

Travis, Meet Thomas. Firefighter Travis Lahey gets acquainted with the flames from the Thomas Fire as he works alongside his fire-fighting buddies to save yet another structure in Ventura.



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FEATURE

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# FIRE AND FURY

## HEROES OF SO CAL

BY JENNI KEAST

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Band of Brothers. Happy faces after the men from Ventura City Fire Station #5 get their first meal and rest in 24 hours. The "Monster" Thomas Fire taxed even the toughest of firefighters.



From L to R: Preston Andreini, Austin Foulke, Chris Pironi, JJ Rhoads, Eric Mukes, Aaron Tapking, John Toll, Russell Skinner.

Helicopter loads up to deliver water for aerial firefighting.



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They'll live to race another day. High-priced Thoroughbreds gallop freely on the grounds of the over 200-acre San Luis Rey Downs facility. Letting them out of their "tinderbox" stalls gave them their only chance of survival from the raging Lilac Fire.

Bring in the marine. Marine Daniel Williams rushes in to help lead out as many horses as possible to safety in the midst of the Lilac Fire that killed 46 thoroughbreds.



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## FEATURE

### Eric Mukes: Fire Captain, Ventura City Fire Department

At five years of age, Eric Mukes knew exactly what he wanted to be when he grew up: The Lone Ranger. After all, the guy rode around on a horse, wore a cool mask and fought outlaws. What little boy wouldn't want to be him?

Thirty-seven years later, Captain Eric Mukes rides around on a fire engine, wears a mask and fights fires. But he would be the first to tell you he's no Lone Ranger. He and his team of firefighters at the Ventura City Fire Department, Station #5, work as a single lifesaving unit, tackling anything that Southern California's natural disasters — and other life-threatening situations — throw at them. Never was this more true than during the recent SoCal fires, which combined, devastated approximately 369,522 acres, destroyed over a thousand structures and paved the way for the next disaster — the Montecito mudslides.

The day the Thomas Fire broke out, a team of Ventura City firefighters was dispatched to Santa Paula where the fire originated. "We're the 'specialized rescuers,'" states Mukes. "So when the Thomas Fire suddenly turned and descended with full fury towards the city of Ventura, threatening Vista Del Mar hospital, that's when my team was called in."

Saving the hospital turned out to be a fierce firefight that lasted for hours. Mukes and his men cut holes in the roof making a way for the heat to exit before the engines came in with water. Though they couldn't save the entire



© ERIC MUKES

Man against fire. Firefighter Aaron Tapking takes his stand against The Thomas Fire atop a structure in the city of Ventura.

hospital, they were able to save a couple of wings and prevented surrounding homes from being torched.

From then on, it was non-stop firefighting for Mukes, who worked up to 32-hour shifts. While 427 homes in the city of Ventura were destroyed, Mukes marvels at how many homes they managed to save. "It could have been worse — a lot worse," he says. "And the fact that there was no loss of life, with one exception, is even more miraculous. I attribute this to our amazing law enforcement as they made sure that everyone was evacuated."

Sadly, loss of life, 20 to be exact, did occur in the ensuing Montecito mudslides, where Mukes was called up for search and rescue. He came dangerously close to being the 21st victim when he fell into a sinkhole with mud up to his chest — relying on his "band of brothers" to haul him out.

"... I PUSH THROUGH THAT FEAR BECAUSE I KNOW THAT MY MISSION IS BENEVOLENT AND THAT KNOWLEDGE LEADS TO COURAGE."



Up on the roof. Fire Captain Eric Mukes and fellow firefighter Aaron Tapking get "photobombed" by flames from The Thomas Fire as they seek to save another structure from being destroyed in the city of Ventura.

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## The Bitter with the Sweet

When his efforts to save a victim or home fails is when Mukes experiences the worst — yet strangely the best — part of his job. “It’s impossible to describe a situation like I had with parents who watched us do everything we could to save their child, but to no avail,” shares Mukes. “They would be kissing their child on the forehead as we worked, only to turn to us after the worst possible outcome and thank us through their tears for trying. Or to have a couple stand in front of their home that has been reduced to a chimney and yet still they thank us profusely for our efforts to save their house. That is super humbling to me. And yet it’s also, in a strange way, the best part in that we get to be there to help them bring closure to the worst possible moment of their life.”

### Manny Calvario: Horse Trainer, San Luis Rey Downs

To many race horse trainers, the thoroughbreds they train are their children. Trainer Manny Calvario, who has lived, breathed and slept horses since he was 14, is no exception. Which is why when the Lilac Fire broke out near San Luis Rey Downs Training Center where Manny also lives, he knew his only recourse was to join the other trainers in letting their “children” loose in hopes that they would run away from the fire to safety.

## “EVERYONE LOVES TO WATCH HORSES RUN ... BUT NOT WITH FEAR.”

Not every trainer was committed to that course of action. French trainer Martine Bellocq decided to stay put. But as the flames inched closer and closer, Manny knew it was a lost cause. “Martine, the fire is 100 feet away, you have to turn your horses loose!” he warned his fellow trainer. It was Martine’s delayed decision to finally let the last horse loose — a favorite named Wild Bill Hickory — that would turn into a fateful one. Within seconds, the flames engulfed both her and her horse. Upon hearing the screams — a sound Manny says he will never forget — he rushed into the thick black smoke and grabbed Martine, pulling her out from the fire. He then covered her in a blanket to extinguish the flames, effectively saving her life.

As for Manny, he is still processing the trauma of that day. Even speaking of it causes the tears to well up. “It was only afterwards that I realized how close I was to catching on fire myself,” he shares, his voice choking. “But you don’t think



Muzzle love. Manny Alvarez gets nuzzled by one of the high-priced thoroughbreds he trains to compete on the track. Fortunately, all four of his horses survived the Lilac Fire.

about the danger at the time — of being a so-called ‘hero’ — you just do what you have to do.”

There were many heroes that emerged from the recent SoCal disasters — some celebrated, some not. Like marine Daniel Williams, who while returning from checking on his grandparents’ house, drove not away but towards the fire descending upon San Luis Rey to help lead terrified horses to safety. Or a Montecito man who rescued a baby buried in the mud. Then there were those who worked together as a “collective hero” bringing food to victims and rescuers, providing temporary shelter, rescuing animals, starting Go Fund Me pages, or simply providing human comfort to those shattered by unimaginable loss.

### Do It Afraid

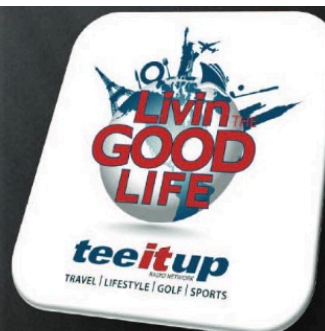
When asked to share his own idea of what a “hero” is, Captain Eric Mukes has a simple definition: “Do it afraid. I feel fear every single time I go out there,” says Mukes. “But I push through that fear because I know that my mission is benevolent and that knowledge leads to courage. I have lives to save and a family who needs me to come home to them, and that’s what gives me the courage to go in and do my job, and do it well.” ♦

Tools of their trade. Men from Ventura City Fire Station #5 hold some of the “weapons” they used in their fight against the Thomas Fire and the Montecito mudslides.



From L to R: Jon Haggren, Aaron Tapking, Kyle Corny, Mike Westbrook, Tony Weisell, Eric Mukes

Diva & Jason, Cajun & Josh back of truck Montecito mudslides.



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