

Woman credits deputies in escape from Park Fire



Lori Osbon needed help from Butte County sheriff's deputies to pull her horse trailer as she fled Cohasset and the Park Fire.





Lori and Roger Osbon refused to leave behind Buddy and Holly, their two 25-year-old quarter horses, as they fled the blaze.



The Osbons' home on their 5-acre "mini-ranch" survived the Park Fire, but their horse barn and workshop were destroyed.

BY MATTHIAS GAFNI

Lori Osbon had been inching her Chevy Tahoe down a dark, dusty logging road for hours, pulling a heavy trailer containing her two beloved horses. Then the caravan of vehicles she had joined stopped. Osbon heard a woman yell that they still had 8 miles to go.

“I went into a full blown panic attack,” Osbon recalled. She was crying, her hands shaking and feet numb. “I was too frightened. I was picturing myself falling off the cliff, and the horses with broken legs.”

As first responders tried to calm the 67-year-old woman, she reclined her seat and looked up at the stars.

“I’m just gonna stay here,” she told the sheriff’s deputies who arrived to check on her.

That wasn’t an option. It was the night of July 24, and the huge Park Fire had spread into Osbon’s small community of Cohasset in Butte County, 15 miles northeast of Chico. Osbon and other residents were making a perilous escape on private logging roads because the public road out of the area was essentially blocked by flames.

Over the next several hours, California witnessed another near-tragedy caused by a wildfire in a remote place. It took a brother-and-sister team of Butte County deputies and search-and-rescue volunteers to calm Osbon and help her and other Cohasset locals, and their animals, reach safety.

In weeks of devastation in the Park Fire, which as of Tuesday was 39% contained after consuming more than 670 square miles of land and nearly 650 structures, Osbon’s flight offered a glimmer of hope.

Earlier that day, around 4p.m., Butte County sheriff’s Detective Mary Barker had been finishing her shift when she began monitoring radio calls about a new fire. The nine-year veteran works in the special victims unit, investigating sex crimes.

Her sergeant texted her, asking if she could meet at a Little League field where deputies planned to stage before evacuating residents. Barker had helped evacuate residents of Paradise during the 2018 Camp Fire that killed 85 people — and now she flashed back to the memories of melting cars and

people running. She was a proponent of early evacuations, even if they sometimes led to unnecessary inconvenience.

When Barker got to the baseball field, she spotted her brother, Reserve Deputy John Barker. Though the siblings worked in the same department, they rarely teamed up. Their older sister, Meghan McKone, was coordinating resources that evening as a dispatcher for the agency.

The Barkers decided to double up in John's marked Ford F250. They drove up Cohasset Road, the one public road into the remote town full of retirees, and started knocking on doors of elderly and disabled residents included on a list of the town's most vulnerable. There was little time.

Horses over boats

Lori Osbon, who recently retired from the Butte County Housing Authority, has lived on a 5-acre "mini-ranch" right above Cohasset's only grocery store for more than 20 years. Two years ago, she married Roger Osbon, a 71-year-old cancer survivor.

That afternoon, the couple heard sirens. A friend stopped and alerted them to the new fire, allegedly ignited by a man who pushed a burning vehicle down an embankment. Roger drove out to gather some information and, when he returned, the first evacuation notice went out.

Lori's daughter-in-law drove the family's boat down Cohasset Road, but soon returned crying, saying the road was blocked. For decades, town residents had feared a fire would cut off lower Cohasset Road, leaving them trapped with no way out — other than the series of logging roads behind gates locked by landowner Sierra Pacific Industries.

The Osbons unhitched the boat. It wasn't worth dying over. Lori sent her daughter-in-law to evacuate through upper Cohasset and the logging roads, which had been unlocked by company officials. The couple would soon follow, they told her.

"We're never like this. We're always ready to go," Lori said. "But when it's happening and it's last minute, you kind of panic."

A boat was one thing, but they weren't going to leave behind Buddy and Holly, the family's 25-year-old quarter horses. They hitched a rarely used horse trailer to the Chevy Tahoe.

"They were very easy to load," Lori said. "It was almost like they could sense things going on."

She stuffed their two Great Pyrenees, Sophie and Blue, and their black lab, Shadow, into the SUV. Roger took their other truck and their cream-colored golden retriever, Emma.

They followed a fire truck to a helicopter pad and found a group of more than 100 residents.

“I didn’t know what I was in for,” Lisa said. “It was insane.”

Driving through flames

Back at the Little League field, supervisors asked for volunteers to help deliver more than 100 stranded Cohasset residents out of the fire zone. Mary and John Barker had already tried to clear Cohasset Road for firefighters, but the blaze had engulfed the road. They had to turn back.

The siblings offered to try again.

The siblings teamed up with a group of other first responders from neighboring departments and a search-and-rescue team. They drove back up the roadway, a video capturing them pushing through flames that swept up a ravine and crossed the pavement, while navigating around fallen trees.

As they passed through town, they sounded their high-lows, a distinct siren used during evacuations, summoning remaining residents to follow them up the mountain. They reached the top around 8 or 9p.m., Mary Barker said.

Around this time, fire officials prepped National Guard helicopters for a possible rescue of the trapped residents. The Barkers radioed back to command, asking if they should caravan back down Cohasset Road, possibly with police cars surrounding residents’ vehicles — makeshift protection from the flames.

The answer was no. More trees had toppled. The road was impassable.

Mary recalled thinking: *How are we getting people off this mountain?*

‘Just crazy’

At the helipad, Lori Osbon waited with her neighbors. They passed around a map of the logging road, but it was incomprehensible, she said. The caravan began as a deep red glow enveloped the horizon.

Mary and John Barker stayed behind at the helipad, where they helped load a sheriff’s helicopter with several medically fragile patients, including a man using an oxygen tank, along with some who ran out of gas, and their pets.

They would wait another half hour to make sure no one else arrived needing to evacuate. When the tree line began to glow red, they left.

Up ahead, as Lori descended into a valley, she was stressed and couldn't adjust her seat. She had trouble reaching the pedals. Visibility was minimal.

"Wildlife was running out across the road," she recalled. "The dust was just crazy. It was clouds and clouds, so thick."

Periodically, the rattling of the roadway knocked out her headlights. She'd stop, get out and bang on the lamps until they popped back on. In some spots, her boots sunk into fine dust up to her knees. On hills, she struggled to drag the trailer, and the horses, to the top.

She tried to calm herself by reciting hymns to her dogs, ones she used to sing with her late mother.

Lori was on a flat, curved section of road when a woman yelled that the group had 8 miles left, and that the next stretch was curvy and difficult. Lori panicked. She couldn't go further, she told her escorts.

They radioed for a truck to come get her trailer.

Jeans and jumpers

"You can't see the car in front of you when you're driving," Mary Barker recalled of the H-Line logging road. The shoulder slipped off into ravines or steep cliffs. Vehicles repeatedly fell off the side and got stuck. No one had tow straps, so people used tied-together jeans and jumper cables to pull each other out.

Four vehicles had to be abandoned, two of them out of gas and two stuck off the roadway. The occupants jumped into other vehicles. Some couldn't make it up inclines, so the Barkers, who caught up to a portion of the caravan, pushed them up with their front bumper.

At one point, a couple of drivers decided they were going to turn around, head back and ride it out, Mary recalled. She and her brother strongly discouraged it, but their priority was to stick with the large group.

"Everything that could go wrong, went wrong in the caravan," Mary said. "I was glad I was with my brother. I wouldn't have wanted to be with anyone else."

As they limped along with the back end of the caravan, the radio crackled for a truck to assist with a horse trailer.

Improvised escape

“I can’t go on! I can’t go on!” Lori Osbon cried out, hyperventilating as Mary and John Barker arrived.

As John sought to calm Lori, her husband knew nothing of the predicament as he continued down the road, with no cell connection and little visibility.

The plan was to attach Lori’s horse trailer to John’s truck hitch. But as they positioned it, they realized the ball was too small. The deputy’s pickup normally pulled boats for the marine unit. The brother and sister improvised, tightening chains to the back of the truck.

Buddy and Holly remained calm. The deputies would just drive slowly the rest of the way.

“Worst case, we discussed, we’d take the horses out and ride them out,” Mary recalled with a laugh.

The siblings explained the plan to Lori and reassured her that she could drive her Tahoe much easier without the weight of the trailer. They would keep her sandwiched between a search-and-rescue vehicle and the Barkers’ truck.

“Just be careful,” Lori implored. “They’re my babies.”

About halfway through the slow trek along the logging road, one of the trailer’s tires blew. They had no spare, so they dragged the flat and let the other three tires handle the load.

They finally reached Highway 32 around 3 a.m., more than four hours after they left the helicopter pad. They were safe.

“We gave her a big ol’ hug and she tried to pay us,” Mary laughed. They declined and suggested she donate to the volunteer search and rescue team.

“They were like the wind beneath my wings,” said Lori, who lost her horse barn but not her home in the Park Fire. “I’ve never been a quitter and they helped me get my courage back. I knew I needed to get out, but my body was shot with anxiety. I owe my life to them and the lives of my animals.”

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