On Nov. 8, 2018, Rob Harry, site director of clinical engineering for Adventist Health Feather River, and his team—BMET III Marc Silver, BMET III David Falcon, and Network Systems Specialist Jared Wilson—helped evacuate at least 45 patients from their hospital as a wildfire swept through the town of Paradise, CA, leaving them with little time to escape themselves. The Camp Fire, as it became known, would go on to become the most destructive and deadly wildfire in California history, killing at least 85 people, destroying 14,000 residences, and charring an area the size of Chicago.

“It hit within minutes, and within minutes, the whole town was gone,” Harry said, recalling the fire that would destroy his community, his hospital, and ultimately tear his team apart. “There was only time to evacuate—and not even enough time for that.”

A Day Like Any Other
Fire is nothing new for those living and working in Paradise. “We’re fairly used to it,” said Wilson, whose family has lived on the ridge since the 1930s. “We live in Paradise. It’s common.”

In fact, on Wilson’s first day at Feather River, he had to help evacuate the hospital because of a fire in the same area.

“It burned down to the river and stopped. It never jumped over to the other side,” Wilson said of the Humboldt Fire that sprang up in July 2008. Last year’s Camp Fire, however, was a different beast.

Just as members of Feather River’s healthcare technology management (HTM) team were starting their day around 6:30 a.m., the Camp Fire began kindling in a wooded area near Pulga, about seven miles northeast of Paradise.

Silver arrived at the hospital around 7 a.m. “As I was unloading my car, I kept hearing plunks hit the ground and these little bumps hit my car,” he remembered. “I look, and...
there's charcoal coming down from the sky, and you could see the fire in the distance."

Wilson remembers Silver walking into his office and holding out a chunk of burnt wood in his hand. “He said: ‘This hit me in the head in the parking lot.’ And I said: ‘Did somebody throw it at you?’ Because it’s Marc, and he’s a goofball.” But when Wilson learned that it fell from the sky, both men went outside to see a “giant plume of black smoke.”

“We were going out every 20 minutes or so to check on it, and it was getting bigger. It was getting blacker. And the wind, the wind was just dead in our faces—40, 50 miles an hour ripping up the canyon,” Wilson said. “I remember looking at Marc, and I’m like: ‘This is bad. This is all bad.’”

“By the time I got to the hospital around 8:30 a.m., it was already kind of smoky,” Harry said. “And within 10 or 15 minutes of me being there, the winds were picking up so strong that embers were coming from miles away and landing like bombs all over this ridge where we were. Then the smoke was billowing up, and we could tell that the fire was here and not miles and miles away.”

“The smoke spooled up south of the campus. It spooled up north of the campus, and then I started watching as the fire actually came up over the hill onto campus,” Wilson said.

**Called into Action**

As the fire approached, evacuation orders were given. Then, “it started to get crazy,” according to Harry.

“I asked the lady in charge: ‘Biomed’s completely available. Where do you want us?’ They decided that we should gather up all the wheelchairs that we could find—in the PT [physical therapy] gyms and just scattered all over the place. So, we went into action.”

The team found as many wheelchairs as they could and staged them outside of patient rooms, then jumped in to help the nurses and other hospital personnel clear rooms and transport patients to the emergency room (ER) for evacuation.

“We only had two elevators for the building between the first floor and second floor,” Silver explained. “But the place was kind of built on a hill, so the ER would have been considered on the second floor.” This meant there was another way to get patients from the first floor to the staging area—by going up the hill.

“The line was backing up so much in the elevator area with beds that we decided to start moving them out through the back door and going up a grade,” Harry said. “It took maybe six or seven people to bring up one bed.”

“I remember grabbing this one gal, and she was frail,” Wilson said. “We’re a retirement community, so a lot of the people in our hospital are elderly, and she was just saying: ‘Oh, it hurts. Oh, it hurts.’ I told her: ‘I’m sorry, honey, but we have to move you.’”

Silver will never forget one patient he helped transport to the ER. “I looked down at her, and I was telling her: ‘It’s going to be OK,’ and we’re going to take care of her. She was an elderly woman, and she looks up and goes: ‘This is exactly why I hate coming to the hospital.’”

**‘Controlled Chaos’**

“By this point, there was no light anymore outside; it was completely dark. The sky was just absolutely covered in ash,” Silver said. He then remembers the sheriff showing up at the hospital to let them know that “there were no ambulances, and there were no fire trucks able to get there. We were kind of stuck on our own.”

With no more ambulances coming to transport patients to safety, the hospital staff began loading patients into whatever vehicles were available. “It was just kind of controlled chaos,” Silver said. “People and nurses had
David’s Story
BMET III David Falcon was one of the many Feather River employees who lined up in their cars at the hospital’s ambulance bay to help transport patients to safety. There, hospital staff loaded Rachelle Sanders into his passenger seat just hours after she gave birth to her son Lincoln via C-section.

As Falcon attempted to navigate the congested streets of Paradise, flames lined, and sometimes crossed, the road. He was forced to turn around several times when the fire cut off their escape route.

Because the anesthesia used during her surgery left her unable to walk, let alone run, if the fire overtook the car, Sanders made a dramatic request of Falcon in the event they got trapped by the flames.

“I said, ‘I want you to take the baby and run,’” Sanders told CNN soon after her ordeal.

Luckily, it never came to that. About nine hours after leaving the hospital, Falcon successfully navigated the 20 miles to safety.

“I thought I wasn’t going to make it, for sure. I wasn’t sure any of us were going to make it,” Sanders told reporters. “It was very, very terrifying.”

begun taking their own private vehicles and lining them up, and we just began putting people into whatever we could. If they could go into the back of the car or the passenger seat, they would. People who were bedridden were put into the back of SUVs.”

It took about 45 minutes to completely evacuate the hospital, according to Wilson. That’s when Harry told his team: “I think we’ve done what we can do. Now it’s time to go.”

Wilson’s Escape
At that point, Wilson said he shook Harry’s hand and told him to “stay safe” before hopping into his car.

Wilson had traveled to Ukiah the day before, which is several hundred miles away from Paradise. “And on the way back, I, for whatever reason, decided not to fill up my gas tank. And so I was on one tick above empty when I got to work,” he said, which left him with very little fuel to navigate roads that at this point “were just a parking lot.”

According to Wilson, Paradise is a “maze of tiny little roads off of tiny little roads” that feed into three main arteries that run north and south. By 9:15 a.m., the roads were jammed with 27,000 people trying to get out of town. So, what was typically a 15-minute drive took Wilson four hours.

“It was pitch black, and the smoke was so dense you could barely see anywhere,” Wilson said. “These are roads I’ve driven for 30 years, and unless I looked at the road signs, I didn’t even know where I was some of the time because you lose all sense of distance, especially when you’re moving at like half a mile per hour.”

Houses lining the roads leading out of town were engulfed in flames.
As he saw trees “explode” and houses ignite on both sides of the road, Wilson was intensely aware of his gas gauge. “This whole time, my car is on one tick above empty,” he said. “So, I prayed. I said: ‘OK God, if you can keep the oil lamp burning, then you can keep my Volvo running.”

Just as Wilson neared the edge of town, he was met with a wall of fire. “I didn’t know what was on the other side of this wall of smoke and fire, but there were cars going through it, and they hadn’t stopped. So I figured, let’s do this,” he said. “And so I went, breaking through to the other side, and it was just instantly clear.”

It was only then that Wilson said his gas gauge dropped ever so slightly.

Silver’s Experience

As the fire advanced toward the hospital campus, Silver ran into his wife, who was a nurse at Feather River, in the hallway.

“By this point, it was really bad outside, like really bad,” he said. “I looked out the window, and I could see fire in our parking lot—the plants and bushes had begun to ignite. So, I made the decision that I wasn’t going to leave my wife again.”

When they were given the all clear to leave, Silver realized that they had parked their car in a lot near where the fire was advancing. “I told her that we weren’t going to go back and get it, and instead we jumped into the car of the IT guy who was there. He had brought his 4Runner up to carry a patient, but they had put the last patient in [the car] right before him. And so he ordered us to get in his vehicle, and we began the process of trying to get out of there.”

“But there was nowhere to go,” Silver continued. “We were trying to make the decision of what we should do, and as we were sitting there, we were next to some trees—not even three feet away—a fireball came down and hit them and just ignited them completely.”

The group, along with a number of other cars from the hospital, decided to head toward Chico. “We made it about halfway down this road where everything was on fire around us. The trees on top of us were on fire. The houses on both sides were fully engulfed. The cars in the front yard were just completely engulfed. And I just remember thinking: ‘Man, this is it.’”

Having his wife with him in that moment was the only thing that kept him calm. “It was one of those things where I was like: ‘You know, if I’m going to die, at least I’m going to die with my wife.’”
Eventually, the group reached a checkpoint, and Silver spoke to the sheriff. “I said: ‘I need to go south because I have a nurse, and I need to get her to the hospital in Chico.’” So while the rest of the line of cars got turned west into town, the sheriff let Silver and his wife pass. “After that, it was just kind of staying ahead of the fire,” Silver said. “Finally, after about two hours of sitting in lines, we made it to Chico.”

Harry’s Harrowing Departure

Harry wasn’t so lucky when he left the hospital. “I was finding that it was hard to go in either direction [north or south] because everything was backed up,” he said, so he found himself backtracking. After two unsuccessful attempts, he finally went south. “I went a half mile and made a right to get me more west back to Chico,” Harry said. “Finally, after about two hours of sitting in lines, we made it to Chico.”

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Eventually, a man on a bullhorn told the group to stick together and make their way back to the hospital. This wasn’t the only group to find themselves back at Feather River, according to Harry. “Other people from other directions were trapped also, and they made their way back to the hospital, including several patients. So, they started triaging patients right in front of the ER entrance.”

Harry jumped right back into work mode. “There was a woman in labor, and my first task was to go get an infant care bassinet out of the nursery,” he said. “So I made my way into the hospital in the dark, and using my cell phone [as a flashlight], brought one of those out,” he said.

Harry continued to do whatever he could to help the staff and patients, such as bringing cases of water and food from the cafeteria kitchen and getting an emergency radio up and running—all while watching his office go up in flames, along with other parts of the hospital.
said. “About a mile down the road, I was completely out of the flames. Even though I did go through some fire after that, at that point, it didn’t scare me anymore. I just drove through it to get out of there.”

Paradise Lost
Just a few days after barely escaping from Paradise with their lives, Harry, Silver, and Wilson returned.

“It looked like a war zone,” Silver said. “It was just completely destroyed. The trees were gone, the homes were gone, and all you could see was about 20 freestanding brick chimneys. That was pretty much all the evidence that anybody had ever lived there.”

“It was eerie because I followed the same pathway [I used to evacuate],” Harry said. “There were about eight or nine burnt cars before we got to the spot where we were able to go into the field, and the same amount after I had passed that spot going toward the hospital. There was another line of cars that were completely burned into just frames, including a police car that was complete gone.”

Because the fire destroyed the power lines and the main transfer switch from the hospital generators, getting electricity to the building was not possible. Without power, Adventist was worried that the helium in the MRI would gain so much pressure that it would turn from a liquid into a gas, which “can be pretty violent,” according to Harry. Therefore, he was tasked with taking pressure and temperature readings for the next few weeks until the decision was made to “take the load off” the machine by “moving all the amperage and stored voltage and demagnetizing the magnet.”

Silver and Wilson returned to salvage whatever equipment was left so it could be used in nearby clinics.

“We were walking around with a flashlight because it was pitch black,” Wilson said. “The water had gotten in [to the hospital] and so the ceiling had dropped and wires were dangling. The door to the lab had a big X across it. It said: ‘Do not enter under any circumstances.’”

Surprisingly, despite the damage, a lot of the medical equipment remained in usable condition. “When we opened up the ER, there was everything from infant care beds to monitors and gurneys,” as well as “all kinds of random stuff left everywhere in the exodus,” Silver said. Nearly six months later, he is still “trying to figure out what we have and what we don’t have.”

A Team Apart
Adventist Health Feather River remains closed, and its clinical engineering team has scattered. Prior to the fire, the health system had solicited proposals to outsource its HTM services and wound up awarding the contract to GE.

For Wilson, the request for proposals had already prompted him to contemplate his next steps professionally, and the fire sealed his resolve to start something new. Now the chief technology officer for a startup called Insight HTM, Wilson said that the Camp Fire “opened the door to really going full bore and...
starting this company.” He is now living with his family in Tennessee where “it’s more wet,” and he doesn’t have to worry about wildfires.

Harry’s house remained untouched by the blaze. “The fire got about 500 feet from my road,” he said. “I have 40 acres of real thick forest that would have gone up in a second—my house with it.”

For three months, he was in and out of Adventist Health Feather River helping inventory biomed equipment and sending reports to headquarters. He has since retired and is figuring out what he wants to do next.

That has left Silver to hold down the proverbial fort as a BMET III for GE. “I’m by myself here,” he said. “I’m doing all the work orders and other biomed stuff … to try to get services back to this area.”

After being displaced from his Chico home in the “second wave of homelessness” that followed the fire, Silver and his wife are looking forward to a time when they can “just live life as normal again.”

Going Above and Beyond
There are times when hospital staff must react to extraordinary circumstances, but Silver, Harry, and Wilson view what they did in response to the Camp Fire as an intrinsic part of who they are as HTM professionals.

“As a career field, we are very accustomed to adapt and overcome, and it comes out in an emergency,” Wilson explained. “I think we are one of the better assets that a hospital has. We know the hospital better than almost anybody else. We know the back doors to get in anywhere.”

The department also made sure its members participated in fire safety and life systems training. Because of this training, “I knew how to do transfers, and I knew how to do all these things that aren’t necessarily my job,” Wilson said. “But under these circumstances, it helped out a whole lot of people. I can look at several people’s faces and know, yeah, I helped that person out. I was there for them when they needed somebody.”