



Reed Maguire, who was on vacation when fire erupted in Santa Cruz Mountains, stands near fire truck after returning to California to help fellow volunteer firefighters battle flames. GLOBE PHOTO BY MIKE HEALY

Fires are a personal matter to volunteers in California

By Dean Nelson
Special to the Globe

LOS GATOS, Calif. — Reed Maguire followed the television news accounts of the fires in the Santa Cruz mountains with great interest. The sight of a helicopter dipping its 300-gallon bucket into Lexington Reservoir made him shudder.

"That reservoir is right near my house," he said Friday during an interview on the fire line. "I knew it meant my home was in danger."

He and his wife had been vacationing in Alabama when they watched the Santa Cruz mountains — where their home is located — go up in flames on television.

"We were nervous, sure," he said. "But what really made me panic was when my son called from the house Tuesday and said, 'Dad, they want us to evacuate our houses.'"

Maguire caught the next flight out — at midnight — to join his neighbors working with the Loma Prieta volunteer fire department. The 22-member force joined more than 3,000 firefighters from six states in an effort to save their homes. While 2,500 homes were threatened, only 14 have been destroyed.

12- to 14-hour shifts

The volunteers have been working 12- to 14-hour shifts in the difficult terrain and intense heat. They've been at it for a week.

"I'm not really that tired," said John Haak, pastor of the Mountain Bible Church. His church had been in the fire's path, but the crew created a fire line around it; the building is one of the few in the area that remains.

"When it's your own houses you're protecting, you don't notice

the heat and the long hours as much," he said. "We think this fire will be out in a few days. If the weather stays good. But even if it gets worse, we'll still be working. That's our job."

The reason for the fire is another motivation for putting in extra effort. State officials have determined that the fire was deliberately set.

"You really want to put out an arson fire," said Haak. "You want to just get it over with."

Fire 70 percent contained

By yesterday nearly 70 percent of the fire had been contained, with only the Loma Prieta area burning out of control. The 4,500 people who had been evacuated from the area Tuesday were allowed to return Thursday. More than 14,000 acres in the mountains have been blackened so far.

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Volunteers are heroes in California brushfires

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More than 300,000 acres of forest have been destroyed in the state, along with about 175 houses.

Attacking a fire as big as this one takes planning, much like a major military operation. There is a base camp at the foot of the mountains in a state park, and smaller, more localized "staging" areas throughout the fire region.

Reconnaissance missions flown by the National Guard, the state Department of Forestry and the Air Force keep the tacticians informed of the fires' location and intensity. As shifts report for duty they are told where the "hot spots" are, their trucks are filled with water and they are dispatched.

While the trucks remain on the road the crews uncoil hundreds of feet of hose and drag it into the forest.

"With wild fires like these," Maguire said, "you aren't just hosing down a structure, or even just

an area in front of you. Sometimes the fire surprises you and you end up with it burning behind you, too."

One of the reasons the fire spread so quickly, firefighters have said, is that unseen fires burn inside dead redwood trees, creating a chimney-like inferno. Sparks and cinders fly out at the top and ignite other areas.

"In the first days of this fire, sometimes firefighters just dropped their hoses and ran," said Haak. "The flames were swirling all around them."

In addition to hosing down burning areas and clearing land for fire lines, the firefighters employ a tactic used extensively in the California fires - the setting of back fires, intended to remove the fuel for the advancing fire.

Cheers for firefighters

Also reminiscent of military operations are the banners hung throughout the town congratulating the firefighters and thanking

them for their courage. Pedestrians applaud as convoys of fire trucks rumble through the streets.

The Salvation Army delivers sandwiches and cold drinks to the crews while local merchants donate pizza, ice cream, soda and pastries at the base camp. There are even masseuses and chiropractors on site for aching muscles and bones.

There are more seasoned firefighters in Los Gatos than the Loma Prieta band. Like a SWAT team that sweeps in on terrorists, "strike team" members come from almost every county and fire department in the state. When one fire is contained they leave the "mop-up" work - the dousing of every smoldering bush and log in the mountains - for the local groups and head for the next fire.

Chris Love of the US Forest Service in San Bernadino is about 500 miles from home and is on his 24th day of fighting California wilderness fires.

"I started in San Luis Obispo, then moved on to Ventura County, and got here soon after it started," he said. "I don't know where the next one is, but I'm sure I'll be sent there."

There are still hundreds of fires burning in California, with some newer ones being caused by lightning in the dry, hot forest.

About 1,500 of the workers at Los Gatos were either sent home or to other fires on Thursday.

The mood of the strike-force members is surprisingly buoyant. With few exceptions, the firefighters don't seem discouraged by the heat, the hours, or the seemingly unending task they have. There are at least two reasons for this.

"Every new fire is a new adrenaline rush," said Mark Ivy of the Department of Forestry, who fought fires for 10 straight days, spent two days in the hospital for exhaustion and dehydration, then returned to the line. "I won't say it's fun, but we got into these jobs to do exactly what we're doing."



John Haak, pastor of a Baptist church and a volunteer firefighter, carries hose back to truck near Los Gatos. GLOBE PHOTO BY MIKE HEALY