



# 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 4

**Retired LAFD Assistant Chief Bob Defeo**

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

Cameron: Hi everyone. This is Cameron Barrett and you have joined MySafe LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. Thanks so much for tuning in and having a listen today. We're continuing with our January Northridge 20 years ago remembrance series and we are really fortunate today to be joined by somebody who was instrumental in helping save lives that day. He is retired Assistant Chief of the Los Angeles Fire Department, Robert DeFeo, a good friend of mine and a fellow Rhode Islander, I would like to add who had turned his back on Rhode Island by the time the Northridge earthquake hit in 1994 and was already an established expert in urban fire fighting at that time. Thank you so much Chief for joining us. It's an honor to be with you here today.

Robert: You're welcome. I'm glad to be here.

Cameron: Tell us a little bit. Let's set the scene a little bit, January 17th, 1994. What was your rank and your assignment that day?

Robert: I was the battalion chief at that time, assigned to battalion 5A in Hollywood.

Cameron: You were in Hollywood, but we don't really think of the Northridge earthquake as affecting Hollywood that much. We always think of it as affecting the valley.

Robert: No, it did tremendous damage in Hollywood because [crosstalk 01:27]. I was home and I forget what time, 4:30, 5:00 and it shook me out of bed, the earthquake itself. I got up and did a search around the house, turned on the TV, and none of the TV channels were working, so I told my wife, wow this is a big one and it's probably happening in LA and I'm going to go to work. She said well God bless and I headed into town.

Cameron: How far away were you living? I mean how far away [crosstalk 01:51]?

Robert: 35 miles.

Cameron: Wow, and it was that violent that it [crosstalk 01:54].

Robert: Oh absolutely, yeah. I checked the house to make sure the gas lines and the water lines were intact, because that's the first thing that probably goes on them, and the house, although it had been hit and the water was sloshing in the pool, there was no structural damage that I could see to the house, so I started up and I was actually going to work that day anyway because there was an A shift coming on that day.

Cameron: What time did you leave the house? as you drove in, were [crosstalk 02:20].

Robert: I probably left at 4:45, 5:00. I'm not really familiar with the deal, but it was real early. I'd say it was right after the earthquake happened, so I started in knowing that it was going to be a big one. I'd been to a couple of them before, the Whittier and there's a whole bunch of them that had happened before. Nothing of this consequence though, nothing of this consequence.

Cameron: When you were driving in, did you get any kind of forewarning? Could you hear any kind of reporting on the radio on your way in or [crosstalk 02:53]?

Robert: The radio was going on, but they didn't know either. It happened so quickly, they were just getting in the information mode itself, but just by the tone of the radio reports, you knew it was going to be pretty bad and that it was centered in the valley.

Cameron: You ended up being in charge of probably the most iconic destructive areas that day, which was the Northridge Meadows Apartment Complex. We've all seen those pictures. You ended up being incident commander there, is that right?

Robert: Yes, I did. I'll tell you how I got to that.

Cameron: Yeah, how did you get [crosstalk 03:28].

Robert: I came up the 5 freeway. I get off at Sunset to go to battalion 5, which is stationed with fire station 27, and on Sunset Blvd., you could see a lot of debris in the streets. I think maybe it happened in Hollywood. When I got to fire station 27, the B shift commander was following earthquake procedures and got in front of the station and had set up a command post to administer his battalion, battalion 5. When I pulled in, I said Dennis? What he says. I've got this here, I call our operation OCD, our

operations control and they said we want you to go to the valley. That's where most of this is and report to division 3, which is at fire station 88.

My driver by that time had come in also, Billy Fost. We got the battalion reserved sedan loaded with what equipment we needed including our turnouts, as we didn't know what to expect, and went out to division 3. When we got out to division 3, it was very turmoil, a lot of stuff just flowing around because of the consequences and all the information coming in. They were just establishing really a good command post. The chief at that time sent me to the address on Reseda Blvd telling me it was an apartment house that had collapsed. It was Young, Assistant Chief Young sent me out there. It collapsed.

I reported out there to battalion 15 and a guy named [Schnitker 04:55] who was in charge of that area at that time, he said you better go over there and tell me what's happening. I went over to the address, I forget what it was, 35-something on Reseda Blvd. As I pull up, the sun is just coming up and I'm looking over there and a lot of action going on, a lot of people moving around and everything, but I look at a building and it looked solid and solid to me. The original Captain on the job, one of the original responders, Steve Bascom was there and I said, Steve, what's the problem here? This doesn't look that bad. He says oh chief, it's a three story building and I'm only looking at two stories now.

Cameron: Oh my.

Robert: Right away, my adrenaline started to pump and I said okay, we've got to set up a command post. We've got to start getting resources in because I knew there was people that were going to be trapped in the building itself. I appointed Steve as my operations chief at that time, even though Steve was a captain too, but a very competent outstanding captain. I said okay, let's start a strategy. First of all, what is the damage to the building? How many people are trapped? Where are they? How can we find them? There's a whole series of things that enter my mind. Who are they? Where are they? What are they doing?

The initial companies on the scene, I didn't know what they were doing at that time. I think fire station 70 was in the act of extracting a man from one side of the building itself who was trapped in his room. Then it started settling down. I requested additional resources right away. I knew this was going to be huge. Sorry, no resources available. I'm going whoa, wait a minute. The department is overwhelmed. There's no question about it.

Cameron: Chief, sorry to interrupt, but that's a really important point that you just brought up that a think a lot of people forget about, is the Los Angeles Fire Department like many large urban fire departments know that

they're in something called a degraded mode when a really big disaster hits. Can you just explain that quickly?

Robert: A degraded mode, if they had a alarm, instead of sending a full first alarm, which would be two trucks and three engines, they'd probably just send a task force with a truck and two engines. [crosstalk 07:15]

Cameron: Because they're overwhelmed, right?

Robert: From there, it would build depending on what the person found. That's what they did with me when they sent me out there. They really truly were in a degraded mode, scrambling, trying to find out exactly what had happened, where the points were that were going to cause the most problem, and I think at that time, they also had a rescue going on over at the Sherman Woods Mall. There was somebody trapped under the concrete parking structure. We had eaten up a lot of resources for that. We were stuck because they're on one side of the valley, we're on the other side of the valley. As the messages went out and back and forth, some of the guys on the other incidences started becoming available and being fire fighters the way they are and the captains the way they are, they gravitated to our incident.

In the meantime, while I was there, I'd set up an incident command system, which is the basis of everything we did on the fire department at that time. I really was faithful for that system. We set up the ability now to start moving people in, finding out what is wrong, finding out if we can rescue people. In the meantime, the hard rescue is going on on the South Side. We've got another rescue going on on the second or third floor of a guy trapped behind a refrigerator, and now the company has started to come in, so I divided it up into three divisions at that time, A, B, and C. I couldn't see the back. Then as the companies came in and I assigned them, three person investigation teams. One guy would be outside all the time on a radio. The other two would be checking inside the building itself. [crosstalk 08:47].

Cameron: Would that be to keep them safe [crosstalk 08:51].

Robert: Absolutely, because I didn't know really the structure of the building itself what was left, how safe it was or whatever, but that's our first thing is rescue, rescue and then rescue, rescue, rescue. That's what I was looking at in the particular incident. Could we rescue people who were still alive and then what are we going to do with the people who are trapped and they're not going to make it out, but we were lucky [crosstalk 09:16] excuse me, go ahead.

Cameron: Did you know at this time, Chief, how many people were in there?

Robert: No.

Cameron: What kind of injuries they had sustained? You didn't know yet.

Robert: No idea. It was so fluid. It was such a catastrophic event and then the press starting coming in and they exacerbated it because they're hanging around you, they're walking around, they're trying to get into the building itself to see. Luckily, I was able to get LAPD and they brought a couple of their sergeants over and they straightened that out right away and pushed them off to the side, and then we'll talk about press releases later on. In the meantime, I think Bascom had sent somebody inside, but in the front was the office, and he came out and God bless, there was a schematic of the whole apartment there. You could see the hot rooms where they were.

Now we determined that maybe all of the people had got out, or were being helped out that could be, that were ambulatory. Now what about people that were trapped? We started in that building. What had happened to the building itself was what they called soft wall construction. When it collapsed, it collapsed ten foot. It went right to one side and fell on itself, so the entire first floor was underneath the second and third floor.

Cameron: So it pancaked?

Robert: It pancaked, exactly. Using the schematic, now we started into the deal of opening up above the room on the first floor. You understand what I'm doing now?

Cameron: Yeah. [crosstalk 10:46].

Robert: We took the schematic and we started a room to room search and the guys had chainsaws. It was hard physical labor because of the construction of the building even though it was soft wall, which allowed it to collapse. In between the walls was poured concrete on the floors, so they had to break through the concrete and it was a terrible job. Now they start finding bodies. In the meantime now, we're getting more resources in, not so much from the command post, although they're starting now to give us logistic support, which means they're starting to bring heavy equipment in that they rented. I'm not really paying attention to that. I'm focusing on what we're doing here.

We had set up the command post of the hood of the sedan, so we're working right off the hood of the sedan. Things are happening and things are starting to taper down so now we could get a handle on what we're doing because we're using the instant command system. Again, we still had those three divisions. I assigned captains at that time until I could

get chiefs in to be division commander or division supervisors. I'm sorry, division supervisors to make sure everything was happening within their division and that it was an attempt at rescue or as it turned out, body recovery operation that we started.

Cameron: How long did it take, Chief? How many bodies? How many people were rescued? How many bodies were recovered?

Robert: We never really did get a handle on the rescue because it was such a fluid deal, and a lot of people self rescued, there was no question. They were able to get out of the second and third floors. I know the one hard rescue, two, three, four, five, what they call hard rescues and that's my recollection where we had to put companies or urban search and rescue teams in to get those people out. The other ones was the body deal and I think when I was in command, we found 15 bodies. In the meantime now, we're starting to now the county urban search and rescue or task force two came into assist us.

We had already done two pretty thorough searches of the building and we didn't think that anybody was still in the building itself. They geared up while we continued our body recovery actions, they geared up for another search in the building itself using much more advanced techniques with the fiber optic TV, the listening, which we didn't have at that time. I think they relieved emergency about 2:00 in the afternoon and about 5:00 that night, they found another victim. We had made two sweeps through. The police came with their dogs. They made one sweep through and then the county came in and made the one sweep through and they found another body eventually there.

That was pretty much the upshot of what we had done on that particular deal, but the incident command system was really the key to it because we were able to control people. We had that issue of who are they? Where are they? What are they doing? We knew what they were doing. We had constant contact back and forth from the division supervisors on what they were finding and how they were moving through the system and where they were advancing to and what they had finished and what they had left to do. As the day started, as time started passing, we were able to get more resources. The other part and I almost slipped right on by it, across the street, they set up a medical command post because they were treating people for minor injuries there and the hospitals were overwhelmed already.

The EMS supervisor at that time, he handled most of that for me. If I remember, Dr., he used to be the physician for the department. I forget his name now, but he went over there. They did a lot of work over there setting up and treating the minor injuries from the incident itself because a lot of people were scraped, cuts, bruises, and everything.

Really in the end, even though it was so chaotic at the beginning, by using the incidence command system, getting all the division covered, getting the medical deal up, getting the police in, and having them take care of the security for us, and we were able to handle it.

Cameron: ICS really does bring a sense of order to [crosstalk 15:20].

Robert: Order to chaos. It [crosstalk 15:25]. It's one of those systems you really have to push. People want to run in and do what they think needs to be done [crosstalk 15:33].

Cameron: Of course they do.

Robert: You can't do that.

Cameron: Citizen rescues often turn into two recoveries, right?

Robert: That's exactly. Even fire fighters, when they pull up, they want to go to work right away. Wait a minute. Hold on. Somebody has got to be in charge of them, so you set up the base where they can come to. You set up staging where you're going to use them right away and of course that was later on in the incident itself. [crosstalk 15:58] really dictated it.

Cameron: Is this something that the Los Angeles Fire Department still uses?

Robert: Absolutely. It's the core. Let me put it this way. I've been retired ten years. If they're not using it, they're not ... I know they use it. I know they use it. They have to. In fact, what we developed in LA City and Southern California is nationwide now with the NIMS. They use it constantly.

Cameron: I think that's just something that I know you and others who put that system in place are very proud of that. You became the model. Here in LA, became the model for the [crosstalk 16:38].

Robert: Yeah, I taught high-rise incident command for 20 years in the state and around the country. We were really dialed in on incident command. Thank goodness we were. I don't know how many people we saved that particular deal because like I say, it was so chaotic and everything was happening so fast, but the issue of the bodies, and most of them weren't trauma. They mostly suffocated. We'd open up the deal and here's another body, here's another body, here's three in the bed. A lot of them were kids, young people, because there was a college close by, Northridge I think, and this was a place where they went. Another incident, another what happened was that it was a holiday. I think it was Martin Luther King, so a lot of people weren't there. They had gone for the long weekend.

Cameron: Thank goodness.

Robert: It really wasn't as full as it normally would have been with people, so that was a blessing on our side.

Cameron: Let's look forward a little bit. Is Los Angeles ready for the next earthquake?

Robert: I've been gone ten years and I really haven't gone back too much. I left the job with great feelings and love for the department, but it's moved on. Frank Borden was one of the originators of both the urban search and rescue and incident command, and I'm sure he still has a handle in teaching all over the country and through the city, but they've done the community emergency response teams, which should be a great help, although at times they could be a pain also, but the incident command system could handle those because they're an adjunct to the fire fighting forces, but you still can't commit them in places where they're going to be in danger themselves.

I think as anybody could be, they are, although the force has been reduced [inaudible 18:32] over 300 people. That's one tenth of the fire department, 300 out of 3300 members when I was on the job. That's a big gouge out. I don't know, given the earthquake there and we talk about 6.0 whatever it was, I don't know if we could handle it as well now as we did them. I'm sure the people trained up on it. I'm sure that given the opportunity, they'd do the best they could, but when you run out of people, you can only do so much.

Cameron: Ultimately it comes down to how many bodies do you have? How many well trained bodies do you have [crosstalk 19:12]

Robert: That's exactly right. Now they've really advanced. When we went to 911, all the stuff they had, it's so different now and it's so highly technical that they can do a lot better with the urban search and rescue. I think they've got three or four of them in the city now that are fully equipped rather than the one we had at that time.

Cameron: It always comes down to how many trained people do you have to use that equipment?

Robert: That's correct. Then as you went to the state mutual aid disaster plan, what they bring in to help, but the original issue is right at the beginning. What can we do right at the beginning because that's where it's going to happen. That's where we were fortunate that I got up there as quick as I did. That I had Stevie Bascom there, that companies starting attaching themselves to the incident, and we were able to use them in a timely sequence using the incident command system, and not

only in a timely sequence, but to the best availability of the equipment and the men we had.

Cameron: When you look back on that day, what's the first thought that comes to mind? Thank goodness we did what we did? [crosstalk 20:19].

Robert: Thank God. You know what I say to myself, thank goodness I was there, and I'm not saying that disparaging anybody, and thank God Stevie Bascom was there because we had people who were conversant with the incident command system. We had people who were conversant with urban search and rescue. We were able to put a good incident command system in and you know what? That's what they paid me for. I had the opportunity to do it. I did it to the best of my ability and think overall it was a successful operation even though we lost 16 people, and they were gone at the beginning. There was no way we were going to save them. They were buried in that first floor.

About 12:00 that afternoon, we had set the command post, it was apparatus part [inaudible 21:02] an aftershock that took a ladder truck came about two foot off the ground with the aftershock. It looked like a bunch of honey bees coming out of the nest as the rescuers came out of the building because afraid, but the system allowed for that, because we had the safety people there with them. Get out, come on, right now. They had a safe exit. They didn't commit themselves in so far that they couldn't get out. I was so proud of the guys that were there that day. It was just outstanding. They did a great, great job.

Cameron: You must look back on January 17th, 1994 as one of the most important days in your career.

Robert: Absolutely, absolutely, it really truly was. I hope I was up to it. I think I was. Given what we had, we did the best we could.

Cameron: Chief Robert DeFeo, thank you so much for being a part of our Northridge Remembrance 20 years later podcast for MySafe LA and it's just been a joy and a real education to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Robert: Thank you. Thank you for thinking about me.

Speaker 1: This is a MySafe LA Fire and Life Safety podcast. Make sure to visit us at [mysafela.org](http://mysafela.org).