

Firefighters return with lessons learned

SEEN FROM SEASIDE

R.J. MARX



The fire started Nov. 8, in Butte County near the northern California city of Paradise. Before its containment on Nov. 25, the fire had burned more than 153,000 acres, destroying almost 14,000 residences, 528 commercial buildings and thousands more damaged.

After a request from California officials and Oregon Emergency Management, county strike teams headed south as part of the emergency management assistance compact, a national state-to-state mutual aid system.

The Clatsop County strike team, with members from Gearhart, Seaside, Olney Walluski, Knappa and Lewis and Clark, joined teams from throughout the state. Randolph “Tad” Pedersen, Deputy State Fire Marshal for the Office of the State Fire Marshal the county’s team, led by Chief Jeff Golightly of Lewis and Clark, was one of 15 that received an emergency management assistance compact request. Between the two strike teams, 19 county people joined the team. Two Clatsop County engines joined the Columbia County Strike Team.

Div. Chief David Rankin, Jenson Segui, Matt Keefer and Katie Bulleset were Seaside’s strike team volunteers.

Rankin’s first impression was of “the wide-scale of destruction,” he said. “The amount of buildings, trees, vehicles — everything just gone. You thought: ‘Wow, this could have been anybody you know trying to get out of this inferno.’”

‘All you saw was black’

Teams were stationed at the fairgrounds in the nearby city of Chico.

Mornings began with briefings and division breakouts, Rankin said.

Rankin’s assignment was outside of Paradise, along the road to Concow, a small community of 700 in the Sierra Foothills.

Patrols looked for areas that “might be reigniting” and checked up on homes that hadn’t burned or had gotten damage.

“Later in the week we transitioned to structure assessment, going into areas that had been burned and looked for what was necessary to clean up or put out hot spots,” Rankin said. “We supported big burn-out operations to help strengthen up the fire line.”

Air quality was terrible, Rankin said, smoky throughout the whole valley. “The only way to get around it was to go onto the mountaintops,” he said.

Firefighters Aaron Smith, 26, and Troy Foster, 21, both of the Olney Walluski Fire and Rescue District, were among the department’s younger members to head out.

Smith, an eight-year volunteer, has fought wildfires within the state, but wanted to get experience on a bigger fire, including technical experience on bulldozers and hand crews. Smith traveled with the Clatsop County Strike Team, while Foster was detailed to one of two Clatsop County engines assigned to the Columbia County Strike Team.

He built hand lines, laid hose and extinguished hot spots within 100 feet of the road or any area that was unburnt. “We’d flag it and our strike team would go up the chain of command.”

“The second to last day there, we were patrolling a community on Concow Road,” Smith said, describing a road leading to a community of 700 in the Sierra Nevada Foothills. “We reached the end of the road as far we could go, and it was basically bare land. All you saw was black. There were no trees standing, no grass. Most of the houses we came on were completely gone.”

With two years experience in Warrenton



SEASIDE FIRE

Jenson Segui (Seaside) patrols the perimeter of a large back burn used to strengthen the fire line.

and about eight months with the Olney Walluski department, this was Foster’s “first conflag.”

“I like firefighting and I just wanted to help people,” he said.

Foster worked with crews in the town of Paradise, a community of 27,000, where the fire destroyed thousands of homes and killed dozens of people. “Our job was to protect structures, but by the time we got there, there weren’t many structures left in Paradise.”

Firefighters were “24 on, 24 off,” constructing direct lines and holding control lines to mitigate the threat of fire escaping.

Air quality was “poor when we got there, and it was poor when we left,” he added.

Gearhart firefighters

Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department sent seven firefighters to California.

James Hutchinson, an intern and student, along with Jordan Chandler, who works with the Oregon Department of Forestry, were joined by Tanner Rich, Sean Kirby, Angels Vargas, Kayla Miller and Lindsey Wolfe.

When the state fire marshal came through, it “started the motion of things,” Hutchinson said.

Firefighters were performing a fire prevention demonstration at Gearhart Elementary School when Chief Bill Eddy said two Gearhart engines were requested.

Volunteers responded within the hour, meeting at the staging area in Seaside.

Like firefighters from neighboring communities, they were divided into the Columbia County and Clatsop County strike teams.

Chandler described the fire scene in Paradise as “massive devastation — that’s all it was. That town will never be the same.”

Houses were “combusting on their own,” he was told by Cal Fire responders.

In an observation post, they could watch as flames threatened the city of Oroville, a

nearby city of 16,000.

Hutchinson and Wolfe worked alongside bulldozers before heading into neighborhoods in Paradise, where 90 percent of the structures were burned down.

Chandler said his objective was to make sure that any residents left were evacuated, and to “do anything we could to save structures.”

With live wires in the roadways, it was “like Russian roulette,” Rich said. “It was a ghost town when we rolled in.”

“I think that was the worst fire I’ve ever been on,” he added. “This fire wiped out an entire town. It was like the opening scene from ‘Terminator,’ where they pan through and there was nothing left.”

“Lines of cars burnt in the middle of the road,” Vargas said. “Roofs were collapsed on houses. Everything was burnt.”

Firefighters participated in structure preparedness, yard work removing pine needles and other debris, and preserving remaining structures.

“I don’t think any training prepares you for this,” Vargas said. “It’s not what you’re trained to see.”

Gratitude

Firefighters stayed at the Butte County Fairgrounds in Chico, alongside newly displaced residents who had set up “mini-refugee camps,” Rankin said.

Rankin described tents and cars and tarps, “like Third World countries popping up in the middle of town.”

Nights were extremely cold, Miller said, with temperatures dipping to 22 degrees.

Firefighters slept in tents or yurts at the fairgrounds, or when on the fire sites — about 35 or 40 miles away — taking breaks in the engine, back seat or the stairwell of the engine to get “power naps to keep you going,” Rich said.

Foster said he and his team received a

Camp Fire statistics

Butte County’s Camp Fire was the most destructive and deadly in California’s history. By the fire’s containment on Nov. 25, Cal Fire reported 85 civilian fatalities and three firefighter injuries. The cause of the fire remains under investigation. A total of 1,065 fire personnel responded to the blaze. On Nov. 29, just under 200 people were still declared missing, and search crews are combing the area looking for remains, slowing the ability of cleaning crews to enter. Heavy rains flooded roadways, stranded vehicles and created the need for further evacuations.

Clatsop County’s strike team included:

GEARHART: Jordan Chandler, James Hutchinson, Tanner Rich, Sean Kirby, Kayla Miller, Angels Vargas and Lindsey Wolfe.

KNAPPA: Amy Lenz, Scott Whelden
LEWIS AND CLARK: Jeff Golightly, Flint Helisgo, Brett Saulsbury
OLNEY WALLUSKI: Troy Foster, Aaron Smith, Ron Tyson

SEASIDE: Katie Bulleset, Matt Keefer, David Rankin, Jenson Segui

TOTAL FIRE PERSONNEL: 1,065

TOTAL FIRE ENGINES: 73

TOTAL FIRE CREWS: 11

TOTAL HELICOPTERS: 2

TOTAL DOZERS: 3

visit from California’s governor-elect Gavin Newsom.

Kindergartners presented Oregon firefighters with a thank-you card.

“The people in Chico were amazing,” Foster said. “There were signs everywhere. They were amazingly thankful.”

Lessons learned

Firefighters recounted learned firefighting lessons learned.

“Keep your head on a swivel,” Smith said. “Anything can happen, and what can happen, will happen.”

Rich said he is a firm believer in Murphy’s Law. “Anything can go wrong — even walking around structures, you can slip and fall. I never get the sense this is safe.”

“One of the things I got taught was never going thinking everything is OK,” Vargas said. “Weather can change within seconds, and you don’t know when that’s going to happen. You have to be on your guard constantly.”

The Camp Fire reminded Rankin to always anticipate what can happen when incidents get compounded.

“The lessons don’t just necessarily pertain to wildfires,” Rankin said. “If you had a gas line explosion at a house, what if that was a gas line explosion at a hotel? If you have a little wildfire, what if you have a fast moving wildfire moving through town? Those are the kind of lessons I took. Don’t get complacent with your regular emergencies, but

contemplate what happens if they get bigger, past what you’re normally used to.”

Meanwhile, the 10 days away and long shifts gave way to a Thanksgiving weekend with families, and on Nov. 25, news that the Camp Fire had been fully contained.

“A lot of us have seen fatalities and we’ve seen the devastation before,” Chandler said. “But none of us have seen what we saw down in Paradise. It’s on a much larger scale than anything we’ve dealt with here.”

Rich said his family was getting accustomed to seeing him leave town every fire season.

“My family’s used to it,” Rich, who volunteered at California’s Santa Rosa and Thomas fires last year, said. “Going to wildfires has become the new norm. My brother’s like: ‘Man, you’re gone again.’”

The North Coast is ‘Candyland’ at the holiday season

This morning as I wound my way around town, I noticed live Christmas trees for sale in Seaside on the corner of Holladay and 12th. What’s better than the smell of a live tree? The trees reminded me Santa Claus is coming and it’s time to think of gifts, both to give and to receive.

After decades of gift giving, I’ve decided you can’t go wrong with gift certificates or sweets. In an effort to help readers find the best sweets, for months I’ve been doing research, eating my way through bags of fudge, caramels, salt water taffy, and almond bark. Two amazing handmade candy companies are located right here in Candyland, er, Seaside. We always send my father-in-law in Michigan candied ginger which they make at Bruce’s Candy Kitchen located in the Seaside Outlet Mall. If you require shipping, contact their Cannon Beach store. I love Phillips Candies located on Broadway in

VIEW FROM THE PORCH

EVE MARX



the heart of town. I’m partial to their candied grapefruit slices and their fudge. Schwietert’s is pretty amazing too. If you are a fudge lover, try the sampler, also available at the very sweetly stocked Sweet Shop in Gearhart.

Possibly the most conversation-starting stocking stuffer can be found at By The Way in Gearhart where they appear to be the exclusive retailer of Gearhart Elk Poop. It’s not poop. It’s a chocolate, nut and toffee confection shaped into, uh, pellets. They are ridiculously tasty. It’s hard not to gulp down the whole bag despite the

name. This is a perfect gift to shock your Gearhart friends who either love or hate the elk.

I’m all about gift certificates. Seaside Massage and Spa is offering gift certificates for all their services including couples massage, custom facials, and the full monty of waxing menus. Ladies, surprise your sweetheart with a French bikini wax; gentleman, surprise your significant other with a chest or back wax. Or just get that clump of hair out of your ears. Seriously. Stop in to purchase a gift certificate at their location at 810 Broadway in Seaside, or book a soothing appointment for yourself at bookseasidemasage.com.

Deborah Albrecht is considered by many, including other massage professionals, to be one of the most intuitive and gifted massage therapists in the area. Serving the north coast since 1998, she says it’s her pleasure to help people get more comfortable. Call 541-507-

7780 to book an appointment or inquire about gift certificates.

Acupuncture is a great way to ease pain and reduce stress; in years past I’ve made it a point to get acupuncture a few weeks in advance of Christmas just to help me deal with stress. I’ve learned that even if you don’t put up a tree or make the Christmas dinner, the holiday, while joyful, has a lot of moving parts. Moving parts give me a migraine.

If you feel the same way, treat yourself to a session with Katherine Stewart who works with kids, pregnant women, adults, and people like me, i.e. journalists suffering from sciatica. She recently moved locations in Seaside from Holladay Drive to 600 Broadway, Suite 8. Book your next day appointment online at ancient-handhealing.com.

Now about that live Christmas tree. Hurry to get one while they last.

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