



As Sandy stayed behind, readying to protect their home if need be, Craig went to man the water tender and spent the day pumping water from Lake Oroville at the Enterprise boat ramp to deliver to engines bound for the front lines. Early in the evening, Sandy heard radio chatter about firefighters falling back from Station 51, a career station farther up the hill where crews were staging, and knew it was time to leave.

"I figured if these guys, the real professionals, are retreating, then I have no business thinking I could stop anything," she said. "I called Craig to ask him if I should meet [him] at the water tender, and he said, 'No, you need to get off the mountain.'"

Sandy said her skill set leans toward medical emergencies that account for the large majority of Company 52's service calls and that she feared she'd be in the way in the firefight. So she evacuated to Oroville and put her communication skills to use, helping keep evacuees and fire personnel connected and updated.

As he made his runs up and down the hill, Craig found himself in the area of the Gold Flake as flames fast approached the building. Knowing he couldn't singlehandedly stop the advancing wall of flame, he parked on a turn above the saloon known to locals as "Crash Corner" and prepared to watch the beloved bar burn. Then, in the nick of time, he heard over the radio that ground crews were showing up to protect the Gold Flake. He joined them as they pulled into the parking lot.

"The hand crews went crazy, they jumped straight out and started cutting everything to

Katherine Molohon has lived in Berry Creek her whole life and followed in the footsteps of her father (and aunt and uncle) to become a volunteer firefighter.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KATHERINE MOLOHON

remove some of the heat, and doing some small backfiring," Craig said. "They didn't have much time for prepping, because before we knew it, the fire was here.

"You couldn't see more than a foot and a half in front of you," he said. "Some of the firefighters were taking serious heat in the lungs. It was like that for about 20 minutes, and then it was gone."

**"The fire coming in sounds like a jet engine, and you can't hear anything."**

—Berry Creek volunteer firefighter Katherine Molohon

In Berry Creek, four of the volunteer force—including Rankin and Molohon—had been "staffing" (staying full time) at Fire Station 61 since Aug. 17, the day lightning strikes sparked 21 wildfires in Plumas and Lassen National Forests.

On Sept. 8, they received a call from a resident of the Mountain House area—about 15 minutes up the hill from their station—who said the glow of the fires was fast approaching. The company loaded into the squad vehicle—a pickup truck with a utility bed outfitted with some hand tools, medical equipment and small amounts of water and hose—and went to investigate.

En route, the crew began encountering spot fires, and the firefighters were soon surrounded by flaming, towering trees. They immediately turned their attention toward driving the winding mountain roads

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