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Keizer Fire back from California

By DEREK WILEY
Of the Keizertimes

If 10 years ago someone had told Mike Jensen that he would one day drive a fire truck nearly 1,000 miles to California to help with a wildfire, he would have said they were crazy.

But that's exactly where Jensen and three other Keizer firefighters, Bill Herring, Matt Dryden and Aaron Pitts, found themselves on Dec. 8, assisting with what would become the largest wildfire in the state's history.

The Thomas Fire began on December 4 at 6:28 p.m. to the north of Santa Paula, Calif., near Steckel Park and Thomas Aquinas College, 70 miles northwest of Los Angeles.

That evening, the small brush fire exploded in size, thanks to 60 mile per hour Santa Ana winds, and raced through the rugged mountain terrain.

KFD, as part of a Marion County task force that also included firefighters from Silverton, Salem and Woodburn, left for California on Dec. 5.

By the time they arrived to the Ventura County Fairgrounds on the morning of Dec. 7, the fire had grown to more than 115,000 acres.

"Where we stayed at in the Ventura County Fairgrounds, because it's right there in the heart of town, you can literally see on the hillside where the fire had burned down and into the edge of the town," Jensen said. "It was pretty incredible. It's not something we typically see in Oregon where it gets so close to a big city like that."

Their first day of work, which mostly included protecting homes and schools in the Ojai Valley by patrolling the area, putting out hot spots and clearing any dry brush that



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could catch fire, was Dec. 8. "There was a lot of being there in case the fire came close to people's homes to try to prevent it," Herring said.

The crew worked 24 hours on and then 24 hours off. But their off time was mostly spent cleaning equipment, eating and sleeping.

"Cal fire is really good at wild land firefighting where we're primarily structure firefighters so we're really good at that," Jensen said. "They basically utilize where your strong points are."

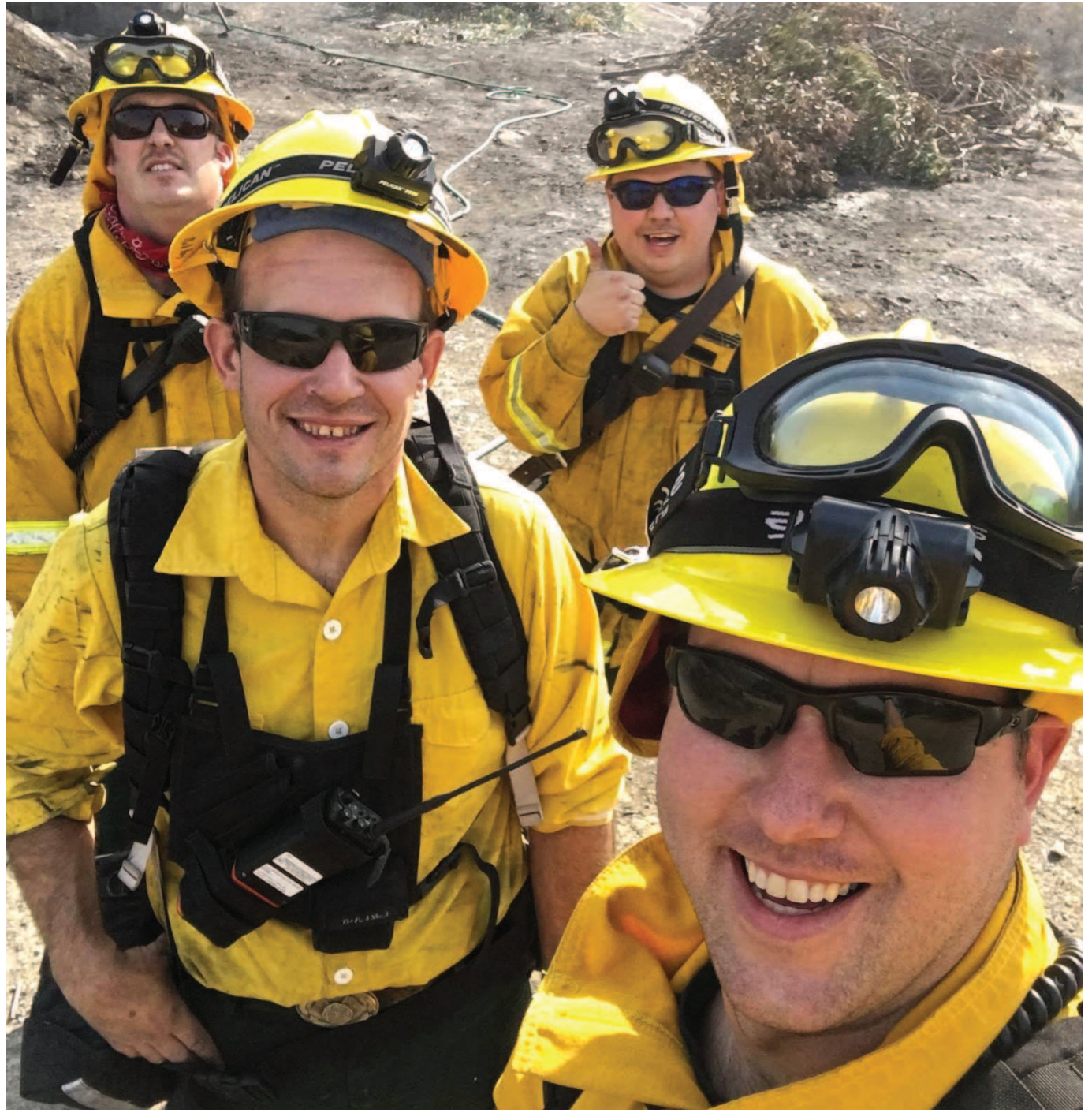
Herring said any photos taken of the fire, which by Dec. 19, when the Oregon State Fire Mobilization Strike Teams began departing, had grown to more than 270,000 acres, didn't do it justice.

"Until you're up close and actually see it, the magnitude of it, the fire is impressive in a photo but until you see the size of the area and how far it had to travel and the total destruction in front of you, the photos don't sum it up," Herring said.

Jensen won't forget the sound.

"One morning the fire had crested the ridge and then had burned through an area, we were a quarter mile or half a mile away and it was just incredibly loud," Jensen said. "It was like a freight train moving through."

Jensen and Herring were impressed by the multi-million



Keizer Firefighters Aaron Pitts, Bill Herring, Matt Dryden and Mike Jensen spent two weeks in December protecting homes in Southern California from the Thomas Fire.

dollar homes they were protecting.

"It's like all of the homes that you see on HGTV but you never in your lifetime get to visit them," Jensen said.

"One of the last days, we sat at a house for instructional

protection and they had an infinity pull overlooking a cliff and you could see right into the ocean," Herring said.

The people were also thankful.

"The residents of California were super grateful and super

friendly," Herring said. "It was cool to see that. Random people would come by camp and offer treats or clean socks, little things you take for granted."

As of Jan. 3, the Thomas Fire had burned 281,893 acres but was 92 percent contained. It had destroyed 1,063 structures and damaged 280.

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