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## Firefighters: North Bay fire could happen in Orinda

By Nick Marnell



A police officer looks on as firefighters sift through the rubble of his destroyed North Bay home. Photo provided

A team from the Moraga-Orinda Fire District responded to the Tubbs Fire in the North Bay in October, but what struck the firefighters about the incident was not only the amount of devastation but the parallel to their own district's topography and demographics.

With the perfect storm alignment of high temperatures, high winds and low humidity, and a Red Flag warning issued by the National Weather Service, MOFD prepared for heightened activity Oct 8. "Of 14 calls that day on Engine 145, only one was a medical emergency," said Capt. Mike Lacy.

Near midnight, crews responded to a 2-acre fire near the Lafayette Reservoir. One hour later, a small vegetation fire ignited along Monterey Terrace in Orinda. A 5-acre vegetation fire atop Tilden Park, near the golf course, erupted around 2:30 a.m. and took three hours to contain.

Early in the afternoon of Oct. 9 came the state mutual aid request to the North Bay and the raging Tubbs Fire. MOFD personnel joined a strike team from Santa Clara, arrived at the Sonoma County Fairgrounds and were assigned to the Fountaingrove and Wallace Road neighborhoods of Santa Rosa.

It was too late for fire suppression. "Where could we make the most impact in an area that was not burning?" Lacy said was the goal of the responders. "We tried to do more than just fight fire. We tried to restore a new normal for the people."

The crew sorted through ashes looking for a wedding ring. Firefighters saved a baby calf and fed cows for a rancher. A police officer returned to his destroyed home, and firefighters sifted through the rubble to find his safe - a large, expensive safe, expected to survive anything. But nothing inside survived. The officer's guns and all of his paperwork were gone. "Complete and utter destruction, within the indestructible," Lacy said. "The fire showed no concern for anybody."

Twenty-two died and 5,500 structures were lost, including more than 4,600 homes, in the most destructive wildfire in California history. "It took everything in its way, including large shopping complexes. And a fire station," Lacy said.

Though the MOFD personnel worked 72 consecutive hours upon arrival and then 24 on, 24 off for 12 days, Lacy said the fire was more emotionally draining than physically.

"The community interacted with us so closely," Lacy said. "'Can you see if my kid's shoes made it?' But we knew the shoes didn't make it. Nothing made it. There was nothing our team could do to stop this fire. It was bigger than all of us."

Lacy explained that being defeated by a fire is contrary to everything that firefighters stand for. "We do everything that we can, and it still beats us? That impact is heavy. It stays with us for a long time."

The Tubbs Fire destroyed 57.5 square miles and more than 36,000 acres; MOFD covers 63.5 square miles and more than 40,000 acres. Lacy said that the Fountaingrove neighborhood reminded him of Wilder, and the Wallace Road area reminded him of Orinda Downs, with an even higher vegetation density in Orinda than in the North Bay.

The district benefitted from the exposure, the experience and the training, Lacy told the MOFD board Jan. 17, and the knowledge attained from working the Tubbs Fire will enhance community risk reduction.

Lacy closed with an ominous admonition. "This fire has a very real potential to occur in our district," he said.

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