LOCAL SEARCH DOG TEAMS RETURN FROM JAPAN

Reaching out across the ocean

Workers moved by what they saw

By Kim Lamb Gregory

A string of pearls. A stuffed bunny. The page torn from a photo album. These images haunt Linda Tacconelli.

The 54-year-old Goleta woman and her golden Labrador retriever, Joe, just returned from a week of combing through the tsunami wreckage in Japan with five other human-canine teams with the National Disaster Search Dog Foundation.

Tacconelli recalled the album page with pictures of someone’s wedding that had snagged on a nail protruding from the side of a gutted home.

“The couple in the picture, they looked so pretty and so happy,” she said, her voice breaking.
Tacconelli and two firefighters who live in Ventura County searched for survivors in the fishing villages of Ofunato and Kamaishi. They were part of Los Angeles Task Force 2, a 74-member heavy rescue team sent to search for survivors of the magnitude-9.0 earthquake and tsunami that tore through the Japanese island of Honshu on March 11. The team left March 13 for Japan and returned to California on Monday.

The task force included six teams from the Ojai-based National Disaster Search Dog Foundation, as well as physicians, structural engineers, hazardous materials specialists, paramedics and firefighters. It is one of two in the U.S. authorized to respond to international disasters.

After a fuel stop in Anchorage, Alaska, the teams landed at Misawa Air Base in northern Japan. Task force members camped in a gymnasium near the search areas, rising at 4 a.m. each day to search.

“We were given a certain area of the city to go through with a fine-tooth comb to make sure no one was alive under the rubble,” said Santa Barbara County firefighter and paramedic Eric Gray, 37, who lives in Camarillo. They found no survivors.

The searchers did, however, find about 16 bodies, according to the Los Angeles County Fire Department, some still in their cars or homes.

“There were photo albums, clothing. With 15 minutes’ warning to get out of the way, most of these people just got in their cars and headed for higher ground,” said Los Angeles County Fire Capt. Doug LaCount, 44, of Ventura, a task force member. “They did the right thing.”

Cars and boats were lodged atop two-story buildings, rescuers said.

“There was no rhyme or reason. It was as if you were to take homes and buildings and cars and jumble them all up and throw them on the ground,” Gray said.

“You’d see beds and children’s toys, closets, bicycles, refrigerators.”

The searchers and dogs worked through cold, snow flurries and shattered glass on the ground, which sometimes cut the dogs’ feet.

As a squad leader, LaCount worried about radiation and warnings of a secondary tsunami. Firefighters are trained to deal with basic radioactive nuclear hazards, he said, but LaCount never

“There was no looting,” he said. “No picking through what was not theirs.”

Gray teared up when he recalled the time he sent his golden Lab Riley into an area to search and a Japanese man came around the corner and pantomimed putting food into his mouth. He gestured for Gray to come around the corner and join him.

“It was very clear he was offering me food,” he said. “He didn’t have anything, and he was trying to make me food.”

He said a woman who had lost everything opened her purse and offered Gray a cracker.

“That’s the kind of thing you took from it,” Gray said. “In the face of utter devastation, they’re looking to help someone else.”

There were few people in the village, but those he did see were working hard, he said, putting their homes back together.