



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 12

Battalion Chief, Michael Greenup

Announcer: You're listening to a special edition of MySafe LA's Fire and Life Safety podcast, "Remembering the Northridge Earthquake 20 Years Later."

David: Hello, everyone, and welcome to another of the Fire and Life Safety podcasts from MySafe LA. My name is David Barrett. I'm one of your hosts, and this is part of our special series on earthquakes in Los Angeles.

We're talking with Los Angeles City firefighters about their experiences during the Northridge earthquake on January 17, 1994. These stories are important not just because of the experiences of these firefighters, but because of the educational value they may hold for our people who live in the community as we look forward to the next earthquake and how to be better prepared to survive it.

Today, I'm really delighted to have Battalion Chief Michael Greenup whom I've known for more than that. More than 10 years now, Chief, and we're delighted to have you. How are you today?

Michael: Very good, thank you, David.

David: In 1994, what was your rank and assignment?

Michael: I was a Captain 1 working at OCD, Operations Control Division, which is our dispatch center for the LAFD.

David: Were you working on the 17th, or coming in, or what was your status at that point?

Michael: I was working on the 17th. I was actually working on the dispatch floor. We rotate our watch throughout the day. I had just finished my watch at 1:00 AM in the morning and had gone to bed for a couple hours of sleep.

David: So 4:31 comes along and BOOM. What did it feel like down underneath the floor?

Michael: That was the thing. I was in the dispatch center which is four floors below ground level in our P4 level at City Hall East. Quite a shaker. I was in the dormitory. There was another Captain in there. It shook real hard. I asked him if he had felt an earthquake that strong down there at OCD, and he said he'd never felt one that strong. As we got up, I had some concerns being in City Hall East four floors under. I thought we might have lost our exits, because they have the spiral driveways going down there. I thought the driveways might be down, and then made sure we had proper escape routes to get up to the street level.

David: I imagine you got up and got dressed and went to the floor.

Michael: Yes. Got up, got dressed, went out to the floor. There's three Captains working that 8 OCD per 24-hour shifts, so all three of us were out there. But what I found, what was interesting was as soon as I got out the first call we got was the 10 freeway at National and one of the dispatchers said, "Hey, the 10 freeway at National has collapsed. We have a car over the side there." I thought that was very interesting that that was the first call we got in the Northridge earthquake.

David: Now you had some interesting challenges that morning with a power generator scaling, the software going down, trying to get it back up, and manually using radios, and local computers can manage the impotence for the day. Can you walk me through that a little bit?

Michael: Yes we did. That morning, it was interesting, because we did have a power surge. The power went off right away, but then we got power back up. But it didn't last long. It was probably for maybe 5 minutes or so. We lost power, the generators kicked on, and we could tell we were on generator power at that time. Computers were operating a little slower. We were still able to work with the computers in dispatch through our proper dispatch system, and then probably, it was probably 10-15 minutes, as we were starting to get all our status, our system crashed and went down. We couldn't figure out why, but we lost generator power at that time. The generator at the P3 level actually had some water leak in there, had a water pipe burst, so that went down. Then we were on battery power.

So, very limited operations when the computers went to batteries. Screens were going dark. We did have good lighting within the communication center, and right away we put all the whole city on radio watch, and that's how we were controlling our dispatches, through radio watches not computer generated.

David: One of the things that we take for granted today in terms of our communications that we have, cell phones, and these computers, and so on to get information around. That wasn't the case back then. At the call

center, they were mostly coming from land lines and what was the issues that might have existed with that?

Michael: That was interesting because we did have some problems communications right away. After we got a few calls from West LA, we knew that valley was impacted. So we had a lot of radio communication problems out in the valley in establishing where our companies were, the proper status of each company, and it's kind of funny you say that, because at that time, the three division commanders throughout the city were issued cell phones. I think they were some of the few people that had them within the department. Phone power went down right away, so we weren't able to call Division 3 at the time, which was at a Fire Station ADA. But they did have their cell phone, and we were able to communicate via cell phone. Very limited cell phone communication. Phones weren't working good--the hard line.

It was funny, the cell phones were actually working good. What limited communication we had and the few people that had them worked good. I wouldn't say that would be the case today. With as many cell phones as we got out there and many cell phone towers, I would think that system would crash right away. That was our one line of communication for the Division Chief out in the valley was the cell phone. It was real beneficial.

David: Interesting thing to think that in an area where you dispatched fire apparatus throughout the entire city that you get the birds-eye view of the earthquake and how it's affected the entire city. From that perspective, what did that day teach you guys? What did you experience throughout the day in terms of, there were 110 fires related to the earthquake, but there was 800 and something fires throughout the course of the day. What was the day like in terms of... You're underneath the ground there and you're trying to figure out what is the city like. What were your impressions about what the city was like?

Michael: Good question because it's real imperative that we get situation awareness. That morning with the power being on we weren't able to... Right away down there, at our dispatch center, what we do is flip on the TVs to see if we have any helicopters, news helicopters up working to give us some situational awareness of what's going on out in the field. That morning, not having power and then going to battery power, we weren't able to use the TVs and it was, like I mentioned, the first call that came in was in Santa Monica. Then the second call that I took personally on the dispatch floor from the Captain's console was Santa Monica Fire Department requesting a strike team.

So right away thinking about this, we assumed that something must have been going on on the west of the city with the freeway down and then Santa Monica requesting resources. Within probably 5 minutes all the

resources, we've noticed that most of the resources calling in were within the San Fernando Valley, and then we even scaled that down to the Northridge-Chatsworth-Reseda area. We know that was heavily hit.

To get a picture of it, we were getting it from the Battalion Commanders. They were radioing in. Division Commanders gave us a good size of what was going on. They got some eyes on, and they were communicating with us through the cell phone like I mentioned. It was mainly just grab and situational awareness what we heard from the fire companies out there once we got our radio comms up, and then also the Battalion Commanders checking in and let us know how each one of their districts were.

David: One of the big incidents that occurred during the day, of course, was the collapse of the Northridge Meadows apartment complex. Were you involved at all in managing resources for that incident? I know Bob Defeo was the incident commander there, and his side of the story is pretty relevant to resources.

Michael: On that specific incident we didn't have, right away we knew it was going to be a lengthy incident, and we were going to need our Urban Search and Rescue teams out there. We didn't have formed Urban Search and Rescue teams like we do now. Most of the guys were on call though. Right away we had one of the Captains start notifying the team to get companies out there. My job was actually to start filling behind them, to make sure that we had enough companies to do that operation and we weren't going to be short staffed.

Pretty much at that time when Northridge Meadows went down, simultaneously we had the Northridge Fashion Center at the mall. The parking garage collapsed, and collapsed on one of the maintenance workers that was in a street sweeper type machine. We were working both those incidents pretty much the same. We had to use our team right away to Northridge Meadows because we know a lot of people, most of them being home at 4:30 in the morning and then also being a holiday, being Martin Luther King Day, that that was going to be our most at-risk and most life-loss was there. The one in the parking lot at Northridge Fashion Center, we knew we had probably minimal people there at that time. Mainly just the maintenance workers.

My involvement in there, to answer your question, was to make sure we had enough companies there to handle the incident, and then also to start filling behind them in a support function to make sure they had proper relief, logistical issues like food and water, restrooms, and enough companies to handle that specific incident.

David: Everyone talks about January 17th and what happened during those initial hours. But what about the disaster after the disaster? What about the management and the number of fires and the number of people who needed help in the days after the earthquake? What happened in the week after?

Michael: It was interesting because a lot of services were lost throughout the San Fernando valley. Part of our job, being at the dispatch center, was we actually placed engine companies with large hose throughout a lot of the Northridge area, throughout the North Hills area, Mission Hills, and we actually supplied water to many homes where to would put a pumper, a fire engine on a hydrant, and they would be pumping 1/4 mile down the street supplying water to the local residents. Right off the fire hose, they had fittings where they could tap in and able to fill up water jugs, water pails, whatever they need.

Then, also, we had a few fire stations that were severely damaged where the firefighters weren't able to go back in there. For example, Fire Station 70, which actually was red-tagged. Internally we did have our own problems where we weren't able to put these fire companies back in fire stations. We had to relocate them also, and a lot of problems with aftershocks afterwards. People, their home being destructed where we went in, did quick inspections, assisted them with whatever we could--moving furniture, moving heavy items, and assisting people getting back in their homes as quickly as possible.

David: What about language issues? Did you have the right ability to manage people who spoke Spanish or Korean or Japanese or other languages in terms of assessing what their needs were?

Michael: At that time, 20 years ago, especially at the San Fernando Valley, it wasn't multicultural like you see the San Fernando Valley today. It predominately a caucasian-bedroom community. We did have some language problems with the Hispanics calling in. Luckily, there at OCD, probably at that time about half of our dispatchers were Spanish speakers, so we were able to bring them onto the dispatch for assistance with the Spanish speakers. Then also we transferred calls to wherever the Spanish speakers were sitting.

David: 20 years have passed. You've had just a remarkable number of jobs and promotions since then. You've spent a lot of time in Hollywood. You've worked in arson, and you're now in the heart of Koreatown, southern LA. What do you think about our readiness today for the next big earthquake? What would happen if an earthquake of the magnitude of the Northridge occurred in Battalion 11 where you are in Koreatown? What are your impressions?

Michael: An earthquake with the impact of the Northridge earthquake 20 years ago, I would say it would be pretty devastating in this area, because if you look at Battalion 11 here, Pico Union area, the Alvarado District, a lot of dense population in this area. We have a lot of apartments. We have a lot of apartments that are pre-33 construction, which is unreinforced masonry that are anywhere from two-story all the way up to the taller ones that are 7-8 stories. Those with an earthquake of the that magnitude would take a big hit within this area and would really effect the apartments and the residents here.

David: It seems that it's really important for the community to be able to take care of itself for some period of time following an earthquake. That's where programs like CERT come in. Beyond that every home should have an escape plan and water and a fire extinguisher. Do you agree with that or are there other things that you might want to suggest?

Michael: Oh, most definitely I think. Even seeing the devastation of the Northridge earthquake and as stretched thin as those initial fire companies were, that a lot of the homeowners had to take care of themselves. That was a good example, that they did have to put out their small fires. They did have to go out there and turn off their power and gas utilities if necessary. I would say in this area, most definitely. Like I said, the fire department's not going to be there right away. If they could have their earthquake pits, their readiness plans, their family communication plans to make sure that the families know everyone's OK and where they're meeting, and where they're relocating to possibly. Definitely preparedness would be the key and I would say definitely in this area.

David: The LAFD is an all-risk life safety organization. If that regard a lot of change for the better in the last 20 years. Today, tell me briefly about how the department is prepared in terms of user apparatus and teams and training and so on.

Michael: I think we've greatly moved forward in that direction. For one thing, the USAR teams on duty. We have USAR task forces throughout the city right now. There's currently four of them. We have two in the San Fernando Valley, one in the Hollywood area, one in the harbor. We've increased our HAZMAT resources throughout the city. We have HAZMAT squads in Division within the city. I think people have really cherished and appreciated the CERT component. Our CERT folks have gone out and taught thousands of people since the Northridge earthquake to get them better prepared for when that big disaster happens within the city that they'll be able to take care of themselves and be more self-sufficient.

David: That's all important stuff for everyone to remember that. The fire department will help whenever we ask unless there are too many people

asking at the same time, so we need to think about that. Thank you very much Chief for spending time with us today, and some interesting insight from down four floors below the street in City Hall East. Today, dispatch has been moved onto Temple Street into an above-ground facility which is now called Metro Fire Communications or MSC. But OCD still remains there as a backup, and in the event of a major earthquake, it's very likely that OCD will put back into use once again. So Chief thank you very much for being with us today, and stay safe out there.

Michael: Thank you, David. Thank you very much. Thanks for having me.

Announcer: You've been listening to a MySafe LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. MySafe LA is the public education partner of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Visit us at mysafela.org.