

When Disaster Strikes Twice

By Bill Brown, Sheriff-Coroner, Santa Barbara County



The duties and responsibilities of a sheriff are essential and unusually broad. In California, sheriffs are generally responsible for providing front-line law enforcement service to unincorporated areas and contract cities, running the county jail system, protecting the courts, and providing search and rescue for those who are lost or injured in wilderness areas. They may also oversee the delivery of specialized law enforcement services such as S.W.A.T. and hostage negotiation teams, aviation and marine units, mounted and K-9 units, drug trafficking task forces and the like. In 49 of our 58 counties, the sheriff also serves as the county coroner, responsible for investigating and determining the cause and manner of death in violent, suspicious and unattended cases.

With such breadth of duty and the accompanying resources comes an extraordinary level of first responder utility and capability, something that is unparalleled at the local government level. Whenever disaster of any type strikes a county, you can bet that the sheriff's office is going to be involved in a very big way. In fact, sheriffs are responsible issuing orders for, and conducting, evacuations during times of disaster. Such was the case recently – twice – in Santa Barbara County.

In December of 2017, the Thomas Fire broke out in our neighboring Ventura County. This fire was destined to become the largest wildfire in California history, ultimately consuming 281,893 acres, destroying 1,063 structures and claiming two lives – a victim who was fleeing it and a firefighter who was on the advance to fight it. Because of the fire's proximity to Santa Barbara County, our agency committed a commander and several lieutenants to the incident command center established to tackle the fire, run by Cal Fire-led Incident Command Team 3. After several days of devastation in Ventura County, generating massive amounts of smoke and ash that blew into our region, the fire soon spread to the west and headed toward the Santa Barbara County line.

What followed was a full-court press to fight and defeat this stubborn fire. Water dropping assets including a fire retardant-dropping Boeing 747, other big air tankers and a host of public safety agency and contract helicopters fought this fire from the air, flying sortie after sortie in support of thousands of firefighters below. Firefighting men and women from all across California and the western United States filled those boots on the ground. Also engaged were state prison inmates from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation firefighting teams, paying back their debt to society by risking their lives or by supporting others who did.

Despite these Herculean efforts, the fire spread into Santa Barbara County. It rapidly pushed westward behind a coastal mountain range, threatening the communities of Carpinteria, Summerland, Montecito and the eastern part of the City of Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara

County's Emergency Operations Center (E.O.C.) was fully activated. Daily news conferences and community meetings were broadcast live, in their entirety, by local television and radio stations. Clips and quotes from them also appeared in regional, national and even international media. Sheriff's deputies and search & rescue team members evacuated large parts of Montecito, Summerland and rural areas above Carpinteria, as an army of firefighters worked to keep the flames from destroying homes. Fire engines and their crews were everywhere in the hills above the threatened communities. Attacks from the air continued, including daring night time water drops conducted by members of the Santa Barbara Sheriff/Fire Air Support Unit.

In the end, the bravery and determination of the first responders who fought this fire paid off. Through sheer force of their efforts the fire was held at bay, and ultimately turned northward toward a wilderness area. Santa Barbara County lost 28 homes compared to Ventura County's loss of 749. The key difference was time. We were able to prepare for the fire that we knew was coming our way, and the Incident Command Team had enough time to order and deploy the firefighting resources that saved the day.

After 17 straight days of putting almost everything else on hold, the exhausted men and women of the Santa Barbara Sheriff's Office were finally able to stand down and focus on their families, the Christmas holidays and the pending new year. But after only a few days of respite, Santa Barbara County found itself faced yet again with another significant and related threat.

Rob Lewin, Santa Barbara County's Office of Emergency Management (O.E.M.) director, was already working with a Cal Fire Burn Team to assess the watershed damage caused by the Thomas Fire when he received information from the National Weather Service that a large rainstorm was headed toward Santa Barbara County. Based on the amount of predicted rainfall and the severely damaged condition of the ground above some of our south county's populated areas, he knew immediately that the potential for flash flooding and debris flows involving mud, trees and rocks was great. Rob quickly called emergency agencies and convinced their department heads, including me, that we were now facing a very dangerous situation.

A press conference was arranged and the public was warned – in no uncertain terms – of the danger that was coming our way. News services repeated the dire warning over the weekend in print, radio and television media. A meeting of expert scientists and many of Santa Barbara County's top emergency managers was hastily convened on Sunday, January 7. The result of that meeting was a recommendation that evacuations be conducted the following day if the storm continued on its trajectory toward Santa Barbara County's south coast.

The next day, after receiving word that the storm was still enroute, I approved evacuation orders. Sheriff's deputies and members of our search and rescue team knocked on the doors of homes in mandatory evacuation areas that housed more than 13,000 residents. Voluntary evacuation orders were also issued for an additional 20,000 residents in lower lying areas. Unfortunately, by one estimate only about 40% of those in mandatory evacuation areas were home or answered the door. Worse yet, only an estimated 15% indicated that they intended to leave. Many of these same residents had recently evacuated during the Thomas Fire, and the inconvenience of leaving

their homes *again* – on a beautiful, clear day, for a danger that could not be seen – was something a significant number of people were not inclined to do.

Nevertheless, thanks in large part to Rob Lewin's call to action, considerable advance planning and the pre-positioning of public safety assets took place. An Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team and a Swift Water Rescue Team were brought in and pre-staged below the precarious hills. The National Guard responded with a motor transport company, driving heavy troop-carrying trucks with large tires and high ground clearance. The Sheriff's Office Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicle and two smaller BearCat™ armored vehicles were made ready. Air assets were put on alert, and a cadre of additional sheriff's deputies and search & rescue team members were brought in that evening and stood by. As the storm approached, the National Weather Service and the County of Santa Barbara's Office of Emergency Management transmitted warnings to cell phones throughout the region.

Santa Barbara County's emergency response agencies were prepared. But the storm that we had prepared for – the one that was predicted – was unfortunately not the storm that we received. The storm struck our county on January 9, 2018 at 4:00 AM with a violent vengeance, at one point dropping 1/2" of rain in a 5 minute period – a downpour of Biblical proportion that scientists would later say was a once in 200 year event.

The results were devastating.

Sheets of rain skimmed off the ash-covered hills. As torrents of water moved downhill, the earth beneath charred trees, and vegetation eroded and began to give way. When that happened, large sandstone rocks that had been held in place broke loose and began to roll down the mountains. Many of these boulders were the size of – or larger than – automobiles, and as they tumbled down or off the mountains they damaged or destroyed everything in their paths: trees, bridges, creek channels, motor vehicles, telephone poles – and homes. A 4" gas supply line was severed and set alight; creating a giant flamethrower that lit up the sky and burned down several homes. Other large rocks tumbling down the hills shot over cliffs, raining down onto homes below and penetrating roofs as though they had been dropped from a bomber. The rain continued to pour, and six-to-eight foot tall walls of water, mud, wood and rock hurtled down the mountain and bulldozed their way onto streets and home sites below, ultimately traveling several miles to the Pacific Ocean.

A bend in the 101 Freeway was inundated with mud and water that soon stopped traffic in both directions. Either side of this new lagoon was strewn with jack-knifed trucks and wrecked, abandoned vehicles.

Two sheriff's deputies in a patrol car near the top of Montecito became stranded by knee-deep mud. Two California Highway Patrol officers drove into a flash flood, which spun their car around like a top. Miraculously, after turning 180 degrees, the vehicle regained traction and the driver was able to speed away in the now-opposite direction to safety.

Sheriff's dispatchers in our Communications Center performed exceptionally well. They received over 2,000 9-1-1 calls for help during the first day of the mudslides. During the following two days, they received another 1,300 9-1-1 calls related to the storm damage.

At first light, the scope and extent of the damage became stunningly apparent. A mass of boulders and trees had accumulated at certain "choke points" in four watercourses, and turned these points into dams that caused the destructive debris flow to jump the creeks and destroy or damage whatever ran parallel to them. Wide flood plains replaced what had been thickets of vegetation along the creek banks. Some homes built close to the creeks were broken apart and literally swept off their foundations.

In one of my first comments to the media, I remarked that the scene, "looked like a World War 1 battlefield," with mud, wrecked vehicles, rocks and parts of destroyed buildings strewn across a devastated landscape. That quote was repeated in publications and on television around the world.

And like a battlefield it was. Many people were trapped in their homes, and even rescuers got caught in waist-deep mud. Some of them were stranded for hours and eventually had to be rescued themselves. Communications were strained, and there was a need for triage to determine who needed to be helped first.

Conventional vehicles could not enter the area due to the rivers of mud, and it soon became apparent how invaluable the helicopters, armored vehicles and National Guard trucks would be to our operations.

Although the weather was still foul, two of our Sheriff/Fire Air Support UH1 "Huey" helicopters were able to launch from their base in Santa Ynez. They were joined by three more from the United States Coast Guard, and one from the Ventura County Sheriff's Office. Together these aircrews effected more than 20 dramatic hoist rescues that first morning. As the day wore on, an evacuation rally point was established at the Birnam Wood Golf Course, from which an impromptu National Guard and Coast Guard heli-fleet flew dozens of people from the golf course to safety at the Santa Barbara Airport.

Within hours of first light another massive mutual aid operation was put into motion, this time led by Cal Fire Incident Command Team 6. Fire, search & rescue and law enforcement personnel from throughout the state

By day two, additional helicopters from the Army National Guard and the United States Navy were provided to assist us with the rescue and evacuation efforts. A total of 131 people were subsequently evacuated by air, along with 42 dogs and 11 cats.

While these rescues lifted our hearts, there was a very grim side to this tragic event. The bodies of some of those killed were soon found, retrieved and cared for with dignity and respect by first responders in the field and Sheriff's personnel from the Coroner's Bureau.

Over the course of the next several days, many more rescues and emergency evacuations were conducted on the ground. The massive amount of mud had blocked numerous streets and made islands out of some residential neighborhoods. As a result many people were stranded, and families and friends were separated. All total of more than 850 people were either rescued or evacuated on an emergency basis during the incident.

Daily news conferences and community meetings once again became means to inform members of the community, many of them displaced, in the immediate aftermath of the event and in the days and weeks that followed.

A Family Assistance Center staffed by Sheriff's Office, Behavioral Wellness and Social Service personnel was established. Chaplains, deputies and counselors worked compassionately with anguished families to determine the fate of their missing loved ones.

Sheriff's detectives worked through dozens of reports of people believed to be missing and were able to narrow the actual number down, while search and rescue teams with specially trained dogs diligently searched for both the living and the dead. The bodies of more victims were found, and as the days wore on, our hope of finding any additional victims alive evaporated.

The results of this disaster were devastating: 21 people killed; 2 missing, presumed killed; 202 homes destroyed; 321 homes damaged, and at least 100 cars destroyed. Montecito's water and sewer systems were both heavily damaged, and all other major utilities were either damaged or shut off for safety reasons. In terms of fatalities, the "1-9 Debris Flow" (as this event was named), was the greatest disaster in Santa Barbara County's history since its establishment in 1850.

The entire community of Montecito, with more than 10% of its homes destroyed or damaged, was declared a disaster zone. For days it was cordoned off while repair crews worked feverishly to clear mud from streets and fix damaged utility infrastructure. During that time a special detail of sheriff's and custody deputies escorted hundreds of evacuated residents back to their homes to pick up items that were needed due to emergency or extenuating circumstances. Animal Services employees fed animals that had to be left behind by their owners, including horses, flamingos, penguins, and an aviary full of exotic birds and dozens of turtles. For weeks the area was patrolled and protected by a small army of law enforcement officers from throughout central and southern California who had been brought in on mutual aid. Several career criminals were arrested when they attempted to steal possessions from the vulnerable area, including two who were swiftly apprehended following a hot prowl burglary.

The determination, teamwork and results of those engaged in the recovery efforts have been exceptional. CalTrans workers had the 101 Freeway opened again in both directions 12 days after the storm hit. Utility workers repaired broken and damaged infrastructure with relentless speed. F.E.M.A. and California Governor's Office of Emergency Services personnel worked side-by-side with Santa Barbara County personnel from a myriad of agencies. Flood Control employees and United States Army Corps of Engineers contractors hauled hundreds of thousands of cubic yards of rocks out of debris basins and waterways.

In the wake of such horrific circumstances, there were countless displays of compassion, kindness and generosity. Thousands of people came together at a candlelight vigil to remember and mourn the victims who perished; several fundraising events were later organized to help their families. Local residents showered first responders with large amounts of food, thank you letters, signs, ceremonies and other expressions of support and gratitude.

In a remarkable display of bigheartedness, a giant thank you party and celebration for all first responders and their families called the “One805 Kick Ash Bash” was conceptualized and developed by local businessmen Pat Nesbitt and Eric Phillips, who were ably assisted by an incredible event committee. An astonishing \$2 million dollars was raised to underwrite the event, buy equipment for local public safety agencies to use in future disasters, and to provide a donation for the family of Firefighter Cory Iverson, who lost his life in the Thomas Fire. Comedian Dennis Miller emceed the soirée, which featured many local Santa Barbara County celebrities who donated their time to perform or say thank you. The star-studded line-up included Katy Perry, Wilson Phillips, the Alan Parsons Project, Dishwalla, Ellen DeGeneres, Don Johnson, Jane Seymour, David Crosby, Michael Keaton, Kenny Loggins, and many others who shared their talents and gratitude with those who had fought the flames and mud. It was a wonderful day that those of us who were present will always remember and be grateful for.

Although our county and its people are resilient and bouncing back, the results of these dual disasters will continue to be felt for a long time to come. It will take years to completely recover and rebuild from the fire and related mudslides, and the negative fiscal impacts from the huge rescue and recovery costs, property damage, clean-up costs, lost business and reduced property tax revenue to the County and various districts will be felt well into the future.

Ominously, we are also told by the same scientists and burn experts that the danger of further debris flows is now heightened, and that it will remain so for the next 2 to 5 years. We have developed new warning and evacuation definitions, protocols and procedures to address the dangers of storm-related debris flows, and have begun a community outreach campaign to educate those we protect and serve about this continuing threat. Debris flows have now been added to wildfires, earthquakes and tsunamis as potential natural disasters for our region.

In remembering the Thomas Fire and 1/9 Debris Flow, I am struck with great sadness by what happened and the lives that were lost, but also with great pride in the response by the men and women of the Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Office who I am privileged to lead. Their actions in these two related events were magnificent. They and the members of all the other emergency agencies came together – as a team of teams – to manage two terrible, back-to-back ordeals. These incredible first responders and those who support them are now battle-tested and ready to serve again whenever another disaster – or two – may strike.