

Santa Maria Sun / Cover Story

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Sheriffs' dive team members recount a harrowing call-out to the Conception boat fire at the Channel Islands

BY PETER JOHNSON

As soon as the news broke on Labor Day, Sept. 2, Scott Smith of Nipomo started anticipating the call.

Earlier that morning, the *Conception*, a 75-foot commercial dive boat, had caught fire off the coast of Santa Cruz Island, killing all 33 passengers and one crew member on board. The charred vessel—and the remains of those who perished in its hull—sunk to the ocean floor. It was the worst maritime disaster to hit California in more than 150 years.

Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown—responding to yet another catastrophic event in his jurisdiction—understood quickly that this incident would demand substantial emergency mutual aid resources.

“We started to grasp the magnitude of what had happened, ... unprecedented in terms of loss of life,” Brown told the *Sun* six weeks after the incident. “We realized that the extent of the operation was going to be beyond our capabilities.”

Smith, an elevator mechanic in his late 50s, figured as much while he digested the news at home. As one of the volunteer divers on the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff’s Underwater Search and Recovery Dive Team, he stood ready for the mutual-aid call. Smith had done real-life victim recoveries before, but nothing like the magnitude of what occurred on the *Conception*.



SONAR

SLO Sheriff’s dive team members assemble a side-scan sonar device to use in a training at Port San Luis on Oct. 12.

PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

“We kind of figured with the amount of people involved that there was a good chance we’d get called out,” Smith said. “The call went out.”

Over the next 10 days, more than 80 divers from six different agencies would be dispatched to the *Conception* wreck—including about 25 SLO and Santa Barbara county locals like Smith. Together, the divers tackled the daunting and gruesome task of recovering the remains of the fire’s 34 victims, most of whom were in an unrecognizable state underwater.

Local dive team members recounted the disturbing but crucial part they played at this disaster to the *Sun*, shared how it affected them, and discussed the role of dive teams on the Central Coast.

Called to duty

At 4 a.m. on Sept. 3, a day after the *Conception* burned, a SLO Sheriff’s dive team unit of 11 members left for the Santa Barbara Harbor. They arrived to a hub of activity: local, state, federal officials who’d descended on the city for the disaster.

“Whenever we have a disaster like this, we set up what’s called the unified command,” Sheriff Brown explained. “We’ll bring in all of the agencies and departments that have to be involved.”

SLO’s divers departed the harbor for the wreck site on the team’s *Defender* boat at around 7 a.m., joining forces on the scene with the Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Los Angeles counties’ respective dive teams.

The whole situation was unusual. The last time the SLO dive team had recovered a victim in Santa Barbara waters—a single drowned paddle boarder—it was only because the team happened to be there on a training exercise. The majority of the SLO team’s recovery dives take place in local lakes, usually in response to a drowning.

“Lake Nacimiento takes up most of our call-outs, maybe 75 percent of them,” said Sgt. Dave Lipanovich, a supervisor on the SLO Sheriff’s dive team and one of the 11 team divers at the *Conception*.

But there was nothing routine about the *Conception*. Each responding agency’s dive team was assigned to search a different area of the wreck. Santa Barbara and Los Angeles covered the boat itself; Ventura went to the east of the boat; and SLO went to the west. The *Conception* sat 60 feet below the water’s surface on the ocean floor, next to the north shore of Santa Cruz Island.

Search and rescue efforts had been called off—which is typically the juncture at which the dive teams start their work.



BOAT FIRE

The Conception, a Truth Aquatics commercial dive boat, erupted in flames on Sept. 2, killing 34 people on board in the worst California maritime accident in well over a century.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SANTA BARBARA COUNTY SHERIFF’S OFFICE

"That's pretty much when we take over along the coast," said SLO County Sheriff Ian Parkinson. "For us, our dives aren't search and rescue. Our dives are search and recovery."

'They were us'

Looking through his scuba mask in the crystal-clear waters of the Channel Islands, John McKenney recognized the *Conception* immediately. After all, he'd been a passenger on it and other Truth Aquatics boats countless times throughout his life.

Here it was now reduced to a blackened, turned-over heap on the ocean floor.

"It looked like an upside-down hull—a burned up, wrecked hull," McKenney recalled. "The whole top side was gone. ... You could actually swim through it from one side to the other because it wasn't perfectly burned down to the water line."

McKenney is a clear stand-out on the SLO Sheriff's dive team. A world-respected ocean water diving cinematographer, he hung up the thrill of filming great white sharks at age 48 to focus on family and a new career as a SLO Sheriff's deputy. Over decades of making diving movies, McKenney produced more than a dozen features for Discovery Channel's Shark Week.

Yet in all those years of underwater experiences, McKenney had never seen anything like what he saw west of the *Conception* wreck on Sept. 3—the fragmented remains of somebody's hip bone and spine.

"None of the recoveries I've personally made have ever been in that shape," McKenney said. "It made me sad. These poor people, how can you even feel what the relatives must feel right now?"

Smith, too, on that first day of diving recovered a female victim that he found "far outside the zone that they expected any bodies."

"They were exposed to a huge amount of heat," Smith said. "You could identify that it was a female, but that was it."

For all the divers on the *Conception* recovery, the scene hit heart-wrenchingly close to home. Virtually everyone who was there had at some point taken the same diving trip that the victims did when they perished, and they had slept in the same bunk room the victims were asleep in when the fire erupted. They could all relate.

"All these people," Lipanovich said, "they were us. That very same boat, the *Conception*, my wife and I and one of my other dive team members and his wife were booking it in July to do that exact same trip. We decided last minute to take our own boat just to save money, but we've all been on those boats. This could've been any one of us."

Lipanovich felt that the kinship gave the divers additional strength to finish the job.

"It was one of those things where it really makes you want to give everything you got and make sure you collect every body," he said.



ON THE SCENE

SLO Sheriff's dive team members spent three days at the Conception boat disaster site last month, recovering three victims, including the final missing victim, 16-year-old Berenice Felipe Alvarez.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE SLO COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Over the first two days of searching, divers found all but one of the *Conception* victims. Rapid DNA tests were able to identify them within a day or two. Then the search effort was suspended until the following Tuesday, Sept. 10, due to poor weather conditions.

Emotions frayed as the final victim's family began to worry that their daughter, 16-year-old Berenice Felipe Alvarez, the youngest on the trip, would never be found.

"It was especially difficult for that family. It was very challenging," Santa Barbara County Sheriff Brown said. "They really got a double whammy where they were told initially that their loved one was missing and believed to have perished, and to subsequently be told we'd identified the remaining remains [but not hers]. ... The next day and a half, it was really a full court press to try to recover her remains."

In a remarkable stroke of luck on Sept. 11, SLO's divers, in their third day at the site, decided to search a large cave on the coast of the island that was far outside the previous search grid. As they were examining it for her remains, a responder on their support boat noticed something floating on the surface nearby: Alvarez.

"It was a pretty amazing development," Brown said. "If it were not for their actions searching that cave, they wouldn't have been in that area to find the victim at that point."

"The only three bodies that weren't located at the wreck were found by our team," Lipanovich added. "That was significant for us. It brings closure to the families."

Motivations



RECOVER

Dive teams like SLO County's are an auxiliary service of sheriffs' departments and conduct search and recovery operations for victims or evidence in water bodies.

PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

Smith decided to join the SLO Sheriff's dive team as a volunteer about three years ago. As a lifelong scuba diving enthusiast, Smith said he simply wanted to give back to his community, using a unique skill that he'd enjoyed for decades.

"I joined really to show support for local law enforcement," he said. "Both my daughters moved out, so I'm trying to give back to the community that's given so much to me and my family."

As it turns out, that's a common reason civilians join the dive team, which currently has more volunteer members (16) than it has sworn deputy members (11). The Santa Barbara dive team, in contrast, is made up of all deputy members.

"Their unique skill that they bring to the table is they're divers, which not everyone is," Lipanovich said of SLO's volunteers. "These guys, that's what they do. They dive."

The SLO dive team is an auxiliary service of the Sheriff's Office, similar to its Search and Rescue Team, Sheriff's Posse, Aero Squadron, and Volunteer Patrol. All those services are volunteer-driven, which Sheriff Parkinson said he's proud of.

"We have a tremendous number of volunteers just in those units alone," Parkinson said. "If you poll your local police department, you're probably going to see a half a dozen total. And we've got probably over 200."

The SLO Sheriff's Office provides year-round trainings to its dive team, putting members in a variety of settings—ocean, rivers, lakes, lagoons—and in different scenarios so members can perform at a high level when the recoveries are real. For instance, SLO County's lakes and coast have notoriously bad visibility, so the dive team will sometimes train with blacked-out masks to simulate that. The team also practices helicopter dives and rescues; the use of side-scan sonar to comb the ocean floor for victims or evidence; and deep dives of 100-plus feet in Lake Nacimiento.

"The training plays a huge role," Smith said. "All the divers on our team, especially the volunteers, we're very fortunate to have an outstanding group that trains us, disciplines us, and provides oversight for us."

No matter the support that the department provides, the inherently morbid nature of a diver's job doesn't suit everyone. Dive team volunteers have come and gone over the years, whether it's over one particularly upsetting victim recovery or the attrition that catches up with them.

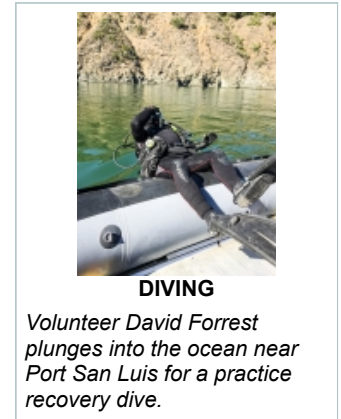
"It's not what everyone is hardwired to do," Lipanovich said. "It's not your normal dive. You have to have a tremendous amount of commitment to be on a dive team and do this kind of stuff."

Supporting each other

As emergency responders wrapped up their work at the *Conception* wreck, removing every bit of evidence and eventually wrenching what was left of the boat out of the ocean for investigators, Smith couldn't shake from his mind what he'd experienced.

He started having nightmares. He found himself having a "nagging need" to learn the name of the female he'd recovered. It felt like all of the disturbing realities of the recovery were hitting him on delay.

"You really don't have time during the recovery to focus in on the horrific nature of it. You're more focused in on getting these people home," Smith said. "It isn't really until after, when you're driving home or laying in bed, when the magnitude of it hits and the humanity of it sets in."



DIVING

Volunteer David Forrest plunges into the ocean near Port San Luis for a practice recovery dive.

PHOTO BY PETER JOHNSON



GETTING READY

SLO Sheriff's deputy and dive team member Matthew Shields gets wetsuit help from teammates Pat Nugent (right) and JD Cronin at an Oct. 12 training at Port San Luis.

PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

Years ago, Smith might've had to deal with those struggles alone. But after the *Conception* recoveries, the SLO Sheriff's Office held a mandatory "debrief" with a psychologist for all of the dive team members who were dispatched to the disaster to attend.

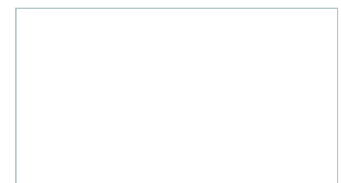
"When I started, there was really nothing other than suck it up and move forward," Parkinson said. "Over the years we've learned more and more the cumulative effect it has on you."

The debriefs are department policy for employees who've experienced a psychologically stressful incident while on duty, according to Parkinson. In the case of the *Conception* divers, it was an opportunity for all the team members on hand to reflect on the shared experience.

"We all kind of sat around, everyone who had recovered, and compared notes and talked about it, which was therapeutic," Smith said. "Having that group of guys that had been doing it for so long was invaluable too because you could talk to them."

Lipanovich said he thought it was cathartic for team members to realize that they weren't alone in holding dark feelings about the dives.

"I think it's good as a group because you got guys who maybe don't want to say, 'Hey, this really bothered me.' But if you start talking and learning that you're not the only one who feels that way, I notice that guys



started to open up really quick," he said. "Hopefully we do that kind of stuff more because I found that very beneficial."

While some volunteers may decide to step down from the dive team after the *Conception*, Smith said he isn't one of them. He feels too strongly about the importance of serving his community through diving and helping victims' families heal.

"I felt proud and humbled to be out there to try to bring closure to these families," he said. "You learn very quickly how important it is. That's really what we're doing—bringing closure for these people. That is the No. 1 mission, and that's, I think, why we do it. It's certainly why I continue to do it."

Reach New Times Assistant Editor Peter Johnson at pjohnson@newtimeslo.com.

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LOCATE THE VICTIM

SLO Sheriff's Deputy John McKenney brings a dummy victim onto the department's boat for a dive team training exercise.

PHOTO BY JAYSON MELLOM

MY 805 TIX TICKETS TO UPCOMING EVENTS

Select An Event Type ▼

Select An Event Topic ▼

Clear Filters

[Select A Date Range](#)

Jun
26

SANTA MARIA CIVIC THEATRE 2020-2021 MEMBERSHIP
Jun 26, 2020 at 6:00 PM to Dec 31, 2020 at 8:00 PM
 📍 Santa Maria Civic Theatre, Santa Maria, CA

[Get Your tickets!](#)

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Concert / Performance - Visual Arts & Performing

Jul
01



VIRTUAL SPIRITS TASTING

Jul 1, 2020 to Dec 30, 2020

[Get Your tickets!](#)

[Get Your tickets!](#)

Class or Workshop - Culture & Community

Dec
01



POINT SAN LUIS LIGHTHOUSE VIRTUAL HOLIDAY TOUR

Dec 1, 2020 to Jun 30, 2021

📍 Point San Luis Lighthouse, Avila Beach, CA

[More Details](#)

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Attraction - Outdoors, Camping & Hiking



DONATE TO SUPPORT WINE COUNTRY THEATRE

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Other - Causes & Charity

Jan
06

WEDNESDAYS AROUND THE WORLD: CHINA

Jan 6, 2021 from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM

📍 7350 Linne Rd, Paso Robles, CA

[Get Your Tickets!](#)

[Get Your Tickets!](#)

Dinner - Food & Beverage

Jan
22



ESTATE BEEF DINNER SERIES: SHORT RIBS

Jan 22, 2021 from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM

📍 7350 Linne Rd, Paso Robles, CA

[Get Your Tickets!](#)

[Get Your Tickets!](#)

Dinner - Food & Beverage

Jan
24

JANUARY WINE SEMINAR: TASTE LIKE A PRO

Jan 24, 2021 from 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM



7350 Linne Rd, Paso Robles, CA

Get Your Tickets!

Get Your Tickets!
Talk or Seminar - Food & Beverage

Feb
03



WEDNESDAYS AROUND THE WORLD: INDIA

Feb 3, 2021 from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM

7350 Linne Rd, Paso Robles, CA

Get Your Tickets!

Get Your Tickets!
Dinner - Food & Beverage

Feb
13



A SPECIAL VALENTINE DINNER EXPERIENCE

Feb 13, 2021 from 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM

7350 Linne Rd, Paso Robles, CA

Get Your Tickets!

Get Your Tickets!
Dinner - Holiday & Seasonal

Feb
21



PECHO COAST TRAIL PLANT LIFE

Feb 21, 2021 from 9:30 AM to 1:30 PM

Point San Luis Lighthouse, Avila Beach, CA

[More Details](#)

Get Your tickets!

Get Your tickets!
Attraction - Outdoors, Camping & Hiking

Feb
21



FEBRUARY WINE SEMINAR: THE BOLD AND COLORFUL MALBEC

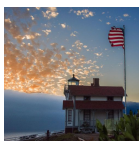
Feb 21, 2021 from 1:00 PM to 3:00 PM

7350 Linne Rd, Paso Robles, CA

Get Your Tickets!

Get Your Tickets!
Other - Other

Mar
19



SUNSET PHOTO SHOOT

Mar 19, 2021 at 5:45 PM

Point San Luis Lighthouse, Avila Beach, CA

[More Details](#)

Get Your tickets!

Get Your tickets!
Attraction - Culture & Community

May

14



HARTLEY FARMS DINNER IN THE GARDENS

May 14, 2021 from 6:00 PM to 9:00 PM

📍 6770 Estrella Rd, San Miguel, CA

[More Details](#)

[Get Your Tickets!](#)

Get Your Tickets!

Dinner - Food & Beverage

May

25



MOVIE IN THE GARDENS AT HARTLEY FARMS

May 25, 2021 from 7:00 PM to 9:00 PM

📍 6770 Estrella Rd, San Miguel, CA

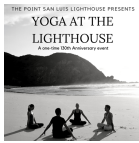
[Get Your Tickets!](#)

Get Your Tickets!

Film Screening - Other

May

29



YOGA AT THE LIGHTHOUSE

May 29, 2021 from 8:00 AM to 1:30 PM

📍 Point San Luis Lighthouse, Avila Beach, CA

[More Details](#)

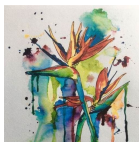
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Class or Workshop - Wellness, Health & Medicine

Jun

19



PAINT 'N SIP AT POINT SLO

Jun 19, 2021 at 2:00 PM

📍 Point San Luis Lighthouse, Avila Beach, CA

[More Details](#)

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Get Your tickets!

Class or Workshop - Culture & Community

Jul

18



PATRIOT CRUISE OF SAN LUIS BAY

Jul 18, 2021 at 2:00 PM

📍 Point San Luis Lighthouse, Avila Beach, CA

[More Details](#)

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Attraction - Outdoors, Camping & Hiking