

THE RESCUE COMPANY

SEARCH AND RESCUE TEAMS

Search and rescue teams have been in existence for years, but only in the past decade have these teams received the recognition they so richly deserve. The National Association for Search and Rescue, Urban Search and Rescue Inc. of California, mountain rescue organizations, and cave rescue organizations have been working together with state, city, and local agencies to develop voluntary guidelines and standards relating to qualifications, training, SOPs, management, and coordination of search and rescue. An immense amount of time and effort has been dedicated toward those goals—and the positive results are seen in search and rescue operations on a daily basis.

As we near the end of this century, we remember the devastating catastrophes that have occurred throughout the world. As recently as July 16, 1990, a major earthquake struck the Philippines, killing hundreds of people. At the time of this writing, search and rescue teams from around the world (including teams from the United States) were racing the clock in hopes of finding victims still alive among the debris.

DEVELOPING A NATIONAL SYSTEM

The challenges that search and res-

■ RAY DOWNEY has been a member of the City of New York Fire Department for 28 years and has commanded the operations of Rescue Co. 2 for the past 10. Captain Downey holds an associate's degree in fire science. He's a New York state certified instructor and has conducted seminars and lectures throughout the United States on rescue-related tactics.

cue teams will encounter in the future call for the same ingenuity and extraordinary capabilities that the fire service and search and rescue personnel have displayed in handling earthquakes; floods; hurricanes; aircraft incidents; train, rail, and bus incidents; and major boating incidents.

I recently attended the Federal Emergency Management Agency's national urban search and rescue working group meeting held at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Increased interest has been focused on the capability within the United States to respond to catastrophic incidents as a result of the earthquakes in California, the Philippines, Soviet Armenia, and Mexico City. FEMA is initiating an effort to organize a national urban search and rescue system. Five working groups (standards, equipment, communications, training, and management and coordination) have been selected and are presently in the process of developing first interim and then more permanent standards to support implementation of a national urban search and rescue system.

More than 40 experts from across the United States specializing in search and rescue met for three days to develop draft documents that identify interim standards and equipment needs for the urban search and rescue system. Working group members were selected based on technical expertise, geographical location, and a willingness to work voluntarily with the various groups.

I had the privilege of serving on the equipment working group with a

number of very talented individuals—for example, Chuck Christman from Mojave, California. Chuck is an instructor in surface and underground training for mine operations and a member of the Indian Wells Valley Search and Rescue Team. The search and rescue team is comprised of trained professionals who volunteer their time, money, and personal equipment to help others.

SHARING EXPERIENCES

During our leisure time (limited, to say the least) between meetings, the group exchanged search and rescue stories. Two members of the group, Bill Gustin of the Metro Dade County (FL) Fire Department and Chuck Jarrell of the Fairfax County (VA) Fire Department, had participated in the rescue efforts in Armenia and their input in discussions was invaluable.

Interestingly, although our expertise in search and rescue varied, from East Coast inner city to West Coast mountain and desert areas, our objectives and goals—the saving of lives—were the same. As one of the East Coast inner city members, I listened with interest as Chuck Christman told of one of the mine shaft rescues that the Indian Wells Valley Search and Rescue Team had been involved in.

Chuck related the details: Two young men, ages 23 and 24, were out on a nighttime excursion in a four-wheel drive vehicle, exploring their hills near Cerro Coso Community College in Ridgecrest, California. Their 1985 Nissan King Cab crested a ridge, and before they could see it, their vehicle fell into a mine shaft,

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coming to rest on a ledge approximately 35 feet from the surface. The front section of the vehicle was facing downward into the shaft. Miraculously they were not injured and were able to climb into the back of the truck through a sliding glass window.

After spending an entire night in the back of the truck (the incident occurred at 10 p.m.), at daylight they started to burn various items in hopes that someone would see the smoke coming from the shaft. Both young men said that they heard several cars and motorcycles passing nearby and that they yelled out to them, but no one heard their voices. Two search and rescue teams, Indian Wells Valley and China Lake, had started a search of all mine shafts in the area that were frequented by youths in four-wheel drive vehicles.

Two local residents, who had been out riding their mountain bikes and decided to stop to discuss their return route, heard voices coming from an abandoned mine shaft. They notified the sheriff's office, which quickly notified both search and rescue teams, who responded directly to the scene.

Indian Wells Valley brought their specially designed "A" frame and hauling system to the scene. This unit had been used very effectively in other mine shaft rescues. It is designed so that the hauling system can be located over the middle of the shaft opening for lowering and raising victims and rescuers. The need for a rescuer to avoid using his feet on the sides of the shaft or accidentally striking the sides, causing additional debris to fall on victims, was a prime consideration in the design and utilization of this system. The system can be set up in 15 minutes and easily transported to the scene by vehicle or helicopter.

After the system was readied, a line was dropped to the men in the shaft so that the vehicle could be secured. Team member Rich Winnford was then lowered into the shaft and assisted both men out safely.



The specially designed Indian Wells Valley A-frame hauling system. Rescue personnel assemble the unit in about 15 minutes.



Squad member Rich Winnford is lowered into the deep mine shaft to assist victims trapped with their vehicle on a ledge approximately 35 feet down. One of the victims is raised to safety. Below, the hauling system is utilized effectively in another incident to recover an injured biker and his vehicle. (Photos courtesy of Chuck Christman.)



The victims had spent 19 hours in the shaft. The expertise and professionalism of the search and rescue teams; the ingenuity in developing and using the special hauling system over open mine shafts; and the dedication, training, and coordinated efforts of the search and rescue teams all were responsible for saving the two lives. A tip of the helmet to the Indian Wells Valley and China Lake search and rescue teams. ■

The incident described in this article is but one example of the many interesting rescues that are made nationwide every day. Do you have a rescue story to tell? We'd like to hear from you. Please write to Ray Downey c/o Fire Engineering, Park 80 West, Plaza Two, 7th Floor, Saddle Brook, NJ 07662.