

## Fire Brigade News January 2014

I was not able to do the December article due to the fire and already it is time for January, or I guess really the article for the February issue. The deadline is in a few days so it is now or never, or I will miss another month. I am trying to decide if writing will be cathartic, (I would look this up to make sure it is the appropriate word I want to be using, but my dictionary burned up), or shall I stick to the facts as it would then be less painful to put on paper. I think to myself when I went to bed that night, it is windy, I hate it when it is windy.

At 11:46 PM Sunday night we were paged for a vegetation fire at the Big Sur Lodge, I find out later that is where the RP is calling from. As usual, I get dressed grab my purse and head out the door, never once having a premonition this will be the last time I will ever see things that are familiar and dear to me.

I walk out my door and embers are already flying by my house, I run back in and call Jess in town, all I need to say is fire, come down. Jose/Pepe my caretaker's wife calls, she is leaving, he is trying to fight the fire down below me. I give a report on the radio to our dispatch; it is already at the top of the ridge. I call Charlie, USFS, and say fire, get up here. I radio the official request in to dispatch. Tevye shows up and hooks up a hose for me then has to leave to go back and protect his own house. I get my pump going in the back of my fire pick up and do what I can, meanwhile trying to talk on the radio. I tell dispatch to send all fire response and get SO going for evacuations. I hear Brigade members coming up on the air responding. Eventually I tell dispatch I can no longer talk to them; I am too busy trying to save my home.

Matt takes over at this point. Jose cannot save his trailer or my caretaker house, they are gone, he has to run south on Pfeiffer ridge road to get to my house as the whole north side is on fire. He helps me fight the fire, I think, we can do this. I hear Brigade units responding, some have to go up Clear ridge to access Pfeiffer, no one can go past or up my driveway it is engulfed. Why is the Thomson house, Mel's old place still standing? My 3000 gallon tank below my house has melted, washing away a lot of my winter firewood pile down the driveway. "My guys", the Brigade crew, have to access my house by going up the Goodman's driveway; Jess has to go that way too. Goodman's is still fine at this point. We have lots of water, hydrants, pumps, clearing, the clearing some of my neighbors really didn't like; we can do this I still think. They run a hose lay from the Goodman's pool over for more water, Jess and Jon are behind the house where the fire has hit first trying everything possible to save it. I look across Pfeiffer and watch it raging up the hills, I think, people will die tonight.

At some point we start thinking of neighbors we know may have difficulties getting out and try calling them, I think I call Frank to tell him, I call Tori. I find out later that OES has done the reverse 911 and notified people, some only have cell phones that don't work on the ridge. I keep moving my fire pick up and the FB red truck further and further away from the house, they eventually end up out in my old horse corral, now my garden. I have Jose take my tractor and break through the fence for a possible escape route down the hill. We talk about having him cut a path right at the bottom to take the trucks out, if worse comes to worse. We move my mule, (4x4) out of the barn. Steve shows up in the tender, he is finally able to come up the driveway. I hear other agencies arriving, Mid Coast is up at Goodman's doing structure protection.

I get a text from my daughter, "are you OK?" The entire Brigade has responded, Jeannie and James are at the bottom of Pfeiffer helping SO with traffic. Marcus and Rafael are driving around warning residents to get out. Matt and Hubbs are in 7831 doing structure protection. It becomes obvious my house cannot be saved, and I think, I can try and run in and save something, black smoke is coming out the grates at the bottom and the front door, maybe I can hold my breath and just grab my computer, it is close, no, don't be stupid. Can we still get my trucks out? No, too late. Still a month later I wake up in the middle of the night and think, "coulda, woulda, shoulda"... When did it go from thinking my house would be OK to being too late to grab anything, anything at all. So much lost....

USFS has set up a safety trigger point, if the fire reaches that we need to come off the ridge. My guys try to save my barn. My 1500 tank melts too, we still have the little vinyl pool with 3000 gallons, the hot tub and my metal 5000 tank. The fire is snaking around below the road heading south toward Wittbrodt's. It has already reached over to Paul Sterns, I think, this will go to the ocean. We put out hot spots on the front, west side, I text my daughter back, it is all gone.... We get the word to leave, the fire has reached the trigger point. It is almost dawn now, we have spent the entire night fighting fire, I know my neighbors are doing the same. We don't want to leave, we have black to get into if we need it. But because we are in the incident command we do leave, by this time we can drive down my driveway, we put the tractor and the mule in the cleared field hoping for the best, later we find the tractor burns up, the mule has a burned bumper but survives. My barn survives, albeit with one blackened side.

We see fires on the news with homes burned, we have experienced it here in Big Sur before and will again, the FB responds to structure fires and we see firsthand the devastation, but until you lose your own home you cannot really understand the full impact. "Lose", what a funny word, like you will suddenly, miraculously find your home. My history taken away from me in one night. So many homes destroyed, more in one night than in the one month the Basin fire burned. So very lucky there were no injuries and no lives lost, this time....

The type 2 fire management team arrives, we quickly fall into the usual routine we do on every fire, the 6 AM briefings, 8 AM planning, 10 AM cooperators meeting, 4 PM public meeting, 6 PM briefing and lastly the 8 PM planning for the next day.

The fire continues to burn with more homes lost and threatened and lost. Jess and I go town and go to Target to get some “essentials”, I have some sweats at his house to wear and feel like a bag lady going through Target. We come back down and my insurance agent finds me at the ICP, he asks me where am I staying? I have no idea. He puts us in Ventana where we stay for 3 weeks. My daughter fly’s in for “moral support” and more. She goes shopping for me, as I, and I know others, only came out with the shirts on our backs. We go out with the damage assessment team, such destruction! A bit of humor, we see Alan Perlmutter’s lab “leading” the con crews down a trail, having a great time with all his new BFFs☺ We know he gained 10 pounds that day with the lunches. The media is everywhere, I am trussed up like a Christmas turkey with microphone wires, the irony of the Chief’s home burning down does not escape me. In one of our meetings the talk goes to hopefully the crews being home by Christmas, I slip out the back hiding my tears, I have no home to go to.

The Brigade engines stay assigned to the fire for over a week, I stay until the end on the 27<sup>th</sup>. During all this time we still continue to get our usual calls and even another veg fire! It is so very dry. The back yard burn ban is still very much in effect, I don’t know if we will be able to burn at all this season. Plan on finding another alternative. CERT is very active during the fire, they get tied in with fire ops are very helpful showing them the area and pointing out concerns. CPOA, Butch, Patte and Dick work non-stop. So much for them to do, meetings for the Pfeiffer residents, clothes at the Grange, issuing checks, handling post fire concerns. Frank comes down from Carmel Valley, running the public meetings and reminding us of lessons learned in past fires. Everyone is so kind, Ventana puts a Christmas tree in our room☺ They also bring in a small fridge and a microwave. We eat at the fire camp a couple nights, it is freezing down there, we go to Nepenthe a few times, thank you Kirk, it becomes the busy Christmas week with tourists everywhere and we decide it makes sense to eat at the firehouse. This becomes our routine,

Dick and Mary join us and our little group shared dinner each night. Some nights friends would bring in dinner and eat with us. During the day Janet and Tori help me sift, finding a few treasures. New Year’s eve day we have 5 calls and end up flying a patient out late at night. At 11 PM at a turn off the highway we say a subdued happy new year to the Brigade members who have responded and head back to our room. For Jess’s birthday we have a small potluck at the firehouse, our last night eating there. I have found housing with Greg Hawthorne’s help in Coastlands and we will be moving there the next day. I try to find time to handle Brigade work along with all the aftermath of the fire.

The priority is that we are still going to continue with the Volunteer Firefighter class. It will begin on February 22, the schedule should be posted on our web site, [www.bigsurfire.org](http://www.bigsurfire.org). I especially need firefighters in the Esalen area and south coast. We will continue to have fires, that is the nature of where we live. Realizing we all have busy lives, I would strongly encourage able bodied Big Sur residents to look at joining the FB as a way to give back to their community. We have a FB debriefing of the incident, we all agree the decisions made that night were the correct ones, this was a fire storm that all the engines in the world would not have stopped.

At the risk of taking up the entire Round Up space, I would like to acknowledge the cooperation of the Sheriff’s department and PG&E during the fire. While many non-fire agencies were helpful, they were a constant presence and extremely willing. Also thanks to Kathleen Lee from Supervisor Potter’s office for everything she does. If anyone has any pictures of the fire they would like to share, please email them to the FB at [bigsurfire@gmail.com](mailto:bigsurfire@gmail.com). Again, to everyone, your kindness, graciousness and help was so very nice and appreciated.

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Chief