GUNFIRE AND FLAMES IN CALIFORNIA

How the Los Angeles Times simultaneously covered a mass shooting and two of the most destructive wildfires in California history

It was college night at Borderline Bar and Grill on Nov. 7, and the dance hall was teeming with young country music fans. Suddenly, around 11:20 p.m., the Thousand Oaks bar began filling with smoke and the sound of gunfire.

A former U.S. Marine and Afghan war veteran had armed himself with smoke grenades, a .45-caliber pistol and seven high-capacity magazines – the type that are illegal to sell or import in California – and launched a savage attack on the crowd. In just minutes, 13 people would suffer fatal gunshot wounds, including a sheriff’s deputy who responded to the scene and the 28-year-old gunman, who took his own life.

The killings devastated a community that boasted one of the lowest violent crime rates in the nation, and reaffirmed California’s grim distinction of being the state with the highest number of mass shootings. The grief spread beyond Thousand Oaks to a handful of local colleges, such as Malibu’s Pepperdine University.

Yet even before friends and families could mourn the Borderline deaths, a second tragedy would disrupt their lives and force more than 250,000 people to flee their homes.

Hours after the shooting, two fast-moving wildfires would ignite to the east and west of Thousand Oaks and sweep across Ventura and Los Angeles counties, killing three people and destroying more than 1,600 structures.

Southern Californians likened the twin disasters to an apocalypse and watched in horror as flames burned from Simi Valley south to the Pacific Ocean. But even as residents would describe the flames as the worst they had seen in 40 years, a far more deadly wildfire had erupted hundreds of miles to the north, in Butte County.

At roughly the same time authorities were briefing reporters on the background of the Borderline gunman, wind-driven flames were overwhelming the towns of Paradise, Megalia and Concow. The wildfire would kill 86 people and destroy nearly 14,000 homes, making it the most destructive in California history.

For the staff of the Los Angeles Times, reporting on these simultaneous events would pose numerous challenges. In some cases, staff who were roused from bed to cover the Borderline shooting were forced to evacuate homes hours later due to wildfire, yet they continued to inform the public on the fire’s progress and the shooting’s aftermath. Others found themselves in the path of rapidly spreading flames as wildfires jumped major roadways or bore down on homes. Nearly all of them found themselves working for several days straight as they switched between shooting and fire assignments.

Today, more than two months later, The Times continues to report on the aftermath and root causes of these tragedies.
11:20 p.m., Wednesday, Nov. 7 >> A Ventura County dispatcher announces reports of gunfire at Borderline Bar and Grill.

11:42 p.m. >> It’s late and the newsroom is mostly empty. Social media editor Jessica Roy is home when she spots a tweet about the shooting and posts it to Slack. Crime reporter James Queally is settling into bed when he sees the message. He calls authorities to confirm.

11:46 p.m. >> Digital editor Sean Greene, who lives near Borderline, sees the message and heads to the scene. Meanwhile, Metro editor Shelby Grad and city editor Hector Becerra begin waking reporters and sending them to Thousand Oaks. Writers Richard Winton, Alene Tchekmedyian, Brittny Mejia, Andrea Castillo and Sarah Parvini race to the scene some 40 miles away. The Los Angeles Times Twitter account informs 3.3 million followers that the paper is looking into reports of a shooting.

https://twitter.com/latimes/status/1060439168478789632
11:50 p.m. >> Our first story is published on latimes.com and will be updated 10 times over 15 hours. The Los Angeles Times Twitter and Facebook accounts alert readers to each update and link back to the growing story.

12:03 a.m., Thursday, Nov. 8 >> Greene arrives on scene before authorities establish a cordon and locates a group of survivors at a nearby gas station. He files feeds and photos.

1:22 a.m. >> Overnight digital editor Courtney Lewis creates a live blog, as more reporters arrive and send details to Queally, who is writing the story from home. Witnesses describe a scene of terror and chaos. Some had survived the Route 91 mass shooting in Las Vegas a year earlier. The live blog publishes 39 posts over the next 13 hours. https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-thousand-oaks-shooting-updates-htmlstory.html

Live updates: 12 killed in Thousand Oaks bar shooting; gunman is also dead

2:56 a.m. >> Authorities brief reporters on the “horrific scene” inside Borderline: Thirteen dead, including Ventura County Sheriff’s Sgt. Ron Helus and the unidentified gunman. Helus appears to have been killed in a fierce gun battle, while it looks as if the shooter died of a self-inflicted wound.
3:40 a.m. >> The Times publishes an online story about how Helus was on the phone with his wife right before he rushed into Borderline Bar and Grill. “He told her he loved her and he had to go.”

4:50 a.m. >> A witness provides Times reporters with an account of the shooting.

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**Thousand Oaks assailant ‘just pulled out a gun and shot my friend,’ witness says**

5:59 a.m. >> Morning assignment editor B.J. Terhune dispatches writers Jaclyn Cosgrove, Ruben Vives, Angel Jennings, Benjamin Oreskes, Ben Poston, Melissa Etehad and Eric Sondheimer to Ventura County. Meanwhile, reporters in the main office – Hannah Fry, Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, Rong-Gong Lin II, Sonali Kohli, Maria L. La Ganga, Esmeralda Bermudez, Laura J. Nelson and Laura Newberry – are tasked with digging into the shooter’s background, reporting and writing victim biographies, and rewriting stories for print and online.

6:33 a.m. >> In Butte County, more than 430 miles north of Los Angeles, howling winds stoke flames on a rocky slope in the Sierra Nevada foothills. In a matter of hours, the Camp fire will grow to become the state’s deadliest and most destructive wildfire.

7 a.m. >> Authorities identify the shooter as a combat veteran and speculate he may have suffered from PTSD. A Times reporter uses Facebook Live to stream the news conference.
8:42 a.m. >> The Los Angeles Times lifts its paywall for online shooting stories in order to provide the broadest possible access to information. Hours later, fire coverage will also be posted outside the paywall.

9:29 a.m. >> Reporter Paige St. John, who lives in Pilot Hill, roughly 70 miles southeast of the Camp fire, hears police scanner reports of four people trapped in the basement of a Paradise hospital that is surrounded by fire.

9:45 a.m. >> A portrait begins to emerge of the Borderline gunman. [https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-shooter-profile-20181108-story.html]

Ian David Long’s behavior alarmed roommates and neighbors, and drew police to his home, but never became threatening enough for him to be taken into custody for mental health treatment.

The troubled ex-Marine who stormed into a bar Wednesday night and shot 12 people to death was described as reclusive and agitated, picking fights with teammates in high school and cursing so loudly at his mother that he regularly woke up neighbors. He was killed during the massacre — possibly by his own gun. Authorities said they have found no motive for the killings.

Long, 28, saw combat as a machine gunner in Afghanistan in 2010, and one of his roommates suspected he had post-traumatic stress disorder.

Though a neighbor in Newbury Park said the fights predated Long’s military service, they grew worse after his discharge in 2013.

9:45 a.m. >> We post our first staff story on the Camp fire, which has burned more than 5,000 acres. [https://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-camp-fire-20181108-story.html]

10 a.m. >> A black Cadillac hearse containing the body of Sgt. Ron Helus departs Los Robles Medical Center escorted by law enforcement vehicles. The Times streams the procession on Facebook Live.
11:30 a.m. >> We begin posting biographies of the shooting victims.

He was a bouncer, she loved music, he wanted to join the Army — these are the victims of the Borderline shooting.
2:03 p.m. >> The Hill fire ignites just seven miles northwest of Thousand Oaks, cause unknown.

2:24 p.m. >> The Woolsey fire ignites roughly eight miles east of Thousand Oaks. The official cause remains under investigation, but victims since have filed multiple lawsuits against Southern California Edison, accusing the utility of failing to mitigate fire risks.

2:55 p.m. >> After covering the arrival of Helus’ body in Ventura, reporter Angel Jennings drives east along the 101 Freeway, unaware that she is headed straight for the Hill fire. Her car is buffeted by heavy winds as thick smoke floods her view. She can feel the heat through her car window as flames reach the shoulder of the freeway. After driving clear of the fire, she pulls into a gas station to interview bystanders as they watch flames leap the highway and force its closure.

3:05 p.m. >> After a graduate of California Lutheran University is found to be one of the victims in the Borderline shooting, the school cancels that evening’s scheduled performance of a play based on the Columbine High School shooting.

3:05 p.m. >> In his first public appearance since he was elected governor two days earlier, Gavin Newsom calls the National Rifle Assn. “bankrupt morally” and calls on California to “do more and do better on gun safety.”

4:40 p.m. >> Arriving at an evacuation center in Oroville, reporter Paige St. John begins interviewing Camp fire survivors. They describe a scene of chaos, confusion and traffic gridlock as they sought to flee the town of Paradise. Already the inadequacies of the town’s evacuation plan and escape routes were becoming apparent to the reporter.

Sound files of St. John’s interviews are posted to The Times Facebook account, which has 2.7 million followers.
5 p.m. >> Public health reporter Soumya Karlamangla explains to readers why Long failed to qualify for an involuntary psychiatric hold, while legal affairs writer Maura Dolan and Sacramento reporter Patrick McGreevy tell readers about California’s battle to outlaw high-capacity magazines for ammunition and how it was illegal for Long to purchase or import an ammunition clip of more than 10 rounds.


8:44 p.m. >> A fire official tells reporter Jaclyn Cosgrove that the Woolsey fire is “not an immediate threat,” but that the situation could change. “We think there’s potential, if the wind picks up, for it to move down the hill toward Oak Park, Calabasas, Agoura, Westlake Village.” Later in the evening, reporter Ben Poston is ordered to evacuate his Malibu home after covering the Borderline shooting. He will return to Malibu the following day to cover the Woolsey fire.

12:45 a.m., Friday, Nov. 9 >> Wind gusts of up to 50 mph begin pushing the Woolsey fire south. The Times publishes its first online story about the fire’s steady, destructive march to the sea. The story will be updated 21 times over 24 hours.

2:30 a.m. >> Greene helps his parents evacuate their home in Newberry Park as fire consumes a nearby hillside.

4 a.m. >> The front page of the Los Angeles Times print edition includes three stories on the Borderline shooting, and refers to the fires burning in Ventura, Los Angeles and Butte counties. The front of the California section includes a story on the Camp fire, as well as a column by Steve Lopez on veterans seeking aid for mental health problems and gun control.

6:30 a.m. >> Law enforcement reporter Richard Winton wakes up in his Calabasas home to find the power out, and flames from the Woolsey fire approaching. He loads some photo albums into his car, along with some clothes and documents and evacuates along with neighbors.


10:20 a.m. >> A live blog is created to keep readers updated on the spread of multiple California fires. Reporters will produce 351 posts over the period of a month.
11:10 a.m. >> The Thousand Oaks Teen Center, which had functioned as a family reunification center for the Borderline shooting, is designated a fire evacuation center. https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ventura-disasters-20181109-story.html

“The center was where family and friends of those missing from the Borderline shooting came to await word about their fates. Many left with the worst news of their lives — that their loved ones had died. Now the sprawling center is being used as a shelter for evacuees from the fire. Some don’t know if they’ll have a house to return to.”

12:56 p.m. >> Photographer Wally Skalij stumbles across an owl hunkered down on a Malibu beach. A photo of the battered bird touches something in readers, and the image spreads rapidly across social media.
1:16 p.m.  >> Reporter Brittny Mejia stops at Malibu’s Pepperdine University, where officials have ordered students to shelter in place. Traffic fills Pacific Coast Highway.  

1:47 p.m.  >> As the Woolsey fire continues to burn along the Pacific Coast, areas to the north, such as Thousand Oaks, are no longer in flames. Some residents return to their neighborhoods to find devastation.  

2:12 p.m.  >> As reporters and photographers file from the burn areas, reporters Alejandra Reyes-Velarde, Nicole Santa Cruz, Howard Blume, Hannah Fry, Javier Panzar, Laura J. Nelson and Maria L. La Ganga work from the office, stitching feeds into print and online stories and the live blog. They also comb social media, scanner reports, television broadcasts and government websites to broaden the scope of coverage.
2:22 p.m. >> As fire evacuees continue to stream toward the ocean, they also bring their animals. Skalij photographs llamas tied to a lifeguard stand. (A follow-up story about the animals: https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-california-fires-woolsey-hill-camp-thunder-luke-and-gidget-in-los-angeles-1542318707-htmlstory.html)

4:20 p.m. >> When President Trump suggests that Ian David Long’s combat duty in Afghanistan caused him to become violent, veteran advocates and mental health professionals voice dismay. The president, they say, is helping to perpetuate a myth that veterans are broken and dangerous. https://www.latimes.com/politics/la-na-pol-trump-california-shooter-20181109-story.html

5:15 p.m. >> Hours after driving into Paradise and finding all cellular towers destroyed and long queues of incinerated vehicles, reporter Louis Sahagun is able to find phone service and describe the devastation in words and pictures.

5:45 p.m. >> Reporter Soumya Karlamangla, who grew up in Thousand Oaks, posts her first-person account on covering overlapping tragedies in her hometown. The story describes how she, reporter Jaclyn Cosgrove and a Huffington Post reporter were all staying at Karlamangla’s parents’ house when they were forced to evacuate due to the Woolsey fire. The editor of the story, Steve Clow, was also forced to evacuate his home. https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-ln-thousand-oaks-hometown-20181109-story.html
Law enforcement sources tell Times reporters that the Borderline gunman was posting on Instagram before and during the shooting. “I hope people call me insane,” he wrote, and mocked the “thoughts and prayers” that are often issued publicly after shootings. This material is published in a story that includes comments from former high school instructors and classmates, who describe disturbing behavior even then. The online story includes a video animation of the interior of the Borderline Bar and Grill and illustrates the movement of the shooter, victims and authorities.

Although local authorities and President Trump suggest PTSD might have caused Ian David Long to commit violence, an expert tells science reporter Deborah Netburn that such a conclusion is premature. Fewer than one in five combat veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and violent behavior is not a common symptom.

The front page of the Los Angeles Times print edition includes three stories on the Woolsey and Camp fires and another story on a former Marine who died in the Borderline shooting.
4 a.m. >> Those who fled the Woolsey fire describe a scene “like Armageddon.”

7:35 a.m. >> Wildfire experts say that blaze that destroyed Paradise should not have come as a surprise. The combination of high winds and dry vegetation has given rise to increasingly devastating wildfires. They note also that the scorched footprint of the Camp fire includes two major fires that both occurred in 2008.

9:49 a.m. >> After President Trump tweets that the California fires are due to “gross mismanagement of the forests” and threatens to cut federal payments, The Times publishes a story detailing how the president’s claim is incorrect. Firefighters call the tweet “ill-informed, ill-timed and demeaning to those who are suffering.”
1:15 p.m. >> Experts tell Times law enforcement reporters that Sgt. Ron Helus’ quick action likely reduced the death toll at Borderline. His decision to confront the gunman speaks to an evolution of police tactics during mass shootings. However, a third of all officers who make a “solo entry” on an active shooter are shot, researchers say.  

2:19 p.m. >> Fourteen hours after he blamed California’s fires on mismanagement, Trump issues a second more sympathetic tweet. “Our hearts are with those fighting the fires, the 52,000 who have evacuated and the families of the 11 who have died … God Bless them all.”  
https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1061382890100002817

Sunday, Nov. 11 >>

3:30 a.m., Monday, Nov. 12 >> The Times print edition reports that the death toll in Butte County has risen to 29, but that more than 228 people remain missing.
4 a.m., Tuesday, Nov. 13 >> We explain how a development boom and changing climate contributed to the Camp fire’s destructiveness.

Despite fire after fire, Paradise continued to boom – until California’s worst wildfire hit https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-paradise-fire-development-warnings-20181113-story.html


8 a.m. >> Images from Times photographers covering the Woolsey fire are displayed in a photo gallery. https://www.latimes.com/visuals/la-me-woolseyfire-unfurled-2018-htmlstory.html

9:15 a.m. >> Reporter Ben Oreskes accompanies a yacht-owning millionaire who is helping to deliver supplies to Malibu residents along the coastline. Entry by car is blocked by fire damage and by authorities enforcing evacuation orders. A photo gallery and video accompany the story online.

Here’s where the Woolsey fire burned through the hills of Southern California https://www.latimes.com/projects/la-me-woolsey-fire-progression/
Wednesday, Nov. 14 >> After a gunman opened fire in their favorite bar, these survivors have banded together like family

Tuesday, Nov. 20 >> Disaster after disaster, California keeps falling short on evacuating people from harm’s way

Thursday, Nov. 22 >> As deadly flames approached, a mother called her daughters to say goodbye

Friday, Nov. 30 >> Camp fire evacuation warnings failed to reach more than a third of residents meant to receive calls

Sunday, Dec. 2 >> They thought they’d die trapped in a parking lot. How 150 survivors of California’s deadliest fire made it out alive
https://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-In-paradise-survivors-20181202-htmlstory.html

Saturday, Dec. 8 >> Report that friendly fire killed sergeant adds another layer of tragedy to Thousand Oaks shooting

Thursday, Dec. 13 >> Many victims of California’s worst wildfire were elderly and died in or near their homes, new data show

Sunday, Dec. 30 >> Here’s how Paradise ignored warnings and became a deathtrap

Monday, Dec. 31 >> Friends took this photo at their favorite bar in Thousand Oaks. An hour later, the shooting started
www.latimes.com//la-me-borderline-shooting-heroism-20181231-htmlstory.html