



PRESSRELEASE

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For Immediate Release

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Bay Area Urban Search and Rescue Task Force returns from Butte County for the second time in two years after searching 139 structures spread out over 39 square miles for the missing

East Palo Alto – California

70 tired members and 4 K-9's with California Urban Search and Task Force 3 (CA-TF3), sponsored by the Menlo Park Fire Protection District, returned from their six-day search and recovery mission to Butte County late Saturday and over the weekend.

For a number of these specialized search, rescue and recovery veterans, this was their second time in two years in the region looking for human remains in burnt out structures. During the Camp Fire two years ago, the Task Force spent seven days mostly searching some 1,346 destroyed structures in the small community of Magalia, located above Paradise.

This time they searched 139 structures, but in a much larger, remote 39 square mile area in vastly different and difficult terrain where accessibility was half of the challenge. Off road and smaller vehicles were in high demand and the team spent a lot of time clearing dirt roads of fallen trees using chain saws just to gain access to small enclaves of structures that then needed to be thoroughly searched and cleared.

In some cases, the structure would need to first de-layered, which was mostly done with metal cutting saws and by hand, in other cases visual searching was backed up with Human Remains Discovery K-9's (HRD) or by bringing in a group of forensic pathologists.

Methodical and well documented searches were a priority and the Team delivered day after day using a tracking product called Survey 123, which helped them capture and record every structure as they searched. The groups skill and speed were notable, reducing the anticipated time on task (14 days) or by over half.

Fire Chief Schapelhouman said *“sadly, we’re getting very, very experienced, efficient and*

good at these types of search and recovery missions here in California. Our more experienced members were also able to show a number of first timers how we operate as a team in the field and as a singularly focused and effective instrument. Most every one I spoke with when they returned was humbled, grateful and honored to have been able to have been there. One thing they all mentioned this time, was how vast of an area had been destroyed, mile after mile, and how small it made them all feel, one person described it as almost overwhelming in scope and scale “.

Twenty vehicles ranging from semi-tractor trucks pulling four 53-foot trailers loaded with 80,000 pounds of technical rescue and search equipment, to small vans and four-wheel drive equipped pickup trucks and small off-road Gators were used while the Team was based out of the City of Chico, then daily driving 20 – 45 miles into the mountains above Oroville Reservoir to their target locations and search zones.

The 70-person team had 4 specially trained dogs, two of which came from Orange County Fire Task Force 5 (CA-TF5), and fifteen civilian professionals like Doctors, Structural Engineers, Hazardous Material Specialists, Communications and Heavy Equipment Operators, to name a few.

Eleven Menlo Park Firefighters were joined by forty-four other Firefighters representing thirteen other local Fire agencies consisting of Aptos La-Selva, Central San Mateo County, Palo Alto, San Jose, San Mateo Consolidated, Santa Clara City, Santa Clara County, South San Francisco, Sunnyvale and Woodside Fire personnel along with civilian members from Genentech, SRI and Facebook

Fire Chief Schapelhouman said *“we couldn’t have pulled off this deployment without our dedicated civilian professionals who said yes during a pandemic and our supporting fire agencies, all of whom not only had other personnel on wildland fires, like we do. We all prioritize covering our local Fire Stations first, in-order to keep our communities safe. Orange County Fire Authority was a life saver with two HRD K-9 Teams and a Plans Manager, together we all pulled off a miracle and these then these Team Members more than delivered, like it was business as usual”.*

The team was activated Sunday, September 20, 2020, under a special request from the California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (CAL-OES) Fire/Rescue Branch, working in support of the Butte County Sheriff Department, who requested Task Forces 3’s assistance. Once finished, the Task Force returned by Saturday evening, September 26, 2020. Unfortunately, one Team Member was injured in a mechanical fall as he was navigating the often steep and un-even ground. He returned home and is currently under the care of his physician.

The Bay Area Task Force joined a smaller number of Task Force 7 (Sacramento) and Regional Response Fire/Rescue units from Los Angeles and Santa Barbara County members, all deployed under the State’s Master Mutual Aid system.