



Camp Fire Search and Recovery

**November 13 – 22, 2018
Paradise, California
2018-029**

Written by Dana Potts Part One

On November 8th, 2018 a small northern California town called Paradise became ground zero for what would become California's most destructive and deadly wild fire. This small mountain community sat quietly beneath a beautiful canopy of pine trees. If you had visited this town prior to the fire, you would for sure see more pine needles on the ground than asphalt and concrete.

Unfortunately, on November 8th, 2018 it was the perfect storm. Sadly, with the explosive conditions, many resources were unable to get into the town in time to save it. Reports of the fire spreading more than a football field a second made its way around the press.

Initial reports of more than 1,000 people missing or deceased presented the Sheriff with a monumental task of literally checking every property in the city. Overwhelmed and in need of assistance, the Butte County Sheriff's Department reached out via the Office of Emergency Services for assistance. The Search and Rescue community of California responded with an overwhelming yes.

November 13th, 2018 Riverside Mountain Rescue Team members Glenn Henderson, Alex Rilloraza and I responded to the Camp Fire in Paradise California. Our first real sign of smoke in the air was 299 miles south of Paradise at the 5 Freeway and Highway 41. The presence of the fire north of us was impossible to ignore.

Before I get further into this story, I will add that as a police officer of 27 years, I have worked what I thought were some big deals such as the Los Angeles Riots and many large-scale warrant/tasks force search warrant services. As we arrived at the city of Paradise, the scale of the destruction and loss was overwhelming. One cannot just say I understand your loss.



**Searchers quarters for the Stay
Photo by RMRU member.**



**Getting checked in and Photo-ID
Photo by RMRU member.**

We checked in with the command post at Butte Community College and proceeded to Durham High School where we would be housed with hundreds of rescuers and soldiers from the California National Guard.



Morning Briefing with lots of Searchers
Photo by RMRU member.

The next morning, we arrived at the Tall Pines Entertainment Center and Bowling Alley for our morning briefing. This location was one of very few structures within Paradise that was still standing. We were advised that we would be donning full body suits and would need to utilize air filters to protect ourselves from the environmental hazards that we would face.



RMRU members Geared Up
Photo by RMRU member.

Our job was to respond to assigned locations and sift through what was left of structures for human remains. When you take in the potential of the large numbers of missing at that time it was to say the least, very emotional and humbling.



One of the Search Areas
Photo by RMRU member.

For the next two days, we donned our protective suits and air filters. Our team did locate three remains at two different locations.



Searching and then Marking Complete
Photo by RMRU member.

Before our three-day trip was over, the number of missing had continued to drop as people reported in with the Sheriff's Department. However, the number of deceased also grew. Day two, the Butte County Sheriff Kory L. Honea spoke at our morning briefing. Sheriff Honea was candid and humble. Sheriff Honea passed on his deepest gratitude to what had become the largest search and recovery in state history. Over 500 members, mostly volunteer search and rescue members from every county in the state wear present.



Burned out Car
Photo by RMRU member.

After searching on day three was complete, we left behind our soiled suits and the town of Paradise. I'm sure I speak for all four of us that responded when I say, what I could not leave behind was the memory of the destruction, the loss of life, family heirlooms, respect for the residence of Paradise that continue to move forward and promise to come back and rebuild.

I continue to love my job as a volunteer and love the work we do. I have nothing but the highest level of respect for the individuals and even more the families of the volunteers' families that allow us to be out there.



Glenn, Ray, Dana, Kirk, Shani, and Alex
Photo by RMRU member.

Written by Raymond Weden Part Two

Shani and I started driving up at 0600 on Thursday November 15 morning to take over for Kirk, Glenn, Alex and Dana who have been up in Paradise since Tuesday. The 10-hour drive gives you time talk about your favorite movies, songs, etc. Most of this conversation is just idle chit chat to help you take your mind off the gravity of the task you are about to take on. We were called out to assist in searching for the remains of those that did not make it out. As we crested the Grapevine Hill and headed toward the central valley the air quality became very poor. With the Woolsey fire still not fully contained in Malibu, the smoke was pushing in the too valley. The air quality would progressively get worse as we headed north with visibility dropping to no more than a mile or so at times. Unbeknownst to us, this would be the last time we would see blue sky or even stars until our return home many days later.



**Shani and Ray by Team Truck
Photo by RMRU member.**

We arrived in Paradise, CA about 3:30pm. The drive up one of the two main roads in town left us speechless. There were more buildings destroyed than standing along the main road. We met up with the team that had been there for the last several days at the command post. This was the towns bowling alley that was still standing due to its metal roof and block wall construction. From here we headed in to Chico for dinner and then to the middle school for our overnight accommodations.

Waking up at 5:30a we headed to breakfast and then back to the bowling alley. After checking in we were given our personal protective equipment (PPE) which consisted of a protective cover suit, work gloves and an N100 rated respirator. The contents of a burnt homes and the items within it can be toxic and these items are to limit or exposure to both inhalation as well as surface contact on our skin. At the morning briefing they stressed to be situationally aware of the surroundings for safety. Gas leaks, falling tree branches, open septic lids, and nails sticking up are just few of the hazards we encountered while here.



**Ray and Shani in Personal Protective Equipment
Photo by RMRU Ray.**



**Ray doing Safety Check of Property
Photo by RMRU Shani.**

We did not cover much ground on the first day. The maps we were given were not clear and, not being familiar with the area, we spent a lot of time trying to find our way to the home sites we were given to search. Being our first day here we still were getting used to the process. We ended up clearing only 4 or 5 homes on day one. Day two was much more efficient as we were given much better maps which was a direct result of the previous days request. We would clear about 15 homes that day. One of the first of 15 homes we checked on was still standing. As we approached, we were greeted by the owner who let us know he chose to stay and fight the fire on his own. With just him and his garden hose managed to save his house though his decision to do so was ill advised. He also let us know that he believes most of the neighborhood was evacuated in time which was comforting for us. We still searched every home diligently as if we did not hear that information all well hoping he was right.



**Ray Marks Cars after clearing them
Photo by RMRU Shani.**

This fire was hot, so most homes were burnt all the way to the ground with nothing more than a chimney standing tall. To give perspective on how hot the fire was, aluminum melts at just over 1,200 degrees. Most of the cars we saw that had burned had pools of melted aluminum which flowed downhill like rivers. This meant we needed to sift through several feet of ash and debris in order to clear the home. Being this was a figurative needle in a hay stack, we were told to focus on high priority areas and spend more time searching around recliner chairs, mattresses and bath tubs. These items were only identifiable by their metal frames at this point.



Car and Melted Aluminum Wheels
Photo by RMRU Ray.

The drive home was surreal as we processed the last few days of activity and prepared to go home to our friends, families and jobs. Like the drive, up we kept our conversation light to keep our minds from wandering. Our spirits were lifted as we started back down the Grapevine in to LA and we saw the blue sky mixed with our typical layer of smog. We were both amused on how we were grateful to see our smog filled air.

I am writing this several weeks removed from our service and since then I have been asked, so how was it? This is not a question that can be simply answered with a "good" or "bad" as it was both at the same time. The only simple way to answer this question is that this was an experience... one that I will never, ever forget.

Written by Editor Part Three

RMRU member Tony Hughes met up with DSAR members as the third group of Riverside County Sheriff's volunteers to help in the search. They were there for 4 days.



Part 2 RMRU members and Part 3 DSAR members
Photo by Unknown

RMRU Members Involved: Kirk Cloyd, Glenn Henderson, Tony Hughes, Dana Potts, Shani Pynn, Alex Rilloraza, and Raymond Weden.

Dsar Members Involved: Mike Smith, Mike Fogarty, Rick Feliciano and Sharon Ollenburger.

RMRU is a volunteer search and rescue team that covers Riverside County and assists other teams with search and rescue efforts in other counties. Each member purchases their own equipment and takes time off work, without compensation, to participate in search and rescue missions. Team equipment is purchased from contributions from the community. We are a non-profit organization and are funded by [donations](#) from people like you.