



Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Fire Chief Mike Smith during 1982 disaster at Love Creek.

Courageous fire chief Mike Smith dies at 46

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BEN LOMOND - A courageous man is dead.

Ben Lomond Fire Chief Mike Smith, the man who led the Love Creek rescue work in the Storm of 1982, died late Monday night.

Until the end, fighting the years' long disease that took his life, Chief Smith performed his work. He was 46 years old.

The word spread among firemen early this morning and those who had not heard were informed by a fire-network radio dispatch at 9:15 a.m.

Mike Smith had been a firefighter for 28 years and had been Ben Lomond's chief for 10 years.

Zayante Fire Capt. Nick Pagnini knew Smith from the sixth grade at Ben Lomond School and was one of his lifetime friends.

"A real courageous guy. He never complained and he was in pain all those years; eight years, maybe. He was in pain all during those storms."

It was the Ben Lomond firemen who inherited the rescue work of the devastating Jan. 3-5 Storm of 1982. It flooded roads

and the lower pockets of the Valley and in numbers killed, it was in Ben Lomond that the storm's greatest devastation occurred.

Ten people died at Love Creek when the side of a mountain gave way in one of the state's greatest landslides. Ten homes were destroyed.

Smith and his men worked around the clock, getting into the Love Creek area and helping the few survivors. They then began the painful work of removing the dead and held on until the area was declared too unstable to be safe.

Ben Lomond Fireman Wayne Drager III has been on the department for two years and was on duty at the firehouse this morning.

"I've known him all my life and he

really cared about his men and his community. He really took things to heart; he was a caring guy. I'm glad he's not in pain anymore."

Sam Robustelli, a district attorney's investigator and a volunteer fireman in Boulder Creek, was a lifetime friend of Smith and his family.

"I see him as a person who extended himself to others without really thinking about himself. He's been sick a number of years and with the mudslide, he totally extended himself beyond what he should have.

"He was always there to help someone else. He didn't have an enemy in the world that I knew of.

"He doesn't hurt anymore," Robustelli said.

Felton Fire Chief John "Mac" McDonnell said this morning: "He was a very able chief and very discerning of what an emergency was. When he was on the scene, he didn't have to look at it long before he knew what was needed.

"The Love Creek thing was a good example. It didn't take him long to know he had a major disaster there."

Zayante Capt. Pagnini said that just last week Smith attended a chiefs' meeting and had answered a couple of calls this month. "Courage, it was, and I doubt that anyone ever said a bad word about Mike."

"He was a fighter. He was Mr. Straight Arrow; he was so honest it would hurt you," said McDonnell.

Survivors include his immediate family, wife Patricia, daughter Stacey and son Mike.

Arrangements are pending under the direction of Norman's Family Chapel in Sequel.

This morning, county flags were lowered to half-mast in memory of Fire Chief Smith.