

PRESIDENTS MESSAGE

By Douglas Sherman

WILDFIRES AND HEROES

October 26th seemed like another typical directors meeting in San Jose. As we sat in the San Jose airport for our return flight to San Diego, however, directors Murry, Lombardi, Falconer and I were notified that all Airports in Southern California were closed – due to smoke and flame. San Diego was on fire, and we all contacted our families to see how bad it was. Homes in San Diego and the adjacent areas were being evacuated.

Jim Lombardi decided to stay at the San Jose airport with hopes of a later flight since it was rumored that L.A. would open up. Directors Murry, Falconer and I opted for the 10-hour rental car drive back home. My family was locked indoors, trying to avoid breathing-in the heavy smoke and ash. Kim's house was being evacuated due to the approaching fire, and Darryl's family was packing as the fire was approaching his home.

As we drove South, Kim's cell phone quit due to battery depletion caused by numerous frantic calls and messages. I can't tell you the feeling we all had with our families in trouble and being 10 hours away. We passed lines of fire trucks and emergency vehicles going south with us, all with lights flashing and firefighters ready to act. We stopped only for fuel and dinner and proceeded through the burning hills of L.A. as we continued south. We arrived in San Diego a little after midnight and returned to our homes.

The sky over San Diego was dark the next morning with the generous golden sun of Sunnyside reduced to a pink gumball hanging powerlessly over the mountains. Indoors, the house was a wash of strange, muted colors, the floors glowing red or brown, the kitchen countertops thinly painted in the hue of vin rouge. Outside, the birds were holding their breath as fine threads of white ash rolled down out of the sky, and the distant thunder of aircraft rumbled through the smoke.

This was the season of the apocalypse, the season Raymond Chandler and Joan Didion came to dwell on, when the sea pulled the desert air down over the mountains and your eyes dried up in their sockets, and all the pyromaniacs went to heaven. Southern California was at war with nature and the fires were burning from San Diego to Los Angeles to Ventura.

As of that morning there were 3 fires: The Cedar fire (100,000 acres burned, 250 homes lost, 1000 people on the fire line); the Paradise fire (17,000 acres burned, 160 homes lost, 800 on the fire line); and the Otay lakes fire (34,000 acres burned, with 147 on the fire line). So far, 11 people were confirmed killed with on-going investigations of more reported found bodies.

Courage, dedication and self sacrifice defined the actions of the firefighters and San Diego volunteers who fought the fight. Steve Rucker, a Novato firefighter lost his life in the Julian area, and his partner Capt. Doug McDonald was injured.

CRPOA director Conklin spent a couple of 21 hour shifts on duty, with no sleep, assisting in the fight, and was at the scene when firefighter Rucker was lost in Julian. When Charlie went off-duty he had to turn in his Suburban to the shops for repair as 4

days of continuous code 3 operation had burned out the front and rear strobe lights and front grill blue light.

CRPOA director Falconer, spent several 14-hour days on duty, interrupted by evacuating her home several times, and going back on-duty again.

Charlie Sloan, an S.D.S.O. search and rescue volunteer, lost his ex-wife, 17 year old daughter, sister, and home in the fire.

All did what they could to help. Director Falconer and the San Diego Commander's Association arranged for a fund raiser for SDSO volunteer Charlie Sloan. On November 5, at S.D.S.U. we all met for a Dr. Bass book signing, and raised over \$2,100.00 for Charlie. \$500.00 of that came from the San Diego Commanders Association. Director Cantrell sent money down from Stockton P.D. Additional money was donated by Bob Callan from Community Safety LLC.

Now the fires are over and the threat of floods in the burn areas will continue for the next 5 years. The fires just keep on giving: Floods, biochemical reactions that affect the water quality, fire debris, and more. San Diego residents are starting to rebuild their homes, and finding that their insurance coverage was insufficient.

But the good news is that our directors, volunteers, firefighters, and police are again ready and willing to serve. The great people within our organization like the work they perform, for their sheriff, police or fire departments, willingly giving countless numbers of thankless hours, and most do it for free. My heart goes out to the volunteers who fought the fight, and some who lost their lives, family members and homes in the process. The flame of courage within these brave men and women burns far brighter than the fires they were chose to battle.

A hero is one who, knowing the risk, disregards his or her own safety and takes necessary action anyway. Those who fought this fight are truly heroes.

Doug Sherman is a retired Reserve Commander from Chula Vista Police Department and the ARPOC 2005 Conference Chairman. He welcomes your questions and comments at sherman@crpoa.org.