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Emergency teams, LAFD Battalion Chief John Quintanar among them, were in rescue mode for hours following the Metrolink crash.

Metro Fire Expert Called to Duty at Metrolink Train Crash

- Battalion chief joins initial transportation board investigation

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Oct. 30, 2008) John Quintanar, a battalion chief for the Los Angeles City Fire Department, must often explain which transit agency he works for. So when a fire department dispatcher called him Sept. 12, asking about a Metrolink crash, he had a ready response, "Hey, I work for Metro, not Metrolink."

That evening, as emergency personnel pulled people and bodies from the Union Pacific/Metrolink collision, the difference between Metro and Metrolink shrunk, and Quintanar soon found himself helping investigate Los Angeles County's worst train crash since 1956.

Quintanar, a rail coordinator for Metro, acts as liaison between LA City Fire and Metro. In addition to being a firefighter for 33 years—he helped fight the First Interstate Bank high-rise fire in May 1988—he has worked with Metro for four years.

Quintanar was already home on Friday, Sept. 12, when he received the call from the dispatcher. Initially, the report from Chatsworth was that a train had collided with a pedestrian. As the dispatcher received more and more calls for additional units, however, he reevaluated the incident.

Quintanar next received a call from Roman Alarcon, director of bus & rail operations control. Alarcon asked Quintanar to help Metro Public Relations answer questions about the collision. "People were calling Metro when they meant to be calling Metrolink," Quintanar explained.

Quintanar left for the Chatsworth crash site and arrived at 8 p.m., after a 90-minute drive from his home.

Initially, according to Quintanar, there were not enough fire-fighting personnel to extinguish the Union Pacific locomotive fire, extract victims and aid the injured. So LA City Fire called on the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department to help.

Sheriff deputies concentrated on the first Metrolink car. LA City Fire extracted bodies and sent the injured to the nearby triage center. LAPD joined firefighters in concentrating on the second and third Metrolink cars. (One person was killed in the second car and two were killed in the third car.)

Because of Quintanar's rail experience, the Los Angeles City Fire Department's unified commander asked Quintanar to maintain communication between Union Pacific and Metrolink. He also conversed with Metrolink and the contractor charged with moving the derailed cars away from the point of impact without impeding the rescue efforts.

That effort included moving two Union Pacific locomotives and one Metrolink locomotive. "It was incredible what they did," Quintanar said, still amazed at seeing such heavy vehicles being moved.

The first crash-scene impression Quintanar recalls was the size of the first Metrolink passenger car.



Quintanar left for the Chatsworth crash site and arrived at 8 p.m., after a 90-minute drive from his home.

*Photos by Engineer
Sweasey Fire Station
96 "C" platoon*

"The car was [originally] 85 feet long," he said. "The impact from the Union Pacific locomotive compressed it to 35 feet. [Rescuers] were working in a crushed beer can." Quintanar saw workers—working in very close quarters in the first car—cut a piece of metal only to see it spring back to its former shape.

Quintanar saw one tense rescue after firefighters heard pounding on the window frame of the Union Pacific locomotive. After they removed the locomotive's window shade, firefighters helped three Union Pacific crew members flee from the engine filling with flame and dense smoke.

Besides paying tribute to the first responders who came upon the human carnage resulting from the crash, Quintanar acknowledged the ingenuity of the emergency teams. Because the regular streets were jammed, workers cut a road to allow heavy equipment to reach the crash.

The emergency teams were in rescue mode for hours, even when odds

grew long that they would find someone else alive. That intensity, he recalls, lingered long after midnight on Sept. 12.

At approximately 8 a.m. Saturday, emergency crews removed the Metrolink engineer's body from his locomotive. Quintanar finally left the crash site two hours later.

At 8 p.m. Saturday, while Quintanar watched USC play football against Ohio State, he learned he was being loaned to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), the federal agency charged with investigating train crashes, for the next four days.

This was Quintanar's first NTSB investigation, and he was struck by how professional NTSB staff were, how much experience they brought to the investigation.

The investigation was divided into eight disciplines, including signaling, crash worthiness, human error and first responders. The meetings usually included 50 experts, such as Quintanar.

Quintanar expects the final accident report to be ready in six to nine months. "The report will probably be one of those thick books we all see," he said.

"Overall, I think we did an outstanding job," Quintanar believes, although he sees room for improvement in what he calls "the numbers game." The emergency teams knew 225 passengers were on the train, he explained. They later counted 135 to 140 people who were examined for injuries.

"What happened to the other 60 to 70 people?" Quintanar asks. He assumes that the uninjured walked away. But because of the threat of injuries without obvious symptoms, he would have preferred if emergency workers had ensured that everyone leaving was truly uninjured.

The final total was grim enough: 25 fatalities, 130 treated, 27 transported via helicopter to 12 area hospitals—Harbor UCLA being the farthest away.

"I've never been more proud of my city," Quintanar stressed. "The police offered to come to our aid to move people. That's not what they're paid to do. The egos were left [behind]."