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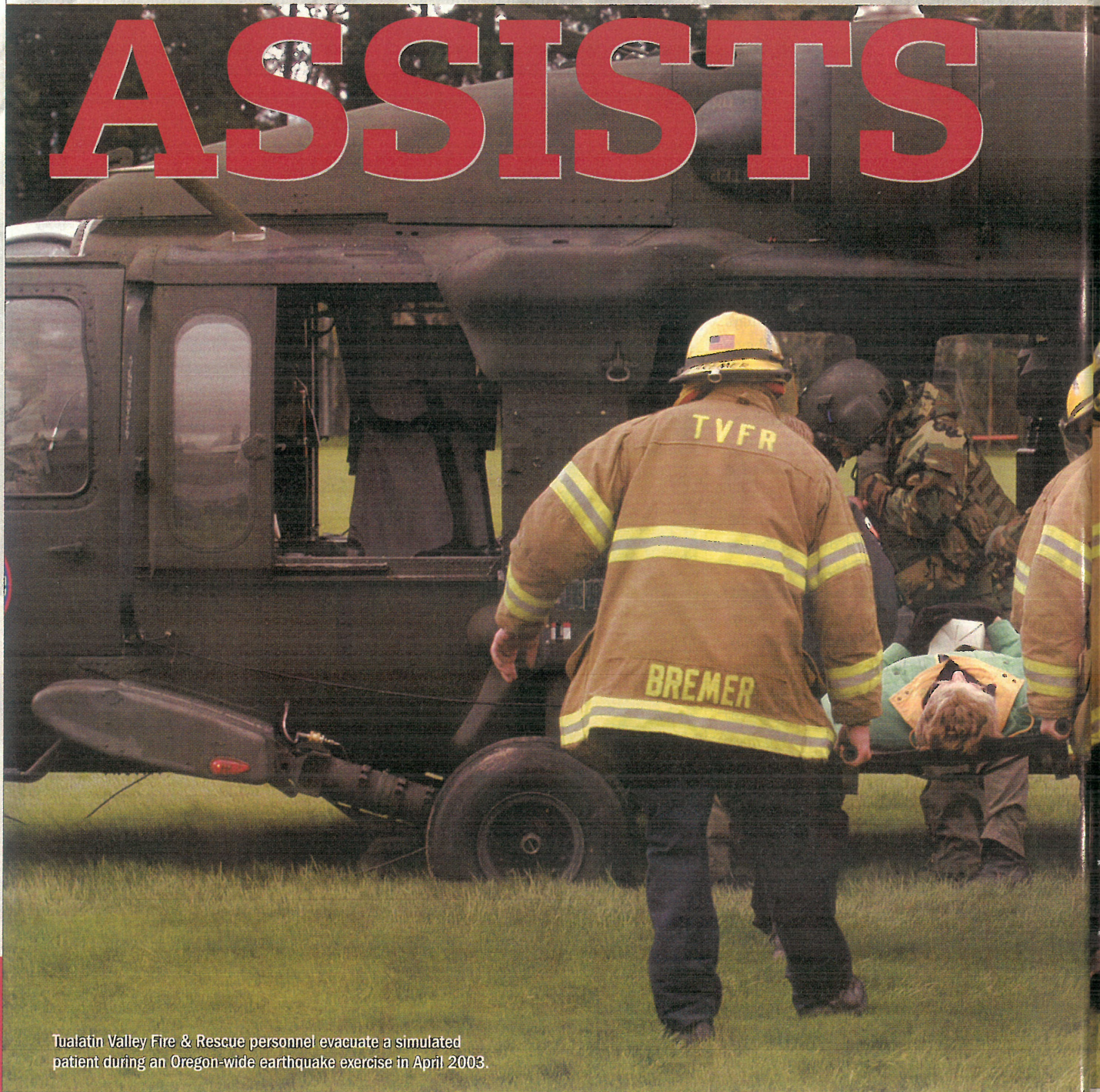
ICS OPTIONS

Overhead teams provide strategic support for extraordinary situations.

[EMS INTEGRATION] [MASS CASUALTIES]

Overhead teams take the Incident Command System to the next level by providing strategic support for extraordinary responses. By Jeff Rubin, Ph.D.

ON-CALL ASSISTS



Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue personnel evacuate a simulated patient during an Oregon-wide earthquake exercise in April 2003.

A hazmat incident generates multiple patients and shuts down a busy industrial area. A nighttime fire in a city hall causes substantial damage and disrupts city operations. A four-alarm fire in an apartment complex on the hottest day of the year taxes responders and leaves residents homeless. A presidential visit generates uncommon requirements for responders, planners and commanders. A climbing accident involving off-duty fire-district employees generates internal trauma, national media coverage, and extended

demand for information for employees and reporters alike.

What did these incidents have in common? All employed overhead teams from the principal responding agency, Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue, the second-largest fire-rescue service provider in Oregon. Covering 210 square miles south and west of Portland, TVF&R protects 418,000 people in nine incorporated cities and portions of three counties, with the bulk of the district's service area in Washington County. As a direct-taxing fire district, TVF&R must continually demonstrate its ability to provide superior service while demonstrating fiscal efficiency and responsibility.

TVF&R maintains five overhead teams that rotate on-call status on a weekly basis. The teams provide strategic incident management and support for incidents involving a large area, long duration, technical or political complexity, extraordinary impact on population, or any other aspect extending beyond routine response capabilities.

Team members are responsible for arranging coverage for their position to account for regular duty schedules and vacation; members are compensated for their on-call time as determined by their bargaining unit and exempt status. On-call positions include most standard ICs command and general staff positions, plus some unique to TVF&R's teams:

- Incident commander.
- Public information officer.
- Planning section chief.
- District operations chief.
- Deputy incident commander.
- Safety officer.
- Logistics section chief.
- Company officer.

Teams are notified on all second alarms and automatically dispatched on third alarms, but they may be requested in entirety or by position on any incident. Some positions have their own response protocol: On-call safety officers respond on all incidents of two alarms or greater, or by on-scene request. On-call PIOs respond on all working fires and other noteworthy incidents, all overhead team activations, and by request. Aside from safety and public information, the most common position-specific request is for logistics to provide support beyond standard rehab response on incidents of long duration, including portable toilets, fencing and meals.

Critical functions

When requested to respond by an on-scene incident commander, an overhead team allows that IC to continue to concentrate on direct incident management and control. Once an overhead team IC arrives at the scene and is able to perform a face-to-face transfer of command, the relieved "original" IC becomes the operations section chief within the command structure. This maintains operational continuity while transferring other responsibilities and concerns to the overhead team, which includes maintaining crew and duty-chief coverage throughout the district according to predetermined minimum standards.

In addition to standard training and drills for their regular assignments, overhead team members receive a variety of training opportunities related to their team role. Position-specific classes are offered in-house with applications geared to local protocols, district operations and regional capabilities, and team members may enroll in external classes depending on availability. Several members also serve



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on incident management teams through Oregon's Office of the State Fire Marshal.

As a group, all five teams receive combined training, which includes a full-scale or functional exercise, three times per year. Participation in an annual exercise is a commitment embraced throughout the organization, up the line to the fire chief. Repeated training and response reinforces advanced ICS concepts throughout fire district operations, provides line personnel the continuing opportunity to develop advanced ICS skills, and provides non-line personnel the opportunity to take part in large-scale responses and expand their organizational role.

In addition to their operational functions, the overhead teams help strengthen political and operational ties between TVF&R and the cities it serves. As a result, TVF&R can localize its presence as a local fire department to its constituent cities. As a fire district that replaced several municipal fire departments, TVF&R must continue to earn the trust of both the taxpayers who fund it and the constituent cities that chose to form partnerships with it. Although neither the sole means of solidifying these relationships nor the sole service TVF&R provides, the overhead teams serve as a strongly positive, highly visible manifestation of those relationships.

Substantial differences

Incident management teams are not a new concept, but several aspects of TVF&R's overhead teams differ substantially from common practices, particularly in staffing pool and functions for specific positions.

Most overhead team members are uniformed staff: company officers; training officers; deputy and assistant fire marshals; and chief officers, ranging from battalion chief through chief of department. Several team members, however, are support staff with little or no prior response experience, including a

senior administrative assistant, studio manager and fleet manager.

In selecting support staffers to fill overhead team positions, principally logistics section chief slots, the department looks for a combination of achievement in a person's everyday



Karen Eubanks, PIO for Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue, works a hazmat scene in April 2003.

job, attitude and a willingness to undertake the necessary ICS position-specific training, much of which is provided in-house. Use of support staff to fill key positions expands the available staffing pool, allows for individual development on the part of the employees, and generates both a greater sense of shared mission and a greater degree of understanding of emergency operations throughout the organization.

In addition to filling some roles with support staff, TVF&R staffs most of the deputy incident commander positions with non-TVF&R senior staff members of some of the

cities within district boundaries. Bringing senior public works and police department staff into the overhead teams helps to promulgate ICS and emergency preparedness in the cities and counties that compose the district.

Despite the greater national attention to preparedness and the promotion of the National Incident Management System by the Department of Homeland Security, NIMS is still a challenge for many cities and counties. City representatives serving as deputy incident commanders can serve as champions for adopting ICS and taking basic preparedness steps within their own organization.

During incidents, deputy incident commanders provide general representation for municipal responders and, if the incident is within their municipality, may become part of a Unified Command. As many major incidents require local law and public works response, deputy incident commanders can provide ready contacts with their peers elsewhere in the district, thus filling some liaison officer functions as well. Beyond their function as police and public works representatives, however, the deputy incident commanders help provide the IC with a more global perspective. As non-fire personnel, they can look outside the box to ensure that relevant input from other sources is included and that other agencies

are kept in the loop.

Unconventional positions

The operations section hosts two unconventional positions: district operations chief and company officer.

The district operations chief is tasked with assessing and maintaining adequate district coverage by crews and duty chiefs, in coordination with the independent dispatch entity that serves Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue and all of Washington County; the district operations chief may be sent directly to the 911 center to accomplish this.

Coverage is maintained primarily through move-ups using TVF&R and neighboring agency resources and through assembly and dispatch of task forces in place of standard alarm assignments, as determined by resource availability and call volume. The

district operations chief is also responsible for determining the need for and implementing personnel callbacks and staffing of reserve apparatus to maintain coverage.

The company officer position is developmental and voluntary, and does not require

coverage arrangements for shift schedules or leave time. It provides district captains and lieutenants the opportunity to learn more about managing large and complex incidents, which can make them better officers and may improve their chances for promotion.

The position also provides a succession strategy for the teams, as company officers are encouraged not just to learn by observation, but to select an area of interest and train for that position. As the position evolves, a possible future task for company officers will be to serve as a tactical observer for the operations chief, moving around the perimeter of an incident to provide a continually updated picture — verbally and through photos or drawings — of incident status. This concept is adapted from Portland Fire & Rescue, which has found it fruitful on large incidents.

NOT JUST FOR INCIDENTS

Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue's overhead teams aren't just on-scene teams. As situations require, teams may be dispatched to staff the Fire Operations Center or assist in staffing city and county emergency operations centers. Should a major incident require dispatch of an overhead team to the scene and subsequently require activation of the Fire Operations Center, the next-up team is tasked with FOC setup and operations. This flexibility greatly increases both the teams' utility and their opportunities to apply their assets, as the following examples illustrate.

In 1996 a significant flood had struck the metro region in and around Portland, and one of TVF&R's cities suffered catastrophic damage. As that was the only city in TVF&R's district to be severely affected, overhead teams were shifted to that city, not to respond to incidents but to provide staffing and PIO support to the city's incident management team within their emergency operations center.

TVF&R can't commit to providing this level of service to all of its cities simultaneously — such as for a disaster that affects the entire region, like an earthquake — but a TVF&R officer will serve as the fire branch director under the operations section in every city that activates its emergency operations center. The officer filling the fire branch position has been trained to work within the city EOC structure, and staffing it allows an additional avenue of two-way com-

munications between TVF&R and its cities during major incidents.

In another situation that demonstrates the depth of the overhead teams' services, a fire broke out in the city hall of TVF&R's largest city in June 2001. It was shortly after midnight on a Monday, so the

coverage were accomplished easily. The overhead team maintained direct contact with the mayor to advise on the structure's status and when the unaffected portions, including the mayor's office, could be occupied.

The on-call PIO responded to the scene and worked



building was unoccupied; the fire was confined and extinguished. Smoke and water/humidity damage was considerable, and a substantial portion of the building couldn't be used temporarily.

The fact that the fire went to three alarms generated an automatic overhead team response, and there was substantial response from city staff, including police, public works, and the mayor. As life-safety concerns had been ruled out early in the incident, significant issues were property protection and continuity of city operations.

Upon overhead team IC arrival, the on-scene IC became operations chief, and the district operations chief addressed district-wide coverage. Given the low call volume associated with the off-peak hours, move-ups for

closely with city staff to coordinate media releases. Rehab had been established early in the incident, but more substantial support was needed, so food and port-a-potties were requested through logistics and delivered.

In addition to standard planning functions, the planning section assigned a liaison to the city staff to determine how the fire district could help them maintain the services that their citizens would expect later that morning and during the next few weeks.

In part as a result of input obtained from the planning liaisons, TVF&R was able to provide some surge space to city staff by vacating an annex in city hall a few weeks ahead of schedule, on very short notice.

Planning and logistics

One of the ways that TVF&R makes its overhead teams functional is to emphasize the functions of the planning and logistics sections. For most incidents — and in most agencies — ICS staffing is centered around command and operations functions because most incidents are short enough that the support functions of planning, logistics and finance/administration aren't needed or can be handled easily by standard protocols, such as rehab. Incidents that require overhead team activation are more likely to require longer-term support functions.

As with other duties in the fire district, planning and logistics chiefs are selected for their positions based on their individual attributes rather than an arbitrary factor such as rank or regular duties. Most of TVF&R's logistics and planning chiefs have staff assignments: Only four out of 14 (including shared positions that allow for shift schedules) are line officers or duty chiefs, and some of those line officers were recruited from the company officer position.

Planning and logistics chiefs meet several times each year to review procedures and resources, determine what needs development or improvement, and receive position-specific training. Planning section training includes Situation Status (SitStat) and Resource Status (ReStat), and logistics section training includes resource ordering and communica-

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tions planning. Both sections participate in information-flow training and exercises, mostly centered in the Fire Operations Center, TVF&R's command and control facility that serves as the district's emergency operations center, but applied to the field as well.

Well-developed planning and logistics functions offer additional resources. For

Whether visits of dignitaries (Oregon was a swing state in the 2004 election) or homeland security alerts, winter storm warnings or pending volcanic eruptions, the on-call planning chief and incident commander, along with the district's emergency manager, assess potential impacts to district residents, businesses and local governments along with

advanced levels. Standardized classes go only so far, however. Lessons learned from exercises and actual incidents around the world are incorporated into team training wherever possible. External training is added as necessary, but almost all training for the overhead teams is both developed and taught in-house.

Team development has been a lengthy process with substantial adjustments to the standard incident management team model. Many of these adjustments were institutionalized as unique overhead team aspects, and adjustments are still being made as the program evolves to meet new demands. Internally developed training offers relevance and originality, and it can be customized to specific audiences and objectives. The downside is a more labor-intensive curriculum development process that may not translate into universal application.

Municipalities, districts and individual departments looking to develop their own teams may underestimate the challenges associated with startup and development: A clear sense of mission must be combined with adequate time and resources, as well as a willingness to adjust program parameters in order to achieve objectives. The reward is a system that can develop to meet an ever-increasing range of needs.

Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue periodically updates position responsibilities and provides focused training as needed. The district also seeks additional opportunities for partnership with other agencies. For the much of the past year, each TVF&R team has hosted a "shadow" member from a local EMS provider to forge better interagency relationships and improve interagency operations on large incidents.

As local and regional incident management teams receive greater attention under the National Incident Management System and National Response Plan, and agencies strive to comply with new and ever-changing requirements, overhead teams like TVF&R's have demonstrated their value operationally, organizationally and politically, and they will continue to do so. **[FC]**



Overhead team members conduct a planning meeting during a large exercise at a paper mill in their district.

example, although there are many effective agencies dedicated with providing temporary shelter, food, supplies and social services, TVF&R is likely to be the first agency victims encounter in an emergency and does not want to see anyone fall through the cracks.

The logistics section is tasked with filling a victim services role in incident response. In addition to carrying a variety of resource directories for response needs, logistics chiefs also carry directories for a variety of social services and have become accustomed to contacting public and private social-service providers), translators, insurance companies, pharmacies, family members and any other services that might be necessary until dedicated providers can take over. Training and exercise scenarios reinforce and test this function.

Team development

Not all incidents occur without warning.

TVF&R's continuity of operations.

Even if no immediate action is necessary, those who would be making the decisions during an emergency have started to plan already. Although a full incident action plan may not be necessary and is generally impractical, a template is started and used in the same way a full IAP is used during an actual incident: as a standardized communications tool for the entire organization. For events with potential short-term recurrence, such as multiple visits by dignitaries during an election year, and those with an extended period of uncertain potential for severe impact like volcanic activity, these draft IAPs serve as templates and prompts for the next team.

Unconventionality brings its own challenges, and perhaps the greatest is training and development. All team members are grounded in ICS, and many have taken a series of standardized ICS classes through

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