

# THE RESCUE COMPANY

## PREPARING FOR A DISASTER

DISASTERS CAN STRIKE at any time—during a World Series game, over morning coffee, or during a routine commute home. It is their element of surprise that makes them difficult to plan for—difficult, but not impossible. The past 12 months have been full of disasters, including the following:

- *Armenian earthquake, December 1988.* More than 25,000 lives were lost, and some buildings and towns were completely destroyed. It is estimated that it will take more than a decade to restore the devastated area to normalcy.

- *Flight 103—Lockerbie, Scotland, December 1988.* A Pan American Boeing 747 en route to New York crashed, killing all 258 people on board.

- *United Flight 232, July 1989.* A United Airlines DC 10 crashed at Sioux Gateway Airport in Sioux City, Iowa, killing 112 people; 185 people were rescued.

- *US Air Flight 5050, September 1989.* At La Guardia Airport in New York City, two people died and 61 survived a crash into the East River. Hundreds of rescuers were involved.

- *Hurricane Hugo, September 1989.* A hurricane struck Charleston, South Carolina, causing numerous deaths; \$4 billion in damage; power loss for 200,000 people; and the destruction of thousands of homes. It caused more than 30 storm-related deaths in the

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Caribbean and Puerto Rico and more than a billion dollars in damage there. Some islands had up to 90 percent of their homes destroyed, and most islands lost all electricity, water, and telecommunications.

Other disasters involved school bus crashes, train derailments, and high-rise fires. The list goes on and on.

How would your department react to such disasters? Do you have emergency plans for hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, power outages, aircraft crashes, transportation incidents, water accidents, hazardous-materials incidents, high-rise

incidents, or earthquakes? If you have a plan, does it outline only your department's duties and responsibilities or does it provide for an interagency disaster plan, which can ensure a much more effective, coordinated operation?

### AGENCIES, COMMUNITIES PITCH IN

Disasters require the services of numerous agencies. I recently went to Puerto Rico as part of a rescue team to provide assistance after Hurricane Hugo. I had the opportunity to work with a variety of agencies involved in the operation in both Puerto Rico and

At the time this article was written, a major earthquake, registering 7.1 on the Richter scale, hit northern California. Just two months earlier, 600 people in Sacramento and federal agents in various departments throughout the country participated in "Response 89"—the first major test of the federal government's plan for responding to a catastrophic earthquake, sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

The exercise emphasized interaction among federal and state emergency response agencies and tested the following support functions: transportation, communications, construction management, firefighting, damage information, mass care, resource support, health and medical services, urban search and rescue, hazardous materials, and food. Participants were warned that the first few hours would be full of chaos and uncertainty.

FEMA had just begun to analyze par-

ticipants' comments about the exercise (in the form of written evaluations) when an earthquake struck—this time for real—on October 17. Just as they trained, local fire and emergency personnel and state and federal agencies sprung into action.

Rescue and firefighting operations were initiated on scene; command centers were set up; and up-to-the-minute information was able to be received, transmitted, digested, and analyzed. The roadway and bridge disasters, building collapses, fires, interruption of communications service, severing of gas and water supply mains, and the presence of larger crowds (in this case the third game of the World Series)—all components of the simulation—were all factors in the real disaster.

In a future issue, *Fire Engineering* will examine the earthquake in depth and analyze how Response 89 prepared emergency and rescue workers for the actual disaster. ■

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the island of Culebra. I worked with the local fire department; civilian defense personnel; the National Guard; the U.S. Army and Navy; public utilities workers for telephone, water, electric, and sewage; local medical personnel; the Red Cross; and the community itself.

The small island of Culebra was hit extremely hard, but the interagency cooperation and especially the community's involvement in effecting the disaster plan were instrumental in restoring order. The devastation had a major impact on the buildings and properties but not on the spirit of the community that had lost so much.

Having a plan in place to prepare for a disaster and drilling that plan have proven effective in dealing with the disaster and lessening its impact. Take the following examples:

In Sioux City, the success in rescuing, treating, and transporting the 186 survivors of Flight 232 can be credited to

Woodbury County Disaster and Emergency Service preparedness. Woodbury holds annual disaster drills using different scenarios, one of which is airline disasters. The service involves 22 response organizations including the Sioux City Fire Department. Their presence was felt during the disaster.

Less than a year before the crash of Flight 5050 at La Guardia Airport in New York City, rescue personnel participated in a disaster drill simulating the crash of an airliner into the waters surrounding a major airport. The drill included fire, police, EMS, Coast Guard, Port Authority, FAA, and other personnel. The recovery of aircraft "black boxes" was stressed, among other things. When Flight 5050 was aborted and crashed into the East River surrounding La Guardia Airport, personnel put theory into practice, rescuing the 61 survivors.

Near Pittsburgh in the suburb of Swissvale, Pennsylvania, as part of a nationwide disaster drill a local demolition company partially demolished an 80-year-old, six-story, reinforced con-

crete building. The drill simulated earthquake conditions found in Armenia and Mexico City.

In August of this year, Sacramento, California was the scene of "Response 89"—a federally sponsored earthquake exercise to test the area's catastrophic earthquake plan. Participants included federal, state, regional, and local agencies.

One of the most proactive efforts in disaster planning is the Los Angeles Fire Department's "Disaster Preparedness Division." The division, under the leadership of Assistant Chief Frank Borden, is charged with developing plans and programs to mitigate the predicted life and property loss from an earthquake. Included in these plans are developing and training community volunteer response teams; providing for research, analysis, and development of programs; introducing resources and regulations to reduce potential losses; and educating the public and government sectors in disaster preparedness.

### IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU

Regardless of the size of your department, you can use plans such as the Los Angeles Fire Department's as a role model. Using your resources and the innovative capabilities of your firefighters effectively can help you develop plans that suit your department's needs. Disasters don't just happen in big cities; being a small department shouldn't mean that your plans are small.

A plan that spells out each agency's duties is essential. Not only will it help eliminate duplication of services but it will be instrumental in effecting a well-coordinated interagency rescue operation.

The fire service conducts daily operations that require good communications, effective utilization of resources, and coordination—all of which are prerequisites for disaster planning. Our experiences with daily drills and mutual-aid drills put us in the forefront of disaster planning.

Disasters are increasing at an alarming rate. Although by nature disasters are "unforeseen," planning for them should never be. ■

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