

An Independence Day to Remember

By Jim Hughes, L.A. County Lakes

There are rescues that we train for and some rescues we actually anticipate. Then there are those that no one would ever dream would actually happen. Such was the case at 12:30 PM on July 4, 2002, when a twin engine Cessna aircraft lost power and plummeted into a crowd of picnickers along the shoreline of Lake Puddingstone at Bonelli Park.

The events that took place in the 14 minutes between the crash and the arrival of the first Fire Department personnel will forever be ingrained in the memories of 16 Lake Lifeguards. Lifeguards, who responded from the swim beach, lake-patrol and elsewhere, barefoot mostly wearing nothing more than Lifeguard swim trunks. Without hesitation, these Lifeguards landed in boats, climbed up a rocky shoreline, waded through a fuel soaked lawn to eighteen victims trapped in a horrific scene of mangled wreckage amid shredded trees.



Firefighters assist L.A. County Lakes lifeguards at Lake Puddingstone.

The events tell a story of Lifeguard Alan Taylor, who's trained to "survey the scene". He first had to put out a hot BBQ fire a few feet from pooled airplane fuel before he even started treating his first victim. They tell us of Jamie Shellenberger, a second year Lifeguard, who carried an 8 year old boy with head trauma and abrasions over his entire body several hundred yards to an awaiting helicopter. This was after she brought the boy's bleeding under control, placed him in C-Spine, and administered Oxygen. Ms. Shellenberger returned to assist in moving another victim from an automobile into an ambulance, then helped place yet another victim onto a backboard, and continued to clean and bandage other victims until all had been treated.

Battalion Fire Chief Glynn D. Johnson in a letter sent to our department stated:

"Upon arrival at scene, I observed several lifeguard personnel among the twisted and jagged aircraft debris providing emergency medical assistance to numerous injured victims which eventually totaled 18: 14 adults, 4 children -- 5 critical, and 3 in full arrest... Despite the initial havoc, seeing Lifeguard personnel on-scene among the most seriously injured increased the comfort level and assured responding paramedics that the victims would receive professional life saving care.. Fire fighting personnel, many with 25 to 30 years tenure .. have indicated that this incident was the most challenging in their long careers."

Senior Lake Lifeguard Steve Dixon was the Beach Captain in charge of the swim beach. During the incident, he began sending his Lifeguard staff across the lake to the scene in patrons' private boats. He knew that he was sending these young heroes into a situation that would change them forever. Gone would be the naiveté of the summer job to pay one's way through college -- an occasional rescue, a lost child...a normal day would never be taken for granted again.

This experience will be the one we will remember for the rest of our lives. We will carry it with us like an old scar. It will help us appreciate the essence of life, the tragedy of loss and the innate call-to-duty we all have as Lifeguards.

(Picture below)



Lifeguard John Silberstein heads out through the surf on a PWC for a rescue in Maui, Hawaii.