

Sisters firefighters served in Paradise

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Two Sisters firefighters deployed earlier this month to California as part of Oregon strike teams mobilized to support the battle against the catastrophic Camp Fire, which destroyed the town of Paradise in central California.

Shift Commander Rob Harrison and Firefighter Matt Millar headed south on November 9 and returned to Sisters November 20. The first days of their deployment, they served in structure protection and fire suppression details, and spent the rest of their deployment patrolling the area and identifying fire safety issues that might prevent people from returning to the site of the fire.

There is not much to return to in Paradise. The firestorm, driven by wind gusts as high as 70 miles per hour, destroyed most of the residences and much of the business district of the mountain community.

“The scope of it is mind-boggling, for sure,” Harrison told *The Nugget*. “Unlike anything we’ve seen.”

While what the Sisters

firefighters saw in Paradise is a sobering reminder of fire’s destructive force, Millar noted that there are some key differences that make such a catastrophe less likely to occur in Sisters.

“While we’re certainly exposed to that kind of thing, we’ve got some things going for us here that they didn’t have in Paradise,” he said. “We don’t have as problematic terrain as they do in paradise.”

Steep and deep canyons that cut through the area affected both fire behavior and people’s ability to evacuate quickly, Millar said. The winds that drove the fire are fierce downslope winds — essentially the same as what Southern Californians call Santa Ana winds. Canyons channelize the winds — and they channelized evacuation efforts.

Harrison noted that management to protect the urban-wildland interface has been pretty substantial in Sisters Country.

“In this area, they’ve done a lot of work in the years since I’ve been here,” he said.

Still, both firefighters agreed that individual

initiative is important to prepare for the inevitable blazes that break out here every fire season.

“There’s a lot of things you can do as a homeowner well in advance of the fire front,” he said.

Residents are consistently urged to create defensive space around their homes and to keep gutters and the areas under decks and porches free of debris that can host a spark from embers thrown out by wildfire.

The firefighters saw evidence of the strange vagaries of fire behavior. Millar recalled seeing a house under construction, nothing but exposed lumber, that was — inexplicably — the only thing standing for a couple of blocks. They saw instances where a car was sitting melted two feet from a house that had survived — or a house burned down next to a car that had only light fire damage.

Harrison noted that a commercial building constructed entirely of metal collapsed — because it simply got so hot that the walls couldn’t hold up.



PHOTO PROVIDED

Two Sisters firefighters were deployed on the Camp Fire in Paradise, California.

“There was a part of it that seemed really, really random,” Millar said.

Thousands and thousands of people were displaced by the fire. Yet, whatever the divisiveness of the times, the firefighters saw people coming together.

“The thing that I’ll never forget is just the support we got from everyone we ran across in that community,” Harrison said. “It was overwhelming. It really was.”

Millar said that firefighters deeply appreciate the support that they have received in their deployment

to the catastrophic fires in California. But he notes that the impact of the blazes will linger in people’s lives for many years to come — long after the headlines have faded.

“The people who really need support right now are the people who lost their homes, lost their livelihoods — they don’t have jobs to go back to,” he said.

One means of support is through contributions to the North Valley Community Foundation at <https://www.nvcf.org/fund/camp-fire-evacuation-relief-fund>.

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