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Local firefighters reflect on recent major disasters

By Nick Marnell



A rescued dog gets decontaminated in Texas.
Photo courtesy MOPFA and California Task Force 4

Lamorinda fire personnel spent weeks outside their jurisdictions during a busy fall that included disaster responses in Texas and Florida and strike team deployments to the North Bay wildfires. But what impacted the responders most was the appreciation and gratitude of the local residents whom they came to help, many of those locals having lost everything.

Both the Moraga-Orinda Fire District and the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District are participating agencies in the Urban Search and Rescue response system of the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The two local agencies are assigned to California Task Force 4, sponsored by the Oakland Fire Department. Task forces step in when states seek federal assistance, as did Texas following Hurricane Harvey and Florida for the onslaught of Hurricane Irma. MOFD responded with two personnel to Texas and three to Florida; ConFire sent five to Texas and six to Florida.

On to Texas

The Hurricane Harvey convoy left Oakland Aug. 26 and drove 44 hours to Texas. "We become FEMA employees upon deployment. Our local titles no longer matter," said MOFD firefighter Steve Rogness, a task force rescue specialist. The 80-person task force, whose members must meet rescue certifications and must be able to depart on three hours notice, was deployed in San Antonio, Katy, Simonton and Wharton, Texas. The responders stayed in makeshift dorms at school gyms and stadiums.

"The response from the citizens when we got there left the biggest impression on me," said Capt. David Watson of ConFire. "They were more concerned for us than they were for themselves. And these were people who lost everything."

"Texans brought out home-cooked meals," Rogness said. "A family came to our truck stop with a full Texas barbecue - for 70 of us."

The work in Texas included repairing rain damage and performing rescue operations. Wharton experienced severe flooding, and the task force searched for and evacuated residents and animals from the flooded areas. Rescue officer David Mazaika, a veteran MOFD engineer who orchestrated the district's original participation in the task force, discovered something in Wharton that he had not expected.

"What I learned is that you're not only there to handle the big issues. It's the little things that people appreciate the most. The local fire chief in Wharton was so appreciative that guys from halfway across the country came to his small town. The people were shocked and amazed," Mazaika said.

U-turn to Florida

After the completion of the Texas deployment, Rogness sensed what was on deck. "I saw the writing on the wall. Irma was coming. Guys who were driving home made it to El Paso, and had to turn around, to Atlanta. Then to Florida," Rogness said.

"Ten days in Texas, home for 30 hours, 12 days back to Florida. With a baby daughter just born July 5," Mazaika said.

The task force arrived in Florida before the Sept. 10 hurricane, with the opportunity to work on preparation unlike the catch-up it performed after 40 inches of rain in Texas. Most of the damage was from wind and surge and the group did most of its work between Marathon and Key West. Again, the resiliency of the local communities stunned the task force.

"This guy had a mobile food company in the Keys, he came by and cooked lunch for all of us," Mazaika said. "Not until afterward did we find out that he had lost his home, his clothes, everything. He only had his truck and trailer left. We took up a collection to try to get him going again. He broke down and cried."

The work in Florida was tougher because the Keys were so isolated from the mainland, with most residents having evacuated. Responders had to pick up their own food, their own water, their own fuel. Watson noted that the time in Texas was easier on his family, because in Florida, there was no cell service, no Wi-Fi, no

way to communicate back home.

"I was energized, watching people who had never met each other working together to get the job done," Rogness said. "It's so cool for a small fire department like ours to be able to contribute to something this massive."

The North Bay

MOFD Capt. Mike Lacy had never been to Santa Rosa until his strike team arrived after the Oct. 8 North Bay wildfires. "I thought, this seems like a lot of houses that are burning really fast. When I got there, it only compounded my confusion," Lacy said. "Houses aren't supposed to burn like this. Not 5,000 stucco-sided homes with tile roofs. I wouldn't have even batted an eye at that. I would have said, your house is safe."

ConFire sent two wildland units on an initial attack the day of the fire, along with four engines, as part of a strike team. "A total of 24 of our personnel responded to this incident," said ConFire Operations Chief Ed Gonzales.

Recognizing the amount of destruction and the speed with which it occurred was horrific to Lacy and the strike team. "It's a miracle that none of us got hurt," Lacy said, yet again overwhelmed by the gratefulness of people who had lost so much.

Lacy himself experienced a personal loss. "One of my friends lost his house. I met him when I was 4, while he was dating my mother. He was the reason I joined the fire service," Lacy said.

His biggest takeaway was that you do not have to live in the hills and forests to confront a disaster like the North Bay wildfires. "Where there are homes and major vegetation, this type of fire can hit," Lacy said, a not-so-veiled reference to Lamorinda.

The rush of disaster response is exciting, but responders agree that it's nice to return home. Not only are the responders heroes to the people whose lives have been turned upside down, they are heroes at home as well.

"Being away takes its toll," Watson said. "But when I saw my daughter running up to me when I landed at the Oakland Airport, it was a moment I will never forget."



Task force workers crash inside high school gymnasium at Key Largo, Florida. Photos courtesy MOPFA and California Task Force 4

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