

Wildfire evacuees find refuge at Qualcomm Stadium

By Steve Wightman



Monday, October 22, 2007 started off like any other Monday following weekend football. Arriving to work at 5:30 AM, I began reviewing the day's work schedules for repairing the playing field and cleaning the stadium in preparation for next weekend's football double-header with San Diego State and the Chargers. On my way I had noticed a different sky, one that was not normal this time of year; soon I'd discover that this particular Monday was to be like no other.

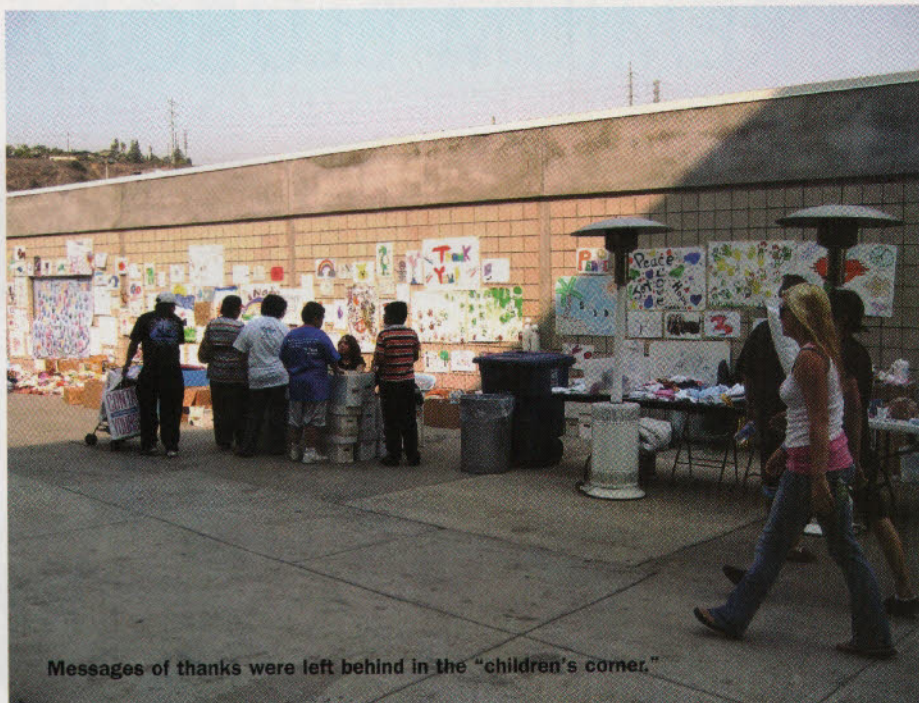
The old Charger practice field became the animal shelter for the hundreds of evacuated pets.

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While most of us slept Sunday night the entire eastern edge of San Diego County was being engulfed by wildfires that were being fanned by the seasonably common Santa Ana winds. Typically, southern California's weather is tempered by prevailing winds that blow easterly from the Pacific Ocean to the inland valleys, distant mountains, and warm deserts. During Santa Ana's however, the wind direction is reversed and brings very gusty westerly winds dominated by the warm temperatures and very dry conditions of the desert regions. The temperatures are welcome yet feared because of the potential for destruction.

While going through my email suddenly a message from the mayor's office came stating that people were being evacuated because of the fires and that the evacuation site was Qualcomm Stadium.

What was a sports stadium just a few minutes earlier was to become a refuge for the young, the old, families, neighbors, pets, and every conceivable possession that people might hastily grab on the way out the door. The first evacuees began arriving at the sta-



Messages of thanks were left behind in the "children's corner."

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dium around 8 AM. At first the traffic was not much more than a trickle into the 150 acres of asphalt parking lots that surround the stadium, but by nightfall the 20,000 parking spaces were about a third occupied by cars, trucks, vans, motor-homes, horse trailers, tents, and sleeping bags.

We began implementing the Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) that, in part, included contacting companies currently servicing the stadium for additional items, supplies, and services. It soon became apparent that much more was going to be needed as the parking area became even more congested and the fires continued raging toward the Pacific.

Numerous other city departments, agencies and military forces sprung into action and added resources to a well developed and seamless execution of the city's Emergency Plan. For example, Parks and Recreation provided trucks, forklifts and personnel to assist with the flood of donated food, clothing and supplies channeled through a "distribution center" setup in the far portion of one of the parking lots.

The old Charger practice field, located in the far corner of the stadium complex, and now used for rugby, soccer, tailgate parties and overflow parking, became the animal shelter for the hundreds of pets of those evacuated. Animals ranged from the dogs and cats to birds, horses, cows, goats, snakes, gerbils, and mice.

Complete with veterinarians, nurses, and throngs of volunteers, all animals were meticulously screened and cared for. To help with the effort the grounds crew setup a watering area for the horses and larger animals and cleaned out some of the nearby open storage bins which became crude animal pens.

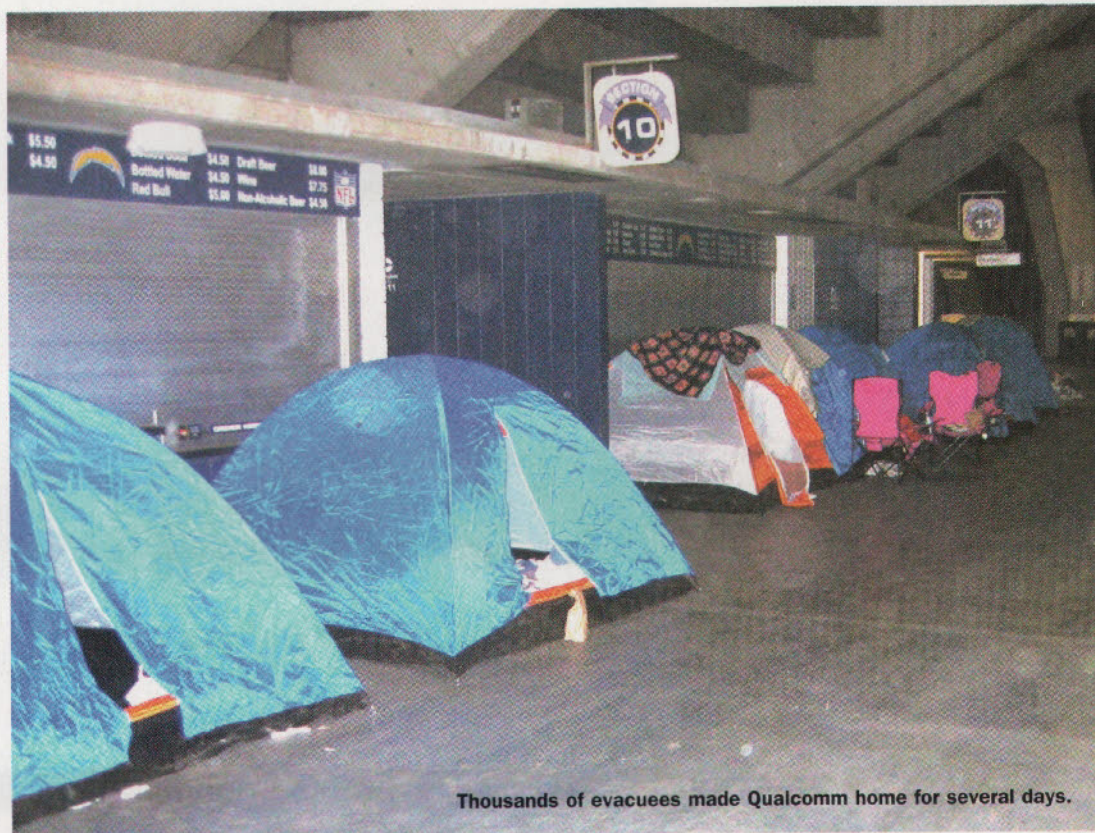
When the evacuations began it was envisioned that all would be confined to the parking areas. However, it became evident early on when more and more people arrived at what was now the main evacuation center for the entire county of San Diego that we were going to have to open up the stadium to properly accommodate all of those who were now entrusted to our care.

Since we were still in the middle of our football season it was decided that all evacuees who came into the stadium would be confined to the seating areas and concourses only leaving the playing field, locker rooms, private suites, and restaurants off limits.

When the gates were opened each person was to be documented for emergency purposes; however, this exercise disappeared when a major logjam quickly formed. So the gates were simply opened up allowing a free-flow of people into the stadium under a somewhat watchful eye of security personnel. It was hoped that the people would conduct them-

selves differently than our normal football crowd. I'm certain that the fact that no alcohol was allowed greatly contributed to that success.

As Monday turned into Tuesday and Tuesday into Wednesday donations of all kinds continued to pour in to the point of exceeding the needs of those housed at the stadium. The distribution center then began to transport the excess donations to other evacuation centers within the city. The number of evacuees now residing within the stadium totaled nearly 10,000. During those first three days many of the evacuees found more comfortable quarters with family, friends and hotel rooms after their initial arrival. Those that left were being replaced by



Thousands of evacuees made Qualcomm home for several days.

new evacuees as the fires continued to rage westward.

The Field concourse became "tent city" with tents covering nearly every square foot and filled mostly with families. Some tents contained giggly children with the tent next door occupied by the concerned and somber parents. Other tents were spread throughout the upper levels and congregated in every conceivable nook and cranny. Most however, were located in areas where restrooms were but a few steps away. Some adventurous souls took up residence on the penthouse level with the moon and stars obscured by the smoke and ash of the fires.

Shower trailers were brought in and setup in one of the parking lots and became a much welcomed spot for those many evacuees who had been camped out since the first day. Portable heaters were spread throughout the main concourse to provide some warmth to the exhausted and worried stadium crowd.

With each passing day we all became more experienced in our new roles. City department directors worked along side custodians in assist-

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ing in any way necessary to make the hours of the evacuees pass a little faster and a little easier. Local schools and PTA organizations created a "children's corner" that provided games and educational tools to the throngs of children many of whom did not understand why they were still there sleeping in the seats and concourses of the stadium.

Many of the 800 TVs inside the stadium were turned on early in the week to provide evacuees with constant updated fire and evacuation information. At 5PM every night the Jumbotron scoreboard became the children's theater featuring various Disney movies in hopes of providing the children and their parents a little bit of relief from their anxieties.

On Thursday the media began relating the much-awaited news that the authorities were allowing families of some of the communities to return to their homes. Joy and jubilation reverberated throughout the stadium with each mentioned community. And, the numbers within the stadium slowly began to

diminish much like the 4th quarter when a game is well in hand.

By noon Friday all of the evacuees were gone and the focus was back to getting ready for the Charger game on Sunday. The poor air quality the fires brought to the city prevented San Diego State from practicing and their Saturday game with BYU was postponed. The Chargers had moved to Phoenix that week for their practices and it was decided the game on Sunday would indeed be played at Qualcomm.

The exhausted stadium staff began the long task of cleaning up and getting ready for the game. The grounds crew began painting the football field and the custodial staff began cleaning the stadium, which included washing off the ash from the fires in the seating areas, concourses and sidewalks. The cleanup and preparation efforts would not be fully completed until early Sunday morning.

Personally, this experience was very touching in many ways. It showed me those things

that matter most in life—family and friends. The faces of those last elderly evacuees that were wheeled out of the stadium on Friday showed me the true meaning of determination in getting through difficult times. The chalk marks on the concrete, posters hung on the walls, stick figures, funny faces, words of wisdom and messages of thanks left behind in the "children's corner" left a lasting impression on me, as well, that our youth can teach us volumes about resiliency.

For the Charger game we left the "children's corner" as they left it to us, a small yet powerful memory of the devastating fires and a tribute to a community that came together. It was a reminder left for Charger fans that Sunday, many of whom had spent time earlier that week inside the stadium. ■

Steve Wightman is stadium/field manager for Qualcomm Stadium in San Diego.

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