



VFW Supports its own During Wildfire Relief

More than 19,000 structures were damaged or destroyed when wildfires ravaged northern California in November, and VFW Posts nationwide rallied around Paradise, Calif., which suffered the most damage

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While fires blazed across more than 150,000 acres in northern California in November, VFW Posts nationwide pulled together to support those affected by the devastation.

VFW Post 2039 in Paradise, Calif., about 90 miles north of Sacramento, suffered the most damage from the fires. Commander Keith Taylor said the Post itself withstood damages, but all of the Post's officers, excluding himself, lost their homes.

"The members are kind of scattered," Taylor said. "Most of the members are older gentlemen and not real crazy about cell phones and computers. So when you put them out of their homes, it's made it real hard to get in contact with any of them."

Taylor, who served in Vietnam in 1974 with the Air Force as an aircraft electrician, said more than \$10,000 in donations have come to the Post since November.

The city's infrastructure was down for quite a while, but the community's response has been "awesome," according to Taylor.

His local church ran a recovery center, while Cheyenne Bart, commander of Post 5731 in Gridley, Calif., coordinated assistance and ran a warehouse to help victims of the blaze, which was dubbed the "Camp Fire," because it originated at Camp Creek Road in Butte County.

Though currently 100 percent contained, Camp Fire resulted in 85 civilian deaths, three

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

firefighter injuries and the destruction of more than 19,000 structures.

Michael Halldorson, commander of Post 1555 in Chico, Calif., roughly 15 miles west of Paradise, said the southeast area of his town looked like a “nuclear bomb” had detonated.

“I never saw a cloud formation like that,” Halldorson said. “I didn’t know it was smoke.”

‘Gratitude’ to be Alive

In Gridley, some 40 miles south of Paradise, Bart began helping as soon as she heard people were being relocated to the city’s fairgrounds due to the fire. She grabbed some Buddy Poppies, and she and her son headed to the fairgrounds. The Post intended to hold its annual Poppy drive that weekend, but she instead chose to distribute them — asking for nothing in return — to let people know VFW cares and to identify veterans in the community who needed assistance.

“I have PTSD. I’m familiar with trauma,” Bart said. “[The wildfire] was very traumatizing for everybody.”

Those who had been affected, according to Bart, would need someone to talk to, and she wanted them to know support was available.

“Right away, we just let people talk,” said Bart, who served during the Persian Gulf War and Operation Southern Watch from 1996-97 aboard the USS Stump as a deck seaman.

While she heard a lot of “near-death experiences” from wildfire victims, Bart said there was one commonality.

“[There were] people [who] lost everything, but I noticed a lot of the survivors, they just had a lot of gratitude just to be alive,” Bart said.

Vets Helping Vets Bart said that while her Post has helped displaced veterans find permanent housing, veterans, National Guard members and other community members established a distribution center. “With our veterans, there has been so much gratitude and generosity and paying it forward,” said Bart, whose Post was unaffected.

Volunteers worked as a “mobile distribution” center, taking items to those who couldn’t get to the center itself.

“We had just a flood of support from VFW members all over the state,” Bart said.

The Post also hosted a Thanksgiving dinner in conjunction with the Gridley community. More than 400 dinners were served, according to Bart.

Halldorson said his Post members began helping with relief efforts “immediately.” His Post is about 16 miles from Paradise and was not affected by the fires. However, some of his members live in Paradise, and 14 lost their homes.

“Ironically enough, we were distributing Buddy Poppies the first day that it happened,” said Halldorson, who served on the USS Hopewell from 1964-67 during the Vietnam War.

‘It’s What We’re About’

VFW Posts offering assistance in such situations “speaks volumes” about the organization, according to Bart.

“It’s what we’re about,” Bart said. “Veterans. Community. We just acted like typical veterans, getting out there and helping our brothers and sisters.”

Halldorson’s Post purchased and distributed roughly 150 gift cards, ranging from \$25 to \$100, to veterans in need. They also purchased \$100 worth of food for one vet after learning that he had been ordering pizza for about a week and a half because he did not have a vehicle. Halldorson also said he helped facilitate vehicle donations to veterans.

“When something happens, you jump into action and you do whatever you can,” Halldorson said. “Posts from all over the country started sending us money, which was their way to help.”

VFW Post 9650 Commander Greg Rodgers, in Anderson, Calif., said his Post donated \$1,000 to those in Paradise, Calif., from the Post’s relief funds.

Rodgers, who served off of Vietnam from 1971-73 aboard the USS Enterprise, said the Post made the donation because it was “the right thing to do.”

“They were brothers in arms,” Rodgers said of those at the Paradise, Calif., Post.

Located about 70 miles from Paradise, Post 9650, according to Rodgers, did not sustain any damage, but his community’s response to the wildfires has been “pretty successful.” He said Auxiliary members donated clothes and “humanitarian” supplies. One volunteer, according to Rodgers, put together items such as bars of soap, toothpaste and towelettes into gallon-sized bags.

“We haven’t had wildfires quite like that in forever,” Rodgers said. “It’s sort of a first. We tried to reach out to them and give them as much moral support as possible.”

Relief efforts still are ongoing. “It’s not over,” Halldorson said. “Anybody [who] wants to help, we’re always willing to accept anything.” For information on how to donate to VFW’s national disaster relief fund, visit [vfw.org/disasterreliefsupport](https://www.vfw.org/disasterreliefsupport).

This article is featured in the May 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Kari Williams](#), associate editor for VFW magazine.