

Citizen heroism in Truckee crash recognized by CHP

By Barbara Barte Osborn, Sacramento Bee

Bill Nern and Bill Bartlett are two regular guys who were honored Wednesday for their extraordinary actions.

Calling Nern and Bartlett's rushing to the aid of the two drivers involved in a fiery Jan. 9 collision in the Truckee area "selfless, courageous and heroic," California Highway Patrol Capt. Timothy Malone presented the two men with framed award plaques from the CHP commissioner.

"I only did what I would hope anyone would do," Nern said.

"I'm honored to get it," Bartlett said, "but you just react and do it."

A third rescuer, Sam Keiper, 55, a visitor from Waterford, couldn't attend the awards ceremony and will be honored in late January, Malone said.

"It's very rare the commissioner does this. It's the highest honor he presents to a citizen – the Commissioner's Resolution for Bravery and Heroism," said CHP Officer Pete Mann.

"If an officer had done this, he'd likely get the Medal of Valor – that's our highest honor," Mann said.

Nern, 46, a tugboat captain, had just returned to his home near Truckee from work in the Bay Area and was out in his yard near Cabin Creek and Highway 89 when he heard the crash about 7pm.

"It was almost in front of my yard," he said.

Bartlett, 51, a Truckee resident, was driving home from his

job as a hardware store manager in Tahoe City. His was the only other vehicle on the road at the time and he pulled over immediately.

A pickup driven by a Las Vegas man living in the area for the winter had crossed a solid double line and struck a van head-on, causing the vehicles to become stuck together and the van to burst into flames.

CHP Officer Rich Morin arrived at the scene just as the burning van, driven by Jill Patrick, a longtime area day-care owner, exploded.

“The fire completely destroyed the van,” Bartlett said.

But in the brief moments before that happened, Bartlett and another man had pulled Patrick from the van and gotten her to the side of the road, then rescued her dog.

Paramedics tried to save Patrick, who had received massive injuries, as they rushed her to Tahoe Forest Hospital in Truckee. From there, she was transferred to Renown Medical Center in Reno, where she died two days later.

“Her dog also died later,” Bartlett said.

Nern and another rescuer had attached a chain to the truck, which was stuck to the van, and pulled it away before it, too, could catch fire.

Seeing that the van’s driver had been removed, Nern, who is trained as a first medical responder, rushed to the pickup driver’s side.

“He had to be extricated and was at first out cold, then came to,” said Nern, who stayed by his side and kept him talking to prevent him from going into shock until firefighters and paramedics arrived.

Patrick’s death is the primary reason the awards ceremony was

clouded for the two citizen heroes.

“None of us really like to remember that day,” Bartlett said. “I feel horrible the lady didn’t make it. And the other driver has to live with it.

“I have to drive by that spot every day,” he added.

The pickup driver was taken by Care Flight to a Reno hospital and later sent a thank-you note to Nern for pulling the two vehicles apart before his could catch fire.