

Through the Flames

September 19, 2021

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Allyn Pierce thought it was the end.

The ICU nurse was trapped in his Tundra, desperate to escape the raging wildfire flames inching ever-closer to his truck. He recorded a goodbye message to his family.

“Just in case this doesn’t work out, I want you to know I really tried to make it out.”

The Camp Fire, the deadliest wildfire in California history, was burning the town of Paradise to the ground. A local hospital where Pierce worked as an ICU nurse, Adventist Health Feather River, was trying to evacuate patients and staff.

Pierce and two co-workers jumped in his Tundra – which he nicknamed Pandra for its white body with black accents – to escape as everything else incinerated around them. But his route closed off as flames swallowed up other cars, one by one.

“We were stuck on this road with everyone else trying to get out,” Pierce says. “And I just remember thinking, ‘OK. This is it. We are next.’”

Suddenly, a bulldozer roared through and cleared a path. Pierce had a clear shot out of the flames.

Instead of driving to safety, Pierce turned his Tundra around and headed back for the hospital, where he knew more people were stranded and waiting for rescue.

“I wish I could say it was a heroic decision, but it wasn’t,” Pierce said. “I just headed back up the road. I’m a health care worker, and this is just what health care workers do.”



When Pierce arrived back at the hospital, he joined other medical staff to create a triage area in the parking lot. They raided the hospital for gurneys, oxygen tanks and other supplies. Together, they treated dozens of victims.

But soon, the hospital was on fire, too. Everyone loaded into cars and together, as a caravan, Pierce led them to safety – making two trips to make sure no one was left behind.

Along the way, Pierce documented his journey – taking photos he would later share on Instagram. In one post, he gave thanks to the truck that helped him get out of harm's way.

“Here’s my @toyotausa commercial. This truck literally saved my life today. My little town of Paradise was literally burning down around me and @the_pandra got me to safety where I could help others...twice. #campfire #perfectmarshmallow #meltedplastics #buttecountyfire #sema2019 thanks to the fire fighters, law enforcement and my fellow healthcare workers for the work we all did getting the hospital evacuated and our patients to safety.”

And when you see those photos of Pierce’s Tundra, you understand just how dangerous his mission was. The white body paint is charred brown and black. The rear passenger door is welded shut. A taillight is melted. But to Pierce’s surprise, the truck never had any problems running. It never stalled or slowed. It ferried his precious cargo to safety without a single hiccup – unless you count a “maintenance required” light.

“I figured it just came on because I needed an oil change,” Pierce says.



And sure enough, a few days later, Pierce brought his Tundra to Chuck Patterson Toyota in nearby Chico to get that oil change.

By then, word of Pierce's rescues – propelled by the powerful images he shared on social media – went viral. His survival story has been shared thousands of times. Toyota got word, too, and replaced the Pandora with a brand new one, which he received in time for Thanksgiving. And certainly, Pierce is thankful.

“The craziest thing is how cool the world has been,” Pierce says. “Not just this town, not just California. The whole world has been supportive It’s been cool to see the response. Little things to fill your cup.”

Originally posted on Toyota Driver’s Seat on December 19, 2018.

Editor’s Note: If you’d like to hear more about this story from Allyn himself, listen to episode 2 – Marshmallow Tundra – on our podcast, Toyota Untold. To listen, [click here](#). But also, be sure to subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever else you listen to podcasts.