

TORNADO – Red Cross and Tyler County’s First Combined Drill

by Michael G. Maness – Maness3@att.net ¹

One dead, several injured, some missing and nine homes completely destroyed – “this is a drill”!

Weather: we can predict well, but we cannot control it.

Saturday morning, Mar. 1, the forces of the Red Cross and the Tyler County Emergency Management combined their assets and tested their readiness in the first joint countywide disaster drill. By all accounts it was a great success.

March is Red Cross Month (RedCross.org). Encouraged to drill once a year, local Captain John Stagg proceeded to network and plan. Quickly, TCEM’s Director Dale Freeman drew in the whole county, as TCEM needed a quarterly drill, too, to keep grants coming.

Stagg said, “I believe this is a first for Tyler County.”

TCEM Weatherman George Lucas sent an Immediate Response Information System alert to first responders and soon upgrades the IRIS Alert to a tornado warning.

Freeman dials 911 in the frantic voice of a citizen in the Chesswood Addition. Their home has been hit. What to do? The police respond and call the Woodville Volunteer Fire Department on their dedicated frequency.

Freeman sets up an Emergency Operations Center and an Incident Command Station to coordinate the entities. Tyler County Sheriff dispatcher Jerry Saunders manned the phone. Stagg notifies his network, sets up a Red Cross gathering place and comfort station at the EOC warehouse, and his team of trained volunteers is briefed and dispatched to the disaster.

Ivanhoe Mayor Jack Brockhouse was a part of the Incident Command Team.

Holding many hats and therein drawing in other entities, Deputy Chuck Marshall was on hand for the sheriff’s office, as Woodville’s Fire Marshall, a member of Woodville’s Fire Department, and as an EMT for Dogwood EMS. Officer Marc DeShazo was present for the Woodville Police.

Save for the weatherman’s first alerts, there is little warning in a real disaster. The drill helped test their communication, resources, and responsiveness. Weeks of preparation went into crafting the scenario.

Red Cross Disaster Program Specialist Natalie Prosperie for the Beaumont and Orange chapters mobilized volunteers from many counties to come and help. Red Cross liaison and Prosperie’s right hand, Sharon Smith, played a key role in the command center and was last year’s Disaster Volunteer of the Year.



¹ [Tyler County Booster](#), 03-06-14, 8A.



In front of the **Red Cross’s Emergency Response Van**, donated by the people of Kuwait and Red Crescent Society, front L-R are John Stagg, Wanda Copes-Simmons, Mary Annette Stagg, Dickie Russell Henderson, Natalie Prosperie, Linda Slagle. Back row L-R are Leslie Smith, Tina Richards, James Richards, Travis Smith, David Henderson, Sharon Smith, Joanna Richmond and Dale Slagle.



The **Tyler County team** consisted of (l-r) Ivanhoe Mayor Jack Brockhouse, Dispatcher Jerry Sanders, Director Dale Freeman, Tyler County Deputy Chuck Marshall, and Woodville Police Officer Marc DeShazo.



The **Tyler County Search and Rescue team** consisted of (l-r) Vice President T. K. Jennings, Treasurer Rod Morgan, President Mark Hatch (kneeling) Terry Mayer, and Secretary Joey Mayer who brought both of their vehicles.

The Red Cross had signs posted in front of Chesswood residents’ homes with photos of various degrees of damage, from minor to complete destruction. On the back of a handful of those photos were notes like “there were two injuries,” “there is one person unaccounted for,” and – God forbid – “there was one fatality.”

In a disaster, everyone is stressed, including the first responders. Whatever may be the locality’s normal resources, those are pushed to the limits and often beyond their normal capacities. Remember Hurricanes Rita and Ike. Response times are complicated by fallen trees, debris, outages, and no telling whatever else.

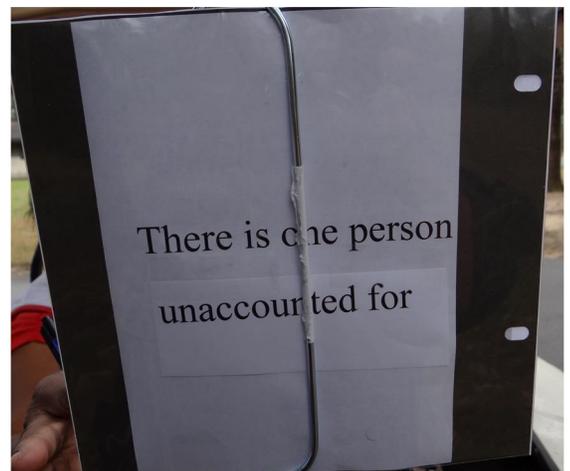
As tragic as 50 major injuries may be, imagine the toll upon the ambulance services and the Tyler County Hospital’s emergency room. The police cannot come to every damaged house – cannot! Search and Rescue appears to be needed everywhere – everywhere! Ambulance companies call in of their entire staff. All police officers work overtime. God forbid!

Tyler County has learned a lot and its TCEM has been fortified with formal agreements with all of the local cities to allow Freeman the great trust to coordinate all the often meager resources the county can muster to save life and facilitate aid as quickly as possible. As the need arose, Freeman could call on city and county road crews to clear roads and even deliver portable oxygen bottles to residents whose supply might be dangerously low.

Who is left to canvas the neighborhoods? Who is the first to assess the damage?

The Red Cross shined. Immediately, two-member teams head out to a specific set of streets all over the disaster area. Normally, only one two-person would assess a specifically assigned area. In this drill, about seven two-person Red Cross teams came to Chesswood, some to learn, others just to practice. Up and down the streets they went, documenting damage and making calls appropriate to a resident’s need.

Trained, trusted, linked to the TCEM, the volunteers go house to house up a street, always on the right side of the street, up to the end and then back again on the right side, filling out “Street Sheet” assessment forms. They talk to residents, and their Emergency Response Vehicle roves the streets, too, with water and immediate aid. As the teams assess, and where needed, the team calls the TCEM for specific aid for a “fatality” or “injury” or “person unaccounted for” or “trapped” person, thereby allowing the TCEM to dispatch an ambulance, police officer, or the Tyler County Search and Rescue.



It dawned on this reporter something he should have known for decades. When the power is down and an entire area is devastated, while the police and rescue teams can “search” for victims – they are so few! The value of having dozens of “extra” eyes and ears already trained, drilled, walking and assessing – the value of the Red Cross increases exponentially in proportion to how devastating the damage may be.

For the residents, how comforting it was, even in this drill, to see Red Cross workers, trusted, in their red vests and red vehicles, looking for ways to help. The police can continue to patrol and the Tyler County Search and Rescue gained another several dozen eyes spread out over the whole territory.

Back at the TCEM warehouse, the Red Cross prepared an “emergency” meal for all drill participants.

Gathering around the tables, a fellowship of volunteers ate lunch. Director Freeman thanked them all. Though there were no incidents to share about this day’s drill – everything nearly coming together as planned, with some minor glitches fixed “in the field” – the more experienced volunteers shared several stories from previous real disasters and rescues.

In the end, the volunteers were keys to success, giving of their precious time and being available to help a neighbor and helping the full-time first responders get to the greatest needs more efficiently.



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