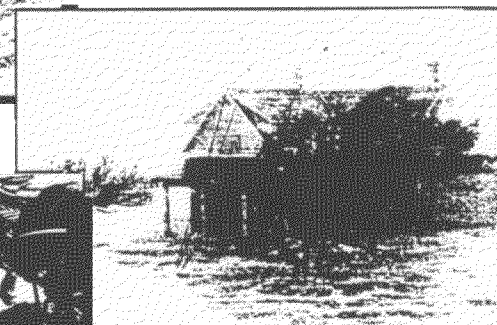
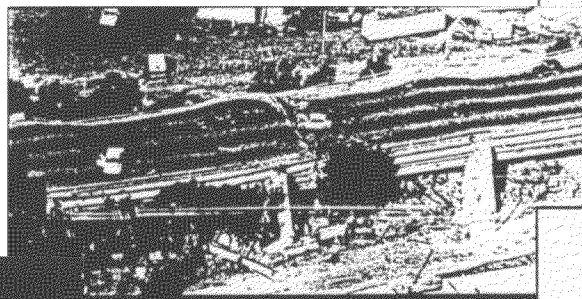
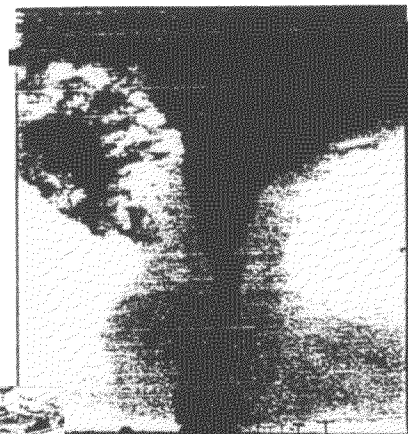


Disaster Operations

Not Business As Usual

BY
MICHAEL GUERIN



Photos courtesy of the Department of Transportation, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration and the California Highway Patrol

At 5:03 p.m. on October 17, 1989, law enforcement personnel throughout Northern California's Bay Area were taking crime reports, investigating traffic accidents, issuing citations, patrolling the streets, and suppressing criminal activity. By 5:05 p.m., all the rules had changed. A major earthquake shook the area, causing death, destruction, and chaos.

All too often, when disasters occur, law enforcement officials

simply comment, "It's business as usual, just more of it." Unfortunately, experience has shown that this is not the case. In fact, given any disaster situation, law enforcement agencies must alter their priorities, operations, and schedules to meet emergency demands.

This article reviews several issues related to the manner in which law enforcement agencies operate after a disaster occurs. It considers

what police have learned from past disasters so that they can prepare better for these crisis situations and provide a complete emergency response. Then, the article covers critical law enforcement priorities after a disaster occurs. These include maintaining police operations, informing the public, dispatching personnel and equipment, and light rescue and evacuation operations. Finally, it provides information on how managers can

establish disaster operations plans for their agencies, regardless of size.

LESSONS LEARNED

In order to best allocate law enforcement resources, a review of police experiences during past disasters provides key information on which to base future emergency responses. Analysis of information obtained during post-disaster interviews clears up some misconceptions police administrators may have regarding disaster operations.

First, patterns of criminal activity do not change dramatically when disaster strikes. Despite media reports to the contrary, looting is not prevalent in the hours following a disaster. For example, after the October California earthquake, only 2 law enforcement agencies out of over 100 noted any quake-related thefts during the emergency period. These were isolated, not widespread, cases. However, looting is possible in

areas where social unrest and poor economic conditions already exist. For example, much of the media coverage of looting after Hurricane Hugo devastated parts of the eastern seaboard showed footage from the U.S. Virgin Islands; yet, incidents of looting in the Carolinas were rare.

Second, there is a myth that the public is uncooperative and subject to panic after a disaster. However, past experience shows that just the opposite is true. In fact, law enforcement agencies have difficulties in handling the over-abundance of volunteers. Citizens are highly motivated to cooperate or offer assistance after a disaster, and agencies should plan ways to best use this enormous pool of volunteer energy, consistent with public safety concerns. Experience also shows that panic only occurs when there is a lack of consistent, visible leadership. Where local officials work as a team, set priorities, and

keep the public informed, the public reacts accordingly.

Another misconception involves police invulnerability. Since they often face difficult circumstances under fast-changing conditions, law enforcement personnel believe they can instantly adapt their daily operations to disaster conditions. Therefore, they give little thought to disaster training and planning. Administrators tend to overlook the safety of their own facilities and the readiness of their equipment, as well as a lack of policy and proper training for disaster situations.

Finally, experience has shown that law enforcement agencies need to better integrate their operations during emergencies. Clearly, however, there are more tasks to be performed during an emergency than just maintaining order and providing security.

DISASTER AFTERMATH

Identifying law enforcement priorities after a disaster occurs is critical. Maintaining police services, assessing overall damage, assisting in light rescue operations, and coordinating security are realistic objectives. These can be handled with a high degree of efficiency and effectiveness if proper planning and training takes place before the emergency occurs. Then, if a disaster does occur, agency personnel will be prepared to provide a complete emergency response.

Maintaining Police Operations

After any disaster occurs, law enforcement agencies must initiate steps to ensure that police opera-

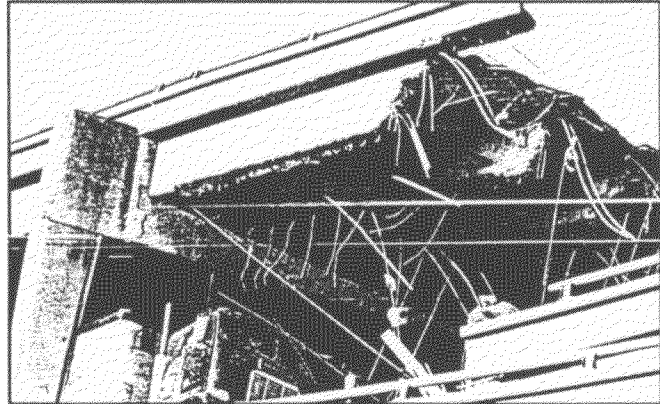
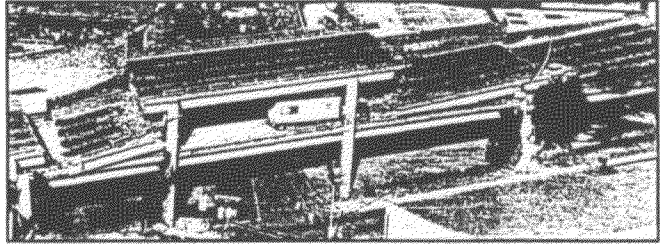


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Mr. Guerin is the Assistant Chief of the Law Enforcement Division, Governor's Office of Emergency Services, Ontario, California.

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tions can be maintained. Clearly, agencies may need to consider facility evacuation plans, as well as alternative arrangements for carrying on critical functions, given a building evacuation. For example, in one major suburban police department, the entire Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and the communications center had to be evacuated for an entire shift in order to assess the damage and structural integrity of the building. There were no alternative 911 routing plans, no duplicate personnel call-out rosters, and no alternate dispatching site. This serves to reinforce the concept that immediately after a disaster occurs, agencies must assess their capabilities and advise personnel accordingly. It is a good idea at this time to start an agency log to include notes on

the effects of the disaster on police facilities, operations, and assignments.

At this point, communications personnel become the lifeline for police operations. They should broadcast that a disaster has occurred and advise all units to avoid transmitting until a roll call can be taken. Units must know to stay off the radio until their identifiers are called. Dispatchers should then call each unit, in turn, to record all essential information. Only then do they report their location and status (injury, vehicle damage, access problems) and give a brief account of the extent of damage in their areas. This allows on-duty supervisors and managers to know the status of their resources, and it begins the critical process of damage assessment.

Damage Assessment

Only through a thorough assessment of the damage incurred and current police capabilities can managers best assign their resources. Agencies may choose to instruct units to respond only to emergency assignments, avoiding activities that may take them out of service for extended periods of time and prevent them from responding to more critical dispatches.

Law enforcement personnel may need to practice a skill similar to triage, which is an emergency medical system of assigning priorities to treatment of battlefield casualties on the basis of urgency and chance of survival. During disaster situations, officers face a variety of problems in a short period of time. They must make rapid decisions as to which are true life-