we have a lightning storm that comes through, and our maps show that there was

a lightning strike in the area where the fire started, then we'll go take a look just to confirm, but it's not a big, let's go investigate. Outside of that, we're going to go investigate, and we're going to go treat it as human caused until proved otherwise. And so, you know, we were talking earlier, once we get the general area figured out, and we figure out who the jurisdiction is, and who's going to be a part of that investigative team. It kind of gets very fast paced, in some aspects, and you're trying to slow it down and others. You want to get interviews, and you want to find out everybody that saw the fire, you know, from the first fire apparatus that showed up on scene, you want to talk to them and kind of figure out, what did they see the fire doing? What direction was it going? How fast was it burning? You know? Did they see any cars leaving or any people walking away running away? All those things we want to try and capture because those are very time sensitive. If we have a vehicle driving away from the area that we think the fire started, we want to figure out the direction and speed so that we can try and get them stopped to talk to them.

Steve Gregory

But that's that, to me seems complicated, because this is a unique situation. In this particular case, evacuation orders were in effect. So you had people leaving? How did you know to track people down? That might have been witnesses.

Captain Tuttle

you just try and get as much information as possible. And usually, you'll be able to differentiate by time, a person who's leaving the probable area of where the fire started and an evacuation. Sometimes it overlaps and you just have to talk to the people and kind of make that determination.

Steve Gregory

So are you going to like to evacuation centers and or how do you do that?

Captain Tuttle

Generally, no, we'll rely on for an example, just a hypothetical. The firefighters said, Hey, we saw a white BMW leaving as soon as we showed up. And we noticed them parked down the road watching us for a while and then they left. Okay, well, we want to figure out where the other end of that road is. They were going and call the Sheriff's Department or a local PD or, or even some of our law enforcement officers to go down there and go see if we can intercept and talk to this person. That may be just an a curious person who saw it. It might be a witness who can tell us more about how the fire started or it could be a suspect. And that's where the the real investigative work comes in on that side.

Steve Gregory

And you guys, I don't want to say it's physically impossible, but it seems pretty cumbersome. It's not like you have cameras in front of the entrance to the park or to a forest. Right. So you don't have that advantage unless you happen to have homes I guess around the outside edge to center for help.

Captain Tuttle

Some communities will have home security, ring cameras. Sometimes there's a like an ATM camera of gas stations, you know the normal places you would expect to see a camera. Sometimes we get lucky. And some of that footage will capture what we're looking for. But as you said in the forest, you usually are lucky to have cell signal much less a camera or any of that kind of resource. So it makes it very difficult

Steve Gregory

talking with Captain Russ Tuttle of the United States Forest Service. We're at the headquarters in Arcadia talking about the Colby fire from 2014. And so in this particular case, when your crews and stuff showed up, I was asking you a little bit, when did you know you had an investigation on your hands? So when did you realize the Colby fire was now in arson?

Captain Tuttle

So at that point, we have an early morning fire. Even though the humidity was lower, and we were in a red flag fire condition, weather wise, we were primed for a fire becoming established, it's still an extremely unusual time. And so that's your first red flag, the time of day doesn't line up. We're on a trail, that's a good distance away from residences, it's a fair distance from the closest roadway. And so that adds more to the mix of something's not right. And so at that point, you're gonna go we need, we need to dig into this, this is most likely not going to be huge, or mother nature caused red flag fire conditions with Santa Ana winds. I've personally never seen a lightning strike in those kind of weather conditions. So the probability that that started it is extremely low. So we're gonna get in there and start methodically picking it apart to try and figure out what happened. And then how did you start? And so our first investigator on seeing a fire prevention patrol, firefighter talks to the firefighters, where did you guys see the fire started? You know, where was it burning when you showed up, and that narrows his scope down. And they'll just start hiking up there, they'll go right up and start looking at what the fire burn patterns are. So when fire burns, it leaves indicators that tell you how hot and intense it was burning the wind direction, what it was being pushed, you know, was it going uphill fast was it going slow. And by reading those indicators and looking at them, it will, your eye will start to work itself back. So when we're doing fire investigations up in the mountains, in wildland, you're looking to find the hottest part of the burn, where did it get established and just start ripping. You want to work backwards from that. And so once you've identified that spot where it burns really hot, then you'll see some of the spots on the sides where it was kind of trying to figure out what it wanted to do. And then you just start zigzagging back and forth and you keep working from hot to cold excuse me and as you work yourself down you'll start noticing that your your area you're looking at is closing in on itself. You've you've

worked back you can see what we call the the heel of the fire was like okay, well. I'm working from hot to cold and I can see unburned vegetation beyond me. And then that's you start to slow down and really slow down.

Steve Gregory

For more about this case and others head over to KFIAM640.com keyword "unsolved". More with Captain Tuttle. But first this is Unsolved with Steve Gregory on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 3

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory. And this is Unsolved. To reach the Unsolved team through the iHeartRadio app, just press the red microphone and leave us a story, idea, tip or comment, or just press #250 on your cell phone and say the key word "unsolved". I've been talking with Captain Russ Tuttle with the US Forest Service about the Colby Fire of 2014. It's part of our crime fighter series. Before the break, you were starting to really get intense, and it just fascinates me. Because something you said about how fire investigators approach the cause of a fire. You were talking about burn patterns, and you were talking about zigzagging back and forth and, and going where the fire was the hottest and what was not the hottest. How on earth you know, after a fire has ripped through an area, how do you know where the fire burned hotter than other places?

Captain Tuttle

A lot of practice, a lot of experience getting out and looking at the fire scenes. We have a school. It's a two week class that you go to to just get the basic fundamentals. And in that class, we're doing live fire burns, three of the five days. So the students are out there practicing what they learned in the classroom, in the real world, so to speak, and applying what they learned so that they can see and train their eyes to look for these little details. I think so I'm probably going to be the my last year this year as one of the lead outside instructors for that class and pass it on to let somebody else take the reins and run with it. After so many years, it is time to let others take the reins and run with it.

Steve Gregory

How many years have you been doing this?

Captain Tuttle

So I've been fire investigator. I think I got signed off in 2009. So a few.

Steve Gregory

How long was the service?

Captain Tuttle

2007.

Steve Gregory

Okay, so you're talking about just going through and practicing this. But what are some of the characteristics? Yeah, I mean, if you're looking at, you know, because I've seen tons of burn areas to the layman, and I'm looking at it, I would never, I would never know, well that burn hotter over there than it did over there, can you can you be more specific.

Captain Tuttle

So the easiest way to describe it would be you're looking at how much has been consumed by the fire. When it burns through, and it's ripping really hot, and it's moving fast. It's like a really hungry monster. And it just wants to eat everything in its path. And so when, like when you look on the news footage, or you go up into a burn area, you know, maybe you're in the Angeles going on a hike. And you see areas where it's just moonscape off, there is nothing but dirt and rocks, it burns really hot through there, you'll get in and start looking at some of the root poles of the brush and the vegetation. And it's actually burned underground and burned out the root poles, because it just keeps cooking so hot for so long. But then if you go a little bit further, maybe towards the edge of a fire or a little bit back to where it started, you'll notice that it's burned, but it's not totally consumed. So there's going to be some of those small branches, there's going to be some leaves, maybe a little bit of grass, bark on the trees will still be there. Or some of it will be protected and unburned well. 180 degrees out the other side of it is just charred off and black like a barbecue. And that's all indicators that tell you how fast and how hot the fire moves through.

Steve Gregory

Yeah, I was gonna ask you about speed of fire, that also helps?

Captain Tuttle

That will determine that will help you kind of figure out how established it was in that spot. And the speed it can be a number of things, perhaps the the slope of the hillside, maybe the wind was blowing through and helping to push it really fast. So you have to look at a lot of different variables when you're evaluating it.

Steve Gregory

We're talking with Captain Russ Tuttle, United States Forest Service about how they investigate fires and the one we're using. Today. The case we're using now is from January 16 2014. The Colby fire so now you see when investigators got on scene. The first thing they did was start to talk with the firefighters that were first on scene what did you get from them?

Captain Tuttle

So really narrowed down a location. You know, by the time the investigators get there, a lot of times the fires already established in and really large in size. And so different talking to the, the firefighters, they can narrow that down and get a good starting point, help speed up identifying that area. And so with the ColbyFire, once they figured out the area that they wanted to look at, and they started hiking up the trail, and they established that that general area of this is probably what we're looking at, you know, it's the the intensity has slowed down the relative temperature, the fire has slowed down a little bit, or lowered. And, and they get to looking at the spot, and then they're like, it looks like a campfire was right there. This isn't a campground. This is an area that's not open for dispersed camping. We're in restrictions. And so that really piques the interest is your main thing you're doing is just observing, you know, what is there that's out of place?

Steve Gregory

So when you say it looked like there was a campfire, they're talking about, like a circle or rocks or something?

Captain Tuttle

Just a circle, a ring of rocks that

Steve Gregory

I guess that would be a giveaway? Yeah.

Captain Tuttle

Sometimes it's really a usually it's really obvious, but sometimes it's not so much depending on, you know, did anybody kick something over as they were leaving or inadvertently disturb it? But you get to looking at it. It's like, okay, well, we're, we're adjacent to a trail. We're not close to a campground. This isn't a normal spot where people are going to go destination camping. And yet, we've got this campfire ring here. But that's a, that's an interesting spot. That's something that we want to note and look at. Not saying that that's the reason that the fire started. But you're going to have to rule it out. And that's the

big thing to keep in mind when we're doing these investigations. You're not necessarily looking for what started the fire. Instead, you're, you're looking at, what can I prove, didn't start the fire. We have a number of what we call cause categories for vegetation fires, you know, maybe it's children playing, maybe it's mechanical use, you know, a vehicle or lawn mower, welders. Maybe it's fireworks, smoking, straight arson, power lines, there's a number of categories. And so you just start down the list, what can I rule out. So, okay, a fair distance away from a residential area a little bit further than what a normal average child would be able to go on at a time of day when normally children are not out playing outside. There's nothing around that would indicate children have been here. There's no child size footprints, there's no toys, there's no things that would indicate a child so we can rule that out. It's most likely a kid didn't start this. We can look up, is there any power lines in the area? If there are, what do they look like? Are we close to a power pole? If we contact the power companies, do they show any kind of anomaly? If there's no anomaly, and nothing looks out of place? And you know, there's a few other things that we look for. We can rule out to the power company and the Power Poles had anything to do with this. And so that's how you do it. You just very methodically you start working your way back and process of elimination. What can I say? I am comfortable with Hey, this did not start the fire.

Steve Gregory

If you have a tip about any of the cases we feature on the show, please press #250 on your cell phone and say the key word "unsolved", or just press the red microphone in the iHeartRadio app. More with Captain Tuttle but first this is Unsolved with Steve Gregory on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 4

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory. And this is Unsolved. If you're listening on the app, you can send us a tip about a case a story idea or a comment about the show, just tap the red microphone on the app and record your message. I'm talking with Captain Russ Tuttle with the US Forest Service. He's been taking us behind the scenes of how investigators were able to find out how, where and why the Colby Fire was started back in 2014. Captain, you were talking about how you sort of do the process of elimination, talking about what you know, instead of using are coming to the conclusion of what started the fire, you're actually looking at what didn't start the fire, and that kind of helps you narrow down the focus. So let's go to that morning. You know, firefighters have been interviewed by investigators, you're starting to kind of get a sense of what's going on, you've already established that they found a what appeared to be an area where a campfire beef started, you don't know whether that had any role in this fire or not. The fire was far away from homes, off the trail, the Colby Trail. At this point, look, you in local law enforcement start to interface.

Captain Tuttle

So the local police department, the sheriff's are shutting down roads, the police department is starting to evacuate the residential areas. And for this case, a couple of observant residents, they identify to one of the police officers, hey, there's two, there's two guys running down the wash. And this is kind of

unusual. We're at six, seven o'clock in the morning. Why is there two people running down the wash. And so the officer goes over and kind of figures out, you know what area they're running to and, and they get to a spot where the wash is going to intersect with one of the local roads here. And they post up and wait for these folks to come up. And up comes to folks out of the wash. And so the officer kind of helps them get over to the road and notices, hey, on top of just being a little bit out of place, they smell like smoke. Okay. And so, field interview, a little bit of a quick investigative work. And these folks are probably suspects for starting this fire. And so they're they're placed under, they're detained. I'm not sure if they were detained or placed under arrest at that point. But they were detained for further questioning and take them down to the station and one of the local detectives is starting to talk to them to kind of figure out what's the story? Where are you running down a wash? Why do you smell like smoke and work through that. And in relative close timing to that one of our fire patrols is up on Glendora Mountain road. There's somebody up on the road and they're kind of hustling out. And so they go hey, jump in, I'll give you a ride down and get you out of this fire area. guy jumps in the car into the fire truck and he's taken him down and he's like kind of said that, you know, you didn't know anything about the fire. But in his head, he was going well, weird area. This guy's being really quiet. He's not very appreciative. Most people are extremely appreciative. You give them a ride out of a fire area. You guys, hands look like he's been in and around a fire. So as he gets to the bottom, he drops the person off and lets the County Deputy know, hey, I think this guy has something to do with the fire. And so the deputy starts talking to him, gets the PD officer to come over and they start talking to him and through a little bit of field investigative work and just quick interview, this guy's most likely got something to do with the fires. Take him down to the station for more questioning as well. And so that's a just amazing example of one your local residents helping yes, we're trying to get out of harm's way we're trying to get our you know possibly kids dogs cats get away and yet they were observant and looking that's out of place. I should let somebody know. You know, maybe it doesn't have anything to do with it but still, it's out of place. Our firefighter who's, you know, bringing out another person. Something's not right. Let me bring this to the attention to say, my got a strong feeling about this because of this, you know, these reasons and the detecitves were talking to them and stories weren't exactly lining up. Which is always a, an indication that you should probably ask more questions.

Steve Gregory

We're talking with Captain Russ Tuttle with the United States Forest Service. He's with the law enforcement branch of the Forest Service, talking about the Colby Fire. You know, I wanted to go back when you were talking about the officer with the Glendora Police Department, and then to you know, detain those first two men taking them down at that point. Is it protocol? Or do you know whether or not they call your folks immediately? Or do they try to do their own sort of investigation first, or are they calling you folks first?

Captain Tuttle

In those early stages, it's usually half chaotic enough to where nobody's completely synched up yet. And so because you'll have the origin and cause investigators, the folks that are trying to figure out exactly what started the fire, and then you've got the overall investigation part where it's okay, we're looking

for people who could be suspects, we're looking for interviews, we're looking to gather more information. And those are the folks that are talking to and reaching out to the Sheriff's Department, to the bomb and arson investigators to the county fire investigators figure out who's coming, who's available to help and what do we have? And it's, it's at that point when you go okay, well, I heard that you guys have three suspects. And then everybody starts talking. A lot of it is just, Hey, I heard that this agency found this or they have that. So you go to get that information, trying to build on it. And then slowly, everybody comes into the fold and you get a good, collaborative team that's working together.

Steve Gregory

When we come back, I want to talk a little bit about you know, then when that all comes together with the three guys and kind of what the next steps were okay. Also, before we go to break, though, one quick question. You as law enforcement for a federal agency, do you have arrest powers?

Captain Tuttle

We do.

Steve Gregory

You do? So you're a post certified law enforcement person in the state of California.

Captain Tuttle

So what we have is by county, it's a by County delegation from the county sheriff that grants us peace officer status and powers of arrest under the state laws. We still have our federal arrest authority for federal violations. And in this county, we've had a long, long relationship with the county sheriff's and the sheriff has always granted us that that authority and that ability to help out detectives help out the deputies and, and address issues of state crime in the National Forest

Steve Gregory

More with Captain Tuttle and how arson investigators got to the bottom of the Colby fire. But first if you have a tip or comment about any of our cases, dial #250 on your cell phone and say the key word "unsolved". This is Unsolved with Steve Gregory on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 5

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory and this is Unsolved. To learn more about this case and others on this program, just head over to our website at KFIAM640.com

keyword "unsolved". In the last hour, we met Captain Russ Tuttle, an investigator with the US Forest Service. He's been taking us behind the scenes of how wildfire investigations are done, and the meticulous work of agents. And with Captain Tuttle at the Angeles National Forest headquarters in Arcadia. Captain before the top of the hour, you had just sort of honed in on three what you say three suspects possible suspects in the Colby fire from 2014. And you were just about to talk about, you know, the fact that those the stories from these three guys weren't jiving. Can you get into more detail about that?

Captain Tuttle

Sure. As the detectives are starting to talk to these, these folks have the stories or I wasn't there. It's always trying to deflect and separate yourself from the event that you're being talked about. Talk to about so to speak. And so the small details weren't lining up. Yes. Yeah, we were up there camping. But we didn't start to fire it started, you know, far away from us. And we ran away, as soon as we saw smoke. Okay, well, what location were you in? One person will say we were here and the next person will say we were in a different spot. And so anytime there's an inconsistency that's a spot where you want to ask more questions and kind of drill it down and try and get to a point where you have a consistent story. And whether or not that's through uncovering a falsehood and getting a true statement. Or sometimes memory has just, it's fickle. As much as Hollywood would have us believe that memory is the greatest thing. It is not sure. Sure. And so you're you're working that back, and you're trying to get down to what's a, a common statement that everybody is saying consistently. And then you build from that. And so during this time, the suspects are not talking to each other. In their head, you've got the whole they're gonna find out, they've got me, how do I get out of this? Nobody wants to be in that room being asked a bunch of questions by the cops. It's an uncomfortable scenario, even on the best of days. Sure. It can be very intimidating. And so you're you're going to be a little nervous, you're going to be a little worked up. And that's when, if it's not a true statement, you're going to contradict yourself at times. And so working through that, you know, the detectives, you know, they interview and they go interview another suspect, interview another suspect and just keep working through it, trying to get down to that commonality. And eventually, one person decides, I'm not taking the blame for all of this. I'm not covering for this anymore. I want to tell the truth. Great. Let's hear the truth. Tell me the truth. Tell me what you want to say. And that's where we get down to starting to have a common story of these three individuals. They went hiking up the trail. They camped overnight up there. They knew they read the signs, no camping. They read the signs. Hey, no fires are allowed. No campfires. And yet, they decided we're going to do what we want to do. They get up there they're camping. No problem. They're doing their their camping. This stuff doesn't apply to me. I can't I'm responsible. I can take care of this little campfire. Nothing bad's gonna happen. can't fire dies down. They all go to sleep for the night. Wake up the temperature drops people Most people don't understand how fast that temperature will drop in the mountains. Two o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the morning, right before sunrise, you're going to think you're in Siberia. It just chills you right to the bone. And then as soon as the sun comes up, you start feeling better. But those last couple hours, it just, it gets to you. And that's what happened. Really cold. Okay, we got to start another fire to warm up. So there we've got the fire and it's already cold, they're already chilled. And one of the hardest things you can do is warm yourself up when you're already cold. And so they kept feeding stuff into the fire feeding stuff into the fire. And somebody throws a notebook. Paper notebook for going to college go into high school into the fire. I

don't know how many of your listeners have ever thrown a piece of paper, you know, writing paper into a fireplace for a barbecue. But it burns fast, and it comes off in pieces and floats. The heat of the fire pushes it up really fast. And so you have burning embers casting out and going everywhere that the wind wants to push it. Well, they threw a whole notebook into this fire. And so it starts burning and starts lighting up. You got pieces of burning paper that are coming out, the wind is pushing it and it pushes it right into the brush. That's right next to the campfire area where they're sleeping. We have low humidity, we have wind, we have warmer than normal temperatures. Poof, it catches. And once fire gets established in the vegetation, it's very, very hard to stop it and put it out in time before it becomes a bigger issue. And that's what happened here. It started getting established and burning in the grass and the vegetation and the brush. And they couldn't they had no choice, no chance of stopping it.

Steve Gregory

Well, in going back to 2014 we still had a drought issue. Horrible drought issues. So there was no moisture to speak of. Right. And that I know that plays a role in it. So was that camp fire area, the one you had described earlier? Was that the spot?

Captain Tuttle

Yes. It was the spot? Yes. Okay.

Steve Gregory

And then, so did you find other evidence in that area that they had been there? Like it was a spiral notebook. So did you find the the metal spiral?

Captain Tuttle

They found all of the little indicators that lined it right back to these three individuals

Steve Gregory

More with Captain Tuttle but first this is Unsolved with Steve Gregory on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 6

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory. And this is Unsolved. If you're listening on the app and have a tip, story, idea or comment, just press the red microphone button

and leave your message. I've been speaking with Captain Russ Tuttle of the US Forest Service. He's been giving us a look behind the scenes of the investigation into the 2014 Colby Fire along the Angeles National Forest. You were about to narrow it down I asked him before a break if that campfire you described earlier in the show that there was evidence of like the rocks around the circle and whatnot. And you said that was the spot they actually camped out so when so when they were camping, I mean, did it appear based on evidence or what investigators told you that they had taken camping stuff with them? Like they were gonna go camping or was it a spontaneous overnight camping?

Captain Tuttle

I think that they they brought stuff to camp. But you know, there's, there's a degree you've got the folks who can't because they love it. And so what they bring is going to be a completely different set of equipment, so to speak, than somebody who's just like, Okay, well, let's go camp up there and have a fire, maybe we'll have a few beers. And, and just do a spontaneous, you know, maybe they just bring a sleeping bag and a little bit of food and something to start a fire. Whereas your other crowd who do this more as a recreational hobby, you know, they're gonna have a tent or hammock and good sleeping bags and their little stoves and, you know, they're much more invested in the camping equipment. And so with this one, you know, what they were looking at, around the area, it definitely lined up there were pieces of, you know, unburned, not totally consumed. Note paper because it never burns completely in a fireplace or in a fire pit. Even if you take it and throw it in your your barbecue. The paper never completely burns. When the fire is done, you'll look off to the side and you'll still see one or two little pieces of paper. When we turn. The heat just keeps pushing it up and away from the flames. And so they narrowed it down and what the investigator who looking who's looking at what causes fire. They determined that the fire was started from this campfire and embers being blown into the brush out fast forward to the interviews and that's exactly once we got down to the commonality. That's the exact scenario that was described by the three suspects. They got cold they started a fire to warm up and embers from the fire blew into the adjoining brush it lined up perfectly and validated that fire investigators determination of what started the fire.

Steve Gregory

So would you characterize these guys as amateur campers?

Captain Tuttle

Amateur, novice

Steve Gregory

Yeah. By the by sheer virtue of the fact that they ignored signs. And I want to put I want to ask you a hypothetical then. If you hadn't found the three guys in a few you hadn't had the one guy who basically cracked where would you have gone from there?

Captain Tuttle

If we didn't have the three suspects. You're really, really working hard at that point. And you've got to you've got your spot your where this fire started. You've got how this fire started and the time. So now you're you're going back to well, what are the ways in and out of the spot? So we could go up to Glendora mountain road. There's three ways in and out of Glendora mountain road so you're looking at who else might have been up there and observed a vehicle leaving is there any cameras around that might have caught a vehicle leaving at a time that lines up with how long does it take to hike from this campsite up to the road and then drive to this camera. You're going back down into town and you're looking at those gas station for footage you're looking at Bank footage for the teller of cameras you're trying to find homes along the route coming in and out that you can see have security cameras that might catch the roadway. You're really, really methodically trying to, to work that out. If you don't have anything, it becomes near impossible to figure out.

Steve Gregory

Which begs my next question, what is your solve rate?

Captain Tuttle

Um, I've never really done the math on it, I would guess. Of all the fires that we do. Solve rate, like figuring out what started the fire, probably about 85%, maybe 90%. Figuring out the person who started it probably 75%.

Steve Gregory

And that's still pretty good.

Captain Tuttle

That's a wild guess on my part.

Steve Gregory

It's still pretty good in the grand scheme of things, you know, when you you're not dealing with, like, you know, like, we're both seeing you're not dealing with street corners and intersections and business footage, and you've got a little bit of a bigger challenge there. So at this point, Captain, you've got the three guys, you've got one who basically cracked and started admitting what had happened. And what are the ages of these guys, by the way?

Captain Tuttle

I don't remember it. I want to say early 20s

Steve Gregory

Young guys, younger younger guys. Okay, so because I was wondering if these guys were homeless, or you know, did they have jobs? Or can you have any kind of profile on who these guys were?

Captain Tuttle

So two, I know for sure. Had traditional homes. One, if memory serves me correctly, was either homeless or bounced between residences moved around a lot. One was not as stable as the other two as far as where they lived goes.

Steve Gregory

Was there any evidence of them consuming alcohol at all? Was there a bunch of booze consumed?

Captain Tuttle

There was a little bit of marijuana consumed by their statement earlier in the evening, and it was looked at as a contributing factor but it wasn't you know, outside of maybe affecting the judgment. Was this a good idea to start a fire you know, in this area? Outside of that, it wasn't really directly connected to the fire.

Steve Gregory

Any professional camping gear with that you know of?

Captain Tuttle

Not that I can recall. Yeah.

Steve Gregory

More on the Colby Fire with Captain Russ Tuttle. But first, this is Unsolved with Steve Gregory on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 7

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory. And this is Unsolved. Subscribe to this podcast on the iHeartRadio app and leave us a message by pressing the red microphone inside the app. I've been talking with US Forest Service Captain Russ Tuttle. We're at his office at the Angeles National Forest headquarters in Arcadia. Before the break, you were telling us now that you kind of had the case all wrapped up with the Colby Fire you kind of knew, you know, and that kinda, you know, the point of origin. And you got three guys have now been charged with the crime at this point. And it since it is on federal land, these are federal charges, correct?

Captain Tuttle

Correct.

Steve Gregory

So what were the charges,

Captain Tuttle

It was a title 18 of the US Code for and three charges of the Code of Federal Regulations are related to setting timber and brush on fire. And not having a fire with a permit, allowing a fire to escape control>

Steve Gregory

The fact that they probably didn't intentionally set out to cause harm or damage in this case. But the fact that they ignored signage, does that become an intentional act?

Captain Tuttle

That becomes a very significant point that you read a sign or a notice I said this is prohibited and you chose of your own free will to violate that signage so to speak and and do the prohibited act. That very much makes it an intentional act.

Steve Gregory

So that this was just a jury trial or grand jury?

Captain Tuttle

It's a federal grand jury indictment on all three, and then a jury trial for the charges or the charges for the charges.

Steve Gregory

So what can you tell us? Did you did you I don't think you probably have time to go to any of these trials or anything. But did you go to this trial?

Captain Tuttle

I did not. They are very time can time intensive. You know, they take a long time to work through the judicial process. There's numerous motions of you know, from the defense, right.

Steve Gregory

So when did this one finally so that the fire happened in 2014? When did it finally go to trial?

Captain Tuttle

2014. If memory serves correctly?

Steve Gregory

The fire started in 2014.

Captain Tuttle

I believe it went to trial later that year.

Steve Gregory

Oh, really? So that's pretty fast. So federal?

Captain Tuttle

Yes.

Steve Gregory

Any idea why this was expedited? Or is that normal course?

Because I mean, I'm still I'm covered trials that happens in the case happened eight years ago.

Captain Tuttle

It really is kind of influenced by the caseload of the prosecuting U.S. attorney. Yeah. Are they overwhelmed with a lot of very large, you know, cases? This are fires usually go into the environmental crime section. So you're looking at also, you know, trials that involve pollution offshore with commercial fishing or cruise ships, you know, that have an issue that dump oil or sewage or, you know, so you, the attorneys can get very booked up therapy, and working through just the scheduling of the court and the judges and all of that kind of influences that timeline.

Steve Gregory

So, how many homes were destroyed and how many acres burned? Do you remember?

Captain Tuttle

So there's just right about 2000 acres, okay. And it was six homes destroyed. Numerous homes were damaged, right? The residents were not allowed to come back until repairs were made to the house or the apartment condo. outbuildings completely destroyed. Your small sheds and that type. Total six, right about \$6 million to suppress the fire your cost cost of for not just the forest service but what's charged for LA County was charged for all the fire response it comes into one

Steve Gregory

What was the total restitution?

Captain Tuttle

A touch over \$9 million 9 million.

Steve Gregory

And since it went to trial he simply pled not guilty.

Captain Tuttle

All plead not guilty all three defense does plead not guilty and and see if I roll the dice a technicality you know, I I don't know exactly what was going through their their minds or what their their counsel was from their defenders. You What the train of thought was and what the motive was. But all three pled not guilty initially, all three were eventually found guilty by trial by jury. Two were sentenced to actual prison time federal jail. All three had restitution ordered, as well as a term of probation.

Steve Gregory

So what was the prison sentence? Or do you know what the max would be?

Captain Tuttle

For something like this is the max, the one charge was a felony. So all three had a felony conviction. I remembering correctly in the statute is 10 years maximum.

Steve Gregory

Wow. And they had to pay back. They had to pay 9 million in total, right.

Captain Tuttle

9 million in total. So they will spend the rest of their lives working off that work and that debt off?

Steve Gregory

Yes. And then I suppose most of that's gonna go to the homeowners.

Captain Tuttle

It will go to the homeowners first. So the government agencies will not receive a penny of restitution until the homeowners have been made whole. First. Are there the homeowner insurance companies? Whoever paid out, you're sure they'll get first. First priority at any of those payments.

Steve Gregory

In all years, you've been doing this now, Captain. Have you ever seen the restitution be completely paid?

Captain Tuttle

Not by a private party.

Steve Gregory

It there are a lot of these cases out there like this. Aren't there a lot of negligence and I mean, there. Let me rephrase. Do you have a lot of intentional arsons in your area?

Captain Tuttle

Intentional I want to set this on fire. Because either a mental health issue or very rarely, or it's usually just just a large majority is negligence. Yeah. Sometimes, you know we, we've get a lot of different kind of areas for fires caused for different reasons. Along the i Five corridor, we have fires nonstop from vehicles, whether it be faulty maintenance, faulty preventative maintenance, and just an old car. Something always catches fire or spits out a piece of hot metal and starts the roadside. You'd be surprised not very often, really. It's it's actually hard to start a fire with a cigarette, catalytic converter, catalytic converter. We'll start it every day of the week.

Steve Gregory

Follow Unsolved on social media. Just go to @unsolvedkfi that's @unsolvedkfi - coming up final thoughts from Captain Tuttle. But first, this is Unsolved on KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.

SEGMENT 8

Steve Gregory

KFI AM 640, heard everywhere live on the iHeartRadio app. I'm Steve Gregory. And this is Unsolved. If you're listening on the app and have a tip, story, idea or comment, press the red microphone button and leave your message.

We have been talking for the last hour about the Colby Fire, fascinating peek into how you solved an arson. Whether it was intentional or not, it was still a fire that was started by three individuals who were convicted for basically starting a campfire, they had no business starting. And regardless of the signs and everything around, they ignored all of that apparently, and, and so \$6 million in cost to to fight the fire a total \$9 million from restitution these guys are going to be they'll never be able to pay it off in their lifetime, I would imagine. But you were telling us before break that you've never really had a case where someone's been able to pay it off completely as a private citizen. You know, I don't think people realize the major impact that their actions have been something like this, you know, especially on the wildfires, you have the one what was the wildfire the gender reveal fire and Yucaipa in that area. There's, you

know, they thought they were doing something fun and exciting and didn't realize, you know, that ended tragically. Very, very tragically, people sometimes don't realize it and somehow the Forest Service are not there. In this case, the forest. You know, people just they flocked to the forest. Which brings me to my next question. As a law enforcement person as a peace officer, you're not just faced with arsons, other things are going on in these forests, right?

Captain Tuttle

There's a lot that goes on in the forest, elaborate. Anything that you could imagine that happens down in town. It also happens in the National Forest. These are public lands, they are meant to be used as a recreational location for all of the citizens for everybody. It doesn't matter if you're, if you're on vacation from Paris, and you want to come in to the National Forest and go camping. Or if you have been, you know, born and raised your entire life in downtown LA, and you're coming up for the weekend. It's the land that's there for everybody's recreation. And everybody has a different perspective on what recreation means to them. Everybody has a different little interest. And so frequently, a lot of those interests are in violation of one of the laws either a federal law or a state law. And just like the Colby Fire where it took the partnership and cooperation of numerous different agencies, you had the Forest Service investigators, you had the local police department detectives and officers, the sheriff's deputies, the arson investigators on the sheriff's side to fire a Cal Fire folks. Everybody came together to solve this one crime. And that's not an isolated instance that happens all the time in the National Forest. For the Forest Service. You know, our primary mission is protection of life and natural resources and government property. We assist in augment and help out everywhere we can with whether it's the California Highway Patrol's mission, whether it's the sheriff's department's mission, Department of Fish and Wildlife, you know, their mission, we're always there to augment and help them. And sometimes that means that we will take in and so to speak, run with the case. We found it and we'll prosecute it and send it in and do the whole thing. And sometimes that means that we're there as a support role. And one of the other agencies is taking the lead on it.

Steve Gregory

For instance, what about missing persons because I don't imagine that kind of thing happens to out how's that handled?

Captain Tuttle

So missing persons is very frequent in the National Forest. And the sheriff has the primary jurisdiction and responsibility for all search and rescue is interesting. And so somebody will be overdue. Somebody will not come home when they're expected. A vehicle will get noticed at trailhead, you know, for longer than what would be normal for that Trailhead. And so the call will come in, and the sheriff's search and rescue team, which are all volunteers, they'll get activated. And these private citizens come out and take on the role of that search and rescue, and go out and look for them, the helicopter from the sheriff's department will come in and look. And we'll come in and help. If that means that they need an extra

map, or if they need a roadblock for a little while, if they need somebody to give their search and rescue team members arrived, it doesn't matter what the need is, at that point, we're there to augment and help the sheriff's department in whatever role.

Steve Gregory

What about like assault, like any gun violence, or anything, stuff like that rises to that kind of level or even murder?

Captain Tuttle

Those major felony crimes, we will go in, and our role is to stop the incident from getting worse. If we can stop it from getting worse and just freeze frame it so that the sheriff's can get there and the sheriff's will take over the lead role. Force, the incident management as well as the investigation. And then we fall back to a support role. as well. We've responded for the shooting incidents we've responded for, you know, fatalities. And same thing every time we get there, stop it from getting worse. And then the sheriff's come in and take the lead role. And we fall back to support to augment them.

Steve Gregory

Do you have a pretty robust, I guess, Ranger service? I mean, are there patrols going on all the time in the forests?

Captain Tuttle

We have. We have six officers to cover the National Forest total 24 hours a day, every day of the year. And so it's really kind of dependent on the officer. If they're more of a morning person, and I play to their strengths, they're out patrolling in the morning and looking at those areas that see more use in the mornings, if they're more of a night owl play to their strengths and they're out at you know, midnight, two o'clock in the morning. And everybody floats around and moves to the area that has the activity and supports each other. Interesting. And then we have mountain deputies, sheriff's units who write their their main patrol area is up in the national forest as well. The fishing game wardens. They're up in the mountains and they're doing they're trying to catch poachers and that sort. And so everybody kind of talks to each other and everybody supports each other. You may not be working side by side, but you are listening to the radio you know about where they're at and what they're doing so that they need help you can get there.

Steve Gregory

Captain Russ Tuttle, thank you for your time. much appreciate it.

Captain Tuttle

Thank you.

Steve Gregory

Well, that's gonna do it. Unsolved is a production of the KFI News Department for iHeartMedia Los Angeles Robin Bertolucci, program director, Chris Little, news director. The program is produced by Steve Gregory and Jacob Gonzalez. The digital producer is Andro Mammo. The field engineer is Tony Sorrentino, and the technical director is David Callaway coming up it's Coast to Coast. But first this is KFI AM 640. Time now for a news update.