

# A RETURN FROM CALIFORNIA WILDFIRES

## Camaraderie made deployment special

By Brenna Visser  
Cannon Beach Gazette

When Tanner Rich joined the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department as a part of his Pacifica Project senior year of high school, he never expected he would help fight the largest fire in California history.

Rich, 19, a Seaside native, was deployed to the Thomas Fire in Ventura County, California, which burned 440 square miles and destroyed more than 1,000 structures.

His previous experience consisted of structure fires, medical calls and helping with the occasional car wreck. So naturally, he was filled with equal parts uncertainty and excitement.

"It was pure shock. Wow — I've never seen something like that before. I grew up in Seaside," Rich said. "Taking in all the burnt houses, seeing people coming back to find their houses was a very somber moment."

Rich was one of the dozen firefighters sent from Clatsop County to fight a variety of fires blazing in Southern California earlier this month. The majority of the task force's time was spent at the Thomas Fire, which has burned more than 280,000 acres and killed one California firefighter.

Fire Chief Ron Tyson of the Olney Walluski Fire & Rescue District, Amy Lenz, Dallas Ritchie and Justin Perdew of the Knappa Fire District, Brandin Smith and Flint Helligso of the Lewis & Clark Fire Department, Tanner Rich and Angels Perez of the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department, Chris Dugan, Lt. Genesee Dennis and firefighter Katie Bulletset of the Seaside Fire Department, and Cannon Beach Fire Chief Matt Benedict all returned home safely Dec. 20 in time for Christmas.

This is the third time Clatsop County firefighters have been sent this year to combat blazes outside of their jurisdiction — an anomaly for the region. The next most active summer



RYAN CULLOM/VENTURA COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT VIA AP



GEARHART VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

Above, A dozen firefighters from Clatsop County were sent to Ventura County, California to fight growing wildfires. Left, Firefighters work to put out a blaze burning homes early Dec. 5 in Ventura, California. Authorities said the fire grew wildly after breaking out, consuming vegetation that hasn't burned in decades.

was in 2015. Personnel were sent out only sparingly before then.

"If we're getting called out all the way out here, I thought, how bad is it down there?" Rich said. "But I was excited to have an opportunity to help."

### 'We were all one'

While on the scene, Clatsop County firefighters were tasked with protecting homes, putting out hot spots and building fire lines to prevent the inferno from swallowing some of the ritziest neighborhoods near Los Angeles. Crew members trimmed back foliage and set sprinklers around houses to beat back growing flames.

Olney Fire Chief Tyson has been in the business of battling blazes in Oregon since 1986, and has seen a number of wildland fire deployments. But firefighting in Southern California, where rain hasn't fallen since last February, brought unique challenges.

"When we went to Sisters, you could tell they built homes with fire safety in mind. They had backup energy in case the power went out to run the sprinklers, they didn't have stuff growing up by the house," Tyson said. "But (in California), the yards are full of dry brush litter for mulch, and plants were growing right

up by the house. It made our jobs harder, for sure."

What also made this deployment special was the camaraderie of the group, Tyson said. The crew worked 24-hour shifts, judiciously monitoring perimeters and putting out hot spots before they evolved into flames. The days were long and tiring, with members taking turns napping in the fire engines. The news of a California firefighter losing his life in the same fire they were fighting dampened everyone's spirit.

But the bond they formed was invaluable to get through.

"If you are going to get deployed with anyone, this is the group to get. We had so much fun, but we took it real serious, too," he said.

Gearhart volunteer Garcia said the bond crews build is one of her favorite aspects of being deployed on larger fires.

"People were encouraging each other, taking care of each other. What I love is that we were all one — not just firefighters from Gearhart, Seaside, Lewis and Clark, et cetera. Those hardworking days and nights, because of the attitude, didn't seem as hard."

### Feeling the gratitude

Garcia started firefighting five years ago at Columbia River Fire De-

partment, and just this year served on three task forces to different Oregon and California fires.

"I just wanted to be apart of something and make a difference. That's how I started," Garcia said.

But what has kept her going five years later — even with the long, cold nights of patrol and the feeling of missing her four children back at home — is the feeling the gratitude of the people she protects, she said.

"It's hard to put it into words. It's different than on TV," Garcia said. "You feel the heat of the flames, you feel the worry of these people, but you also feel the gratitude."

Signs championing firefighters and encouraging messages from locals and family were some ways they felt that gratitude, said Dugan, Seaside's fire division chief.

But one homeowner, still diligently moving his sprinkler around his property day in and day out after everyone had evacuated, stood out.

"He said he was a blue-collar guy, not like the rest of the multimillion-dollar homes that were around him. He was an electrician with a small avocado grove behind their house, and we were assigned to protecting his home," Dugan said. "He told us this is all he had — he spent his whole life getting it. He was so

grateful when we told him we were going to give him a break from protecting it."

### Piece of the puzzle

In the abstract, knowing he was fighting a fire that easily could be the equivalent of the distance to Astoria from Seaside was daunting, Dugan said. But in the day-to-day tedium of tasks, sometimes that awe is lost in translation.

"I was talking to someone on the crew who felt like in the middle of it we weren't doing a whole lot. We weren't on the front lines," Dugan said. "But the Thomas fire is a 10,000-piece puzzle. Maybe we were just one piece, a blue sky piece, but without it the whole puzzle doesn't work. That's what we did."

There's a lot to learn from this year's deployments, both Dugan and Tyson said. While local departments hold semi-regular wildland fire trainings, experiences like this can only prepare local forces better for events in their own backyard.

"Most of these areas hadn't seen fires for 80, 100 years," Tyson said. "The lesson is don't get complacent just because we haven't had a fire like this. Because they hadn't either."

## Adding more firefighters 'is smart'

Levy from Page 1A

Last year, the fire district applied for two Federal Emergency Management Agency grants to fill the two firefighter paramedic positions, but did not receive the award due to reporting errors made by previous administrations. While the district plans to apply for the two grants again, funding the positions through a levy would be more reliable, Benedict said.

"With the grant process we cannot rely on the funding in the future," he said. "The levy would be more permanent as it would be for five years and hopefully supported by the voters to continue in the future."

If the board approves, one firefighter position would also be in charge of recruitment and retention, while the other would take on fire inspections.

"We can survive right now, but with more and more tourists coming in, we need more extra personnel," Benedict said.

### A different kind of call

Part of what is driving the need, Benedict said, is the growing number of medical calls. The fire chief estimates 80 percent of the 380 calls Cannon Beach Fire and Rescue responds to each year are medical.

The majority of emergency service calls come from north Clatsop County, so in Cannon Beach it is not uncommon for an ambulance to take 15 to 40 minutes to arrive, Benedict said. In one case, he recalls waiting 45 minutes before an



COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

Cannon Beach Fire Chief Matt Benedict makes the rounds of the garage doing routine maintenance and checking gear.

ambulance could treat someone with dangerously low blood pressure.

Medix Operational Manager Duane Mullins said there is always at least one ambulance stationed in Seaside and Astoria. While he considers response times over 10 minutes to be the minority, the reality is the farther calls are from those nodes the longer the response time.

"Someone living in Elsie is not going to get the same response than someone in Seaside living across the street from McDonald's," Mullins said. "I think trying to add a couple more people is smart. Fire departments don't respond to fires anymore; they respond to medical calls."

But with Benedict as the only paramedic on staff and volunteer firefighters having varying degrees of emergency medical technician certifications, this can leave first responders without advanced life support for minutes in a field where seconds count.

"Bringing on two firefighter paramedics on alternating 12-hour shifts would mean we

could have someone with the right skills respond no matter what," Benedict said. "You just can't predict when you are going to be responding to these kinds of calls."

### Recruitment and retention

Like many fire departments across the country, recruiting and retaining volunteers is a challenge. The number of volunteers has been slowly declining over a number of years, from about 30 to 18 who respond on a regular basis. It's a problem reflected in Cannon Beach's citizen survey, where positive ratings for fire services dropped by 5 percent from last year.

Benedict attributes volunteer retention issues to the heightened training required by the state that can demand more time. The lack of affordable housing in Cannon Beach also makes it hard to find volunteers who can afford to live in the district they serve.

To address the challenges, the recruitment and retention specialist would figure out what resources are available

to solve the problem. The specialist would explore different community partnerships in the hopes of expanding the program.

With residents juggling the bond passed in 2016 to pay for the new Seaside school campus, as well as a levy to pay for a firetruck, Benedict said he is exploring other funding options to limit the cost to taxpayers.

The fire district is also discussing whether to ask the city to raise the lodging tax as supplemental funding.

"A majority of our responses are for individuals that do not pay property tax and are from out of town," Benedict said.

If the board doesn't support the higher levy, the original fire chief levy, which would just pay for the chief's salary and expenses, would be back on the ballot. It's enough to operate with for now, Benedict said. But eventually, he believes these needs will have to be addressed.

"What price do you put on a life?" Benedict said. "On a \$100,000 house, you are paying \$35 a year. That's not much for an insurance plan."

## Boone to retire

Boone from Page 1A

State Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, praised Boone for her focus on coastal constituents and issues.

"She has been the quintessential citizen legislator," Johnson said.

### New hopefuls

Tim Josi, a Democrat who served in the state House from 1991 to 1998, announced Tuesday he would not seek re-election to the Tillamook County Commission and would instead run for Boone's seat. He has been on the county commission since 1999.

"If elected, I would hit the ground running," Josi said in a news release. "Fortunately, I know the legislative process very well through almost 30 years of experience. I also have a solid understanding of the issues and problems that we face at the local, regional, state and national levels. Most importantly, I have learned how to work collaboratively with both Democrats and Republicans to forge solutions that fit our needs and move us in a positive direction."

Boone, a longtime staffer

in Salem, previously worked under Josi. He was also encouraged to run for the Legislature again by Johnson, who called him "an excellent public servant."

Brian Halvorsen, a community organizer who founded North Coast Progressives last year, filed as an independent in September. On his campaign site, Halvorsen took aim at the two-party system and Boone's history. He struck a populist tone, listing among his campaign priorities lowering income inequality, increasing taxes on corporations and the wealthy, ending the use of fossil fuels in Oregon, reforming campaign financing and making education affordable.

Doug Thompson, chairman of the Clatsop County Democratic Central Committee, said he hopes for contested primary and general elections and sees no favorite to replace Boone. Jim Hoffman, chairman of the Clatsop County Republican Party Central Committee, said the party is still figuring out who will run, and might know next month.

The filing deadline is March 6.

**CANNON BEACH'S BEST SELECTION  
OF OREGON AND WASHINGTON WINE!**

**Shack Hours**  
Sunday - Thursday  
11am to 5pm  
Friday & Saturday  
11am to 5:30pm

**Tasting Room Hours**  
Saturdays • 1 to 5pm

**UPCOMING TASTINGS**

Jan 13 • Walla Walla Wines  
Jan 18 • Wine Women & Wealth - Money Talk  
Jan 20 • Wine Shack Favorites  
Jan 27 • Wine Tasting - Puffin Wines

**"Best Wine Shop"**  
- 2016 Reader's Choice Award

124 N. HEMLOCK, CANNON BEACH - 503.436.1100 - WWW.THEWINESSHACK.WINE

**Congratulations Alaina**  
**on being the #1 agent in**  
**Clatsop County for**  
**2016 AND 2017**

Alaina Giguiere  
Owner/Principal Broker  
503.440.3202  
alainagiguiere@mac.com

**RE/MAX**  
**Coastal Advantage**

219 N. Hemlock, Cannon Beach • 503.436.1777  
430 Laneda, Manzanita • 503.368.1777  
www.CoastalAdvantage.com

*"Real Estate standards for those with 'Higher' Expectations. RE/MAX above the crowd!"*