Deployment to Haiti

by Battalion Chief Joseph R. Downey

If you are a baseball fan, you will never forget the 1989 World Series in San Francisco, California. The Loma Prieta earthquake occurred during the warm-up for the third game of the World Series, featuring the Oakland Athletics and the San Francisco Giants. Images of collapsed buildings and highways, along with uncontrolled fires throughout the San Francisco Bay area, flashed across the television screen. This major earthquake registered 6.9 on the Richter Scale and killed 63 people throughout northern California. In addition to those killed, 3757 people were injured and some 3000 to 12,000 people were left homeless.

The Federal Government realized at this disaster that the local emergency responders were overwhelmed. There was a need for assistance and to develop disaster response task forces. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) brought a group of first responders together from across the country to structure a framework for the National Urban Search and Rescue Response System. My father, Deputy Chief Raymond M. Downey, was one of the leaders who developed the plan to design teams that could operate in heavily damaged, concrete structured, building collapses.

In 1991, FEMA incorporated the concept and formed 25 National Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) Task Forces. There are now 28 teams across the United States. These teams have responded to many catastrophic events since the inception of the Urban Search and Rescue System. The vision this group had of the Urban Search and Rescue teams operating to rescue victims from a heavy masonry structural collapse environment played out in Haiti many times over. Six Urban Search and Rescue teams from the United States were involved with 37 rescues of victims trapped in heavy masonry structures. It was the most successful mission for FEMA's Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces.

Activation order

New York Task Force 1 (NY-TF1) members received an activation order on January 13, 2010, at 2330 hours, to prepare their cache to respond to Haiti. An 80-member type 1 heavy rescue team was rostered throughout the night and members reported to the team warehouse in Brooklyn at 0700 hours on January 14.

The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) is the sponsoring agency for NY-TF1 and the team is represented by members from the FDNY and NYPD. The activation orders stated that NY-TF1 would report to Stewart Air National Guard Base in Newburgh, New York, within six hours and await an airframe to transport the team to Haiti. The activation order also stated that NY-TF1 would support U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) activities in Haiti.

This deployment was unusual because NY-TF1 is not an international task force within the FEMA system. California Task Force 2 (CA-TF2) and Virginia Task Force 1 (VA-TF1) are the only international task forces in the Urban Search and Rescue System. The magnitude of the event required a tremendous amount of resources and the United States sent four additional teams, along with the two international teams.

NY-TF1's Base of Operations (BOO), located about 150 yards off the runway at Aeroport International Toussant Louventure.

Before members can fly on a military airframe, the load (equipment, tools and transportation assets) must be inspected and certified. Every chemical and flammable liquid carried in the cache must be identified and documented on hazardous declaration paperwork and copies submitted to the military load master. The military takes this task very seriously and if the equipment is not properly packed, the team could be delayed or prohibited from flying on that airframe. This is only the third time NY-TF1 has flown with the equipment for a response. The members responsible for preparing the hazardous declaration paperwork and load plans did an outstanding job and members were able to fly without any problems.

Due to the limited number of airframes available and the many agencies requesting military transport, NY-TF1 did not leave Stewart Air National Guard Base until 0600 hours, January 16, Saturday morning. Department of Defense (DOD) supplied NY-TF1 with two C-17 airframes, transporting the 80 team members, more than 100,000 lbs. of equipment and five vehicles.

The vehicles proved extremely valuable once the team arrived in Haiti. One of the major obstacles to the many international and American Urban Search and Rescue teams was transportation. If a team failed to bring its own vehicles, its members had trouble securing transportation into the Port-au-Prince theatre of operations. NY-TF1 also brought a forklift that was used to move the pallets of equipment and tools, which weigh 5000 to 10,000 lbs. each, from the airframes to the base of operations (BOO), located at Aeroport International Toussant Louventure.

NY-TF1 set up the BOO about 150 yards from the runway of the airport. Members began the process of setting up tents, showers, water filtration systems and a communication network upon arrival in Haiti. Urban Search and Rescue teams are required to be self-sufficient for three days when operating at an event in the United States. Considering the information members had and the lack of infrastructure and support in Haiti, the team decided to take a 10-day supply of food and water.

NY-TF1 prepared for the worst, which proved significant because there was very little support. Members reported in to the On-Site Operations Coordination Center (OSOCC), which operated under the United Nations Disaster Assistance Coordination Team (UNDAC). These two agencies acted as the Incident Support Team (IST) and Incident Coordinator (IC). The difference, as seen by their identification, is that both agencies are coordinators, not Incident Commanders.

NY-TF1 received its first briefing, describing the situation, Saturday morning. Members were told there was no transportation, no communication and teams were required to operate only during daylight hours due to the potential for violence. The UN would provide security if available. The UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) is the military force in Haiti and was spread extremely thin, as well as being overwhelmed

Exposure #1 side reveals the marking on the Caribbean Market. This structure was five to six stories and pancake-collapsed.

(Left) Members try to gain access to trapped civilians. Attack was made from all sides, including on top of the Caribbean Market, where members are working.

Entrance to the Caribbean Market loading dock. Access was made through the loading dock to the basement, which is where the rescue operation took place.

with the conditions in Port-au-Prince. For most of the week, NY-TF1 operated without security and worked around the clock for the first two days.

As the team was setting up the base of operations, the technical information specialists scouted out the airport, looking for intelligence and to obtain information regarding what was happening. They spoke with many people and had a convincing report of people trapped in the Caribbean Market, about 20 minutes from the airport. Members reported this information to the OSOCC and requested permission to respond. The logistics specialists loaded three vehicles with equipment and tools and NY-TF1 sent out a recon team to investigate the report of people trapped. NY-TF1 had been on the ground in Haiti for just eight hours when members started out to the Caribbean Market.

As they traveled on a main road, members had their first experience with the destruction of the many communities through which they passed. There were collapsed buildings everywhere and debris filled the streets. The only lights were from fires burning garbage and dead bodies. Mobs of people gathered in streets, sidewalks and any open areas. Nothing could prepare NY-TF1 members for the images they witnessed the first night in Port-au-Prince.

After navigating through this devastated city, the team arrived

Members work off walk-in freezer. They worked on their backs and stomachs to gain entry to the floor above.

at the Caribbean Market. Members saw what appeared to be a five- to six-story building that had pancake-collapsed. The first impression was that little could be done without heavy machinery. As members surveyed all exposures, they found other teams operating on top of the collapsed market.

FL-TF2 and international teams from Turkey, Mexico and Israel had been working at this site and were trying to locate survivors. NY-TF1 joined forces with these teams and assisted with locating the victims. The market was attacked from all sides. There were attempts to reach the survivors from the top and sides, which proved difficult due to the amount of collapsed debris and the compacted pancake collapse. Few voids were discovered.

Members decided to try to gain access from underneath the 40-foot pile of rubble. There was a loading dock entrance that provided access to the basement. Once inside the basement, the structural specialists evaluated the stability of the supports holding this mound of debris above and gave the green light to operate. The basement had 20-foot-high ceilings and members had to operate off the steel storage racks holding products to gain access to the first floor. Members were able to make contact with the survivors, who were confirmed trapped on the floor above the basement. Once identified, the first task was to drill a hole in the basement ceiling and insert a search camera to see if they were operating in the correct location.

It took some time to drill a two-inch circular hole into the concrete ceiling. Once this hole was complete, a search camera was inserted into the opening and members were able to see the trapped survivors. Rescuers were fortunate that there was a walk-in freezer right below the area through which the members would be breaking. The only drawback was that there was only two and a half to three feet of distance from the top of the walk-in freezer to the ceiling. Members had to operate on their backs, working the tools over their heads.

Every 10 to 15 minutes, members from NY-TF1, FL-TF2 and the international teams rotated personnel. Battery, gas and electrically operated hammer drills,

A 12-year-old girl was removed from the Caribbean Market, four days after the earthquake.

NY-TF1 members faced collapse hazards while navigating the streets of Haiti.

Members prepare their listening devices.

Bucket brigade members remove debris from hole. Members used hammer drills, chippers and mauls to gain access to hole with two trapped children.

breakers, chippers and rebar cutters were used for the next five hours to break through the thick, reinforced masonry ceiling. It was time-consuming and exhausting work, but the satisfaction of knowing there were survivors above kept the operation moving smoothly.

As the hole expanded, members entered the opening and made contact with the survivors. The first trapped civilian encountered was a 12-year-old girl whose legs were pinned under debris in aisle #4 of the supermarket. Before she could be moved, the doctor entered the void and evaluated her condition. Because she was pinned for more than four days, there was concern about crush syndrome. The doctor felt that members should get her out as soon as possible and once removed, an IV would be started to counteract any complications from the entrapment.

Within the void with this girl was her mom and aunt--who were deceased--and a 28-year-old man. He was not trapped under any debris, but was encased by the walls, ceilings and stock from the store. He was able to climb out of the hole under his own power. While removing the first two survivors, the members made contact with a woman who was heard, but not seen. It took the members operating in the void a couple of hours more, using small hand tools and sawzalls, to remove the collapsed material around this woman. She was an American citizen who was trapped in a kneeling position and could move only her upper body. Once again, before freeing her, the doctor evaluated her. It was difficult and painful to have her straighten her legs out because they were in a kneeling position for more than four days.

All of the survivors were in good spirits, extremely thirsty and had suffered some broken bones. Once contact was made, the first thing members did was supply them with bottled water. The three survivors found in aisle #4 within tons of rubble were alive because the racks found in the supermarket held up enough debris to create voids. There were many more victims located in the market who did not survive. At this point, the sun was rising and the team had operated for more than 12 hours and returned to the base of operations.

During the next few days, NY-TF1 received their assignments from the OSOCC and put in long days, scouring the 50 plus square miles of destruction. There were thousands of buildings that were compromised or totally pancake-collapsed. Almost every building was a masonry structure. Some of the better-built buildings had reinforcements, but most were unreinforced masonry. The connection points where the columns met the floors were very weak, which caused most buildings to fall like a house of cards. The masonry was a dry mix that proved extremely brittle. Using lightweight hammer drills, breakers, chippers, rebar cutters and mauls, members were able to breach and break through the majority of the masonry encountered.

There was a large area to cover each day and the search managers had developed an operational plan. The team had to try to reach survivors without spending too much time at any one location. As members searched the many neighborhoods, they relied on the residents to provide information. If there were indications of survivors at a location, the team would start with a reconnaissance. The search dogs then were deployed, followed by special listening devices and search cameras to explore voids. Many buildings were searched following these procedures. The unfor-

Void from which Kiki and Sabrina were removed. Note the many layers rescuers had to get through to remove the two children.

Kiki exits the hole and greets his rescuers, eight days after the earthquake.

NY-TF1 members at the airport in front of their C-17 military transport airframe after a job well-done.

FDNY Members Deployed to Haiti as Members of NY-TF1

Lieutenant Aldo Adissi, Squad 61
FF Robert Athanas, Rescue 3
FF Richard Baudille, Squad 270
FF Jeremy Cassell, Rescue 3
Captain James D'Avolio, Haz-Mat 1
Lieutenant Thomas Donnelly, Rescue 1
Battalion Chief Joseph Downey, Rescue Battalion
FF Christopher Dunic, Squad 288
FF Jason Faso, Rescue 1
Captain Liam Flaherty, covering SOC
FF Raymond Griffin, Rescue 4
FF Thomas Ihnken, Rescue 5
FF Darren Jacobs, Squad 1
Lieutenant Thor Johannessen, Squad 18
FF Stephen Katz, Rescue Battalion
Captain James Kiesling, covering SOC
FF Michael Lazzari, Haz-Mat 1
FF Michael Lindy, Squad 41
FF Kevin Maloney, Haz-Mat 1
FF Christopher Mandeville, Rescue 1
FF Gregory Manning, Squad 41
Lieutenant David Marmann, Squad 270
FF Patrick McKenna, Rescue 3
Lieutenant James McQuade, Rescue Battalion
FF Edward Morrison, Rescue 2
Captain James Murray, Rescue 5
Lieutenant William Reddan, Squad 252
FF Jason Ribisi, Squad 18
Lieutenant Paul Rogers, Haz-Mat 1
FF Edwin Sanchez, Squad 288
FF James Sandas, Rescue 2
FF Scott Sarnell, Haz-Mat 1
Captain Stephen Spall, Squad 61
FF William Spiess, Squad 1
FF Alexander Streichenwein, Squad 61
Dr. Dario Gonzalez, OMA
Dr. Glenn Asaeda, OMA
EMS Lieutenant Rafael Goyenecha, HazTac
EMS Lieutenant Ian Swords, HazTac
Paramedic Ricardo Quintero, Station 45
Paramedic Marco Girao, Station 8

tunate reality was there were high numbers of deceased found. There were no resources to move the dead, so the only thing the team could do was mark their locations.

NY-TF1 was finishing up searches on Tuesday, January 19, when a Haitian police officer came over to the convoy and said there was a father digging out his kids from a collapsed home not too far from the team's location. NY-TF1 and VA-TF2 went to the location. On arrival, the team members encountered a father with a crowbar, trying to remove three floors of rubble that was on top of his four children. Once on the scene, the teams quickly realized there were survivors below this pile of rubble.

The search team specialist inserted the search camera into the void and was able to see a young boy in a crouched position. Members tied a water bottle to a long stick, stuck it into the void and got it to the young boy. The members operating the camera could view this child, named Kiki, drinking the water. At this time, members had to decide if they should tunnel horizontally through the void or go on top of the pile and delayer from above. The latter was chosen and an operational plan was set.

A tape measure was extended with the camera to Kiki in the void. Members estimated that Kiki was trapped approximately 12 feet from the opening. The tape measure identified a location to begin removing debris. Once again, members employed hammer drills, breakers, chippers, rebar cutters and mauls to break up the masonry floors. The members not involved with the digging formed bucket brigades to remove the debris away from the expanding hole. NY-TF1 members were teamed up with members from VA-TF2 and rotated every 10 to 15 minutes. Team managers were responsible for supervising this operation and keeping the workers fresh. Manpower was not an issue.

The difficult part was to keep those not digging away from the hole. The Safety Officer helped keep the area surrounding the hole clear and ensured all members operated safely. The adrenaline level was high and everyone was excited to participate in this rescue seven days after the earthquake. Both teams did a tremendous job working together for the next four hours. The location chosen to begin the delayering process was perfect. Members operated with caution, knowing that the youngsters were directly below.

The first child removed was eight-year-old Kiki, who was positioned in a void, but amazingly, had no injuries. He actually climbed out of the opening by himself. His 10-year-old sister, Sabrina, was separated from Kiki by a chair in the same void. Members removed the steel chair and Sabrina miraculously climbed out of the opening. Both children suffered from dehydration, but had no injuries. The Paramedics immediately began an IV at the scene and the children were transported to a field hospital. They were both released the following morning. Kiki and Sabrina survived, but unfortunately, two of their siblings died in that void.

This was one of the most rewarding and fulfilling operations experienced by all members who were privileged to be there. These two children lived for more than a week in a tight void without any food or water.

I believe these two children, as well as the many Haitians trapped, showed the world how strong and resilient they are. It was a humbling experience for all who operated for eight days in Haiti. Thousands of Haitians who didn't have much, lost everything. They embraced the Task Force Teams during the time members were searching for their loved ones. It was equally impressive to see them try to get back to their normal lives. It was hard to comprehend the enormity of this earthquake; 230,000 people are estimated dead, with more than one million living on the streets.

NY-TF1 members have done a tremendous job rebuilding a team that was destroyed after the attacks on the World Trade Center. Fifty-one team members, including senior leadership, were lost. Through much hard work and many hours rebuilding the cache of tools and equipment, NY-TF1 has performed the most successful mission in its 20-year existence. Credit must be given to those who were responsible for setting the high standards for this team and those who had the opportunity to fulfill their vision. NY-TF1 was prepared to respond to one of the worst earthquakes within the Western Hemisphere and due to the preparation and excellent training provided to members, they were able to participate in the greatest rescue effort in the removal of trapped survivors.

About the Author...

Battalion Chief Joseph R. Downey is a 25-year veteran of the FDNY. He is assigned to the Rescue Operations Battalion of the Special Operations Command. He served as a Lieutenant in Rescue 2 and was Captain of Squad 18. He is one of the Task Force Leaders for NY-TF1. He holds a BBA degree in business/computers from Hofstra University. This is his fourth article for WNYF.