

## SEARCH & RESCUE

# Looking for Remains in the Oakland Firestorm

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**O**n October 20th, 1991, a firestorm swept over the Oakland and Berkeley Hills, destroying more than 3,300 homes and apartments and burning over 1,900 acres.

The firefighters were hampered by unusually high temperatures, winds in excess of 40 mph, and the effects of five years of drought. Tin-

or human remains were located. The handlers were instructed to wait at the site for the Oakland Police Dept. Special Task Force to arrive, collect and catalog what was found. The handlers were shown samples of what to look for. The temperature of the fire reached in excess of 2,000 degrees F., reducing most living material to small fragments or ash.



*"Machen" and handler Newell Hubbard continue searching a site while waiting for the Oakland P.D. Special Task Force to arrive. Sheila Klopper photo.*

der dry dead plants and trees were left over from last winter's killing, freezing frost provided fuel. Firefighters were also hamstrung by the area's steep hills, and narrow streets.

The incident command post was set up at Lake Temescal Recreation Area off Broadway near the intersection of Highways 13 and 24. There were 14 different search and rescue associations represented, including two search dog units, (CARDA) California Rescue Dog Assn., and (WOOF) Wilderness Finders, for a total of 14 dogs and handlers.

The search commenced on Wednesday, October 23, with teams reporting in at 0600 hours. The search was concluded at approximately 1930 hours on Saturday, October 26th.

Search dog handlers were given specific instructions and a code to use if any bone, or bone-like material,

Search dogs were used in two specific ways. Hasty search sweeps were conducted along both sides of specific streets where fleeing residents may have been consumed by the firestorm. There were 38 missing person reports and the search dogs were dispatched to these addresses to fine search those areas. While searching some of these residences, the handlers were pleasantly surprised by the missing person appearing on site.

### Unique devastation

This was a unique and very demanding search for our search dogs. Many of the handlers and dogs have worked industrial or residential fires before, but none had ever worked in such devastation. None of us had ever asked our dogs to find bones that had been incinerated at such

high temperatures that the dog's breath caused the bone to disintegrate in some cases. What is left for the dog to scent?

Hot spots were a threat at almost every site. Hut tubs and pools, disguised with a cloak of ash, gave a few handlers a real shock as they watched their dog disappear beneath the ash. The dogs were not harmed

search, but it was not for live people. The dogs used all the skills and agility needed to search an earthquake-collapsed building or rubble, but they also needed the additional training of evidence searching for human remains.

The teams worked in a disaster format. One team, handler-dog, searched an area with another person



*Bill Dunbar mans "Dog Base" communications in the foreground. Bev Peabody assisted with communications. Photos by Shirley Hammond.*

and were quickly assisted out of the water. The landscape was most unusual, containing remains of charred and partially-burned trees, very unstable free standing one- and two-story chimneys with fireplaces, crumbling retaining walls and foundations, and a few cellars.

In most canine disaster searches, the emphasis is on finding the living person. This was a real disaster

acting as a spotter (in most cases, these spotters were knowledgeable handlers without dogs, a very important asset). When the dog has searched an area for 20 to 30 minutes, another dog team with spotter would recheck the same area. Any areas of interest or finds were recorded and reported.

The canine search operated under the incident command structure



*"Wiki" receives attention from handler Desiree Porter after stepping into a hot spot. Utility workers provided ice for the singed paw. Adela Morris photo.*



*"Cody" searches the perimeter of a residence. The dog was called off the search when the owners showed up. Sheila Klopper photo.*

and consisted of:

- A canine agency representative who served as a liaison between command post and the search dogs, and made up the team assignments.
- A roving field coordinator to trouble shoot problems and look out for the teams' welfare.
- A radio technician served a "dog base" and coordinated communication with "Lake Command Communication," which was a very busy and difficult frequency to access.

#### 20 areas targeted

The search dogs were organized into work (strike) teams that consisted of a team leader, two handlers with dogs and two spotters.

In the first few days of the search, foot searches were also assigned to the work team. This was not an efficient use of searchers and is not a recommended procedure. These foot searches, in some cases, were used as spotters, which is not what they are trained to do.

The search dog teams alerted on some 20 different areas where material was collected. As in other disaster searches, some of the dogs alerted or showed interest in sewer pipes and vent stacks. It will take the coroner and forensic anthropologists

some time to determine what is human and what is animal.

#### More to come?

Experts predict that there will be more urban-woodland firestorms in California. There are so many houses being built in the scenic, hard to reach, brushy timberland, with narrow, steep access roads. The drought of the past years, coupled with the weather conditions produced an inferno with which local agencies had little experience in dealing. Let's hope that all the lessons learned can be implemented before the next test.