



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 5

LAFD Battalion Chief Joe Castro

- Announcer: You're listening to a special edition of My Safe LA's Fire and Life Safety podcast, remembering the Northridge earthquake 20 years later.
- Cameron: Hello everybody and welcome to the My Safe LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. I'm Cameron Barrett and I am being joined for our 20th anniversary of Northridge remembrance series by Battalion Chief Joe Castro of the Los Angeles Fire Department. Hi Joe.
- Joe: Hello.
- Cameron: Before we even get to January 17th, 1994 I should say that you've got an interesting assignment today. It's a hot, dry, windy day. What are you up to?
- Joe: I am the Strike Team Commander of Strike Team channel one which is at Fire Station 82 in Hollywood and what that's about is on critical fire weather days, which are basically any time we have relative humidity below 15% and then winds over 25 miles an hour.
- They stand up additional resources throughout the city to significantly augment our initial response in relation to a brush fire.
- We are unbelievably in the middle of January, but we are at a red flag alert today, so I'm here in addition to the normal complement of fire fighters at Fire Station 82, we have five additional engines, that's 20 fire fighters and a battalion chief and we're just standing here as a contingency to respond to any brush fire.
- Cameron: OK, so we're going to keep that in mind because there might be some activity and some noise behind you. You also might have to go at any minute. Let's keep our fingers crossed that nothing happens on a high fire hazard day.

January 7th, 1994 there were a lot of really unusual things that happened including the fact that this was a completely undiscovered fault in a place where people did not know there would be any kind of earthquake danger other than the general Southern California earthquake danger.

It was a very violent earthquake and it was a deadly earthquake. Can you remember what your rank and your assignment were back then?

Joe: Yes, yes, I do. I was the Task Force Commander, a Captain too at Fire Station 35 which is in the Los Feliz area of Hollywood. I happened to be on duty that day also.

Cameron: You were at just a few minutes after 4AM, were you already awake and getting ready to come in?

Joe: No, I was at work that day so we had our typical busy day there in the East end of Hollywood and I was wrapped in the arms of Morpheus, the god of sleep and I was in a deep sleep when the earthquake actually hit, at the fire station.

Cameron: It woke you up I would assume.

Joe: It did. I think initially, I tend to be a heavy sleeper and I think that's due to a clear conscience, but I was deep in the sleep and I remember thinking it was a dream and then I woke up and realized it wasn't.

Some of the Celotex ceiling tiles in the station at Fire Station 35 were dropping on me as I slept in my bed.

I remember thinking that if, you never really know where the epicenter is and when you live, I've lived in California my whole life and when you feel the initial shaking your first area of concern is are we at the epicenter or is the epicenter 50 miles away? Or 100 miles away.

The violent shaking, not only just the sheer magnitude of it, but the length that it lasted left me really concerned that if we weren't right at the epicenter, that wherever the epicenter was, there was going to be significant damage.

For my adult life, this was the most significant earthquake I ever remember feeling as far as the actual violence and magnitude of the shaking.

Cameron: There's a really specific thing that happens when an earthquake strikes in Los Angeles when it comes to the Los Angeles Fire Department and that is you are trained, all of you are trained to immediately go into earthquake mode. Can you talk about that?

Joe: Absolutely, absolutely. Well, the first thing we have to do is we're all obviously housed in different fire stations, a little over 100 stations throughout the city and the first thing we need to do obviously is to get the apparatus, the equipment and the personnel out of the station.

The reason should be fairly obvious and that is in case either the initial shaking or the aftershocks actually destroy the building, therefore trapping us in there and precluding the possibility of us going out through the city and rendering aid.

The first thing we did is I heard, as a captain I sleep in a dormitory by myself, but as I threw on my turnout pants and boots and I slid the pole, I could hear everyone in the station yelling, "We have no power."

The power went out so it was completely dark and our apparatus doors to open to allow the apparatus to leave quarters were non-functional obviously because no electricity.

Also we have a manual release and I remember some of the fire fighters pulling the manual release and we still could not get the doors open.

They had actually, the shaking had moved them off their track, so we actually had to get the jaws of life off of the truck and use that to pry open the door initially to an initial distance where we could then get enough bodies on either side to push the doors open.

That was the first order of business was to get the personnel and the equipment out of the fire station. All fire stations immediately have what is called a safe refuge area that they immediately go to when we initially start the earthquake mode.

That's an area usually some parking lot real close to the station, somewhere that's no underneath overhead wires and things of that nature. Then you go ahead and take a personnel and a company accountability report to make sure everyone's there and everybody's OK.

Cameron: Then you kind of do the same thing with your first end district, don't you?

Joe: Well, what we do then is as soon as we get out and we assess that everybody from Task Force 35 is OK, then we check in with our Battalion Commander.

Our Battalion Commander similarly goes to a safe location and then he checks on all the stations under his command to make sure that we don't have one station that's completely buried in rubble.

We check in over the radio. At that point, as soon as the check-in from the Battalion Commander is complete, then each fire station drives a predetermined route of their entire district with specific emphasis on pre-identified target hazards.

For instance in our area we have Children's Hospital, Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital and Kaiser Hospital. Those are three of our initial things that we really have to access whether or not they have damage and require immediate assistance.

The concept behind this is to therefore be able to prioritize the needs of an entire district. I'll give you an example. When we were driving through our district, we had people coming out to the middle of the street and waving us down and telling us that they smelled gas on their property or that their fireplace had fallen down, things of that nature.

Really, it's important for us to have the discipline to not really, unless we need to act immediately to save a life, that we continue through this drive through of our district because for instance, if we had stopped at the first person that said they smelled gas and spent 15 minutes trying to mitigate this gas leak problem, when two blocks down we had Children's Hospital with four floors pancaked, it would have been an inappropriate use of the resources.

This system is replicated in every fire station in the city. We're supposed to have that done in about 10 minutes.

Cameron: It must still be kind of hard for residents who are obviously panicking to watch you ...

Joe: Certainly.

Cameron: ... drive by, in essence.

Joe: Absolutely. It's tough and we would say a few words to them. It really speaks to the issue of education and preparedness on behalf of the citizens to know that we have a lot of stuff we have to do in those initial 10 minutes.

Probably the single most important thing for us to communicate to the citizens is to become self reliant for that first 10, 15 minutes, one hour and take care of the small things that is within their realm even with a little bit of advanced training to take care of themselves so that you don't unnecessarily tie up LAFD or LAPD resources that may be on the scene of a much more significant life threatening incident.

Cameron: What did you find? Were those three hospitals, those three critical areas that you were checking on, were they OK?

Joe: Well, what's kind of funny is obviously in the aftermath of the Northridge earthquake which I think we dealt with somewhere in the neighborhood of 50 fatalities overall, but the vast majority came at the Northridge Meadows apartment complex.

Cameron: Right.

Joe: That seems to, and rightly so, get a lot of the notoriety in the press. There was significant damages throughout other areas of LA and Hollywood was no exception.

I vividly recall driving down the middle of Hollywood Boulevard and one of the reason we were driving down the middle was because buildings, especially un-reinforced masonry buildings, buildings built prior to 1933, had the walls, the interior walls had fallen out and the number one lanes on each side of Hollywood Boulevard on North and South had a bunch of debris in them, so we were driving right down the double yellow lines because of all of the debris in the street.

There were several building collapses, several issues to deal with in Hollywood. We had several fires. All with we were forced to handle with significantly less resources than we were accustomed to.

Cameron: Yeah, let's talk about that because this is another thing that I think a lot of residents in Los Angeles aren't aware of.

First of all they might drive by you in that first few minutes after the earthquake because of that initial assessment that's necessary, but also what happens during an earthquake, it's kind

of the opposite of what you've got going on at Fire Station 82 right now where you have a lot of resources because you are getting ready and hopefully it won't happen, but getting ready for a large brush fire because of the weather conditions.

In earthquake, you're in something called a degraded mode where there's even less resources than would be normal. Yes?

Joe:

Absolutely. Realistically if you look at the resources available in Los Angeles City Fire Department, we're really compared to a national level, we're resource rich.

We have 1,000 fire fighters in the city of Los Angeles, in the street at any moment. 1,000 fire fighters ready to respond. Even the largest of what we'd call a routine incident doesn't require the effort of 1,000 fire fighters.

Consequently we have and especially in my position now as an [inaudible 12:16] Commander, I have the ability to call as many resources as I would ever need to handle a normal even large scale major emergency.

In the degraded mode, one of the issues with an earthquake as it relates to other disasters is the footprint can be fairly widespread, meaning a big fire, a big high rise fire is in one building.

Obviously here we have an earthquake and I actually think the epicenter, even though they call it the Northridge, it was actually in Reseda, but here we have an incident where the epicenter was in Reseda, yet we had significant damage 10, 12, 15 miles away in Hollywood.

You do have the, one of the things I don't usually have to do is prioritize my objectives because I have enough man power to handle all of my objectives. Whereas with an earthquake we may have to prioritize our objectives. We may have to change our strategy and tactics depending on the availability of resources.

Which is a challenging thing to do, to be able to have to triage somebody's need over another citizens need. Again, at the end of the day all we can do is make the decision that's based on the greater good of all the citizens of Los Angeles and sometimes that's a tough thing to do and something we're not ordinarily used to.

Cameron: That day, January 17th, 1994, what are some of the events that stand out? Driving down the middle of Hollywood Boulevard is obviously a big one.

Joe: Sure thing.

Cameron: The debris, different fires, but what else stands out?

Joe: One of the things we did was we got dispatched to a structure fire in an area of I think it was Kingsley Avenue which was pretty close, in between Sunset and Hollywood. We were the only resource dispatched.

Generally at a structure fire at a building like that we're used to getting an entire what we call a Category B Assignment which is two task forces, two engines, two BC's a rescue ambulance and an 800 ambulance.

We were dispatched as Task Force 35 alone to this structure fire. We got there and it was a significant structure fire.

Three stories, single family dwelling with heavy fire on the third floor that we determined later was started by candles that were knocked over. They had candles that were burning. The earthquake shook the candles of their foundation, went into combustible material and started a fire.

We were forced to extinguish that fire with just the one task force which probably we would have had in reality maybe 10 companies.

That was another one. We've had a couple of other fires up in the Hollywood Hills that were similar circumstances. Either unattended open flames or gas leaks or something of that nature that we, again, were forced to handle with very limited resources.

That's in addition to the multitude of calls we got to shut gas off, to help clear some debris, we had trees that had fallen over, branches had broken and fallen on things and so we received calls very much for about the next 24 hour period, nonstop to take care of issues.

Cameron: Wow.

Joe: Far, far away from it we really identified the damaged area of North Ridge and Reseda.

Cameron:

Yeah, it's probably easier to concentrate on the Northridge Meadows and a pancaked building and the need to rescue people, but there are a million minor emergencies and kind of somewhat major emergencies in a typical earthquake in a large urban setting like Los Angeles.

When you think about 20 years ago and then extrapolate all that you've learned and that you learned that day, then what has been taught and through best practices to first responders in the last 20 years to be ready for that kind of widespread disaster, how's LA doing?

Are the citizens, is the fire department ready for the next one? It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when.

Joe:

Well, that's a great question. One of the things that's kind of funny is when I receive the email about asking me to participate in this interview, the first thing that struck me was I couldn't believe that 20 years had gone by. It seems like it was yesterday.

It's just an amazing figure to think that it was two decades ago. In addition to that we utilize that as a benchmark for our preparation.

Another significant thing happened along these same lines which was the attacks on the World Trade Center. That happened what, another seven years later after the Northridge earthquake.

In the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center, through a series of two homeland security presidential directives, the entire country was therefore mandated to subscribe to one system of incident management which is outlined clearly in the doctrine, the [inaudible 17:33] doctrine, the National Incident Management System.

Now this system of management is something that we have enhanced our already substantial [inaudible 17:45] and practice. It's an all risk system of management, meaning it's for brush fires, it's for tornadoes, hurricanes, terrorist attack and earthquakes. Any type of large scale, widespread disaster.

Even though the driving force was terrorism and attacks on our homeland, the system used to manage a terrorist attack is identical to the system we utilize to manage an earthquake.

The subsequent pressure to practice and become more prepared from an organizational standpoint has increased dramatically in 20 years. It's not even in the same zenith as we were 20 years ago.

That's a good thing. We still have a ways to go without question. We can theorize as long as we want about the true total destruction in a very widespread catastrophic earthquake.

The one in China that happened, I don't know what are we, probably eight, nine years ago, 70,000 people died in that. The earthquake in Japan that resulted in a tsunami and then the damage from the earthquake and then the meltdown from the nuclear reactor, all of those things are actual incidents that occurred and that are very plausible here.

Whether or not we have moved into a period where we can even relax and say we're ready to handle something of that magnitude, I don't think anybody is.

We have a system, but the system really is almost a hypothesis to what would stand up to the scrutiny of a response of that magnitude and nature.

I would say that just based on my teaching which I'm fortunate to teach this system throughout the United States that it's my objective feeling that we're more ready than any large city in the country, but there is definitely a ways to go and a very important element of that in addition to the professional protectors, LAPD, LAFD and then all of the allied city response family, but that's the preparation of the citizens.

Which that element is something that's a little harder to get our arms around in terms of preparation, but is absolutely vital in terms of a large scale earthquake.

Cameron: Battalion Chief Joe Castro, thank you so much for joining us and talking about that day back in 1994. Really appreciate you spending some time with us.

Joe: Well thank you very much for asking and all the efforts you guys do to ensure a safer tomorrow for the citizens of Los Angeles.

Cameron: For everybody who's listening to the My Safe LA Fire and Safety podcast, don't forget to click on all the other episodes that we've got regarding the 20th anniversary of the Northridge earthquake.

We're talking to a lot of folks like Joe Castro who were there as first responders, saving lives and protecting property on that day.

Announcer:

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