

# MVFD Firefighter Jake Blehm

*Interviewed by Rina Faletti*

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**Jake Blehm by RF 06122018**

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R.F.: So, can you just say your name and address and then that identifies you, and then I am going to pull my chair up.

Jake Blehm: Jake Blehm, my wife Mary and I live at 12665 Maple Glen, which is just off Trinity Road in Glen Ellen.

R.F.: Thanks for meeting today. So, do you want to start by repeating what you said about the importance of this project to you?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, when I first heard about it, I thought this is really important because so much of history is second or third-hand and things get distorted. And, so, I think it is so important for us to know about this very hyper-local history, especially talking to like Ted Meyer, who was here for the '64 fire.

And we don't really have much in the way of information. So it is not only from an historical interest, but from the actual firefighting interest of the overlay of one fire and another.

And you know things happen pretty quickly, but there could have been some value in knowing what happened and what actions were taken. And also, family interest. I would like my son and my grandsons to know about what we went through here.

And this is a pretty significant historic event.

R.F.: Mm-hmm. How did you become a firefighter for Mayacamas?

Jake Blehm: Well, I have a Chief Jablonoski to blame for that. We moved up here in the fall of 2006, and I think he solicited me probably early 2007. So I went through the Academy and became a member, I think mid to late-2007.

And then 2008, I actually, during the downturn, I took a job in Pennsylvania, so we moved away for a year and a half. So, but we didn't sell the house, we knew we were coming back.

I came back in 2010 and I think after a few months of getting re-oriented, I started going back to practice, somewhere in late 2010.

R.F.: Mm-hmm. Why did you join?

Jake Blehm: Well, it was an important part of contributing to the community and it's something, it's a way for lay people to give back in a way that is pretty meaningful. I also had a lot of friends in high school that went into firefighting and a lot of people, I think, have this fantasy of what it is like to be a firefighter.

And, so, to be able to do this part-time and to understand the nuances, not only to help the community, but to help protect our own property should it arise. And, obviously, it did.

R.F.: Then that brings me to think about the fire, because I am sitting in your patio that survived. Were you here on your own site fighting your own fire?

Jake Blehm: Well, we attempted to. The second day --

R.F.: Mm-hmm, because you are kind of far in.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, the second day we came up here and I don't know if we should start at the beginning?

R.F.: However you want to tell it.

Jake Blehm: I mean we got here on Tuesday afternoon and the fire had burned all around the property. It was actively on the property. I was trying to get to Station 1 and Mary was going to drop me at Station 1. And we were staying in Nevada with friends.

So we got up here and right in that opening over there was our guest cottage, and when we got on the property we saw this plume and you can tell the difference, whether it is vegetation or structure, by the color of the smoke, right?

R.F.: Can you describe that? Most people don't know it.

Jake Blehm: Well it was very intense over there. I mean there was a lot of smoke just swirling around, but there was a very significant grayish plume that was different color than the rest of the fire.

So we weren't sure as we walked up the driveway. We parked out there at Maple Glen and walked in, because trees were falling and we didn't want to get trapped back here.

We got up here and it was actively burning. But this is Hardy board, so the fire burned right up to the gravel here, all the way around. The flames were coming up this hillside.

I wanted to wet the building before we left, and so, we turned the water on and the tank had melted, so we just had this little pfft, and that was it.

So, yeah, we weren't able to. We grabbed a couple of bags of clothes and left again.

R.F.: So your house survived without actually being defended?

Jake Blehm: That's right. And the lower one, the lower house is old and it's pretty funky and it's made of wood, and the fire was burning down the hill.

It had burned the front of it, but it hadn't caught the structure. And we had no water so I took a push-broom and made a little 5- or 6-foot firebreak.

And I mean, we were lucky because the wind had laid down and so, the flames were less than two feet tall and it was burning down to the house and it was all we could do, is just make this little firebreak and then hope for the best, that the wind wouldn't pick up again.

And that is the only thing that really saved it, is that little firebreak and the fact that the wind had calmed down, otherwise that house wouldn't have made it either.

This Hardy board can take pretty good temperatures. I think it is rated at 1,000 degrees for an hour or something like that.

So it could have probably taken some direct flame, but there is enough of a break around it, the fire burned down this hill as well.

R.F.: Wow. Wow. So now let's go back -- you'll come back through here again.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, right.

R.F.: But, go ahead and tell me your story of the fire, when you heard about it, what happened.

Jake Blehm: So Sunday night, we had --

R.F.: Tell me times if you can remember them.

Jake Blehm: Say again? Oh, the times, sure.

R.F.: Tell me times if you remember them.

Jake Blehm: We had just gotten back from the East Coast a couple of days before the fire, we had been down on Sunday to the celebration in Glen Ellen, which was just so great.

We were down there watching John -- I forgot the local musician -- it was just a great day down there. Beautiful weather, but the wind had started up late in afternoon, early evening.

And so, it was probably 11 o'clock or something, maybe a little later, and I was ready to go to bed. Mary is a night owl. I had been in a car accident. Just a few weeks before I had been rear-ended by a young driver.

My back was really messed up. So, we smelled smoke and you know we had the pager and I said, "Look, my back is spasming," so I took a muscle relaxer and went to bed and then she wakes me up about one in the morning and says, "You know, the smoke is getting stronger."

And I said, "Yeah, I can smell it." And I said, "Did you hear Mayacamas tone-out?"

She said, "No, I have heard all other things up in Wikiup and different places north of here, but I haven't heard anything about Mayacamas."

I called Chief Will Horne and I left Will a message saying, "Hey, you know, there is a lot of smoke up here. I haven't head a tone-out, but what is going on?"

He called me back maybe 10 minutes later and said, "Yeah, everything is happening and there was some mistake. We didn't get toned out. Or, I am not sure what happened there."

He said, "But if you have got your gear, come down to the highway, I am down here at the bottom of Trinity."

So, Mary got the pets and took off for our friends in Novato, and said, "Look, I've got to help if I can, even though my back is messed up. There must be something I can do."

I got down there and Chief Horne said, "Well, the other guys are up near Nuns Canyon, near the --

R.F.: Beltane?

Jake Blehm: Beltane, yeah. So, he said, "Michael J. is on the tender, why don't you help him because it is not a lot of heavy lifting," and the engines were starting to arrive from all over the place, so I jumped in the tender with Michael J. and our first customer was right at the bottom of Lower Trinity, right at the corner of Trinity and 12.

The fire had come down through the Gordenker Ranch and was right at the edge of 12, and a Caterpillar had been unloaded and they were trying to scrape it -- scrap the fire off and get a firebreak.

But the wind was blowing so hard, it jumped the highway and started some outbuildings on fire, and so, I think it was Petaluma, this engine arrived. We had the tender full of water.

They started fighting the fire at that house and we filled them up and we thought, "Well, instead of sitting here, we will go refill to make sure the tender is full all the time."

So we went down to Dunbar, refilled, and came back and they were starting to pack up, and we said, "What's going on?" And they said, "We can't save it. It is more than 50 percent."

Because we were at the front of the house, so you could see the flames, but as we walked around the back, they were packing up. We didn't want to get in their way before, but half the house was burnt.

And, you know, I had never been on a structure fire before, only wildland or automobiles that had been run off the road or something. So I went back there

and half the house was burnt, and I thought, "Well, wouldn't they at least put it out?"

But the Captain said, "You know we could spend two or three hours trying to get this thing out and they are still going to scrape it, because it is structurally compromised now."

And I did realize later, it is better just to let it burn and try to get to something you can save.

R.F.: Mm-hmm.

Jake Blehm: So they went down further down Lower Trinity to try to save something else, and then we were redeployed. Michael J. calls in, they said, "Please go to Arnold Drive and 12 and wait for re-deployment."

We sat down there and by this time it is probably 3, 4, probably 4 -- it wasn't quite light out yet, so probably 4 in the morning. So we were watching the fire now burning south along the base of the mountains.

R.F.: And you are sitting at the light?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, we are sitting at the light at Arnold and Trinity -- or Arnold and 12, looking up toward Trinity. And it hadn't moved up the hill, it seemed like the winds were pushing it south-southwest.

We thought, "Well, we might be lucky, maybe it stays off the hill." So we sat there for more than an hour waiting for redeployment, and then we started hearing -- it had jumped Trinity earlier and it had gotten down to Dunbar and had got some other houses down there.

And we started hearing these explosions, of course the propane tanks were exploding. And then we heard ammunition going off, and someone's ammo.

And Michael J. and I are like, "Well, at least we have this big water truck to hide behind," and we were like, kind of sitting on the south side of that, because we could tell these shots were going off somewhere up there on Dunbar, not far from us.

That lasted, I don't know, about 15 minutes and got through all of that. We were probably there an hour and a half waiting for redeployment, and, of course, it was just chaotic. We heard all the radio stuff and they are trying to get resources

allocated and there is all these new pieces of equipment coming into to the area, and I mean it was just such a crazy time.

R.F.: So for someone who wouldn't have ever been there, like myself, you are sitting there and you are watching the fire. I have that picture, but, and then I understand that you are hearing all the stuff that is going over the radio.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: But what are you seeing. Is there traffic? Is it -- what was going on around you?

Jake Blehm: Well there was very little traffic on 12. I think they have blocked it, right? They were letting people out, obviously. I think most of the hill -- I mean we came down the hill at like 1:30, and I think most of the people that were leaving had gone.

Now, Mary got down to like Arnold Drive and there was a huge line, a lot of cars trying to get out of the town, obviously, because they didn't know whether it was going to get into town or not. A lot of horse trailers, she said she was behind.

It was pretty quiet there at Arnold and 12, there was engines going by and police, sheriff and that kind of stuff, but not a lot of other traffic. I think they were either deploying people north on 12 or south through Sonoma.

R.F.: Mm-hmm.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, so.

R.F.: And when you said -- I want to go back to your first call with the Chief. You said that Will said, "It's happening." But what did he actually say that -- is that really what he said, or did he explain to you?

Jake Blehm: They knew that the closest fire was in Nuns Canyon and so, I think Jerry Apgar and Ted Meyer and I don't know if Scott Palkoski was up there with him, but there was at least 3 of our firefighters up there. It could have been more, trying to deal with Beltane and some of that.

And he just said, "Yeah, it is -- there's multiple fires." He had heard the Napa fires had started. I think the Tubbs had also started by then. So it was, what, 12 or 15 sites all over the county? And, you know, the Chief, I mean he had 50 years' experience.



He was actually really calm. And he didn't have any other people to deploy after I came down the hill. I was probably the last one, so Michael J. and I were in town and everyone else was a little north of Trinity, trying to get that out.

R.F.: Mm-hmm.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: So, you are waiting in the tender?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, so there are other engines coming by and filling up and then apparently, it's funny, they said, "We're looking for Mayacamas, we don't know where they are," and it is like we have been sitting there waiting.

I mean it was so chaotic and it is very -- they just have made that plain, that there were so many assets to manage and this was an unprecedented event. Emergency services was doing the best they could, but people would call up saying, "Where do a I go?" And they couldn't tell them.

So it wasn't any wonder that they didn't know where we -- even though Michael J. had told them we were waiting for deployment at Arnold and 12. So an hour and a half later, they say -- some other support vehicles had come by and given us some water and snacks and stuff, and they said, "Please go to Jack London Ranch Road."

The fire had burned around the north part of Glen Ellen, had gotten into all those houses on Warm Springs, so we get into town, and we are headed up Jack London Ranch Road, and they said, "Oh, no, go down Robertson, there is the Jack London Motel is starting to catch on fire."

We were right there, fortunately, and we pulled down. There wasn't any engines there yet, but we do have a hose on the front of the tender. So Michael J. says, "Okay, get out." And, again, I had never fought a structure fire before.

But there is a big eucalyptus stump behind the lodge and it had caught on fire and so, the paint was starting to bubble on the back of the lodge. And I learned later that that is just before you get to ignition.

He said, "Just get some water on that thing." So I get out and, you know, my back, I mean, I was all jacked up on adrenaline, so I didn't even feel it. You are so hyper sensitive.

I am putting out this stump and getting the back of the motel cooled down and then around the corner, a shed catches on fire near the pool. So we pulled down to that driveway and it is starting to bubble on the north side of the motel.

I am putting that out, and then by then Glen Ellen had gotten there and they were deploying as well, to help put some of the fire out. We didn't know it at the time, but the O'Connell -- several houses had caught fire on O'Connell there.

I am putting out this - trying to keep that side of the building cool and Glen Ellen is bringing their hoses, because the shed is catching on fire. And then I looked at my right, and here is a stack of liquid chlorine bottles for the pool, just like six feet away from the flames.

And we didn't have a breathing apparatus, because someone had taken it out of the tender. It is usually not needed in the tender. Someone else needed it. I am hoping we get this thing out, because you know, liquid chlorine is not good to catch on fire.

And I didn't know what was in the shed. I didn't know if there was more chlorine in there or what, but Glen Ellen got there and we got that out and we were kind of catching these spot fires, and we got it under control.

And then the house next to it -- the fire had jumped the creek and had started vegetation on fire right at the creek bed, and there are nine or 10 houses on Robertson. Do you know where that road is?

R.F.: Mm-hmm.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, so it is catching some fences on fire, between these properties and then it was starting to heat the sides of the garages and the houses, so Glen Ellen got in there and started putting that fence out and the vegetation.

And then we came out and started helping them put those fires out and I remember this one house -- Mary and I had actually looked at it. It is the second one back from the motel.

And they are putting the fence out, and no one had done what we call hot lap, you know, when you arrive at a structure, typically you send one of the firefighters around to do a quick assessment of the property to see where it is, if anything is catching on fire, where immediate need is, as far as water.

So they were fighting this fence fire and the vegetation fire and Mary and I had looked at this house just a month before as possibly moving into town. it was up for sale.

I go up to the north side of the property and another fence had caught on fire and was starting to catch the structure on fire, so I go down and I say, "Hey, there's flames just about to ignite this north end of the house."

So they run some people up there, I am getting more hoses. And I will never forget this guy from Glen Ellen, and he goes, "So are you new?"

And I said, "Well, I have been a volunteer for several years, but I have never fought a structure fire."

Because he could tell I was nervous, and he goes, "Go slow to go fast. Go slow." Because I was kind of fumbling. He said, "Put these hoses together," and everyone was in a hurry, and he said, "Go slow to go fast."

And he was just a great coach, to get me and I said, "You know, you take a few breaths, and of course when you are calmer you can do things."

I got us hooked up and he goes, "Great job."

So they go and they get that fire out and it was a guest house that was on this property, separate from the main house, and it got into the wall, but they were able to get it out with minimal damage.

It was -- they had to break in the windows and get it cooled down. And then it started up the hillside of the next house, and in the meantime, we looked across the creek and almost simultaneously there was three houses there and they all like, exploded.

And this wall of flame, just 60 or 70 feet high. Well I am sure the propane tanks probably caught.

R.F.: You mean a literal explosion?

Jake Blehm: You could hear it go, and then the houses just caught. The winds weren't as strong then as they were early in the morning. By now it is like probably 6 in the morning, it is starting to get light out, but there was obviously no

firefighters on O'Connell across the street, because they just went up, and there is nothing we could do.

We were just trying to protect these on Robertson. And we watched those things burn. After the Chief says after seven or eight minutes you don't get to a house, it is gone anyway, because of the construction material and everything else.

Even if you get water on it, it is going to be compromised. So these were just burning and we were watching these things go up and just trying to protect everything on this side of the creek.

We got it calmed down, we got the fences out, Glen Ellen had helped us get that fire out in that guest house. And then they said, "Look, we have been redeployed, you guys have a hose on your truck, can you just stay in this neighborhood? Because there is going to be spots," because everything was so dry.

And they said, "If you can just hang here for a couple of hours and make sure that it is okay." And so, we just continued to circle that neighborhood.

There was a young guy there, I forgot his name now. He was the only one that stayed to protect his family's house.

R.F.: A resident?

Jake Blehm: Yeah. And he kept checking in with us and he'd tell us if he saw spots and he still had water. There was still water from the tank, that big tank on the hill at Glen Ellen.

And in between that second and third house, this old, big dry stump probably 20 feet tall had caught on fire, and I think it was Doug fir, but it started smoldering.

Michael J. and I tried to get this thing out, because we know if it caught and it burned, if dropped down, it would have hit this house or gotten very close to it and ignited this house.

Little did we know, we would watch that thing for like six hours, because we couldn't get it out. It got inside the tree and it was hollowed out and it was like a blowtorch, right?

And I've got film video of it on my phone, because it is starting to burn the inside of this and then there is this flame three or four feet coming out. Of course, we couldn't get enough water in there, because there were only cracks.

It continued to burn and we just tried to make sure that nothing was igniting on the ground. I think it was probably finally five o'clock before we got it. It burned through enough where we could get water in there and make it safe.

But it was the weirdest thing, and it was right next to the fire hydrant. And these trucks were coming in and some of them would fill up.

And we spent the whole day, really, on Robertson, just circulating, trying to protect those 10 houses or something.

R.F.: So when you say five o'clock, you mean five o'clock in the afternoon on Monday?

Jake Blehm: On Monday, right. So by then, we had gotten all the spots outs. We had talked to several other engines that came through from San Francisco, so then things started to calm down a little bit in that neighborhood.

And then my back started tightening up and it was just excruciating. I went and laid down on the patio for a while and Michael J. said, "You are not going to be any good to me, we've got to release you."

He called Will and so, I went to Novato that night to stay at our friend's. So we came back on Tuesday afternoon. It was feeling a little better and I thought, "Well the least I can do is go up to Station 1 and help out there, refilling other engines and things, because everyone was deployed and that is a main networking hub in the neighborhood."

We came here first, and what I explained to you, the whole property was burning. Mary wanted to see if the house was standing before we got to Station 1. We couldn't get the fire out, we had no water, so we made that little firebreak, as I described.

We were here maybe 15 minutes. She got some clothes. We started to walk down the driveway and some of the trees were burning inside, you know, they had been hollowed out.

She goes, "That is going to come down." And I said, "Yeah, could be, could be tomorrow, could be three weeks from now. Who knows?"

We got like 10 seconds down the road and this thing starts coming over and Mary's got two bags, we've both got clothes and other stuff, photos and things. And we start running down the driveway, and it missed us by 10 or 15 feet, but it was pretty nerve-wracking.

And she was scared, I could tell, when I was trying to get water on it. I mean, she hadn't had the training and everything.

I knew we were safe in the house, because it had burned three sides around the driveway which is gravel, so I thought, "The house is safe, except for embers, if something gets under the eaves or whatever."

I felt safe at the house. We had drinking water. We could have holed up here if we needed to. And that tree hadn't caught, it would have looked like it was going to be okay. But we need to get the heck out of here, so, anyway, we got out and down the hill.

We tried to get up -- I said you've got to drop me at Station 1 before you go back to Novato. We got up to the 3000 block near the O'Connor's house, and the flames were blowing over the road. I mean I was worried that it was going to bubble the paint on the car.

I said, "We've got to turn around." And we had gone past one fire, it was a chief from out of the area, and he was sitting there on the radio and I had gone past him, around that quarry. But it was obvious we couldn't get to Station 1 because of the flames, so we went back down the hill.

R.F.: The flames were coming like, towards the south from maybe Nuns Canyon?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, from the south, toward the north, blowing over the road. And we couldn't see but maybe 10 or 15 feet.

R.F.: From the south over to the north, oh?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, it had burned up this draw, right, up the canyon here and then it had burned around -- it did burn through the canyon and got most of the understory, you can see a lot of the bay laurels burned.

R.F.: Yeah, right.

Jake Blehm: But it didn't get a lot of the Doug firs. But if you go up on top, if you look at the Google maps, up on top where it is sort of flat, this 20 acres behind us, where the fire sat for a while --

R.F.: Yeah.

Jake Blehm: It really just charred those trees.

R.F.: Yeah. At our house, the trees were completely scorched, torched or scorched, I don't remember the terminology.

Jake Blehm: We were lucky when we bought this place, the guy was on the fire department as well. He had been here for 22 years and we asked about fire and he said, "You know this didn't burn in '64."

And what I suspect is because it is cooler and wetter in this little canyon. We've got springs. We get our water from a spring instead of a well. And so, when a fire comes up, it will take the draws.

It will go up a chimney, but it also goes to the driest fuel first. Right, so the ridgeline is where it is drier and the fuel can ignite quicker. So even though it came up this draw, it moved pretty quickly, it did get the guest cottage.

But everything else -- most of the big Doug firs -- made it. We lost a few, but up above you can tell it is -- yeah, everything is just toast.

R.F.: Oh yeah.

Jake Blehm: So that is where the fire was blowing over the road, and it had burned, obviously, up this canyon and on top and then the wind, again, had shifted, so it was blowing north now, because the flames were bending it over the road, blowing north.

And just 24 hours before, it was going south-southwest.

R.F.: So, if I put it together right, or it might have no logic at all, it sounds like when you guys were down at the bottom of the hill at the light, at Glen Ellen, you saw the wind was blowing the fire almost like due south in a way?

Jake Blehm: Right. Right.

R.F.: Or southwest, kind of.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, very close to due south.

R.F.: But then something happened and then it shifted and then came up this canyon, right?

Jake Blehm: Right, and I don't know when that happened, sometime between when I left Glen Ellen at 6 p.m. and it was pretty calm, so the wind must have picked back up the next day and blown kind of east.

R.F.: Right.

Jake Blehm: To get it east, to get it up this hill.

R.F.: So when you drove up Trinity and then got stopped by the flames, that was on Tuesday?

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: And do you have any idea what time that was?

Jake Blehm: That was about 2:30 in the afternoon, and it was interesting, we got about a half mile up and there was a TV van there. And there were power lines hanging down. The only reason we got through is because I had my fire credentials.

I don't know how the TV guys got through. I guess they can go wherever they want. These two guys, Joe Velasquez -- I have seen him on TV -- and they said, "We are trying to get some live shots, do you mind if we follow you up?"

And we said, "Yeah, that's fine. You know you just have to be really cautious, because I don't know what we will find up here."

So they followed us up to Maple Glen, and I told them, "Look, you guys can drive in, but we live here, there is a lot of big trees. I wouldn't recommend it. If you are going to get some footage, I would walk in, because at least you can get out and there could be trees coming down."

I tried to give them as much warning as possible. So we hiked in. They stopped at our neighbor's, because there was a big flame there and some stump burning. And, of course, they wanted to get that.



And we just kept going. We didn't want them with us if we saw our house burning down. So we came up the driveway and I remember being just so hyper-sensitive to what was going on and yet we wanted to know.

The flames along Maple Glen were anywhere from 18 inches to maybe two feet, three feet. Some of the trees were burning.

But it didn't look like anything was immediately in danger of coming in, so, I said to Mary, "Look, don't come in if you don't want to, but I can hike in and get family photos and check on the house."

She wanted to come in, so we hiked in and I explained that part, we were here maybe 15 minutes or something.

R.F.: When you say you felt hyper-sensitive to what was going on, what do you mean? Can you describe your feelings and what was going on?

Jake Blehm: You know you are just super-vigilant about what is going on. You are trying to be calm, but we don't know what we are going to find, so your heart rate is way up.

It is a dangerous situation. I've got my gear on, but I don't have any water with me.

So, it is just, you know, you are just trying to pay attention to everything around you. Just like fighting a fire, you are constantly looking at what you can do to mitigate, but you are also looking at the safety of your crew and yourself, because Chief always says, "Look, a structure and property isn't worth someone's life."

That is always the first concern, is that homeowners or firefighters, you want to make sure that life is protected, as best you can.

So yeah, yeah, so that was Tuesday. We went down the hill maybe 4 o'clock. And Mary was filming as we went to try to see anybody's house that we could determine whether it was there or not.

And she got quite a bit of footage and put that up on Nextdoor, I think. And then Wednesday.

R.F.: What did you do Tuesday night? Did you go back to Novato?

Jake Blehm: We went back to Novato. And so, Wednesday my back was feeling a little better, and I thought, "Okay well I will try to get back up to Station 1 again."

Sean O'Connor wanted to come up, because he wanted to see whether the house was there or not, so he came up with me, their house is completely gone, and he had been told by Anthony Horne that the house, that they thought it was gone.

It was hard. He was pretty stoic about it, but it is hard to be with someone when they face that devastation. He was -- he kind of knew that that was the case.

But we went up to Station 1. I checked in, Anthony was there. We went to check on a couple other houses, and I said, "How are you doing Anthony, do you need me stay here?"

And he goes, "You know, there is food and stuff here. I am here." He was on the phone with Chief Horn at the time. Chief was up Cavedale, cutting trees down.

Anthony had just talked to his mom and their house was catching on fire, and here Chief was on Cavedale trying to clear the road. And I felt so bad for Anthony, he is trying to deal with the fire and his own personal family's place.

He goes, "Dad, we've got to get to the house." And he is on the phone with Chief and the communications weren't very good. I mean a lot of the cell towers had been affected.

And a lot of the radio -- there is dead spots up here with the fire radios. So I think they got back there and of course they couldn't save their house.

I went back down the hill. I came up Thursday and was at Station 1, just helping people fill their engines, because my back was -- I couldn't really lift 20 pounds or anything.

But people they come by, they need directions, they need water, we had some food, so I was just kind of supporting, at that point. I came up Friday, I got some food from my work, because we had converted some of our food preparation to first responders.

R.F.: Oh, because that is what your non-profit does?

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Oh wow.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, so --

R.F.: What is the name of the company again?

Jake Blehm: Ceres Community Project, C-E-R-E-S. So a lot of people were -- some had had the foresight to cancel, but others didn't, so we couldn't get to everybody that took the food, so I was really proud of everybody, because they converted to producing meals for first responders.

We were bringing food to La Luz over here and the church, the Catholic Church, for distribution. I asked for some food for the fire station, so I brought food up -- I think it was Friday.

And they had had sandwiches, but I brought up like hot macaroni and cheese and other stuff and we had crews from all over. And most of them sandwiches or cold stuff, but I remember this chief came out, he was from Patterson.

I said, "How are you doing, Chief?"

And he said, "Oh we are doing okay," and it was kind of funny because he had come out of the bathroom and he goes, "You know, I have been doing this stuff for 32 years. I hate pooping in the woods."

He goes -- I've got to say he had a big smile. He goes, "I really appreciate the porcelain."

[Laughter]

And I said, "Well I am glad we could be of service." I said, "Are you hungry?" And he goes, "Oh, we had some sandwiches."

And I said, "Well there is some hot macaroni and cheese here I brought up from the non-profit I work for." And he goes, "You've got mac and cheese up here? You've got to be kidding me."

And four of the guys from his crew come over and they are just chowing down on this hot mac and cheese. I never saw people so happy. And it is simple things like that, during this kind of situation.

We had given them directions how to move around and they had been redeployed, I think, up to the Tubbs Fire, so they were trying to figure out the best way to get there.

We had given them some food and some water and they were really happy to have some macaroni and cheese. And, yeah, so they went on and it seems like I got up every other day during the next week or so.

And I just hung out at Station 1 and we got to redeploy. Mary and I, after the first week, we stayed with friends and then we got put up in a hotel over in Napa at the Embassy Suites, so I was coming up from there.

But I did have to get back to work the second week, so I would come back in the evenings or stop by in the mornings, because my director said, "Show up when you can, but we understand that you need to be there for the community."

And it had calmed down by the second week. They were putting out spots and things like that, but I really didn't need to be here for active firefighting and my back was messed up anyway.

But I would come up and hang out on Saturday and just kind of help. There were still crews coming with cleanup and doing hotspots and stuff.

I remember this one couple of young guys. They had one of those attack rigs, like ours, but they were from Washington State, and I said, "Where are you guys from?" because there weren't any markers.

And they said, "Well we are private firefighters. We do contract work for insurance companies." And I had never thought of that before.

But I guess some of the policy holders up here -- it makes a lot of sense, you know, if the insurance company can protect someone's house from burning down by spending \$20 or \$30,000 with private firefighters, it saves them a million dollars in claims or whatever.

So I said, "Where are you guys from in Washington" They said, "Well, put it this way, we can see Canada from our town."

So they had driven two-and-a-half, two days down to get here to fight fires and I don't remember which people had policies with that particular company.

But we filled them up several times. And I think there was a couple of other contractors up here as well, but it is just something you learn about that you don't think -- you know there were so many other assets from other cities -- Southern California and other places, that were here and providing service.

I was down on the highway the second week and saw some guys from Ventura County and I pulled over, because that is where we moved up from, and they knew all my high school buddies that were firefighters down there, obviously.

And I said, "Do you guys know Tom O'Malley and Norman Plott?" And they said, "Oh, yeah, yeah, those guys are just about ready to retire" and it was interesting.

So that is kind of the framework of it.

R.F.: When you came up about every other day or whenever to kind of man the fire station and help people however you could, what other things did you see? You said there is a lot of cleanup or whatever, but what activities were going on when firefighting wasn't happening?

Jake Blehm: Well, I remember distinctly the Forest Service had sent out crews, right? They were going through and cutting down stuff. I have got some shots of them deploying up by Station 1. So, the active fire is out, but they have got all the tools, they are cutting down dead trees, they have got rakes and other things that they are trying to get any hotspots out.

Or if they find things, then they will bring people in, to put those hotspots out. They were down here on Maple Glen as well and I think it was the second week. I was actually up here. We obviously didn't have any water or power.

I was picking up something here and I heard them working down there. They had roped off the road going further down Maple Glen and I heard them cutting trees down. And then I heard this commotion down there and I thought, "What is that about?"

Well I found out the next day, that is that tree that had come down and hit their truck and almost killed two of them. And it was a huge tree on Andy's property next door, and even with all the experience and all the knowledge, you can't know what every tree, what is happening with that.

And they -- you know they got caught by surprise, and fortunately no one died or got hurt., but it crushed I think the cab or the hood of the truck and scared the crap out of them.

I remember I came in one day, I think it was the beginning of the second week, and Jerry and Scott -- a tree had come down at our neighbor David's -- and they were trying to clear that tree so other crews could get in here.

There was just a lot of that, cleaning up, not only by our guys, but U.S. Forest Service and others. So that was kind of what was going on in that second week. But even then -- I came up, I think it was a full two weeks after the fire, and I am up here at the house.

We were staying at the hotel down in Napa, and I was just checking on things, you know the house is really smoky and I see some smoke back there by where the place had burned down, and I go in there and it looked like it was about to rekindle.

And so, I figured I'd go up to Station 1 and get one of the rigs and see if I could get somebody to come down and help me. Well it just so happened that a CalFire crew was leaving Station 1 and there wasn't anybody there, and I said, "Hey, can you guys help me with a hotspot?"

So they came down, because it would have reignited that hill, because of all that bay laurel that is dry. And you know, like Chief said at the barbecue, "There is still a lot of unburned fuel here."

But they put out that hotspot and if I hadn't been here and seen the smoke, I mean there is nothing directly up there as far as structures, but you don't know where it is going to go and how fast it is going to go.

And they said things can smolder, especially stumps and roots can smolder for months until you get a significant enough rain to put that stuff out.

R.F.: Yeah, when I came up to my place, well after --we stayed at the Meritage for seven months.

Jake Blehm: Wow.

R.F.: Before we could get home, but water, power.

Jake Blehm: Seven months? Oh my God.

R.F.: Yeah, and I had clearcut three acres of Douglas fir that was fallen down.

Jake Blehm: Who did that for you guys?

R.F.: Galen Bullock did it. I can give you all his information if you want. He is absolutely fantastic.

Jake Blehm: We've got most of the big stuff. We just had a company come and take down a really dangerous one right by the driveway.

R.F.: The one where you are coming in?

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Yeah, that looked like a nice big tree.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, and it had burned like three quarters of it. It was still green until like three weeks ago. And a friend of mine, John Meserve, is an arborist.

R.F.: I know John.

Jake Blehm: You do? Yeah. So he would come up and walk the property and I said, "What is going to make it and what is not?"

And he said, "You know, you can only tell so much. It will be a year before you will know whether some of these trees will make it."

But he said, "This one is probably not going to make it," even though it was still green. And then it started dying and you know, right by the driveway, so it was pretty dangerous.

R.F.: What tree is that?

Jake Blehm: It was a Doug fir.

R.F.: It was a Doug fir?

Jake Blehm: Yeah and it was probably 100, 120 feet or something like that. It was a pretty old tree. It wasn't huge. I mean we had others bigger, it was about like that at the bottom. But, so much of it had burned out, we didn't want it coming down on somebody coming up the driveway.

R.F.: The other thing I have heard and maybe you saw some of this and can talk about it is that -- because we were all wondering after the fire -- we knew the fire went out, but between Mountain [Unintelligible] Road and Cavedale and Upper Trinity, we were the last ones to be let in in two and a half weeks, right?

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: And Soda Canyon on the other side of the valley of course. It was mess and that was [unintelligible], but on this side, we were the last ones let in so we were kept wondering why. And we knew there was tree removal going on, but what about the PG&E?

What was the story with all the PG&E? Did all the PG&E poles fall? Several people I have interviewed have said that they were running over power lines and -  
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Jake Blehm: Right.

R.F.: Did you see any of that? Did you see PG&E up here or AT&T?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, when we came up the second day all the power lines were laid on the ground. Not all of them, but certain places were the poles had burned and then the transformers and everything was laying there on the ground.

And you had to kind of snake around that stuff. I am trying to remember how many days it was before PG&E got up here. It seemed like it was the end of the second week, or the beginning of the third week. And it was the same thing.

We were staying over in Napa and our insurance adjuster was saying, I want to get up and walk the property and I said, "Well, they won't let you up yet."

And it was that third week, I think, finally he met us on the Napa side and drove up with us. But, yeah, they wouldn't let anybody else up before that, unless you had firefighter credentials, you know.

Yeah, so that is kind of what I remember.

R.F.: When you were talking about being with your friend when he discovered his house had burned down -- although he already knew it, you said. But it is a whole different thing knowing it and seeing it.



Then, you said it was hard to be with someone when they found out about that. Can you talk about the emotional part?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, well it was funny. I think I was more emotional than he was.

R.F.: Yeah, tell me about that.

Jake Blehm: It is interesting, because Lisa and Sean O'Connor are good friends of ours. We have known them since we moved up here. And Lisa has never liked her house. It was one of those geodesic domes built in the '80s.

And they have this amazing view, but she has never liked the house, and I think she was more sad about losing -- like she is a very creative person. She makes a lot of costume and art. And she lost all that because they thought they would be coming back and they didn't have time to collect all that.

She said, "You know, I really don't give a shit about the house, but all my art projects." And they had built this cute little art studio that was just close to the house and, of course, everything went up.

But Sean is one of these guys, he is just this stoic Irishman and he kind of had prepared himself for it. And, I don't know, I guess I am more emotional about things, but I just thought, "What would it be like to come up to your place?"

And you know we lost outbuildings and we loved that little cottage. We had it on Airbnb for a while and we grieved a lot for that because we put a lot of work in fixing it up.

And I thought, "That wasn't even our main house, and what is it like to lose almost everything you have?"

And they are going to rebuild a beautiful, new, modern house. I mean they are going to love the house that they are going to have in about a year, but it is everything else. And the land doesn't look at the same. I mean, they lost almost all of their trees.

You know they are on the north side of Trinity, around the 3000 block, so, yeah it is -- I saw a lot of other people become emotional when they were interviewed.

I haven't met the people, I don't know the people in that first house that Michael J. and I were at.

R.F.: Down at the bottom of the hill?

Jake Blehm: Yeah. But you know for months, I mean they have just about got it cleaned up now, but I just noticed every time I came down the hill after we got back in the house, I guess it was just before Thanksgiving when we got back in.

We had an RV in the driveway for the last two or three weeks. We had power so we could at least be on the site.

But every day when I drove down there, I looked at that house and I felt a lot of grief about that, just because you feel like you wanted to be there and save someone's house for them. And it feels great that we were able to save people's houses down in Glen Ellen, but every time I drove by that, it is like, "I hope we did everything we could."

And it wasn't our call, it was the engine's call, and they are professionals. They do this for a living. And, so, you have to trust their judgment that they knew they couldn't save it.

Why spend those resources, when there are houses they could save, and I am sure they did. And months later, we were down in Glen Ellen for a community dinner in a parking lot down there, and I just -- Mary was involved in giving quilts away, so it was really great that she was able to do that for people.

And I met this couple and I said, "So how are you guys doing?" We were getting food, and they said, "Well, our house made it, we are really lucky." And I said, "Well, where is your place?"

And they said, "Oh, it is on Robertson." And I said, "Oh, that is where I was." And I said, "I spent all of Monday there." And they said, "Oh, you are one of the guys."

And I said, "Yeah, my assistant chief and I were there and Glen Ellen and others, but we were there the whole day." And they gave me these huge hugs and it was really touching, you know, that you could do that for somebody.

And they told me which house was theirs, and I said, "Yeah, we stayed there. We thought we would only be there a couple of hours, but there were these hotspots that kept popping up, so we stayed there and kept putting out hotspots and did what we could."

And they were taking selfies with me and it just -- it was -- because I didn't get to fight the fire on the hill in the subsequent days because of my back, but at least Michael J. and I were able to save some houses in Glen Ellen.

So, it was kind of strange because they were so appreciative, and everybody is. But I felt a little disconnected from my crew, because they continued to work up here on the hill and they have so many stories of local -- the houses up here that they saved.

And this why we were needed at the time, and so, we were in the town of Glen Ellen, but it is sweet to be appreciated like that and it has got to be -- I imagine that is why a lot of firefighters start their career in that line of work.

I don't think police are as appreciated as firefighters are. Sometimes they are.

R.F.: That's really great that you got to meet the people directly, though.

Jake Blehm: Yeah and they were introducing me to their neighbors.

R.F.: That's fantastic, yeah.

Jake Blehm: And saying, "Oh, this is one of the firefighters that was on Robertson." So it was really, really nice to have that experience.

R.F.: That's wonderful.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: That's great. One of our questions is, "What do you feel were your most personal and successful moments during the firefight?" Have you already covered that, or do you want to bring up some new things?

Jake Blehm: I think so. Like being able to save those houses in Glen Ellen and then being able to at least help with logistics with all the other crews that were here and you realize that no one else can give them local knowledge.

There was usually one or two of us -- Jerry and I spent a lot of time up there in that second week, as things got calmed down. And we would be sharpening saws or doing whatever, while these crews were up there.

But they are not going to be able to get that kind of local support from REDCOM or anything else, because no one knows the area. So that felt good. They were up

here helping us, so instead of having them wandering around what to do, is to be able to provide that local support.

That made a lot of sense and it is something you don't think about -- like all the training we did years before, it is always about fighting the active fire, and you don't think about actual support of what other people would need in the area that aren't from here.

And I think it is great that they are remodeling Station 1 and that they will be able to have something that is a little rugged to be staying there for people.

R.F.: And it is interesting and true what you bring up about helping people who are from out of the area. I mean, GPS doesn't work up there.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Phones weren't working. You said there was radio -- radio was spotty?

Jake Blehm: The cellphones was working in some places. And a lot of times -- I can't remember if they lost one of the towers on Sonoma Mountain or what -- but there was definitely a lot of dead spots, but sometimes that was the only way that people could communicate with each other, was cellphone.

R.F.: Mm-hmm. And I guess sometimes texting works better than calling.

Jake Blehm: Right.

R.F.: And vice versa.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: You've talked about a lot of challenges, but does some specific challenge stand out as something you will always remember?

Jake Blehm: Just in the overall firefighting?

R.F.: Just whatever?

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: The biggest challenge you faced or that you will remember. A moment that you will always remember. An experience you will always remember, that really stands out for some reason.

Jake Blehm: Yeah, I think the challenges in communication seem to be one of the biggest things. It is that why I didn't get toned-out or why we didn't -- I had to call the Chief to find out what was going on. But maybe other people had called to find out what was going on.

I mean everyone knew something was happening. But actually, I had forgotten what Jerry said about how he got down the hill and everything. You know a lot of times we traded a lot of stories, but it kind of gets blurry.

R.F.: I interviewed him, and he told me that they had just gotten back from a trip also, that night, I think he said.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: I can go back and listen again, but he got paged.

Jake Blehm: He did? Yeah.

R.F.: Yeah, and then he, I think he went to the firehouse and then somehow found out -- I don't remember the exact way -- that they needed him down the hill.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Everybody went down the hill.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Everybody went down the hill.

Jake Blehm: What time? Was that like 1am or midnight?

R.F.: No, it was earlier than that.

Jake Blehm: Okay.

R.F.: It was in the 9 to 10 to 11 range.

Jake Blehm: Okay. That's interesting. So --

R.F.: Well, and also, like Ted said, that they were watching TV, so he saw based on TV, or his wife did -- one or the other -- again, I would have to listen to the exact tape again.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: That they had heard about the Napa fire.

Jake Blehm: Right.

R.F.: That's how we found out about the fire. My husband and I were working late in his office and when I walked out of his office, and I have a view -- I mean at that time we had nothing but trees in front of our house -- now we have a view of the Napa Valley because of all the trees that we had to take down.

Jake Blehm: Wow, yeah.

R.F.: But, through the trees, because it was so huge, I saw the outline -- at midnight, this was midnight --

[Whooshing noise]

Jake Blehm: That's a big tree.

R.F.: That's a big one.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Who's taking those down?

Jake Blehm: I don't know. I don't think -- I didn't hear a chainsaw.

R.F.: Neither did I.

Jake Blehm: Yeah.

R.F.: Whoa. Do you want to go check it out?

Jake Blehm: Yeah, we might need to see.

[End of recorded material]