

America's first responders,
California Task Force Two goes
to the rescue wherever disaster
strikes around the world.

By Vince Beiser

L.A.



NEPAL.



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Gerald Gonzales stared out the helicopter window at the devastation below. He'd been a California firefighter for nearly 25 years, but he'd never seen anything like this. The late-afternoon sun shone out of a cloudless sky, but the air was thick with dust thrown up by the massive landslides that had choked off all the roads leading into the valley beneath him, high in the Himalayas. The villages dotted along the valley had been hit by the earthquake that struck Nepal on April 25 — and now, three weeks later, they had been hammered again, just hours ago, by an aftershock almost as powerful as the first quake. Gonzales could make out hundreds of collapsed buildings, cars crushed by fallen boulders, and knots of people waving frantically at the copter.

Gonzales was one of three Los Angeles County firefighters in the military UH-1Y Huey helicopter, along with two Nepali soldiers and a crew of four U.S. Marines. Forty-four years old, a native of Southern California with sleepy brown eyes and thinning black hair under his yellow helmet, Gonzales had responded to everything from multicar freeway pile-ups to third-alarm fires back home.

PREVIOUS PAGES

The Del Valle Fire Training Center in Los Angeles County, where the task force trains in preparation for catastrophes (left)

Photograph by J Bennett Fitts

Kathmandu after the earthquake struck on April 25 (right)

Photograph by Eduardo Soteras Jalil

This is a whole new level, he thought as the copter descended into the valley.

The Huey touched down in a rocky field, half-grown cornstalks flailing in the rotor wash. A crowd of Nepalis, many of them barefoot, some injured, were already rushing toward it. They were from Singati, a village just down the road, where dozens had died in the two quakes. The firefighters jumped out, spreading their arms while the Nepali soldiers shouted at the civilians to stay back. “We can take three!” the Marine pilot shouted to firefighter Dan McKeen, a lean, long-limbed 45-year-old former surfer.

With the Nepali soldiers’ help, McKeen, Gonzales, and the third firefighter, Matt Prasch, cordoned off a patch of grass with flagging tape and set about triaging the injured. Three girls seemed most severely hurt; one had a head wound that had left her face swollen and bruised. McKeen turned to hustle them toward the still-running Huey and saw that an elderly Nepali man had sneaked aboard in the confusion. Without a word, McKeen picked him up and carried him out. Minutes after the copter had landed, it rose into the air again, carrying the three girls and the Marines. “Make sure you come back for us!” McKeen called after them, only half joking.

McKeen, Gonzales, and Prasch are members of an elite search-and-rescue team known as California Task Force Two. Composed of firefighters, doctors, and engineers, the task force is sort of the Seal Team Six of disaster aid. When the biggest catastrophes hit anywhere in the world, these men and women leave their station houses, hospital wards, and office cubicles and rush to a sprawling base in northern Los Angeles County. Within hours they are wading through flooded streets, digging through the rubble of collapsed buildings, finding and rescuing survivors. The engineers scramble to determine the safest way to access damaged buildings. The physicians tend to the injured, sometimes while they’re still trapped, working on whatever body parts are accessible.

California Task Force Two is one of only two such teams in the United States. The federal government has appointed it and Task Force One of Fairfax County, Virginia, as America’s official first responders to international disasters. Fifty-seven members of each task force were sent to Nepal after the April 25 quake, operating jointly as part of a team mobilized by the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance.

More villagers kept streaming into the field where the Californians had set up their triage area. They treated those they could with the limited medical equipment they had brought, writing numbers on the villagers’ hands with Sharpies to indicate their order for evacuation. But the firefighters’ real expertise — rescue — was needed in the village, where residents said people were trapped inside fallen buildings.

Within ten minutes, another Huey brought in three of the Virginia firefighters. After a brief discussion, a squad was chosen from both teams. The men shouldered a pick, a sledgehammer, and a few other tools they’d been able to bring and headed for the village. Locals pointed them to a massive, ragged heap of shattered concrete, wood, and duck-egg-blue plaster. Hours ago, it had been a four-story building. Someone was trapped in there, the villagers said.

To get to the collapse site, the firefighters had to cross a spindly metal footbridge over a fast-running river, then clamber over piles of debris, lugging their tools and backpacks filled with food, sleeping bags, and other essentials to get them through the next 24 hours. Under his regulation blue canvas jacket and T-shirt, Gonzales was soaked with sweat by the time he reached what was left of the building.

One of the Virginia firefighters crawled into a small opening in the pile and shouted, "Hello!" From somewhere underneath those thousands of pounds of rubble, a voice called weakly back.

IN 1985, after an earthquake jolted Mexico City, the United States government for the first time dispatched a group of firefighters to help. Building on that experience, the Foreign Disaster Assistance office and its counterparts in several other countries established a global network of search-and-rescue teams that could be called up to respond to catastrophes around the world. The Federal Emergency Management Agency soon set up a similar system for domestic calamities. The 1989 Loma Prieta quake in San Francisco was the turning point. "Not only did they have an earthquake, they had fires, building collapses, freeway collapses," says Dewey Perks, a Virginia firefighter who serves as the liaison between the Foreign Disaster Assistance office and the response teams. "Most fire departments had basic rescue capability, but that had to be expanded to bring in engineers, doctors, dog teams, and so on."

Larry Collins, a short but beefy 54-year-old with a square, dimpled jaw and undisciplined hair, is one of the founders of the Los Angeles County Fire Department's search-and-rescue program and of the California task force. He got motivated after he nearly drowned saving a fisherman who was swept from a rocky reef off the Palos Verdes shore during a storm in 1982. "I've been swimming since I was 2 years old, so I felt comfortable taking off my boots and diving in," says Collins. "But I kept getting shoved under the water and pounded onto the rocks by the waves. I was that close to letting him go." A couple of other firefighters finally succeeded in throwing him a rope, and Collins pulled himself and the fisherman out. Soon after, he began lobbying the department to set up special training for water rescues.

Collins is now a battalion chief and one of the world's foremost experts in finding and rescuing people trapped in every imaginable circumstance. He has rappelled headfirst to pull out a man stuck like a cork at the bottom of an 80-foot

PRASCH PULLED ASIDE A PIECE OF CONCRETE AND UNCOVERED A MASS OF BLACK STUFF. COULD IT BE SOMEONE'S HAIR? THE BLACK STUFF TWITCHED.

borehole, hauled a baby and mother out of a flood-swollen river, led the five-hour extraction of a woman pinned beneath five stories of debris by the Haiti earthquake, and worked the aftermath of train wrecks, plane crashes, 9/11, Hurricane Katrina, and the Japanese tsunami. His two-volume book on emergency rescue is widely read by firefighters across the country. He will talk for as long as you will listen about the details of historic disasters and epic rescues. I was driving around Los Angeles with him once when he stopped for a red light that was some 30 feet away, beneath a freeway overpass. We were close to where the freeway had collapsed in the 1994



An emergency medical clinic that task force members helped set up at the Kathmandu airport

Northridge quake, Collins told me. He prefers not to take chances.

Collins grew up in Simi Valley and signed up for an apprentice firefighting program while he was still in high school. At that point, he was still considering becoming a novelist. “I was very ambivalent because I didn’t want to cut my hair,” he says. “I was a little surf rat with hair past my shoulders.” He wound up joining the department at 19. Many task force members I’ve talked with come from similar backgrounds: raised in some unglamorous but comfortable Southern California town or suburb; parents firefighters, military, or government workers of some kind; became a firefighter soon after graduating high school; drawn to rescue work by a mixture of altruism and thrill seeking.

There are outliers, of course. The team used to include a volunteer dog handler named Ron Weckbacher, whose day job was managing investment portfolios with a major financial firm. Or there’s Matt Walmsley. Small but with Popeye forearms and biceps, Walmsley has been a rodeo bull rider, an oil-rig worker, and a Marine attack-jet pilot. “I have a propensity for doing stupid s--- that seems exciting,” he says. In the mid-1990s, now a father of four, he tried to move into a more stable occupation; he wound up working at a Home Depot but was barely getting by. “We were living out of a van,” he says. “I thought about becoming a chiropractor or going to law school.” At age 42, he managed to get hired by the L.A. County Fire Department and made the task force a few years later.

One October morning a couple of years ago, in the scrubby hills north of Los Angeles, Collins and I rolled up in his Chevy Suburban alongside a huge pile of shattered concrete, steel bars, broken furniture, and battered household appliances. A squad of firefighters atop the simulated collapsed building were in the fourth hour of an effort to free a victim trapped in the debris — a live volunteer, gamely

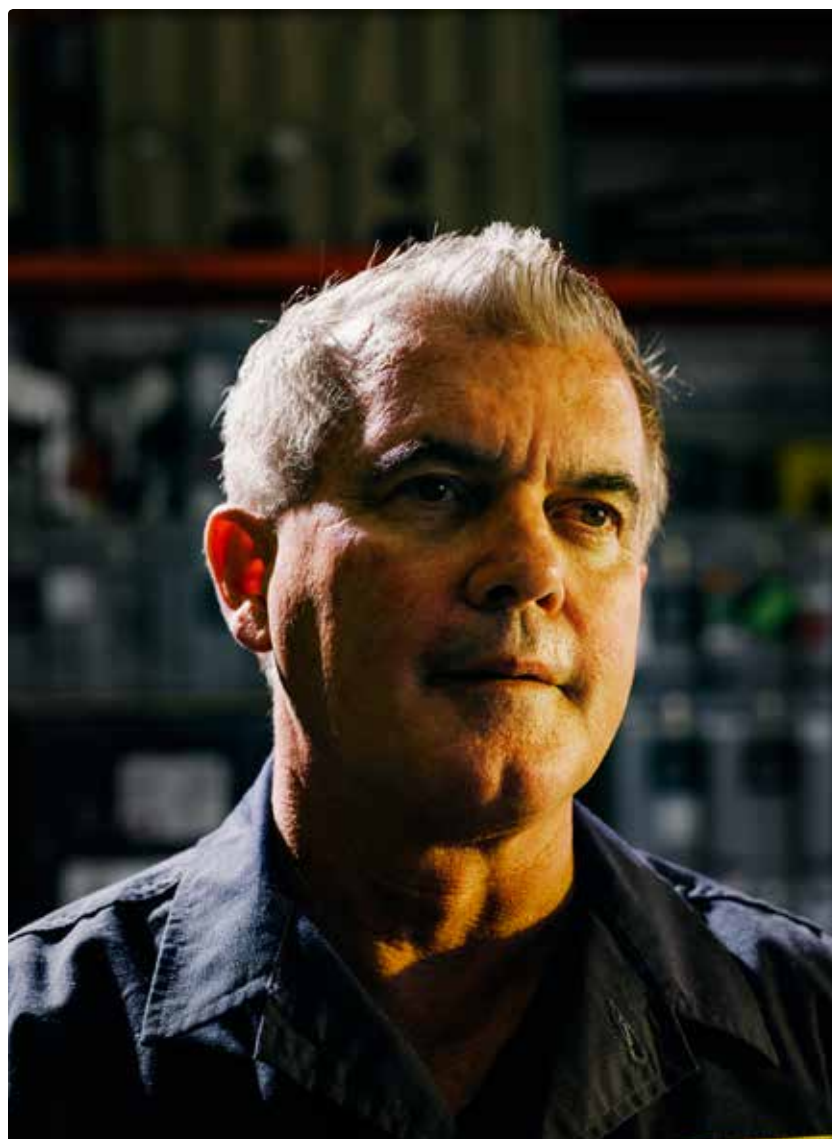
BELOW
Battalion Chief
Larry Collins, one
of the founders
of California Task
Force Two

OPPOSITE PAGE
Gerald Gonzales,
Matt Prasch, and
Dan McKeen, part
of the team that
performed the
rescue in Singati
Photographs by
João Canziani

crying out for help. They’d pinpointed his location by probing the wreckage using a flexible pole with a tiny camera on one end and a screen on the other, and they were now crowbarring and sawing their way toward him.

The firefighters had an arsenal of jackhammers, concrete cutters, and other demolition gear a few yards away but were working slowly with hand tools to make sure they didn’t accidentally bring more wreckage crashing down. Learning when to use which tools and how to cut one object without making another move are key skills. No California task force member has been killed during deployments, but many have been injured. “How’s it going?” Collins called to the firefighters. “It’s just a grunt fest,” replied one of the squad, sweating under his helmet and layers of protective gear. “All right, dude, have fun!” Collins said with a grin and upraised thumb, and drove off to see how things were progressing down the road at the next rubble heap.

The occasion was a training exercise at the 160-acre Del Valle Fire Training Center, a sort of emergency-response theme park. The \$20 million center is set up to re-create just about any calamity Los Angeles County firefighters might encounter. It includes several mountainous piles of reconfigurable rubble and a 500-foot stretch of freeway with an overturned tanker truck that can shoot flames and leak tinted-water “chemicals” while hidden speakers blare sounds of traffic and screaming victims. There’s also a warehouse equipped with hidden flamethrowers, theatrical lighting, swirling fog, and the simulated stench of poisonous gases.



Exercises at Del Valle are just one facet of the intensive training required to be on the task force. The job entails a functional knowledge of engineering, physics, materials science, seismology, and medicine. You have to take about two months of classes — unpaid, on your own time — before you can even apply. You need to learn how to shore up a tunnel while you're digging it to keep it from collapsing, how to scoop someone out of the water while dangling from a helicopter, how to use a jackhammer inside a confined space.

"The training can be pretty miserable. You're thinking, *Why are they doing this to me?*" says Jeff Britton, a veteran task force member. "But when I went to Haiti" — after the 2010 earthquake — "it all made sense. If you can put up with the training, a deployment is just another day at the office."

MCKEEN CIRCLED THE collapse site in Singati, looking for the best entry points, pausing to make sure a body half buried in the wreckage was dead. He and the other firefighters decided to attack from two directions. One group would try to break through the pancaked concrete floors from above. Nepali soldiers from a nearby military base and volunteers from the village would help to clear the debris away, but it would still be a long slog. All the firefighters had with them were hand tools, a battery-powered hammer drill, and a rebar cutter. Meanwhile, the second group would work from the side, tunneling between the slabs. That might be faster, but it was also far more dangerous. Aftershocks were still roiling the ground. The firefighters had to scurry out

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of the tunnel several times when the shaking threatened to bring the wreckage down on top of them.

Only one firefighter at a time could fit in the tunnel; Prash's turn came up after about an hour. He inchwormed his way to the end of the 10-foot tunnel and then lay on his belly, cutting through broken furniture and bookcases with a cordless electric saw,



MCKEEN CHECKED
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COLUMN.

pulling out chunks of debris by hand. After a while, he pulled aside a piece of concrete and uncovered a mass of black stuff. It was hard to tell in the light of his headlamp, but could it be someone's hair? "Hello!" Prash called. The black stuff twitched. Hair, all right. The top of a woman's head. The woman moaned. Prash reassured her as best he could in English. He didn't know any Nepali; his only trips abroad were a couple of vacations in Mexico and Jamaica. Inching forward, he slipped a bottle of water to her through an opening next to her head, then slithered back out to tell the team.

By now night had fallen. McKeen took over. He belly-crawled in and pulled away enough debris to be able to see most of the tiny hollow where the woman lay. She looked to be in her 40s and was on her left side, wearing a pink-and-red sari covered in dirt, debris, and blood. She wasn't moving. McKeen checked the pulse in her neck. She stirred and pointed at her left leg; it was pinned by a piece of concrete column. McKeen studied the column. If it was still connected to the floor, getting it off her would be difficult. But it seemed to have broken loose. Only a heap of bricks and broken concrete held it in place. McKeen stretched his arm into the hollow and pulled one brick away, then another. He felt the column loosen. He worked away at the bricks for the next quarter hour, until finally, with a heave, he rolled the column off the woman's leg.

As carefully as he could, McKeen dragged her through the jagged tunnel to the outside. She was too exhausted to even lift her head. Laying her down on the rubble, the firefighters set up an IV to give her hydrating fluids and sodium bicarbonate to counteract "crush syndrome," aka "death by rescue." When you have serious pressure on an arm or leg for many hours, potassium and lactic acid build up in the muscles. Once that pressure is removed, those toxins can rush to the heart, killing you.

The woman's blood pressure was so low the men couldn't find a vein. Their only option was to bore a catheter into her shin. McKeen held her head and



arms, expecting her to squirm in pain, but she didn't flinch. *She's either really tough or really out of it*, he thought. One of the Virginia guys had found a door that would serve as a stretcher. With the Nepali soldiers helping, they set out to carry her back to the triage area. The helicopters would be back in the morning to evacuate her to a hospital, if she survived the night.

THE MACHINERY OF international disaster response lurched fitfully into gear after the earthquake struck Nepal. On April 25, around 3 a.m. Washington, D.C., time, Dewey Perks was awakened by a call from an Office of Foreign Disaster

The task force helped clear sections of Kathmandu.

Photograph by Eduardo Soteras Jalil

Assistance official who relayed word from the State Department about the temblor. Perks alerted the Virginia and California teams.

By dawn, every member of Task Force Two had received a text message telling them to get ready. There are about 210 men and women on the team, although usually no more than



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72 are ever deployed at once. To make sure there are no gaps, the task force keeps at least three qualified people for each position — hazmat, communications, logistics, medic, and so on — on the roster at all times. Within hours, they had begun gathering at their staging ground in Pacoima, an industrial area of the San Fernando Valley. The task force stores some 60 tons of gear in a warehouse there, all in crates stacked nearly to the ceiling, ready to be thrown onto a transport plane at a moment's notice. Randomly distributed souvenirs decorate the warehouse walls: a hand-painted HOTEL CALIFORNIA sign from their camp in New Zealand (earthquake, 2011), a Haitian flag (earthquake, 2010), a street sign from New Orleans (Hurricane Katrina, 2005), WELCOME HOME signs painted by their kids (all of the above).

The rescue equipment runs from thermal-imaging cameras and listening devices sensitive enough to pick up the sound of a fingernail scratching on concrete to sledgehammers, axes, and crowbars. The idea is for the team to be self-sufficient, ready to operate in virtually any conditions. They bring their own food, water systems, shelters, generators, cold-weather gear, and medical supplies. "You could drop us in the middle of the desert for two weeks, and we'd be fine," says Brian

Kross, a 6-foot-7-inch, 300-pound task force member who used to oversee logistics at Pacoima.

Sending both task forces to Nepal cost the federal government \$2.5 million. It's a sizable outlay to save a handful of lives. But sending American firefighters to the world's biggest disasters also pays back at home, says Collins: "You can't buy this kind of real-world training. Our level of readiness and skill is way higher than it was 20 years ago because of all these deployments. If your kid gets trapped in a collapsed school next week, we've got people that will know exactly what to do." It's also a way of banking international goodwill. Foreign search-and-rescue teams have come to the United States at least twice, after 9/11 and Katrina. "We like to think, *We're the U.S., we don't need anyone's help*," Collins says. "But the truth is, when the big one hits in L.A. or Seattle or wherever, we will."

"You could save more lives by spending the money on hygiene or vaccinations in developing countries," says Dr. Atilla Uner, a civilian with the task force who normally works the emergency room at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. "But that's not human nature. Human nature is, when your neighbor gets buried, you get on the rock pile and dig him out. No one wants to live in a world where you leave your neighbor under the rock pile."

All day long, the Pacoima warehouse was busy with firefighters in blue cargo pants and T-shirts signing in, getting their vital signs checked, cracking jokes, and loading gear onto pallets. Before the team could go anywhere, though, they had to wait — and wait. First, the government of Nepal needed to formally request U.S. assistance. Then the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, the White House, and the American embassy in Nepal had to assess needs, decide which resources should be sent, and figure out a way to get them there.

Every few hours, word would filter to the firefighters that the decision still hadn't been made on whether they would be deployed. As evening fell, Battalion Chief John Boyle, tapped as task force leader for this mission, gathered the team to tell them the Virginia task force would be leaving the next day, but there had been no decision yet for California. Eventually, they pulled out dozens of cots and bedded down for the night right in the warehouse. It wasn't until late the next day that they got the order to head out to an Air Force base in Riverside, where a C-17 Globemaster III plane was waiting for them.

The Nepal earthquake was catastrophic by any measure. It killed more than 8,000 people and destroyed half a million homes. But because the epicenter was many miles from Kathmandu, the damage wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. Nepali and international aid officials had been braced for a Haiti-scale apocalypse, with tens of thousands of deaths.

The task force was busy for the first few days, searching collapse sites in the capital. Their six search dogs clambered over the debris, sniffing for the scent of a live human. On April 30, a few members of the combined team helped a Nepali police crew pull a 15-year-old boy out of the ruins of a hotel. That, however, turned out to be the only rescue either task force could claim any credit for in Kathmandu. By the end of that day, in fact, they had cleared their assigned area of the capital, having found only bodies.

The Californians were supposed to go next to a mountain town called Rasuwa on U.S. Marine helicopters. But the copters didn't show up for three days. When they did arrive, they were assigned to other relief teams. The California and Virginia task forces were left stuck at their base, a miniature village of pavilion-style tents furnished with yellow and black plastic equipment crates, set up in a U.S. government compound in central Kathmandu.

To fill their time, task force members organized training seminars, getting

The 160-acre Del Valle Fire Training Center can recreate just about any emergency that Los Angeles County firefighters might face.

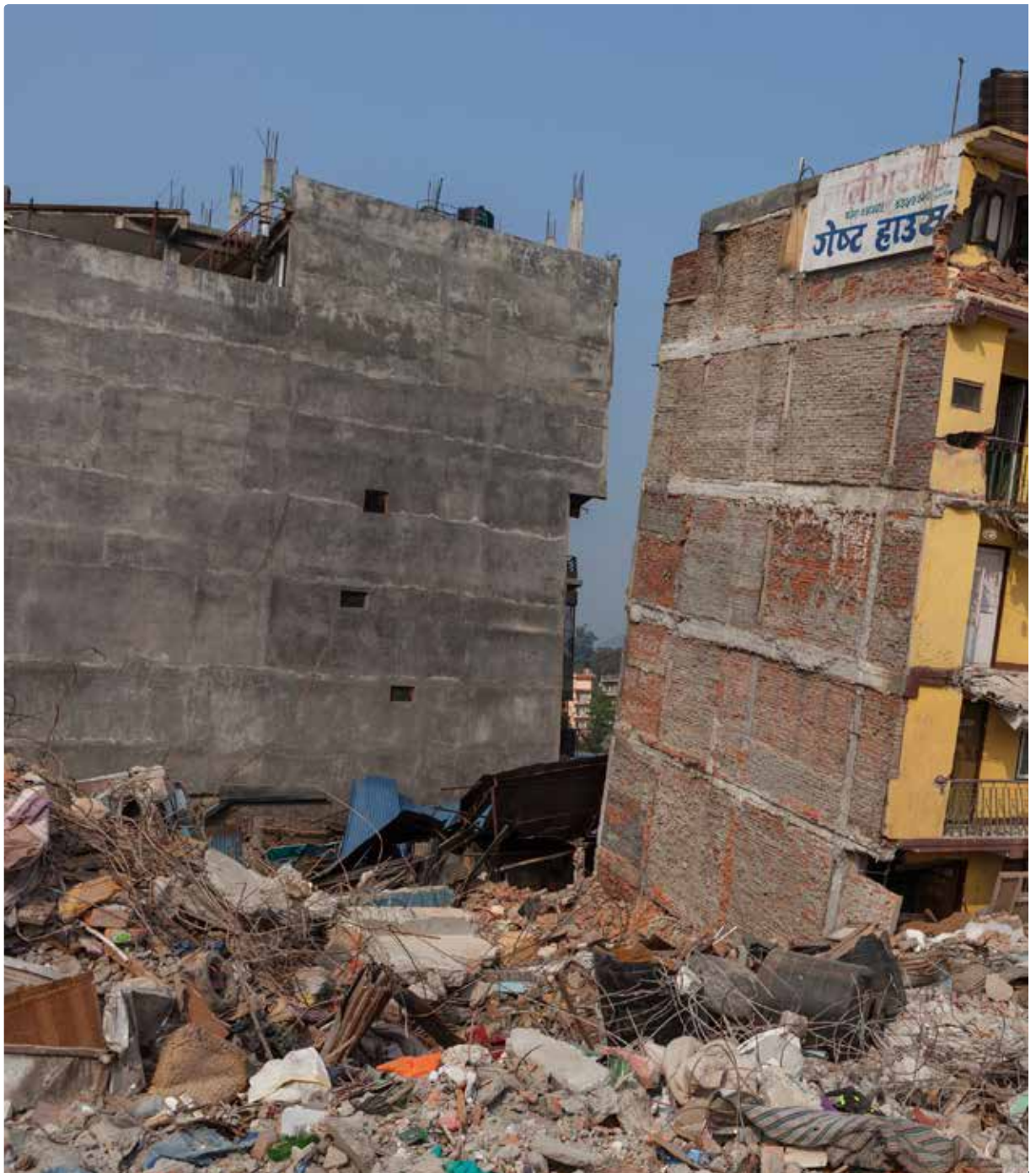
Photograph by
J Bennett Fitts



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PRESSURE WAS SO LOW THE MEN
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THEIR ONLY OPTION WAS TO
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pointers on how to tag dead bodies or quickly set protruding bones. They repaired a brick wall the quake had knocked down in the compound. The engineers volunteered to inspect quake-damaged buildings. Everyone hung out in camp chairs, leafing through *Hot Rod* and *Outside* magazines, FaceTiming spouses back home, chatting about places to take the kids camping, the Pacquiao–Mayweather fight, and the lousiness of the military-style MREs they had to eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

California Task Force Two wasn't supposed to be in Nepal on May 12. It had been ordered home a week earlier but hadn't been able to either get a lift from the military or charter a flight. It was the only major search-and-rescue team left in the country when the ground heaved again, killing at least 150 more people. "We did more in the 48 hours after the aftershock than we did the previous two weeks," Britton says. He and several other members helped set up a treatment center at Kathmandu's main airport.



Several squads rushed out to search newly collapsed buildings in the capital. A few were sent up into the mountains.

AT THEIR OPEN-AIR triage area, Gonzales, McKeen, and Prash settled in for a long night. As it grew colder, villagers helped them build a fire to keep the rescued woman warm and brought hay for her to lie on. The woman's son appeared and stayed with her, helping the firefighters change her bandages and clean up her vomit and diarrhea. "I was scared she was going to die," Gonzales told me. Aftershocks shook the ground again and again. Several times, the men heard boulders crashing to the ground farther down the valley. They were up for most of the night, tending to the woman and the other injured villagers who were waiting to be evacuated.

The Marines had promised they'd be back at first light. When the sun came over the mountains around 5 a.m., the firefighters started packing, expecting

Because the epicenter was miles from Kathmandu, damage to the city was substantial but not as bad as initially feared.

Photograph by Eduardo Soteras Jalil

to be picked up at any minute. Sure enough, a helicopter soon came flying over the valley toward them — and kept right on going. (The men later found out that many of the available helicopters were being commandeered to search for a missing Marine chopper that had crashed, killing all eight people aboard.) Eventually, a Nepali army copter showed up and evacuated the rescued woman and two other critically injured people.

That copter landed outside a military camp some 30 miles away, in a field strewn with dozens of injured evacuees and their relatives. Dr. Uner and five others from the American team had been working there since dawn. They'd spent the night at the camp after fruitlessly searching collapsed buildings in the nearby town of Charikot for survivors and had awakened to find copter after copter unloading patients and leaving them in the field. Uner handed out pain medications, bandaged wounds, and set a few splints, but he couldn't do much — he had only a backpack full of supplies that he'd brought in case one of the team members got injured.

Somewhere along the way, he was surprised to find a woman with a recently inserted catheter in her shin. She was weak, with some broken bones, but her pulse and respiration were good, and that she'd survived the night augured well; Uner was confident about her chances. After a couple of hours, a big Indian military helicopter evacuated the woman, along with most of the other injured. Neither Uner nor her rescuers found out what happened to her, or even her name.

Soon another civilian helicopter landed and Uner watched as Prash, McKeen, and Gonzales jumped out and strode toward him through the dust. By the evening of Wednesday, May 13, the entire task force was back in Kathmandu. Members started coming home on commercial flights on Saturday. By the following week, all were back at their regular jobs. §



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