

The Mock-Disaster Drill

On the evening of January 26th the town of Redding conducted a mock-disaster drill for the public good. Captain Forsythe, head of the Redding Volunteer Ambulance Corps, along with ambulance crews from nearby communities, organized the exercise. His reasoning was simple--what would happen if a terrible accident, one involving a multitude of victims, occurred at a time and place where traffic would be at its worst? How quickly could ambulances get to the scene and then transport the victims to nearby hospitals? And how well could the rush-hour traffic heading toward the accident scene be detoured so as to keep away the curious, who would only impede rescue operations? It would take, reasoned Captain Forsythe, the most careful anticipation and planning in order to turn a seeming catastrophe into a showcase of efficiency and safety.

Accordingly, twelve teenagers, drama students from Redding High School, were hired to play the part of the victims. The "accident" consisted of a mini-bus carefully turned onto its side at the base of Mountainview Road, where it meets Grand Avenue and forms one of the busiest intersections in the county. The teens were then instructed to climb into the bus, strew themselves all about the interior, and act unconscious until they were delivered inside either Northridge Memorial Hospital, eight miles south, or Southcliff Medical Center, eight miles north. A make-up team was also employed to provide the teens with the cosmetic contusions and lacerations they would need to look realistic.

The ambulance teams that Captain Forsythe selected to assist in the drill came from the towns of Orangeburg, Greenville, Bluefield, Blackwood, and Whitehall. With the exception of Orangeburg, none of the assisting

towns bordered Redding, but all were relatively close and, like Redding, bore the names of colors, which would facilitate the dispatching of the ambulances. Thus, each team was referred to by the color which corresponded to the individual town's name.

By five o'clock all preparations and arrangements were complete. The police were set to detour all traffic heading toward the disaster from every direction. Additional officers had to be stationed on each of the four corners at the accident scene to keep back the crowds that were steadily growing. Captain Forsythe had neither expected nor wanted people around once rescue operations got under way, but Redding's mayor Doggett said, when he leaked word of the drill to the press, it was a good opportunity for everyone to see first-rate first aid firsthand. Also observing the proceedings, from their assigned posts at Northridge Memorial and Southcliff Medical, were invited officials of the county's Public Safety Department. Their jobs were to record the time it took each ambulance to arrive and to report to Captain Forsythe their overall evaluation of the exercise. Once the officials radioed that they and the newspaper people were in place, the emergency siren was sounded, and the mock-disaster drill commenced.

So did the the first raindrops, heralding an outbreak of arctic air. Throughout the day, weather forecasters on every local television and radio station had warned of a dramatic end to an unseasonably mild January thaw. They predicted an evening rush hour of wind-whipped rain squalls changing into sleet and snow, with temperatures plummeting some forty degrees before bottoming out in the single numbers by midnight. Roads, they said, would become slippery and treacherous since all precipitation would quickly freeze as temperatures dropped; it was not an evening to be on the road. In fact,

the television crew from WLCD, also notified by mayor Doggett, had been in contact with Captain Forsythe all afternoon. They said that they appreciated the exclusive story they were being given, but couldn't the drill be rescheduled? Even though it was E.M.S.-A.O.K. Week throughout the county, wouldn't it be wiser, they reasoned, to wait until the weather was more favorable for any kind of drill? Besides, they promised Captain Forsythe that if he agreed to reschedule the exercise, they would feature him in live action on that day's six o'clock news broadcast.

Nevertheless, the first calls immediately went out for the two closest teams, the red of Redding, whose ambulance was orange, and the orange of Orangeburg, whose ambulance was red. In order to ease traffic, part of the plan called for the six teams to go to alternate hospitals; that is, the red, green, and black teams were to be sent to Northridge, and the orange, blue, and white were to be sent to Southcliff. But Captain Forsythe's dispatcher misunderstood the original direction, thinking, instead, that the team color referred to the ambulance and not to the town's name. Thus, after Captain Forsythe and his red team arrived, picked up the first two teens, and raced away toward Northridge, the dispatcher ordered the orange team (but red ambulance) also to go to Northridge after they made their pickup. It did appear odd to the dispatcher that Redding's orange ambulance was headed to the wrong hospital, but he dismissed it as a quirk of Captain Forsythe and concentrated only on the five teams in his charge.

Meanwhile, the wind began howling and gusting, and the rain became stinging ice pellets. The crowds on all four corners, despite the police's effort to contain them, suddenly bolted in all directions across the intersection, seeking the shelter of their cars and houses. All made it safely,

except one, a fourteen-year-old boy, who was struck by the oncoming red ambulance of Greenville, landing near the overturned mini-bus, badly spraining his right ankle. The youth was given immediate medical attention at the scene, and then, while Greenville's crew was pulled over to take care of the accident report, the ambulance from Bluefield arrived. However, since the boy was conscious and had already received treatment, Bluefield's team, following Captain Forsythe's orders to pick up only the unconscious, told him that he would have to wait for another ambulance. Two drama students were then loaded on board, and the dispatcher ordered Bluefield's blue team (but green ambulance) to go to Northridge.

The count now stood at six victims to go, but only two of the original six ambulances were available. Orangeburg and Bluefield, having successfully delivered their victims to Northridge, were, by Captain Forsythe's earlier instructions, no longer needed for the drill, and both were answering emergencies in their respective towns. Greenville's involvement in the accident would keep that ambulance out of commission for the remainder of the evening. Their only concern at that moment was to find the injured boy, who, having been struck down by Greenville and rebuffed by Bluefield, was already limping his way home on Grand Avenue. Captain Forsythe and his Redding team were at Southcliff Medical, trying to explain to the Public Safety officials why no one had yet shown up from the disaster. And with a cold wind that was clicking the roads into a whitish glaze, the dispatcher radioed Captain Forsythe for help.

The captain was prepared for such a crisis, having previously arranged with three bordering towns, Hancock, Warren, and Newton Park, to act as back-up crews just in case. First, he made sure both Blackwood and Whitehall were on the way, and then he contacted the three back-ups.

Only one, Newton Park, was not already out on a call, and that crew immediately mobilized.

In the forty-five minutes which had elapsed since the initial siren, salt and sand spreaders were out and doing a creditable job making main roads passable. But as the sleet turned into snow, and the wind sent drifts spiralling everywhere, all secondary roads were untreated and dangerous. The teams from Blackwood, nine miles to the east, and Whitehall, ten miles to the west, had to travel the greatest distance of the original six, and neither would make it to the disaster scene. Blackwood's ambulance, which was black (with gold trim), was detoured around a real accident, one involving the television crew from WLCD, and eventually wound up stuck behind a phalanx of diagonal cars and vans skidding nowhere in particular on Long Hill Road. Whitehall fell victim to a communication error. As the crew approached the roadblock at the top of salted Mountainview Road, the police, having been told by Captain Forsythe to allow the white ambulance team through, detoured Whitehall's orange ambulance to Lookout Way, an alternate route down Cook Mountain. Within seconds on this steep, winding, untreated road, the ambulance slalomed out of control, mounted the curb, and crashed into the Bridge Freezes Before Road sign overlooking Crystal Creek.

The remaining six drama students, shivering out of their unconsciousness, eventually got their promised ride in a warm vehicle. Two were picked up by the Newton Park crew, one was taken in a police car, one was transported in Hymie's Purple Cab, and one each was sent in a town salt and sand spreader, which led the way south on Grand Avenue, passing right by a limping, disgruntled fourteen-year-old boy, and made it to Northridge Memorial Hospital without incident.

On the evening of January 26th the town of Redding conducted a mock-disaster drill for the public good. In the final report, written only by the officials at Northridge Memorial, Captain Forsythe was praised for his efforts and commended for his bravery under adverse conditions. He, in return, has vowed to stage another such exercise soon, when weather conditions will be more favorable, and nothing could possibly go wrong.



DISASTER DRILL - The New Milford Fire Department participates in the Emergency Management County-wide Disaster Drill Saturday. A simulated hurricane and effects called for emergency treatment of victims due to fire and gasoline leaks. Fire departments from Dumont and other towns were called to the scene in this mutual aid practice. Above, a "victim" is saved from danger after the DPW building is "hit by lightning." Below, firefighters use foam to suppress gas from igniting and to keep fumes under the foam. (Photos by Tom Sullivan, Dennis Studio, Inc.)

