

MEMORANDUM FOR THE RECORD

Event: James T. Gower, Deputy Chief of Operations, Alexandria Fire Department

Type of event: Interview

Date: November 4, 2003

Special Access Issues: None

Prepared by: Mark Bittinger

Team Number: 8

Location: Alexandria Fire Department HQ, Alexandria, VA

Participants - Non-Commission: Jim Gower

Participants - Commission: Mark Bittinger; Kevin Shaeffer

U N C L A S

1. Jim Gower's Background: He has been a firefighter for 39 years. For the past 10 years he has served as the deputy of operations since 1993 and was in this position on 9/11. Gower has been with the Alexandria Fire Department since April 1965. He was promoted to lieutenant in 1972, to captain in 1974, to battalion chief in 1980, and to deputy chief in 1994. He has served as the acting fire chief, battalion chief/training officer, battalion chief of administrative services and deputy chief of fire operations (suppression).

2. Alexandria Fire Department Organization: The new fire chief is Gary Mesaris. The department numbers 276 members, organized into 4 groups, manning 11 companies. 150 firefighters, 56, EMS personnel, 50+ code enforcement personnel and 25-30 staff personnel.

3. Events on 9/11: Chief Gower was in a staff meeting and watched both WTC towers being attacked on television. Then he heard the Pentagon explosion. The first request for assistance was from the Arlington Emergency Communications Center (ECC). Arlington was requesting that 1 alarm be staged at the city line. This 1 alarm entailed 3 engines, a truck, a medic unit and a battalion chief. Of the 11 companies in Alexandria, 4 were sent to the Pentagon and all 5 medic units were sent at 9:50 a.m. (including Dr. Vafare). An air wagon was requested and went as part of Engine 207.

Alexandria's EOC opened simultaneously and a total recall was initiated. Alexandria stations were backfilled with outlying companies. A full hazmat team was stood up. And importantly, no units self-dispatched, Alexandria Fire Department leadership issued an explicit directive not to self-dispatch. Alexandria Fire Department took over Arlington County. Chief Gower manned the EOC all day.

Tech Rescue Team (TRT) was at the Pentagon for 10 days.

4. Training: Prior to 9/11 there was a WMD awareness course (4 hours). Within Virginia there are 9 regional hazmat teams and Alexandria has one of them.

Mass casualty drills are conducted including one on the campus of Northern Virginia Community College, Alexandria with a scenario of a bombing in the school lab and a shooter at-large.

Since 9/11, Alexandria has 48 hazmat techs, members have attended ODP training and have gone to New Mexico for bomb training.

5. Regional Approach: According to Chief Gower, a regional approach is "absolutely paramount." Such an approach started in the DC metro area in 1982 as a result of strong leadership. Regional operational SOPs have enhanced this approach. See the "Northern Virginia Regional Agreement," which includes Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax, Falls Church, Fort Belvoir and the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA) (both Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport and Washington Dulles International Airport).

Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (COG).

Participate in statewide mutual aid.

Operate under ICS

"We support each other's jurisdictions."

6. New York City: Chief Gower commented that, "I don't know if you could ever control an incident like that."

Chief Gower believes that freelancing was unlikely prior to the WTC collapse, but once the first tower collapsed freelancing started. FDNY are "tremendous risk takers." They have an attitude of invincibility.

FDNY has their own incident command, but bulk on adopting unified command.

7. Lessons Learned: Prior working relationships were "the key." Drills in the EOC forced people to know the other players involved.

Do not send gear without masks; need to send with SCBA.

Incompatibility of SCBA. Alexandria Fire Department had MSA Brand SCBA and everyone else had Scott Brand SCBA. Since 9/11, Alexandria Fire Department has procured Scott SCBA through COG contracts.

ICS has been adopted well by the fire department. Police departments have not adopted it as well. There is also reluctance to adopt ICS during interjurisdictional incidents, though the DC area sniper event was a catalyst for better working relations.

The Air Florida Flight 90 crash became the impetus to start the formal use of ICS in the DC area. Started under the auspices of COG.

Big issues according to Chief Gower.

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- Staffing based on the NFPA 1710 Standard, now minimum staffing is 3 persons per truck, with 4 persons recommended.
- Response time is critical.