

FLEEING DRAGONS

California Wildfires



by Kevin Reeve
onPoint Tactical

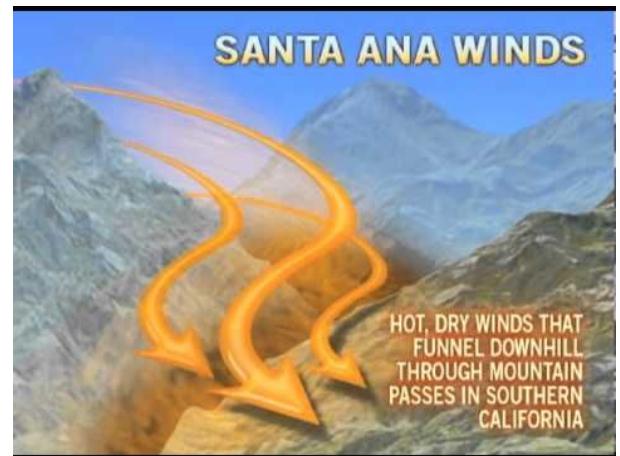
IT is 5:45 in the morning. The sound of sirens in the distance awakens you. You stumble upstairs to your home office. As you are climbing the stairs, the smell of smoke fills your nostrils. Looking west from the upper story window, you see an orange light across the horizon. While at least a mile away, you know how fast fires turn tragic. It is California's latest nightmare. A brush fire fed by Santa Ana winds.

It is the perfect confluence. The heavy drought-ending rains the previous spring have brought the grass back, and a long hot summer has dried it out. In fact it has dried everything out. Add to that the abundance of very flammable Eucalyptus trees, (Eucalyptus burns so hot it will void many wood stove warranties) and the stage is set. The canyons are narrow and steep, the roads windy and sometimes single lane. Firefighting in these conditions is challenging. Add to that the desire to build homes in a forested, natural setting.

“It does not do to leave a live dragon out of your calculations, if you live near him.” — J.R.R. Tolkien

The mountains around BelAir and Malibu are the setting for a perfect storm. Already hundreds of thousands of acres and hundreds of homes have been destroyed in other fires in Ventura County. Now it appears fire has come to your neck of the woods.

The Santa Ana winds can reach gale force strength. Sixty to 80 mph winds not only stoke the fire, it sweeps it along. A shift in the wind can cause a neighborhood to go up in minutes.



You wake your children, and bundle them into your car. You load a few things from the garage, lock up your home, hoping it won't be the last time you see it. And off you go. But how will you do with so little time? That depends upon your preparation.

I just came back from a week in LA. The big news is that there are lots of fires. The Skirball fire threatens BelAir and surrounding neighborhoods.

I did a private class in late October for a Hollywood producer and his wife. He works at one of the major studios and drives from and to their home in Bel-Air.

The class we did was called Urban Evacuation. I checked in with him on Wednesday evening and did he have a tale. He had to evacuate the morning the fire started. Fortunately, he had taken the training to heart. He had his “hot file” with critical papers ready to go. He had a week's food in a tote, and two 5-gallon water jugs, ready to

go. He had crated up his family photos the week before. So when the knock on the door from police calling for evacuation came, he was gone in five minutes.

One of the scenarios we had worked on were foot routes for his wife to follow to retrieve the kids from the local school. The problem is that the roads up there are very narrow, and quickly blocked with firefighting equipment making driving nearly impossible.

Because of the distance, we determined she and the kids would need a halfway resting place. She made arrangement with a friend along that route, that in the event of an evacuation order, she could use the friend's home as a stop-over. In an ironic twist, the friend's entire street burned, destroying multiple homes. Fortunately school was cancelled that morning.

You don't plan because you think the plan is actually going to come to pass; you plan because it gives you a set of operational principles from which to act.

A month prior to the fire we did the preparation which turned out to be so crucial. It is so weird that some of the routes we drove and mapped out were totally destroyed. A different route provided escape. Just as we predicted, the main routes were jammed, but this little known route was open.

As they were evacuating, Google Maps kept trying to send them down roads that were closed - because they were on fire. The Google algorithm plotted that route because it sensed no traffic. Yeah, because the road was about 12,000 °F. Don't underestimate how important paper maps and prior rehearsal are. The height of the crisis is not the time to prepare.

My friends had prepared and were able to not only evacuate safely, but they were prepared for the challenging days ahead. Fortunately, they were able to return safely to their home, which was still standing. Not everyone in the area could feel so relieved.

An evacuation plan should include the following:

Supplies and equipment packed and staged where they can easily be loaded. This includes, shelter, bedding, water, food, medicine, and critical papers.

A plan for various contingencies. Who will pick up the children from school? Where will everyone meet up if the evacuation is immediate? How and when will you communicate?

Evacuation routes mapped out and tried out. What seems like an obvious route will be just that. And everyone will be on it. How can you get to your destination using secondary, even tertiary routes? Drive them in advance so you know what the surroundings look like during both night and day. And turn off your GPS. If can get you into trouble. Use your paper maps. I carry DeLorme Atlas & Gazetteer for each state I am driving in. They provide incredibly detailed maps, including jeep roads and trails.

Have a destination already pre-determined. Being vague here will cause problems. Go visit your Aunt in the Central Valley, or camp in a distant park, but do not leave it up to chance. Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you are going, you might wind up someplace else.”

Leaving matters like this to chance, and then “winging it” is a bad idea. And bad ideas lead to bad situations. Be ready. It doesn’t take that much effort.

Kevin B. Reeve is the founder of onPoint Tactical, llc, a pioneer in the field of Urban Survival and Urban Escape & Evasion. onPoint Tactical trains professionals and select civilians in Scout skills, Off-grid medicine, and more. Visit us on FACEBOOK, TWITTER, INSTAGRAM and website. Copyright Kevin Reeve, onPoint Tactical 2017

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