

News

HURRICANE IKE A TRIAL BY FIRE FOR NEW STOCKTON RESCUE TEAM

SQUAD WAS FIRST ON SCENE IN DEVASTATED GALVESTON ISLAND

By **Christian Burkin**
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STOCKTON - Early on the morning of Sept. 13, Patrick McKeegan and 13 other Stockton firefighters staying at Houston's Reliant Stadium were roused from their slumber and told they had five minutes to prepare before leaving for Galveston Island, Texas.

"It kind of hit us very fast," said McKeegan, 28, with Stockton Fire Department Engine No. 6.

The team was deployed as California Swiftwater Rescue Boat Team 13, a designation it was awarded late last year and which requires it to respond to disasters well outside Stockton and even California. Their first deployment was ordered as Hurricane Gustav rolled toward the Louisiana coastline. They were diverted to Texas to respond to Hurricane Ike during their trip home.

The firefighters languished somewhat in Louisiana - Gustav was less temperamental than expected - but it was an opportunity to break in their equipment, which they had received just days before deployment.

"We were literally taking the tags off the equipment when we got there," Capt. Brian Swanson said.

The trip from Reliant Stadium to Galveston, shared by a team of firefighters from Sacramento and 16 rescuers from Texas Task Force 1, was difficult. The roads were choked with debris. At the Galveston Causeway, the crossing from mainland Texas to Galveston Island, they had to wait for a bulldozer to clear the way.

"There were yachts and boats stacked up on the freeway," Battalion Chief Mike Lilienthal said in a phone call from Houston two weeks ago. "Houses and rooftops and Jet Skis and personal belongings. Picnic tables and ice chests. The Causeway was full."

Eventually, they pushed over the causeway.

They were the first rescuers on Galveston Island, Texas Task Force 1 Operations Chief Jeff Saunders said.

Over three days, the rescuers trudged through water sometimes waist-deep, searched 1,300 homes and buildings, and rescued the stranded, hungry and tired people who had braved the storm, Capt. Tony Moudakis said. "They all looked pretty tired," Moudakis said. "They looked kind of lost."

Capt. Gene Teves and McKeegan said Galveston residents were at first surprised that reprieve had come all the way from California, and then they were very thankful.

"I still get goose bumps from the amount of gratitude people showed," Teves said.

Teves said many of them had second thoughts about their choices. Those who rode out the storm said it was "the dumbest thing" they had ever done, Teves said, while those who had departed regretted leaving their homes

behind and vowed never to leave again.

Ike also delivered a strange coincidence: When the Stockton firefighters arrived at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston, Teves spotted a Black Hawk helicopter in the parking lot and, standing next to it, a familiar face - a pilot with whom Teves, a former Army flight medic, had served in Afghanistan.

After exchanging greetings, the two compared notes. The firefighters had come overland and believed the flooding was local and limited, but the pilot told Teves the vast majority of the island was under water.

"It was nice to get his perspective," Teves said.

Saunders worked with California swift-water rescue teams after Hurricane Katrina in 2006; they have broad experience and capabilities, and are trained to high standards, he said. When Texas officials learned they were available and nearby, they immediately requested them.

"You know exactly what you're getting when you order it," he said.

The team returned to Stockton on Sept. 20.

"I think we were all happy to be home," McKeegan said. "As we were getting closer, anticipation was building."

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THE HURRICANE IKE TEAM

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