

PARK **RANGER**

WILDERNESS SAR, MOUNTAIN & CAVE RESCUE, HELI-OPS



ISSUE
4

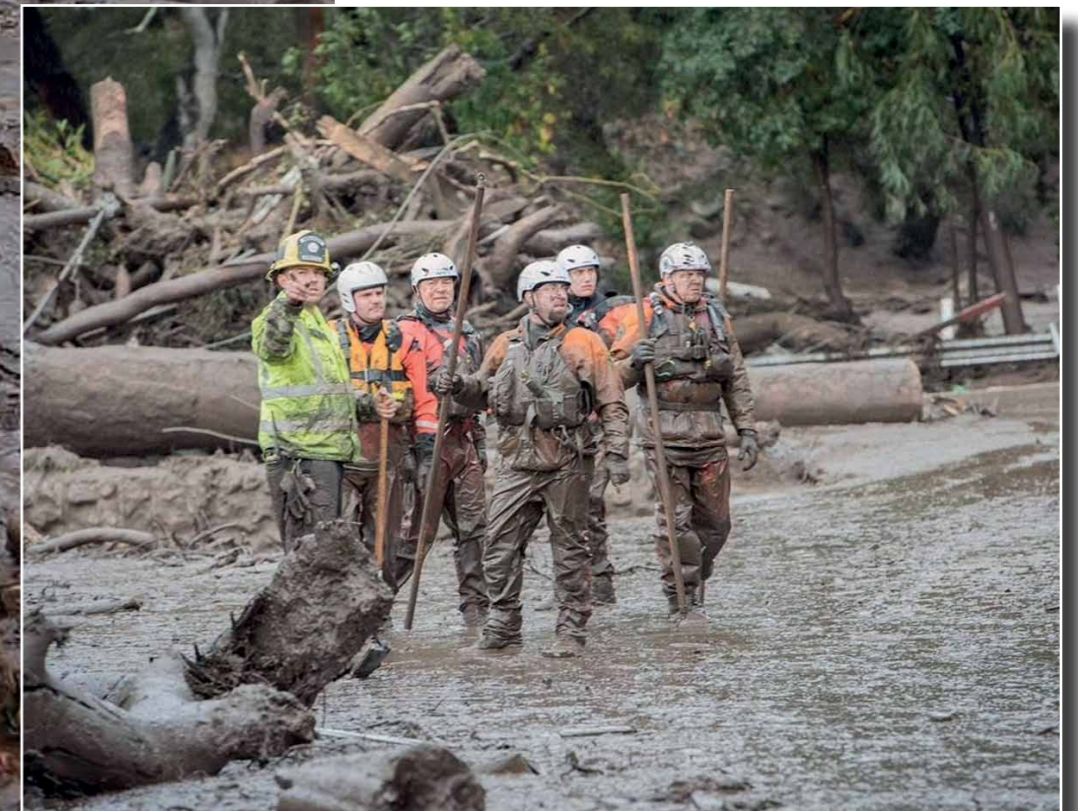
Armageddon in the Foothills

A narrative of the 2018 Montecito Debris Flow

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The following narrative is a perspective of a veteran SAR member who participated in the Thomas Fire evacuations and subsequent debris flow disaster and recovery efforts. Hundreds of first responders from various agencies participated and could also share their perspectives. The following recollections and the views expressed are exclusively those of the author.



SBCSAR K9 McGyver and his handler Rick Stein search debris piles for survivors. The pair participated in multiple operational periods during the rescue and recovery stages.

INCIDENT

DEC 2017

THE THOMAS FIRE INCIDENT:

The Thomas Fire was reported on December 4, 2017 at approximately 6:00 pm near Thomas Aquinas College, North of Santa Paula California. The cause of the fire remains under investigation. Gusty 60 mph Santa Ana winds resulted in a rapid spread. Santa Ana winds are characterized as strong, dry (usually single digit relative humidity) that typically flow down slope. These winds exacerbate fire conditions and on the night of December 4th could be best described as having the fire “move like a freight train”. The fire rapidly spread toward the towns of Santa Paula and Ojai to the North, Fillmore to the East, and Ventura to the South. Multiple alarms went out for initial and mutual aid response. Law Enforcement and Search and Rescue personnel responded ahead of the fire to initiate evacuations orders. Water-dropping Type 2 helicopters attempted to respond but had to abort due to strong winds. Larger Type 1 helicopters made the same effort, but were also forced to turn around. At one point the fire was consuming one acre per second. The fire had grown past 50,000 acres before attempts in containment could be made from the ground and in the air. The conflagration continued and by December 10th it had consumed more than 173,000 acres with only 15% containment. The progression continued to the North and to the West resulting in the evacuation of the communities of Carpinteria (population approx. 15,000) and Montecito (population approx. 10,000) within Santa Barbara County. With strong Santa Ana winds during the evening of December 10th, the fire experienced an explosive growth to 230,000 acres. The majority of this growth taking place in Santa Barbara County.

EVACUATION NOTICES:

The Santa Barbara County Search and Rescue team (SBCSAR) was tasked with managing and carrying out the evacuation orders as directed by the Sheriff and Fire officials. Initially burning around and within the communities of Carpinteria and Montecito, the fire progressed towards the city limits of Santa Barbara and the evacuation zone continued to grow. With the exception of the Santa Barbara downtown core, the evacuation zone was established east of State Highway 154 to the Ventura County line. Evacuating such a large population in such a small time frame was an extreme undertaking. It involved SAR personnel from both Santa Barbara County as well as Ventura County (who had already been working the incident on their home turf) as well as law enforcement personnel from multiple counties, cities and state resources throughout California.

CONTAINMENT:

Containment lines protected the communities in Santa Barbara County while the fire continued to burn North into the Los Padres wilderness. Most families were permitted to return home in time for the Christmas holiday and by New Year’s Eve the containment had reached over 90%.



FIRE DAMAGE:

More than 1,000 structures were lost, the majority of which were located within the city limits of Ventura. \$120 million in damages were reported in Santa Barbara County alone. The cost to battle the fire was in excess of \$200 million. More than 100,000 residents were evacuated. With a total acreage consumption of over 280,000, the Thomas Fire resulted in being the largest wildfire in California history. With over 8,500 firefighters assigned, it was also the largest mobilization of firefighters on a single incident. The greatest loss however was that of lives. On the evening of December 6th a resident died as a result of a single car accident while fleeing the fire and on December 14th CAL Fire Apparatus Engineer, Cory Iverson, died while battling the fire protecting the town of Fillmore.

HOLIDAY RESPITE:

All evacuation orders were lifted and the majority of First responders assigned to the fire were released in time to spend the holidays with their families. The now barren landscape brought new concerns of flooding potential and debris flows to the affected areas. The winter forecast had been dry thus far, so perhaps the rainy season would be short lived or even non-existent?



Flames from multiple structure fires from ruptured natural gas lines as a result of the debris flow can be seen from the street and from the SAR staging area (pic left).

JAN 2018:

DISASTER PREPARATION:

With rain in the forecast on January 8th, preparation for evacuations and emergency response was being discussed at all levels. SBCSAR’s team training on January 7th served as a swiftwater rescue refresher. Time was also spent checking swiftwater and USAR equipment to ensure operational readiness. Based on upcoming evacuations orders and warnings, time was also allocated on drafting individual team assignments and assigning SAR staff to work the command post to manage the upcoming January 8th evacuation plan.

EVACUATING THE FOOTHILLS... AGAIN!:

On January 8th, Search and Rescue and Law Enforcement personnel went door-to-door within the evacuation zone to carry out evacuation orders and advisories. This information was also publicly broadcasted on local news stations, social media outreach and using the reverse 911 phone system. Some residents heeded to the evacuation notices (in both mandatory and advisory areas), and others chose not to evacuate. Perhaps those that made the decision to stay did not feel in danger, or were overwhelmed with continued evacuations after going through this exercise multiple times during the Thomas Fire just weeks before. In any case, even in the mandatory evacuation zone, residents cannot be forced to leave their homes, they can only be highly encouraged to do so. The weather forecast called for heavy rain in the afternoon continuing throughout the evening. The accumulated amounts were forecasted to reach pre-determined thresholds for mud slides and debris flows. The evacuation campaign was completed just before nightfall. The command post was demobilized and the majority of SAR personnel were sent home. The exception was a group of seven SAR Swiftwater Rescue Technicians (SRT’s) in addition to the Senior Deputy SAR Coordinator. A decision was made to have this contingent, comprising two SRT teams staged in an elevated area central to our potential response area.

ARMAGEDDON IN THE FOOTHILLS:

Since the plan to stage SRT’s was somewhat impromptu, sleeping accommodations consisted of using the passenger seats of response vehicles and in the back of the command post vehicle. Despite gusty winds and intermittent rain, most of the SAR personnel managed a few hours’ sleep.



Shortly after 3:00 am we were listening to radio traffic that indicated that US Highway 101 was impacted by heavy flooding and debris flows completely cutting off areas between Carpinteria and the city limits of Santa Barbara. At around the same time we observed the otherwise dark night sky illuminated by a large orange glow. “Something big is burning in the foothills” proclaimed a Sheriff’s Lieutenant standing next to me. Montecito Fire Department began making attempts to reach the conflagration as well as two Sheriff Deputies who were patrolling the foothills. “How could those houses be burning while it’s raining so hard?” is the only thought that I could conjure at the time. Unknown to us at the time, 0.5 inches of rain fell in just a five minute period, triggering a debris flow which ruptured gas lines causing multiple structure fires.

Soon thereafter we received radio traffic that the patrol car of the two Sheriff Deputies were immobilized in mud. We responded in our 4 x 4 vehicles in attempt to render aid to the now marooned deputies. Unfortunately we quickly realized that the road in the foothills that we had to take was now not only impassible, but very unsafe due to large boulders actively rolling down canyon hillsides. The decision was made to regroup back

INCIDENT

to our staging area where our Sr. Deputy SAR Coordinator was monitoring calls for service from dispatch. During the short time that we had been away, there was already an accumulation of over 100 911 calls for service ranging in nature of “I’m stuck in mud” to “my house was washed away and I’m clinging to a tree”.

DAYBREAK JANUARY 9th

The plan of action was to attempt to forge through several feet of mud and debris now covering the US 101 freeway towards Olive Mill Road, located on the West side of Montecito, where the majority of the calls for help were originating from. The next several hours were spent rescuing and evacuating people to a staging area where they were medically triaged and transported to evacuation centers. After daybreak the magnitude of the incident became devastatingly apparent. In some cases, we responded to addresses where the homes were no longer there, completely swept from their foundations. Trees, framework, automobiles and personal belongings washed downstream and now littered a large swath of the adjacent beaches. A landscape once familiar to us was no more.





Debris flow
An unstoppable force



SAR K9 teams from throughout California participated in the search for the missing.



USAR DEPLOYMENT:

The magnitude of the Montecito debris flow resulted in a tremendous mutual aid response including the mobilization of every USAR Rescue Task Force (RTF) in the State of California, numerous aircraft from the US Coast Guard, National Guard and other agencies as well as volunteer Search and Rescue teams from neighboring counties and law enforcement personnel from across the state. To help prevent the civilian population from getting injured, hampering in rescue operations and the potential for looting, the disaster area was declared an exclusion zone requiring a 24/7 law enforcement presence to staff road closure barricades and roving patrols.



RECOVERY EFFORTS:

As the days progressed rescue efforts switched to recovery. Inaccessible areas slowly became accessible and were checked for potential victims. SBCSAR was tasked with managing K9 search efforts as resources from all over California were requested through the Office of Emergency Services from the California Rescue Dog Association. Areas of probability were identified and segmented and were searched as they became accessible as a result of the 24/7 debris removal effort.



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COULD LIGHTNING STRIKE TWICE?

Operations in Montecito did not cease after search efforts were suspended. With additional rainstorms in the forecast everyone remained on high alert. Evacuation advisories and orders were initiated when the predicted rainfall amount reached pre-determined thresholds. Response plans were fine-tuned and SAR resources pre-deployed along with the Sheriff's Special Enforcement Team (SET) along with their 2,000 lb armored Bearcats. Multiple 12-hour standby operational periods took place. But lightning did not strike twice, at least not in this rain season. The hills above Montecito and Carpinteria remain barren. With little vegetation sprouting to help hold the soil in place, we will once again be faced with the potential for debris flows in October 2018, when the chance of rain will once again be upon us.

INDIVIDUAL IMPACTS:

"We slogged through the mud, rescued the living, cared for the dead and assisted those in need"

Sheriff Bill Brown, Santa Barbara County

The Santa Barbara area is a very tight knit community. The physical damage caused by the debris flow was limited to a few square miles in a moderately populated area. People from all walks of life and economical status call Montecito home. The majority of Santa Barbara residents only have a few degrees of separation between themselves and an acquaintance, coworker, or friend-of-a-friend, that their lives would be forever changed by this event. Either by being evacuated during several occasions, losing their homes only to escape with just the clothes on their backs, or worse; being one of the 23 lives that the January 9th debris flow claimed.

Every first responder that participated in this natural disaster was personally impacted to some degree. This proved to be



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taxing to all responders, but especially to SAR volunteers who through it all had to juggle the call of duty with family and work commitments. Between the start of the Thomas Fire to the end of the rain storms in March, SBCSAR team members logged more than 3,500 mission hours as well as an estimated 300 hours spent pre-planning for the multiple operational periods. The future is uncertain with the exception of one known fact, if the call comes, SBCSAR will answer and will do all that is necessary to help its community.

BELOW: 10 days from armageddon to normality thanks to an amazing civic and civil response.



January 10



January 18



January 20

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