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## Resources

- ▶ [Safety](#)
- ▶ [Pressroom](#) (web)
- ▶ [Ask the CEO](#)
- ▶ [CEO Forum](#)
- ▶ [Employee Recognition](#)
- ▶ [Employee Activities](#)
- ▶ [Metro Projects](#)
- ▶ [Facts at a Glance](#) (web)
- ▶ [Archives](#)
- ▶ [Events Calendar](#)
- ▶ [Research Center/Library](#)
- ▶ [Metro Classifieds](#)
- ▶ [Bazaar](#)

## Metro Info

- ▶ [30/10 Initiative](#)
- ▶ [Policies](#)
- ▶ [Training](#)
- ▶ [Help Desk](#)
- ▶ [Intranet Policy](#)

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Metro Security provided support, worked triage at the scene of the Metrolink crash.

LAFD  
photo

## Metro Security Officers Aided Emergency Teams at Sept. 12 Metrolink Crash

- Five employees offer help in environment some could not believe

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Oct. 23, 2008) On Friday, Sept. 12, Rick Nelson remembers the LAPD later inching patrol cars along the bridal path beside the railway, cases of water stacked on every inch of their roofs, hoods and trunks. He, Ronald Allen and Rene Lopez carried cases of water to the dehydrated firefighters working in the first car Metrolink.

Dan Cowden was amazed to see a 160-ton rail car (the first car) demolished, the even heavier Metrolink engine stuck inside. He saw firefighters using ladder trucks to lift gurneys from the wreck and fire lines snaking through horse corrals. He saw residents showing firefighters the best routes to access the crash.

"It was heartbreaking, first of all," said Cowden, a Vietnam War veteran. "It does affect you." He recalls that even the second and third Metrolink cars had blood everywhere.

"Everybody was moving, doing what had to be done," Cowden said. "It was something that shouldn't have happened [but], you have to put that in your back pocket and carry on, and that is what the first responders did."

And there was the evidence of death. Cowden saw four bodies removed on stretchers. "Everyone stood at attention and took their hats off as a sign of respect and a sign of dignity for the dead," he said. He also saw fire department and police chaplains giving last rights. "It was the worst thing I have seen. Period."



"It got really somber when the LAPD realized an LAPD officer was on board," Allen said. "The officers teared up."

When an LAPD officer told the Metro Security officers that a Metro employee had died in the train, "It hit all of us like a ton of bricks," Allen recalls. Especially poignant for Allen was being shown a Metro ID badge bent in half.

Metro Transit Security Officers Ronald Allen, right, and Rene Lopez were among first responders at the scene of the Metrolink crash. Photo by Gayle Anderson

"At that time we were taking water and PowerBars to the firefighters in the first car," Allen said. He recalls the Metro Security officers huddled together and asked each other, "Did you see the Metro employee?"

**Five Metro employees in triage**

An additional shock was seeing five Metro employees in triage. That image has stayed with Allen, especially the sight of an employee in triage with his knee cap bleeding. That was [Gary Katzman](#).

Jack Eckles didn't see chaos in the rescue workers urgent activities, but the sight of the first Metrolink car wrapped around the freight train's engine left an impression.

"It's amazing anyone survived," Eckles said of the first car, given how tangled it was, with interior sidings, poles, seats and tables compressed in the collision.

"I think I was more in awe of how well it was being handled and how quickly it was being handled," Eckles said, remarking that the agencies looked as if they had always worked together on a disaster this large.

Nelson, Eckles and Allen left at around 8 p.m., walking along the track, a different route from the one they took to reach the collision scene. Adding a surrealist quality to their leaving, Allen could not find his patrol unit. When he arrived, there had been only two cars parked there. Now there were hundreds of police cars, ambulances and fire trucks. It took Nelson, Eckles and Allen 20 minutes to find Allen's unit.

By approximately 10 p.m., rescue efforts were over and body retrieval had begun, Lopez remembers. At 10 p.m. the temporary triage center was closed. Everyone had been moved to other medical care.

**Heading home**

Allen remembers that when he and Eckles returned to Gateway, "That's when it really kicked in—the destruction." Allen left for home at 11:30 p.m.

Eckles arrived home at 10 p.m. Lopez left for home at 11 p.m. Because he was working a double shift, Nelson didn't get home until 8 a.m.

When Lopez arrived home, he was late for a gathering his wife had planned with friends. He was surprised his guests knew only that there had been a "little train wreck."

"I explained to the guests what we had been doing," Lopez said. "They were amazed."

Lopez retreated to his bedroom for a moment and found himself thinking of his wife and kids, and feeling a little guilty that he had so much. He thought about a gurney moving a dead body from the collision scene. Because of the bouncing gurney, a hand fell out from under the tarp, and Lopez could see a wedding ring on the woman's hand.

He caught a few hours of sleep, then he was back to work at 6 a.m.

When Nelson returned to Gateway, he said "I was exhausted. I had to eat. I was so exhausted, I was about to pass out." He briefed his brother officers and his watch commander. Some people still couldn't believe it.

Because he was working a double shift, Nelson did not make it home until 8 a.m. Saturday morning. His wife asked about the accident. "She was concerned for me and the guys and the people who were injured," Nelson said. "I told her I saw a lot of broken bones and head trauma. I gave her the watered-down version."

"Seeing that train accident was 1,000 times worse" than what people saw on television, Nelson added.

### **Looking back**

"I've learned, particularly in emergency situations, you can perform well and still have organized chaos," Eckles said. "The training tends to lead you to believe you can create order, structure and procedures, but it's not that clear in reality."

"I was so impressed with the fire departments and the LAPD," Nelson said. "They knew exactly what they're doing. I think they're trained very well."

"The people who lived in the area were extremely nice, offering food and water," to the emergency workers, Cowden said. "The entire [team] was very respectful to us. They didn't care about the patch [we wore]. We were helping them. Just helping."

### **Looking ahead**

"I just think the mass transit industry has to learn from this," Eckles said, pointing to the Metro Board's Sept. 25 meeting as a sign it sees the Metrolink crash as an important issue.

Cowden sees the need for better technologies, crumple zones and collision avoidance devices "anywhere you have the potential for head-on [collisions]."

"The Metro lines are much, much safer," Cowden stressed. "They are double-tracked. Head-on crashes are impossible."

"I never want to see that again," Lopez said of the Metrolink crash, "but that's the job we're in."

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[Continued from Part I:](#) Witnesses to carnage and compassion, Metro Security officers help rescue efforts into

the night.

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