



MySafe:LA Podcast

Fire and Life Safety Education

Our mission: providing children, families, and seniors in Los Angeles with life-saving education, resources, and benefits.

Episode 2

Retired LAFD Assistant Chief Dean Cathey

Speaker 1: You're listening to MySafe LA Fire and Life Safety podcast.

David: Hello everyone. This is David Barrett with MySafe:LA and this is another MySafe LA Fire and Life Safety education podcast. We're talking with Los Angeles fire fighters about their memories of the Northridge earthquake that took place 20 years ago on January 17th, 1994. Our guest today is retired Los Angeles Assistant Chief, Dean Cathey. Dean, good morning. How are you?

Dean: Good morning. I'm doing very well, David. How are you doing?

David: I'm doing terrific. I'm really glad you're able to join us today. The memories of Los Angeles fire fighters and what they had to go through during this incredibly destructive earthquake is very important, particularly for those people who want to know how to be better prepared in the future. What was your rank and assignment 20 years ago?

Dean: I was a rely new Assistant Chief that was assigned to division one, which is the metropolitan area of Los Angeles. I was on duty that morning and actually that evening I had gone to bed rather late. It was probably the soundest sleep I've ever had on the fire department.

David: 4:30 in the morning, the ground starts to shake. Do you remember it waking you up? Do you remember what happened at division headquarters?

Dean: It was interesting. Like I said, I had gone to bed quite late in the evening, actually early morning, and when the earthquake occurred, it's hard to imagine this, but there are single beds in the dormitories, and I had a private dormitory, and the bed took off across the room and woke me up out of a sound sleep. When I realized what was happening, I got out of bed and down on the floor and unfortunately the power to the fire station didn't come on immediately. It went out originally and didn't come back on for a period of time, so I'm groping around in the dark trying to find my turnout pants to get ready to leave the staiton.

Our procedure was we evacuated all the stations and then companies would do a check-in with their battalion commanders and the battalion commanders would then check in with the division commander to determine their availability and that everybody was safe and so forth. Then they would start a drive through through the are. I'm thinking I've got to go to our location and we had a tremendous problem getting out of the fire station because the power was out and getting the apparatus floor doors open to get the companies out of the station and to get us out and up to our command location, which was at Dodger Stadium.

David: There were a whole series of snafus as a result of the earthquake. Some of the fire stations in the city were seriously damaged. Other stations simply because of no power had trouble getting out and in fact, your dispatch center, OCD, their generator went out after after 15 minutes and you had no dispatch capability, correct?

Dean: That's correct. That's part of the contingency plan is for the division commanders to go to a location where they have line of sight communication to the best possible, to most of their commander area, which for us was Dodger Stadium. I had a telephone communication with the commander at the dispatch center who informed me that they were trying to get their status updated. In the meantime, we're getting calls form the battalion commanders as their companies are beginning to do their drive through that there's issues that need to be dealt with. Basically, my staff has to serve as the dispatch center until we can transition it back to our actual dispatch center. That was a rather challenging morning for the first probably two, three hours.

David: Overall, what are the most significant memories from that day? What really stands out to you in terms of something you can deal with it from a personal perspective, but I'd really like to know if you think about that kind of a devastating earthquake, you were 20 miles away from the epicenter, but still it had a significant impact on the Santa Monica Freeway and other kinds of areas that were within your division.

Dean: Yeah. Originally of course, because we're not in the fire station, we don't have the television and radio communication. We did have that in our command vehicle, but the information about what occurred where the epicenter was was slow coming and in division one, which as I said is the metropolitan area, there were about 35 fire stations covering about 80-something square miles from the Pacific up to East Los Angeles and the Santa Monica Mountains down to the Santa Monica Freeway. We were getting reports of damage in this area and I'm thinking this is a long way from where we finally found out where the epicenter was.

The needs were in the San Fernando Valley, in Northridge area in the valley, and so we were trying to give as much of our resources to the

valley to help out with the problems that they had out there, and yet still maintain coverage downtown for any other problems that occurred. We had several fires. We had some collapses. People trapped in unreinforced brick buildings and so forth. At one point, I was getting really nervous because we were down to, I think it was about eight stations that still had resources and the rest based on requests, we had sent to the valley. That whole morning, up until probably, I think I finally got back into quarters around 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon.

Things did settle down relatively quickly despite how much damage there was, for us, at least in the downtown area. A couple of other things that come out of this and this is the preparedness piece. Here's a guy who's 30-something years on the fire department eventually. I didn't have a flashlight by my bed in the dormitory, so I'm groping around in the dark trying to find my pants. Number one thing, which we preach to everybody, flashlight, hard shoes, and so forth, have that close by in the event something happens and some place you can get under during an event like this. That was one.

The other eeriest thing that I think occurred was when we finally left quarters and were heading up to Dodger Stadium, which is about a two mile drive from that station. The downtown area was dark. I've never seen high-rise buildings with no lights on at night. Street lights out. Buildings completely darkened and very eerie, a very eerie feeling. When the sun finally started to come and dawn broke, we're looking out over the whole city and you're seeing much like in the 92 riots where you have these smoke columns from various fires that are taking place, and you're at a vantage point where you can see this very clearly from the Dodger Stadium parking lot. It was an interesting and probably one of the most unique experiences that I've had during my career on the fire department.

David: The city took more than a year to really recover. What kind of an impact was there on the Los Angeles Fire Department as an outcome of this earthquake?

Dean: I think one of the most vivid memories that I had is I was hanging over, if you will. I should have got off duty if it had been a normal day at 8:00 in the morning, and I'm still there. My relief, the division chief on the other shift, was coming in. Ultimately, we made a transition of command and for the next several days, the fire chief at the time, asked me to come back and help with the media and the counsel and other political figures that were coming into Los Angeles to view what had happened and help with the recovery process. For several days, I'm involved with that operation.

We're still having after shocks from the earthquake, days afterwards, days afterwards, and serious ones. The interesting thing was the fire department's role really pretty much culminated within that first 24 hours. In fact, most of the fires that occurred were handled within the first probably six hours and this would probably not be the case if we had a major earthquake on the San Andreas Fault. We would be more overwhelmed than we were in this particular case, but to me that was remarkable that we were able to bring most of the damage, most of the structural potential for conflagration or whatever under control in a relatively short period of time.

I don't think we ever got much credit for that. There was a lot of other issues that took place. There was so much damage in the valley. There were deaths and destruction to the mall and destruction to Northridge Meadows Apartment Complex that really focused on what an earthquake is capable of doing as opposed to what a response agency is going.

David: The idea that as a division commander, you would have to run by the seat of your pants so to speak because of the lack of dispatch capability and power and so on, just amplifies the importance of being prepared. I imagine you probably had a flashlight near your bed after that, didn't you?

Dean: I certainly did. I certainly did. In fact, to this day, my wife and I still do that. We have our shoes close by and a flashlight next to the bed stand and fortunately we haven't had at this point, haven't had to use that, but it's there and we know what to do.

David: Thank you for your service and certainly thank you very much for joining us today. For those of you listening, Dean Cathey, retired as an assistant chief of the Los Angeles City Fire Department, served in a multitude of roles, including in the community liaison office and as well as in the field. He currently, after a long post LAFD career with FEMA as an IST liaison, is a director on the board for the Safe Community Project, which is the parent of MySafe LA. Thank you very much for listening today. Keep in mind we will be interviewing a wide array of fire fighters, both retired and still active who will share their memories about January 17th, 1994. Thank you very much for listening. My name is David Barrett. Be sure to visit us on-line at www.mysafela.org. We look forward to talking with you again very soon.

Speaker 1: This is a MySafe LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. Make sure to visit us at mysafela.org.