

Local fire districts appreciate value of using inmate firefighters during major California blazes

By Vera Kochan

The use of inmate firefighters may seem like a new concept to the public, given that the topic has been in the media more recently thanks to the state's drought resulting in high fire danger conditions and out of control blazes, but in fact, inmates have been called upon to assist with large wildfires since World War II (1940s), when there was a shortage of men.

According to an article by Smithsonian Magazine History Correspondent Francine Uenuma, "The roots of these incarcerated firefighters' story date back more than a century; reliance on prison labor in California is almost as old as the state itself. Soon after the Gold Rush-era population boom and California's entry into the Union in 1850, San Quentin State Prison was built by inmates held on nearby ships. In the early 1900s, inmates in road camps labored to meet the demands created by a growing – and increasingly mobile – population."

"Inmate firefighters have been at every large incident I've ever attended," stated Moraga-Orinda Fire District Captain-Paramedic II Jacob Airola. "We typically do not work directly with them. They are formed up in groups with their supervisors. We rarely interact, but respect the work each other are doing."

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) runs the Conservation Unit Camps also known as Fire Camps. One such camp is located in Ben Lomond near Santa Cruz. Before heading there, inmates are trained at

the California Correctional Center in Susanville, Calif., to determine their eligibility for Fire Camp. Ben Lomond houses a maximum of 113 inmates, all of whom are minimum custody male felons who do not have any convictions for sex-related offenses, escape, arson, or have high-violence tendencies. This allows for five 17-man fire crews. The remaining inmates perform other duties such as mechanics, kitchen workers, clerks, porters, launderers, and landscapers. There are also camps that house female inmate firefighters, with the first one opening in 1983, thanks to a lawsuit filed by two women who wanted the same opportunities as the men.

Why would an inmate choose the program? Those whose crimes were neither serious or violent must serve out their long sentences in prison facilities that aren't typically equipped or designed for long-term housing. As such, many seek an alternative sentence to alleviate the boredom and monotony of their incarceration.

While at Fire Camp, inmates are housed in an open-dormitory setting that includes a dining hall supervised by correctional staff. The camps are subject to ongoing inspections and must comply with standards set by the State Department of Health Services.

Even though they have volunteered for this type of duty, inmates are paid for their services. At Ben Lomond, camp workers earn \$2.67 per day. Skilled inmates (mechanics, cooks, electricians, plumbers, carpenters or welders) can earn up to \$3.56 per day. Inmate firefighters earn between \$2.90 and \$5.12 per day on reg-

ular assignments and \$1 per hour on emergencies.

Besides helping to suppress fires alongside Cal Fire teams by creating breaks in vegetation, and carving out barren soil to deny flames any additional fuel by using chainsaws, shovels and axes, inmate crews also help clear streams, improve trails and levees, and assist in rescues involving floods and landslides. "Large scale incidents require the cooperation and dedication of many agencies," explained Airola. "These agencies range from professional, to volunteer, to CDCR crews. The experience, training and skill set vary, but we come together to complete the incident objectives." CDCR hopes that by developing new skills and disciplines, inmates will learn to become positive contributors to society once they are released.

A 2018 Time Magazine report stated that more than 1,000 inmates have required hospitalization between June 2013 through August 2018. "They are more than four times as likely, per capita, to incur object-induced injuries, such as cuts, bruises, dislocations and fractures compared with professional firefighters working on the same fires." They are also more than eight times as likely to inhale smoke and particulates. Since 2016, four inmate firefighters have died in the line of duty, including one female. Family members and friends have expressed the fallen firefighters' desires to turn their lives around and become productive members of society as the reason for sticking with the program.

Assembly Bill 2147: Expedited Expungement, was au-



Photo courtesy MOFD Captain-Paramedic II Jacob Airola

Inmate firefighters construct handline and crews from MOFD lay hose to secure the fire line.

thored by Assembly Majority Leader Eloise Gomez Reyes who said that prisoners were treated as heroes on the fire line, but snubbed as "convicted criminals" shortly after being released from prison, after "basically providing a free service to the residents of California. We need to trust that these inmates were rehabilitated." Gov. Gavin Newsom signed the bill in September 2020, which provides an expedited ex-

pungement pathway for formerly incarcerated individuals who have successfully participated in the inmate firefighter program. Many have gone on to work with Cal Fire, the United States Forest Service, and inter-agency hotshot crews which don't require Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) certifications.

Letters to the editor

MOFD board power play negatively impacts safety

The MOFD employees' union launched a final power play a few days before they lost control of our fire department's \$30 million of annual tax revenue.

The three directors elected four years ago with \$30,000 of union funding, at the last board meeting of their term, voted to hire six more union members at a cost of over \$2 million a year; money that should be used for wildfire prevention.

The claim that an extra response team will increase our safety is ridiculous. We are already served by six paramedic response units answering 1,900 medical emergencies annually.

That is less than one call per unit per day.

The claim that putting two response units in Orinda's station 45, instead of one, would reduce response times is unfounded. It will take just as long to drive to the top of Orinda Downs or El Toyonal as ever. What these neighborhoods need is brush clearing, not a superfluous medical response unit sitting around most of the day.

Shame on these directors. Thankfully they lost control of MOFD and cooler heads can reconsider how to maximize the community's safety.

Steve Cohn
Orinda

Opinions in Letters to the Editor are the express views of the writer and not necessarily those of the Lamorinda Weekly. All published letters will include the writer's name and city/town of residence – we will only accept letters from those who live in, or own a business in, the communities comprising Lamorinda (please give us your phone number for verification purposes only). Letters must be factually accurate. Lamorinda Weekly reserves the right to refuse publishing a letter submission. Visit www.lamorindaweekly.com for submission guidelines. Email: letters@lamorindaweekly.com; Regular mail: Lamorinda Weekly, 1480 Moraga Road STE C #202, Moraga, CA 94556

Public Safety

Emergency response:

Emergency: 24 Hours 911
Police Dispatch: 24 Hours
925-284-5010

Nixle: Text your zip code to 888777 or go to www.nixle.com
Lafayette Police Department:
3471 Mt. Diablo Blvd. 925-283-3680
Chief of Police, Ben Alldritt
925-299-3221

Police Department Tip Line
94549Tip@gmail.com
Police Department Traffic Issues
94549Traffic@gmail.com

Moraga Police Department:
329 Rheem Blvd., 925-888-7055
Chief of Police, Jon King ext. 7049
Orinda Police Department:
22 Orinda Way 925-254-6820
Chief of Police, Ryan Sullivan
925-254-6820
Orindatip@cityoforinda.org

Lafayette Police Department Incident Summary Report Nov. 13 - Nov. 26

Alarms 36
911 Calls (includes hang-ups) 11
Traffic 33
Suspicious Circumstances 9
Suspicious Subject 19
Suspicious Vehicle 7
Service to Citizen 23
Patrol Req./Security Check 15
Public/School Assembly Check 3
Supplemental Report 21
Vacation House Check 49
Welfare Check 19
Ordinance Violation 0

Vehicle violations

Dui Misd
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Hit And Run Misdemeanor
Pleasant Hill Rd./Taylor Blvd.
Olympic Blvd./Pleasant Hill Rd.
Foye Dr./4th St.
Police Department
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Reckless Driving
Pleasant Hill Rd./Deer Hill Rd.
Pleasant Hill Rd./Eb Sr 24
Pleasant Hill Rd./Reliez Valley Rd.
Pleasant Hill Rd./Springhill Rd.
Happy Valley Rd./Wb Sr 24
Tc - Minor Injuries
Greenvalley Dr./Pleasant Hill Rd.
Noahs New York Bagels
Tc - No Details
Upper Happy Valley Rd./Oleander Dr.
Tc - Property Damage
3400 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Pleasant Hill Rd./Condit Rd.
Tc - Property Damage
Brook St./Dewing Ave.
Vehicle Theft
3200 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Other criminal activity
Commercial Burglary
3800 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Fraud Credit Card
3000 Block Sweet Dr. (2)
900 Block Paulson Ct.
Fraud False Pretenses

900 Block Dewing Ave.
3500 Block Brook St. (2)
Identity Theft
3200 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Misc Burglary
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Panhandling
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd. (2)
Petty Theft
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Not Available
Robbery
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Shoplift
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd. (3)
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Theft Access Card
900 Block Reliez Station Rd.
Nuisance to the Community
Disturbance-domestic
Police Department
1000 Block Carol Ln.
Drunk In Public
Pleasant Hill Rd./Eb Sr 24
Loud Music
1000 Block Via Alta
Loud Noise
3500 Block Brook St.
3500 Block Brook St.
3500 Block Brook St.
Public Nuisance
900 Block Dewing Ave.
St Marys Rd./S Lucille Ln.
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Vandalism
10 Block Olde Creek Pl.
Other
Defraud Innkeeper
30 Block Lafayette Cir.
H&S Violation
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Loitering
100 Block Peaceful Ln.
3600 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
Mentally Ill Violent
900 Block Kelley Ct.
Threats
600 Block Doreen Way
Trespass
3500 Block Springhill Rd.
Trespass W/ Vehicle
900 Block Hough Ave.
Unwanted Guest
3500 Block Mt. Diablo Blvd.
1000 Block Orchard Rd.
10 Block Eleven Laf
Violation Custody Order
Police Department (4)
Violation Restraining Order
4100 Block Hidden Valley Rd.

ORINDA POLICE

Orinda Police Department Incident Summary Report Nov. 13 - Nov. 26

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----|
| Alarms | 44 |
| 911 Calls (includes hang-ups) | 4 |
| Traffic | 116 |
| Suspicious Circumstances | 2 |
| Suspicious Subject | 5 |
| Suspicious Vehicle | 4 |
| Public/School Assembly Check | 0 |
| Service to Citizen | 38 |
| Patrol Req./Security Check | 22 |
| Supplemental Report | 15 |
| Welfare Check | 6 |
| Vehicle violations | |
| Accident Property | |
| Police Department | |
| Moraga Way/Monte Veda Dr. | |
| Auto Burglary | |
| Wilder Sports Fields | |
| Hit And Run Misdemeanor | |
| Camino Pablo/Wb Sr 24 | |
| Reckless Driving | |
| Wildcat Canyon Rd./Camino Pablo | |
| St Stephens Dr./Eb Sr 24 | |
| 10 Block Orchard Rd. | |
| Moraga Way/Glorietta Blvd. | |
| Tc - Property Damage | |
| Rheem Blvd./Laura Way | |
| Other criminal activity | |
| Commercial Burglary | |
| 20 Block Orinda Way | |
| Fraud False Pretenses | |
| 40 Block Hacienda Cir. | |
| 100 Block Stein Way | |
| Identity Theft | |
| 100 Block Silverwood Dr. | |
| 10 Block Orinda Way | |
| Petty Theft | |
| 50 Block St. Stephens Dr. | |
| 20 Block Bryant Way | |
| Camino Sobrante | |
| Warrant Arrest | |
| 200 Block Rheem Blvd. | |
| Orinda Way | |
| Santa Maria Way/Orinda Way | |
| Camino Pablo/North Ln. | |
| Nuisance to the Community | |
| Loud Noise | |
| El Toyonal/Chapparral Pl. | |
| Loud Party | |
| Tahos Rd./Oakridge Ln. | |
| Public Nuisance | |
| 10 Block Theatre Sq | |
| Other criminal activity | |
| Death Suicide | |
| 20 Block Bel Air Dr. | |
| Fireworks | |
| Hall Dr./Rheem Blvd. | |
| Mentally Ill Commit | |
| 10 Block La Sombra Ct. | |
| Other Misdemeanor | |
| El Nido/Upper Happy | |
| Ori Way/Cam Pablo | |
| Revocation Of Probation | |
| Camino Pablo/Brookwood Rd. | |
| Trespass | |
| Camino Sobrante | |
| Unauthorized Possession | |
| Orinda Way | |
| Unwanted Guest | |
| Moraga Way | |
| Warrant Service | |
| Santa Maria Way/Orinda Way | |



Bay Area Drainage, Inc.

Have You Checked Your Crawlspace Lately?

- French Drains
- Underfloor Drains
- Downspout Systems
- Subdrain Systems
- Sump Pumps
- Retaining Walls
- Pavestone Driveway & Walkways



**A General Engineering Contractor
Locally owned and Operated
Contractor LIC # 762208**

925•377•9209

visit our website
www.bayareadrainage.com