

San Rafael's volunteer fire photographer fires off last shots



Photo 1- San Rafael fire commissioner, is stepping down from his unofficial role as in-house photographer. His images have been used for training, investigation and public awareness. (Robert Tong/Marin Independent Journal)

By Matthew Pera, IJ correspondent

Hearing a buzz from the pager clipped to his belt, Larry Luckham pulls off his button-down Hawaiian shirt to reveal a San Rafael Fire Department T-shirt he's wearing underneath. He's always prepared.

Quickly, Luckham slides into his fire gear, slips on his boots and hops into his truck, which is equipped with emergency lights and radios along with cameras and other investigation tools. Within minutes, he's driving toward a house burning on Marina Court Drive. He can see flames as he approaches.

On site, Luckham takes photographs and careful notes — a process he's undergone dozens of times while working as the San Rafael Fire Department's volunteer photographer and fire investigator. But the



Photo 2Luckham's status with the fire department has allowed him close access to fires in progress. (Photo by Larry Luckham/Photo 50)

drill feels different during this house fire in early March; it's the last fire Luckham will investigate.

The 75-year-old fire department volunteer announced last week he's stepped down from his role after nearly a decade of service.

"The fire ground is a place for men and women in superb physical and mental condition, even those who are not actively pulling hose into flame," Luckham said in an email to the IJ. "At 75, I'm finding that some of the little physical annoyances I was always able to ignore could leave me less than fully able to respond to the unforeseen at a fire."

Luckham, who grew up in Los Angeles and has lived in San Rafael for more than 30 years, has been involved with the city's fire prevention and suppression efforts since he was appointed a fire commissioner in 2007 by Al Boro, the city's mayor at the time.

When he interviewed for the volunteer position, Luckham told Boro he planned to take a hands-on approach to the commissioner role.

"I said, 'If you want someone to just go to board meetings, find somebody else. If you appoint me, I'm going to make an actual job out of it,'" he said.

Fire commissioners meet monthly to discuss fire-related issues in San Rafael and play an advisory role in the city's firefighting efforts.

But Luckham had other ideas about the duties of a fire commissioner. During a conversation with Christopher Gray, San Rafael's fire chief, Luckham stated his desire to provide additional, volunteer help for the fire department. Gray suggested Luckham use his skills as a photographer — a hobby he first took to while serving in the U.S. Navy as a teenager — to help document the department's work.

"I thought that was a good way to document history," Luckham said.

He requested his own pager, which would buzz him during service calls, and began using his camera equipment to document fire suppression efforts.

VALUABLE TOOLS

According to Gray, Luckham's photographs quickly became helpful for training and review purposes at the fire department. The fire commissioner shot stills, videos and drone footage, which has all been used to help hone firefighters' skills. Luckham also created annual photo books, set up websites for the fire department and shared his photography with local media outlets and community members, according to Gray.

Soon after he began documenting the fire department's work, Luckham's photography experience and professional equipment became an even bigger asset to San Rafael. The fire commissioner began working alongside Capt. Bradley Mark, the department's fire investigator at the time. Mark, who was using a simple point-and-shoot camera to document his investigations, showed Luckham the basics of investigative photography. Luckham quickly began shooting with his own cameras for Mark's investigations.

When Mark retired, Luckham filled his shoes, acting as a volunteer investigator for the fire department in addition to his photographic documentation efforts. In order to take

on that role, Luckham completed training courses through California's Office of the State Fire Marshal and became certified as an investigator. He paid for the courses himself and continued working with the fire department on a volunteer basis.

During his tenure as a photographer and investigator, Luckham said he was always doing what felt natural to him.

"The motto of the San Rafael Fire Department is, 'We're here to help.' That's been my personal motto for most of my life," he said. "Being helpful, and being of service, has been important to me since I was a kid."

EARLY INFLUENCE

Luckham lived in a group home with his two younger brothers during much of his childhood in Los Angeles. He said it was there that he learned the value of service. The underpaid, overworked staff members who worked for the organization that ran the group home, he said, were there to help the children who lived there.

"I looked up to those people who were really dedicated," he said. "I could see the value in that, even at a very young age."

Now, more than six decades after he left that home, Luckham is reluctant to give up his dedication to service.

Though he describes himself as too old to consistently and safely respond to fires, he's not leaving the San Rafael Fire Department entirely — at least not yet. He plans remain on the Fire Commission and continue to take photographs for the department at events and ceremonies.

"Larry has done an incredible job, and I couldn't be more appreciative and proud of his work," Gray said. "It's bittersweet, but I guess I knew this day was going to come."