

After the Building Fell Down

By— Hatch & Judy Graham
Contributing Editors

On a wooded hill on the outskirts of Tacoma, Wa., a three-story mental ward of Western State Hospital was shattered by a series of implosions. When the dust settled, all that remained standing were end walls of the north, south and west wings, a highly unstable section of the west wing with a suspended "bridge" that had been part of the roof, and a third-story room that appeared to be hanging in mid-air. Below was a jumble of masonry and concrete that used to be walls and ceilings.

Was anyone trapped in there alive?

Early on the morning of August 25th, some 60 rescuers — doctors, nurses and paramedics, firefighters, and disaster dogs with their handlers — gathered to pool their skills in the search and rescue of possible survivors.

It was only a drill, but veterans of Mexico City, Armenia, and other disasters agreed they'd never encountered anything so like a real disaster in training before. It was authentic



"A lot like the real thing." — what's left of the old ward building looms behind rescuers as they gather for a briefing. All photos by Judy Graham.

down to the rats and the TV cameras.

This was the field exercise of Pacific Rim Disaster Team's first Disaster Training Conference, held August 24th through 27th in the Tacoma area. It all started when PRDT chairman Gary Furlong said one day, "Wouldn't it be great if we could blow up a building to use for search and rescue exercises?"

Pierce County Department of Emergency Services director Bill Lokey "saw the possibilities for real improvement in disaster preparedness if a building could be demolished specifically for the purpose of recreating the kind of damage a major earthquake can cause."

Experts from everywhere

Spectacular as it was, the collapsed structure drill was only part of the conference. Experts from around the country were recruited for the instructional staff. They included Bob

Keesecker, Ellery Gray and Art Feller (U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance), Chuck Mills (National Assn. for Search and Rescue), Dr. Fred Krimgold (Virginia Polytechnic Institute), Rick LaValla and Skip Stoffel (Emergency Response Institute), Nicholas Jones and Eric Noji, MD (Johns Hopkins University), Ervin Martin (Alaska Division of Emergency Services), Roger Solomon, PhD (Washington State Patrol), Bill Lokey (Pierce County DES), Bruce Bowler (SEADOGS), Judy Bowler (Alaska Dept. of Transportation and Public Facilities), Lee Johnson, PhA, Lt. Rudy Alvarado (Redmond Fire Dept.), Jim Hone (Santa Monica F.D.), Bob Samuelson (Long Beach F.D.), and Hatch Graham (California Rescue Dog Assn.)

Among the program offerings: "Earthquakes vs. Structures," "Extrication by Building Types," "Protecting Team Members in the Field," "Medical Aspects of Search and Res-

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cue," "OFDA and NASAR Callout: Standards and Considerations," "Organizing: The Key to a Successful Team," "How to Work with Search Dogs," "Human Scent Transport in Rubble," "Spouses: What's My Role as a Volunteer's Partner?" and "Convergence: Is There Such a Thing as Too Much Help?"

coming from all over. There was even someone from Chile. Volunteer search dogs were well represented, with teams from PAWS and SEADOGS (Fairbanks and Juneau, Ak., respectively), German Shepherd Search Dogs of Washington State, CASCADE DOGS and California Rescue Dog Assn.



Rachel Yelle of GSSD encourages "Tally" to pursue a scent while Hatch Graham observes. (This photo by Bob Koenig).

[Editor's note: The last two will be discussion topics on "Geraldo" soon, I hear.]

To demonstrate to firemen and medical personnel what a disaster dog's alert is all about, Ellery Gray hid in an "alert hole" (constructed from two plastic barrels) at dinner on the evening before the collapsed-building drill. Judy Graham's German Shepherd, "Roxy," worked through the crowded banquet room until she hit the "buried" scent, then proceeded to try to dig the OFDA official out of hiding, accompanied by her jubilant barking.

The Disaster Training Conference drew emergency planners and managers, firefighters, law enforcement and medical personnel, seismic experts, and dog handlers from up and down the West Coast, with some

"Oh, shit"

With their varied backgrounds, these were the people who gathered early on the morning of August 25th under the shadow of what was left of the demolished ward building, and thought "oh shit." It sure looked like the real thing.

Of course, concessions had been made to safety for "victims" and rescuers. After the former hospital dormitory was blasted and battered down, and before the drill, heavy rescue instructors had brought down many tons of hanging rubble and roped off sections that remained precarious. Experts trained to evaluate collapsed buildings had checked the site. Spots for burying "victims" had been selected with safety in mind.

Still, the word at briefing that

morning was "walk softly and look in six directions before you take a step."

"If I weigh 180 lbs. standing still, I double my weight if I move gently," cautioned heavy rescue instructor Bob Samuelson. "It triples or quadruples if I go klutzing around. Get a dozen or so people on top of the rubble, and you've added a tremendous load to that unstable pile."

For dog handlers, the yellow ribbons strung across the more dangerous areas had special meaning. "You mustn't cross those tapes," they were told. "You can send your dog in to search those areas, so you'd better be able to get your dog to go out and search at a distance." The area near

grate everybody into an effective team. Each team would rotate through five stations, including the search and rescue drill, working against the clock to get their assignments done before the whistle signaled time to move to the next station.

Station A was an introduction to shoring, or how to prop up tons of unstable building so it doesn't come crashing down on your head. It included a tour of the site and its hazards: Part of a ceiling hanging by three pieces of rebar; a wall attached on only one side to the rest of the building, and supporting a fallen floor.

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the center of the building was declared off-limits even for the dogs — hence the need for a fairly fine-tuned control of dogs by their handlers.

Division into teams

After the general safety briefing, rescuers were divided into six 10-man teams, each with two dogs and handlers, a trauma-trained doctor and paramedic, firefighters and a team leader. None had ever worked together before. Dogs and handlers were paired from different units.

It was the job of firemen, medics and dog handlers to quickly learn each others' skills and methods of working and figure out how to inte-

At Station C, rescuers learned some ways to evacuate victims from an upper story if the stairway doesn't exist anymore. These included a telfer system and a ladder slide. At this station, dog handlers had a chance to raise their partners to the second floor through a hole in the ceiling, using a dog sling and a rope system rigged from a ladder A-frame.

Station D was an illustration of how important it is for search dogs (or other victim-locators) to pinpoint where to dig through the rubble to reach a trapped survivor. This was the station of grunts and sweat (and angry resident yellowjackets). Dog handlers traded off with firemen and doctors in breaking through concrete

When the stairway is gone.... Bruce Speer of GSSD sends "Isaac" to the second floor by means of a ladder A-frame.



floors with a sledgehammer and cutting through rebar with bolt cutters. Something they'd heard in one of the classroom sessions came to mind: "The manpower needs are tremendous; it can take 100 hours per victim to dig people out."

Station E was communications. Dog handlers who feel perfectly at ease in the woods, radioing information and plans to their teammates, learned they may have to make some

coming up through the rubble. In his own characteristic way, each dog signaled the find— by scratching and digging, barking or whining, and always with a madly wagging tail. The lead handler would call for the second dog to confirm the alert. Then it was the task of firemen and medics to reach the "survivor," stabilize him and carry him out in a litter. Meanwhile, the dogs were finding a second and then a third "victim." Every



A hardhat's better than no pillow at all. Disaster work is very taxing for a dog. "Roxy" takes a break after the search exercise.

adjustments to make radio contact when they're crawling on their bellies through a pancaked structure.

Station B

But we skipped Station B. That was the south wing of the ward building, the search and rescue drill. Was anyone hidden under that jumble of concrete and rebar?

Dogs and handlers went into action. The lead handler sized up the rubble and asked for a couple of observers — usually the second handler and a fireman — who positioned themselves where they had a good view of the site. Their job was to watch for hazards and for alerts by the dog, and to make sure the whole site was searched. As handlers picked their way over the precarious footing, they were grateful for the second and third pairs of eyes.

It didn't take long. Within seconds the dog caught human scent

dog located all three subjects.

At debriefing, dog handlers, firemen and medics were equally enthusiastic about the drill. "Closest thing I've seen to a disaster without being in the real thing." "Tremendous activity with the search and the dogs."

A handler commented, "I really appreciated the chance to work as a member of the team, learning about shoring and breaching walls and all the other things I've always said 'but that's not my job.'"

From a team leader: "Nobody knew each other before, but we achieved a tremendous camaraderie. I'd like to take that team to the next disaster."

And how did the "victims" feel about the whole thing? At debriefing, one exclaimed, "I love those dogs! As soon as I heard that breathing, I knew the dog wouldn't leave me, even if the handler tried to call him away. Not one of them ever left me until I was 'found.'"