

L.A. helicopter crews fight darkness and fire

Â

Firefighters launch a risky aerial assault on a nighttime blaze in Sepulveda Pass.

By Joe Mozingo

October 24, 2008

The dispatcher's voice splintered the stillness of the fire station at Van Nuys Airport at 12:51 a.m. Thursday -- abruptly squelching the pilots' hopes for a night's sleep.

"Reported brush. 405 Freeway south of Skirball."

In less than nine minutes -- at 1 a.m. -- Glenn Smith was circling over the fire in his Bell 206 helicopter, trying to assess the situation.

It looked bad. A moderate Santa Ana had funneled south through Sepulveda Pass, driving narrow torrents of flame up draws in the hillside, to a line of town homes on the ridge. His pilots would have to lay siege to that "hot flank" to keep it away from the homes.

Smith, a command pilot for the Los Angeles Fire Department, circled clockwise to look out his right window. He flipped on his Nightsun searchlight to scan for power lines or any other danger hidden in the dark. Nothing.

Â

The full story and photos in the LA TIMES...