



PENNI GLADSTONE

California's Monuments Men and Women

During wildfires and other natural disasters, art and artifacts often get left behind. Colonel Kirk Sturm and his team aim to rescue these cultural treasures.

BY KATYA CENDEL | MAR 27, 2023

It was 7:30 in the morning on November 8, 2018, and the sky was dark. Embers as long as five or six inches were falling around Mark Thorp's home in the small Northern California town of Paradise. A former firefighter, Thorp knew what the glowing debris meant—the flames were close.

As he loaded a go bag containing important family documents, photographs, and other irreplaceable items into his van, he fielded calls from his two places of employment: the Paradise Ridge Chamber of Commerce, where he is a business advocate, and the Gold Nugget Museum, where he is the executive director. A maintenance man at the Gold Nugget, Bob, wanted to know what to do with the museum's 25,000 items. There were Henry rifles—dating back to the 1800s—old vehicles, and Indigenous grinding pots. Officially opened in 1981, the museum had been collecting items related to life on “the Ridge” (as locals call the region) since 1965.

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Thorp wasn't too worried about the artifacts, believing the blaze would be stopped, as all the previous flare-ups on the Ridge in recent years had been. “We knew how prone we were to a [large-scale] wildfire in this case but never treated it as though it was a real thing,” he says.

Nevertheless, Thorp headed out of town, stopping by the chamber of commerce to retrieve the main server. As Thorp waited in traffic, Bob called again. The conflagration was approaching. Thorp told Bob to abandon the building. Bob and two helpers managed to retrieve a small number of items and load them into one of three personal vehicles at the site, prioritizing the historic toys on loan for an exhibit and the museum's computer terminals. Then Bob locked the doors and left.

It was three weeks before they were able to get back onto the Ridge. By then, Thorp knew the Gold Nugget was gone. [The Camp Fire](#), as it became known, had been the state's deadliest and most destructive wildfire, killing 85 people and destroying almost 19,000 homes, including Thorp's. It was the Paradise Police Department that called to tell Thorp that the museum's main structure at 502 Pearson Road was no more. The only item salvaged was an American flag hoisted on a flagpole outside. Everything else—including research material about life on the Ridge dating back to the 1850s—was gone. The museum staff had an emergency evacuation plan, says Thorp. "However, it doesn't prepare you for situations where you're looking at a mass evacuation of materials and personnel."



MARTHA MENDOZA/AP

The Gold Nugget Museum and its 25,000 objects were destroyed by the Camp Fire, which engulfed Paradise, California, in November 2018.

TO CONSERVE AND PROTECT

On California's Central Coast, the loss of the Gold Nugget got a military man with a state parks background thinking. During World War II, the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives program, made famous by the 2014 George Clooney movie [The Monuments Men](#), tasked soldiers with protecting cultural resources.

"What if we took that same concept and did it during emergencies in California?" says Colonel Kirk Sturm of the California State Guard, part of the National Guard.

In 2019, the United States Army and the Smithsonian Institution announced an initiative that would continue the legacy of the Monuments program by training and supporting soldiers charged with protecting cultural artifacts during armed conflict. Natural disasters and civilian unrest are another matter. In the United States, just 42 percent of cultural institutions had an emergency/disaster plan as of 2014, according to a 2019 survey conducted by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the main source of federal support for U.S. libraries and museums. That is because many lack resources, or, more precisely, money, says Stacy Bowe, the training program manager at the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative.

The idea that the millions of artifacts stored in California's thousands of archives, museums, and other heritage institutions could be destroyed by fires, floods, earthquakes, or even civil unrest troubled Sturm. In addition to his military service, Sturm has served as a division chief for California's Department of Parks and Recreation and as a museum director-superintendent of the Hearst Castle State Historic Monument. When artifacts are destroyed, he explains, more than just paintings or documents are lost. The stories of a segment of society are also erased. "Those voices are silenced," says Sturm.

The intrigue and daring of the movie version, in which the program's recruits track down stolen artwork, in reality is overshadowed by acronyms and policy. In his home office in Los Osos, Sturm, who is 68, keeps not priceless antiquities but mugs filled with pens—five of them. Data is where he started his project, first learning the number of heritage institutions in California—4,000 to 6,000—then working with state agencies to find out what their responsibilities were in regard to heritage-resource protection. He discovered that while there were limited efforts in place, there was no uniform action plan.

Sturm and his team turned to Barclay Ogden, a retired UC Berkeley Library director of preservation who had helped develop the library's preservation program, which in turn led to the creation of other conservation labs in the UC system. Ogden saw that the military can do what civilians like him cannot—protect artifacts during emergencies rather than just try to salvage them after the fact. Called the Heritage Emergency Response Team, the program is managed by the California Military Department, which oversees the California State Guard, and it addresses everything from evacuation and salvage to security. Sturm hopes that in the future HERT will serve as a model for other states, starting a national trend of guardsmen and -women protecting heritage sites during disasters.

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Colonel Kirk Sturm, center, of the California State Guard, spearheads the HERT program, which was inspired in part by the 2014 George Clooney movie "The Monuments Men."

FIRST RESPONDERS

The first test was not a disaster but civil unrest. In the early-morning mist on the first Saturday of October 2022, a team of security officers in tactical vests, with their 9-millimeter pistols drawn, quietly approached Rutledge Museum in San Luis Obispo. Lookouts positioned themselves on each side of the small single-story building. A team of four entered.

"Military police!" A flashlight shone in the dark corners of the one-room museum. "Clear!" The quartet moved toward the bathrooms at the end of the space. They banged open stall doors, pistols aimed, searching for the people who had been targeting the museum and harassing its staff since Monday.

On Friday night, the protesters had escalated things. They took over Rutledge's IT system. Then they used it to turn on the sprinklers, damaging the Indigenous artifacts on loan to the museum.

Cherity Bacon, tribal archivist for the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians, explains the significance of such objects, using handwoven baskets as an example. The last prolific basket weavers lived four or five generations ago, and their works are irreplaceable. Bacon says that according to the tribe's beliefs, "baskets are considered ancestors. They're organic living beings in their own sense."

Once the museum was secured, military personnel armed with Sharpies and packing materials instead of pistols took over—bubble wrapping and boxing.

"Ready to go, let's go," a HERT member called as he placed a lid on a box and moved it outside.

By 11 a.m., all the artifacts had been evacuated. The military police had taken off their vests and put down their pistols.

There were no protesters inside.

There never were.

The pistols were plastic, what the military calls "rubber ducks." The museum was a building at Camp San Luis Obispo, a California National Guard training facility. The event was just an exercise to prove HERT was ready for the real thing.

While the core HERT team numbers about 20, it can draw on two dozen or so subject experts as well as a pool of hundreds from the state guard and volunteers. About 70 personnel, from as far south as San Diego and as far north as Sacramento, participated in the Rutledge Museum scenario.

The closest HERT has come to the real thing happened in August 2021 while Sturm was hosting a training inspired by the Smithsonian Cultural Rescue Initiative. The Caldor Fire was raging near Lake Tahoe, and Leslie Hartzell, chief of the California Department of Parks and Recreation's Cultural Resources Division, asked HERT for advice on evacuating the Hellman-Ehrman Mansion in Sugar Pine Point State Park. HERT members were ready to deploy, but the local park staff managed to remove some artifacts, and in the end, the building was not burned. Nevertheless, Hartzell is grateful for the line of communication that was established with HERT and for how Sturm is preparing the guard for such emergencies. "This is a really clear mission: to have the California military trained and ready to deploy."

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HERT artifact-team members safeguard and prepare to evacuate Indigenous artifacts during the fall 2022 training exercise.

IT TAKES A TEAM

Military, law enforcement, and history backgrounds are common among HERT members. California State Guard chief warrant officer 4 Mark Denger, age 63, is a fifth-generation Californian who also brings firsthand experience to the team. In 1995, he was working as an archivist at a museum in

Southern California when El Niño caused major flooding across the state. A colleague at the museum who was in the state guard asked for Denger's help at Sacramento's California Citizen Soldier Museum, which had been inundated with water. When Denger arrived, most of the deluge was gone, but "devastation was everywhere," he says. "Mold was on the walls, mold was in the bookshelves." Historical military logs and record books dating back to the 1850s were waterlogged. Military uniforms and leather shoes were ruined.

Denger helped the museum's staff methodically remove artifacts and sift through them to figure out what was most valuable and what could be saved. It was a tedious process that stretched over months. Denger estimates that they were able to salvage just 12 percent of the holdings that had been affected. A year later, he joined the California State Guard, and he now serves with the Military Museum Command, which is responsible for preserving California's military heritage.

The separation between whom HERT helps and who participates in HERT is not always clear. Jason Espinoza, UC Riverside's former director of emergency management, began collaborating with the program's team after asking HERT to advise him on the school's special collections in October 2020; a museum there had suffered minor flood damage earlier in the year.

The university's rare items include the [Keystone-Mast Collection](#), the largest assemblage of stereoscopic (3-D) photographs and negatives in the world, which is housed at UCR Arts, an off-campus photography museum and contemporary arts center. Before the HERT visit, UCR Arts director of collections Leigh Gleason had an emergency plan in place. The Keystone-Mast's glass-plate negatives are stored in blue file cabinet–like structures on seismic base isolators, which dissipate the forces generated by earthquakes. But evacuation in the event of a fire would be extremely difficult, because the cabinets weigh several tons and are in the basement, and to expect the minimal museum staff (some of whom are older and live far away) to move them in an emergency wasn't feasible.

"It's one thing to put something on your priority salvage list; it's entirely another to think about the logistics of actually evacuating it if it needed to be evacuated," says Gleason.

Other significant holdings include one of the original *Spider-Man* comic books and one of the largest science fiction collections in the world, which are housed at the campus library. Like UCR Arts, the library has a disaster-recovery plan, says Espinoza. "But they don't have the equipment or the resources—financial or human—to be able to do that. And that's where HERT would come in and supplement."

The need for artifact rescue becomes obvious following disasters and near misses. During the 2018 Carr Fire, Parks and Recreation's Hartzell was worried about wagons.

"We got the collections out of the museum and the other buildings, and I was like, 'What about the wheeled vehicles?'" she says. "We were like, 'We can't handle it. We just don't have the resources.'"

Stagecoaches, wagons, and other vehicles at Shasta State Historic Park had been carefully stored by a specialist. Getting them out without harming them was going to be very challenging.

HERT did not yet exist, but Hartzell knew Sturm by reputation. After the danger had passed, she called and asked him what the military could do. They talked over several scenarios. "Could the wagons roll?" "Would they be able to wrap them in fire retardant?" Sturm explained that the state guard had vehicles and equipment that would be able to lift and transport the wagons or help move other valuable objects in a more efficient manner.

RECOVER AND REBUILD

For disaster survivors, the holdings of local museums often represent what it means to be part of a community. Saving just a portion of the objects can preserve this connection. Denger believes that rescuing even 10 percent of a collection is worthwhile because then "you've got something to come back and rebuild."

In Paradise, three years after the fire that inspired HERT's founding, Thorp was finally able to examine the few burned items that remained at the Gold Nugget. Some stone mortars and pestles used by Indigenous people. Porcelain doll faces. They will probably be part of the Camp Fire exhibit the rebuilt museum is planning.

Among the items on display will be the thumb-size C-hook that failed at a PG&E transmission tower and thereby started the fire. The C-hook, according to Thorp, cost less than a quarter when it was purchased in 1919 and caused more than \$16 billion in devastation. It destroyed the museum. Now it will help rebuild it.

From his own work in state parks and at Hearst Castle, Sturm knows that the devastation at Paradise is about more than just monetary loss. "Those artifacts, and those papers, represent California," he says. •

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