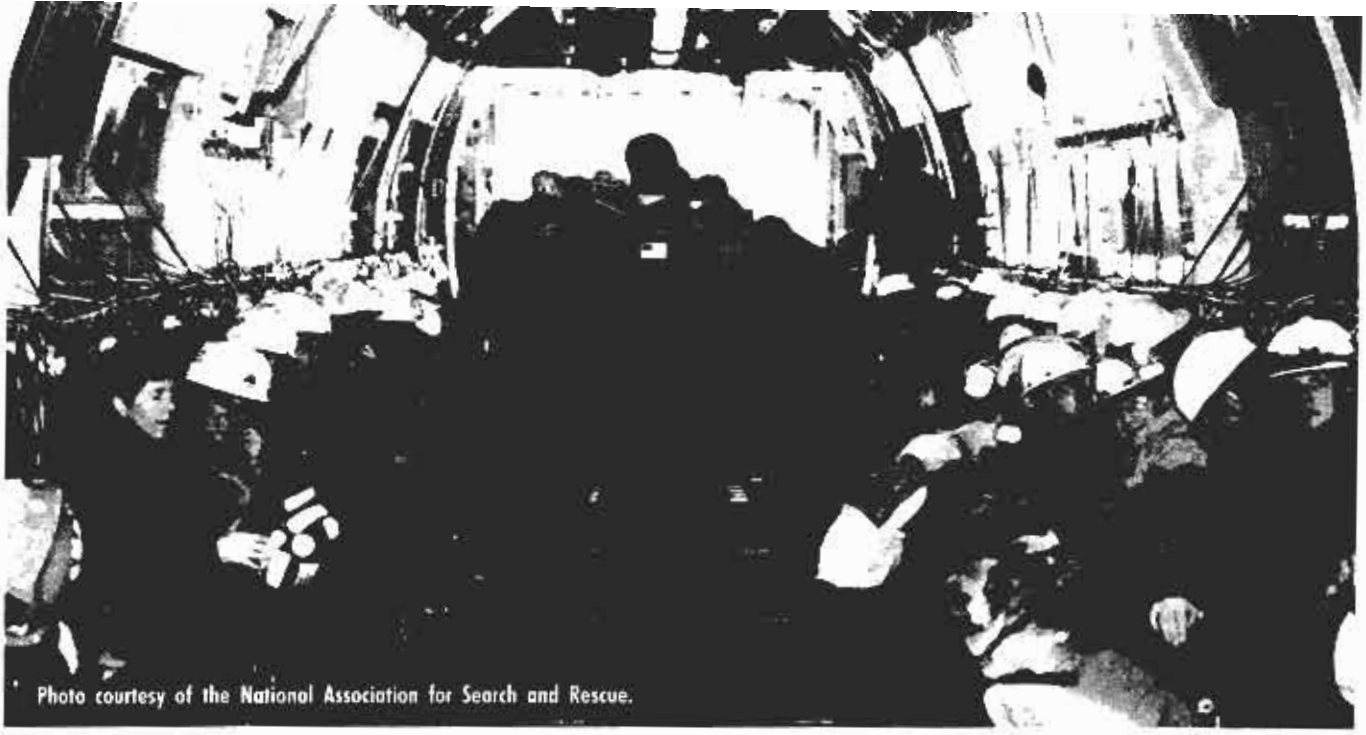

Photo courtesy of the National Association for Search and Rescue.

NATIONAL URBAN SEARCH AND RESCUE NETWORK

BY RAY DOWNEY

In January 1990, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) convened a workshop in Seattle, Washington, to address concerns—including the availability of resources within the United States—relative to conducting urban search and rescue (US&R) activities in the event of a catastrophe such as an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, or other natural disaster. Earthquakes in Mexico City, Armenia, and California have brought to the forefront the need for a national urban search and rescue network with the capabilities to provide personnel, equipment, and resources to accomplish the many varied tasks required during a major disaster. What at first seemed like an almost impossible dream was realized in September 1991 when 25 urban search and rescue teams in 17 states were chosen by FEMA to constitute the first national urban search and rescue network for catastrophic disasters.

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BACKGROUND/HISTORY

Teams deployed to assist at operations during the earthquakes in Mexico City, Soviet Armenia, and California did not have task forces such as those now available, but the many problems they had to overcome and the experience they gained provided the groundwork for the present system. When disasters such as earthquakes occur, the local available resources (manpower and equipment) quickly are overtaxed or in some instances become nonexistent—due mainly to the enormous devastation.

The first workshop, in Seattle, was attended by 85 invited participants representing all geographic regions of the country; all major areas of relevant technical expertise; and federal, state, local, and private-sector organizations. During the workshop, the emphasis was on the following:

- Discussing the status of the existing national US&R capabilities.
- Identifying requirements for a national US&R system.
- Identifying actions necessary to develop and implement a national

system.

- Discussing the present-day structure of intergovernmental relationships to facilitate the establishment and implementation of a national system.

This workshop was the beginning of what eventually would be a major undertaking by FEMA, and the goal of implementing a national system by fall 1991 was set. Surprisingly to some (except those involved in development), on September 26, 1991, FEMA issued a press release that began, "Twenty-five urban search and rescue teams in seventeen states have been chosen by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to constitute the first national urban search and rescue network for catastrophic disasters."

FEMA Director Wallace E. Stickney stated, "This marks the beginning of an important FEMA initiative backed by the Bush Administration to have a well-trained and adequately equipped cadre of rescue specialists who can be called upon in the event of a catastrophic disaster, such as an earthquake or a hurricane." In addition, Stickney announced that each team will receive a FEMA grant of up to $100,000 to purchase equipment. These funds will be channeled through state governments to the local sponsoring organizations.

GETTING STARTED

FEMA established an advisory committee made up of 21 federal and state officials, first responders, and representatives of 19 organizations including FEMA, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the National Emergency Management Association, the National Association for Search and Rescue, the National Sheriffs Association, and the U.S. Coast Guard. This advisory group was given formal status on September 5, 1991, when Stickney signed the charter of the Advisory Committee of the National Urban Search and Rescue Response System, as provided for under the federal Advisory Comittee Act.

For more than a year, various working groups met and were involved in the development of standards and criteria for team personnel, equipment, training, management, and operating procedures. The recommendations developed from these meetings then were passed on to the FEMA US&R advisory committee for approval.

WORKING GROUPS

Five working groups were identified to address specific subject areas: standards, equipment, communications, management and coordination, and training. Subgroups within these subject areas included search, rescue, medical, technical, and logistics. Over the period of a year these various groups met in different areas across the country to develop first interim and then more permanent task force standards to support implementation of a national US&R system. Performance standards, position descriptions, qualification standards, readiness requirements, tactical capabilities, and operational checklists were developed.

The members of the working groups were selected based on geographic distribution, technical expertise, recognition in the subject field, and willingness to serve. After many months of hard work and approval by the advisory committee, documents were finalized that spelled out the requirements necessary for any sponsoring organization interested in submitting an application for inclusion in the FEMA US&R system. Applications, which had to be channeled through state emergency management offices, were accepted up until July 1991. In August 1991, 14 members selected from the various working groups convened in Fairfax, Virginia, to evaluate the technical merits and deficiencies of each application. This group, the Technical Review Panel, considered the qualifications of personnel and the equipment available in organizations interested in becoming one of the

US&R TEAMS

Arizona	Phoenix Fire Department
California	City of Los Angeles Fire Department
	Los Angeles County Fire Department
	Menlo Park Fire Department
	Oakland Fire Department
	Orange County Fire Department
	Riverside Fire Department
	Sacramento Fire Department
	San Diego Fire Department
Colorado	State of Colorado
Florida	Dade County/St. Petersburg
Georgia	State of Georgia
Illinois	Chicago Fire Department
Indiana	Marion County Fire Department
Maryland	Montgomery County Fire Department
Nebraska	City of Lincoln
Nevada	Clark County
New Mexico	State of New Mexico
New York	New York City Police, Fire, and EMS
Pennsylvania	Commonwealth of Pennsylvania
Tennessee	Memphis/Shelby County Emergency Management Agency
Utah	State of Utah
Virginia	Fairfax County Fire and Rescue Department
	Virginia Beach Fire Department
Washington	Pierce/King Counties

teams. The findings then were turned over to the advisory committee for final approval.

TEAM REQUIREMENTS

Teams are made up of 56 members and will be capable of operating on a 24-hour, around-the-clock basis. Team formation is designed to provide a continuous operation: Half the team works for 12 hours while the other half rests for 12 hours. Commitment of a team can last from seven to 10 days. The equipment cache includes sufficient personnel needs so that the teams are self-sufficient for up to 72 hours, after which the government will fulfill their needs.

A team is broken down into the following specialty categories:

- Task force leaders (2).
- Search team managers (2).
- Canine search specialists (4).
- Technical search specialists (2).
- Rescue team managers (2).
- Rescue squad officers (4).
- Rescue specialists (20).
- Medical team managers (2).
- Medical specialists (4).
- Technical team managers (2).
- Structure specialists (2).
- Hazardous-materials specialists (2).
- Heavy rigging and equipment specialists (2).
- Technical information specialists (2).
- Communications specialists (2).
- Logistics specialists (2).

Each one of these specialties has general and specific requirements and criteria with which team members must comply. General requirements include age, physical standards, availability, American Red Cross certification, ability to function for long hours under adverse conditions, and current inoculations; specific requirements include for, say, a rescue specialist a minimum of three years of regular field experience in rescue operations, proficiency in rope rescue techniques, proficiency in confined-space rescue techniques, and a basic understanding of search unit strategy, tactics, techniques, and equipment. Each of the 16 positions has its own criteria; some require more than others.

The task force teams, on activation, are required to mobilize their personnel and equipment and to be at a predesignated point of departure within six hours. The Department of Defense will provide transportation to the site of the disaster, where teams will meet with the local incident command. Teams will be assigned an operational area where they will work with the local incident commander. (See box on page 83 for a list of teams and their locations.)

Grants totaling more than $1.8 million were awarded to the top 25 sponsoring organizations located in 17 states. Teams were awarded up to $100,000 each for the purchase of urban search and rescue equipment. These grants were contingent on a hard-cash match from the sponsoring organizations.

Yearly, FEMA will conduct a solicitation process to evaluate the progress of the teams in the system and to admit new teams.

PRESENT STATUS

An orientation training course is being developed and in June 1992 will be presented to task force leaders, team managers, and state and local sponsoring agencies, including the relevant military representatives. The orientation programs will be held in six centrally selected areas of the country, where four to five teams will meet for a three-day training seminar. In addition, training programs for the teams are being developed to provide a uniform operating procedures system. The training working group is addressing the needs of these teams by reviewing available existing training programs and comparing program contents with the needs of the task force teams and developing a program to meet the needs of the response system.

A number of task force teams already have been involved in training exercises (initiated and sponsored on their own) to test readiness, mobilization and operational procedures. The state of California has had a number of these exercises, one of which included teams from various areas of the state in an operational exercise and another including a mobilization and airlift from Los Angeles to San Francisco (see "Operation Air Bridge," *Fire Engineering*, December 1991).

California has strong competition in the East from Fairfax County (VA) Fire and Rescue, Montgomery County (MD) Fire and Rescue, and the Virginia Beach (VA) Fire Department, who have been meeting, training, and "networking" for the FEMA urban search and rescue response program. This past January, Fairfax County and Montgomery County participated in a day-long exercise simulating activation, mobilization, and response from Andrews Air Force Base. The exercise included team call-out, mobilization, transportation to the site of departure, and equipment packaging and loading onto an aircraft. Military personnel held group discussions with task force team members, explaining the requirements for an airlift in such a short time frame. These are just some of the first steps in this major undertaking by FEMA and the task force teams to coordinate the US&R response system.

* * *

The efforts of more than 100 leading search and rescue experts in the country were commended by Grant Peterson, FEMA's associate director of state and local programs and support, for the many hours and days they spent in the working groups developing this program. As the efforts continue, other nations are looking at what has been developed in the United States in hopes of developing a similar system. Organizations seeking information about the US&R program can contact Kimberly Vasconez at FEMA, (202) 646-4335.

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