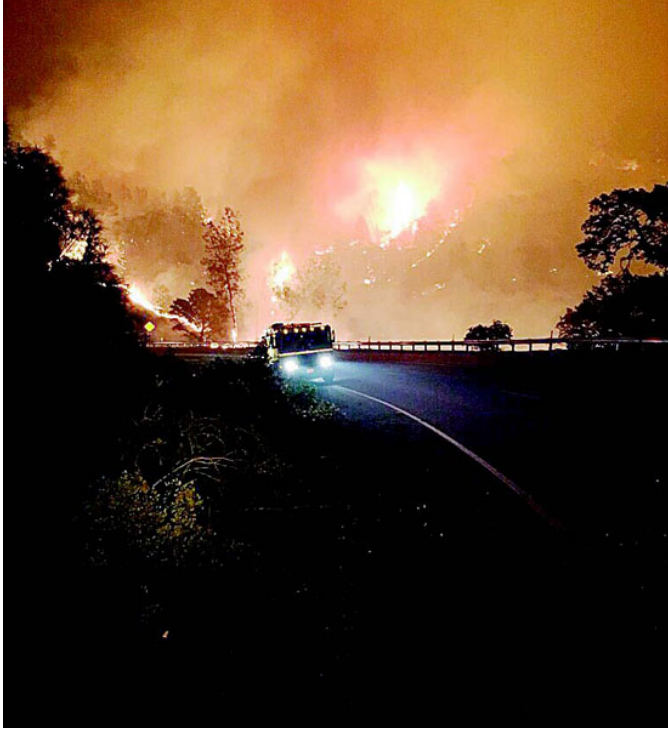


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Stress on the Front Line and on the Home Front

By Nick Marnell



Moraga-Orinda Fire District firefighters hold the Rocky Fire south of Highway 20 near Clearlake

brush, with hand tools and chain saws, fighting fire with fire." Woods said that his crew did not use a gallon of water. The ConFire team was the first arriving outside resource. "There was a lot of fire, and nobody there," said Woods. The fire fell under the jurisdiction of the Six Rivers National Forest Gasquet ranger district, which put the crew up at a campground. "The first two days, we ate military rations," said Woods. "No showers, nothing. Three days later, as the incident ramped up, they brought in caterers, laundry units, medical units. The area turns into a makeshift city." Welcome additions were the semi-trailers that housed over a dozen shower stalls.

Woods, a 20-year veteran whose children are grown, has served on many strike teams. "At the King Fire, I didn't talk to my family for six straight days," he said. "Little kids get used to seeing dad being gone for three days or so, but after five or six, family stress starts to build in."

MOFD

That sentiment was validated by Moraga-Orinda Fire District captain Jon Bensley, who returned in mid-August after nine days on a strike team. "We can talk about the Rocky Fire, but the bigger story is what the families go through when we're gone," he said.

Bensley, 33, has two daughters, 2 and a half and 5 months old. "The sacrifice we put in pales in comparison to what goes on at home," he said. "Our wives have the hard job. It's lonely, and they have to hold down the fort and be strong. Thousands of firefighters are out there now, and each one of them has a family back home that is pretty worried. Especially the young families." Bensley's older daughter experienced nightmares while he was away, which his wife attributed to his absence.

But once he received his assignment, Bensley was eager to get to work. His crew checked in at the Lakeport command center, a 30-minute drive from the fire activity. His task at the Rocky Fire was to contain the fire at Highway 20, north of Clearlake, about 100 miles north of Lamorinda. The

When you talk to firefighters from either of the Lamorinda fire agencies who left the area to fight California wildfires this season, you realize that the fires affect not only those at the incident but those whom the firefighters leave behind.

ConFire

The call came at 2 a.m. and in 30 minutes Contra Costa County Fire Protection District captain David Woods and his team headed to Del Norte County to tackle the Gasquet Fire, a 17,000-acre wildfire set off by lightning strikes in the wilderness outside Crescent City.

"Have you ever driven up 101? In a fire engine?" said Woods. The crew of four responded Aug. 1 to the emergency call in the state system and would spend nine days away, then relieved by another ConFire crew.

"It's a completely different experience than at ConFire," he said.

In a house fire firefighters can see where the fire is going, and the crews can go right in and fight the fire head on. "In the wilderness, you're watching the weather conditions, the wind patterns, the footing is different. You can't see where the fire is. We're cutting through steep timber, heavy

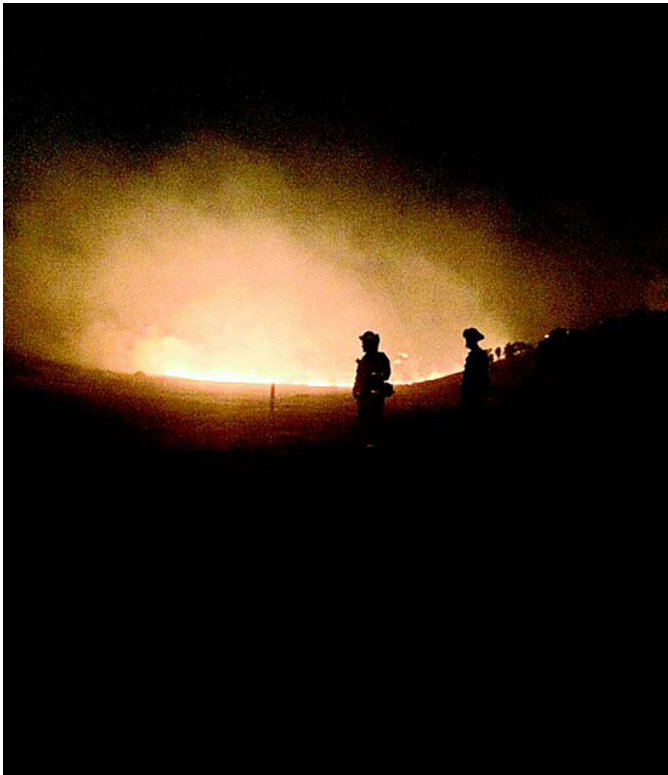
fire burnt through nearly 70,000 acres. "It was unprecedented," said Bensley. "The most extreme fire behavior I have ever seen." The fire ripped through a computer model that predicted a section would take seven days to grow. It took 12 hours.

Two firefighters were killed this year fighting wildfires in California. "When we lose one of our own, it humbles you, makes you take pause," he said, his eyes welling up, staring away. "Those guys were just like us, going to fight fires, and they thought they were fine. Then, something went wrong. We know it could happen any day, and I think it's felt most at home."

Bensley sent his wife a photo of the fire from the front line, but he did not get the reaction he expected. "It really upset her," he said. "We have no phone service at times, my wife hears the news about a firefighter that went down, news is not getting out quickly enough, the imagination runs wild, she panics."

Yet both firefighters left no doubt that they love what they do. "We don't like the uncertainties of our job, but we are happy to do the greatest amount of good we can with the training and preparation we've received," said Bensley.

"I have my bag in my car, ready to leave today," said Woods.



MOFD captain Jon Bensley and firefighter Chris Matthews pictured (right). Photos provided



ConFire engineer Brian Nannini and captain David Woods contain the Gasquet wildfire. Photo provided

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