



MyMetro.Net 9-10-09

North Bureau Sheriff's Deputies Receive Medals for Metrolink Crash Efforts

Sheriff's Deputy Recalls Details of a Tragic Day

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(Sept. 10, 2009) Transit Services North Bureau Sheriff's Deputy William H. Lynch says he can't recall the exterior of the Sept. 12 Metrolink crash scene in frighteningly vivid detail.

Sheriff's Deputy William H. Lynch says the mutual aid following the Metrolink crash was significant.

But Lynch, one of the first responders to arrive at the scene, says the images of the mangled passengers, piles of debris, and the painstaking efforts it took to free the victims from it will remain

with him for the rest of his life.

Along with Transit Bureau North Deputies Barry Ryan and Brad Johnson, Lynch was among 15 Los Angeles County Sheriff's employees honored Sept. 9 with the award of the Medal of Valor and Meritorious Conduct for their efforts in responding to the deadly crash involving a Metrolink train and Union Pacific freight train.

The crash injured 135 people and killed 25 more including Metro Storekeeper Donna Remata, who was riding in the first car of Metrolink's Ventura County Line 111.

When he arrived at the scene, Lynch recalls Sheriff's Deputies Ryan and Johnson were already pulling people out of the wreckage.

"There were trains on fire. There was about four or five of the cars. I think three from the freighter and a couple from the Metrolink," he said. "My training kicked in and the initial thing I thought about was resources. Do we have the necessary resources coming to deal with the problem?"

Lynch recalls that he "hopped right into the train and started pulling people out. There was a fire in the front, and a lot of gas and oil. I knew I had a buffer because I went into the back part. So if it ignited, I knew I had a decent escape route to take."

Complicating the effort to assist the victims, he said, "was that the train was on its side and everything was just in complete devastation inside, with the seats and the railing bars -- and everything was in the way."

Lynch remembers seeing fire department rescue workers arriving with tools which included the Jaws of Life and several saw-saws which he quickly maneuvered around the debris.



September 12, 2008: The scene of the Metrolink crash in Chatsworth.

"One of the things that sticks in my mind is that I went through three of those saws because the battery just kept wearing out because we were cutting through so much metal," he said. "The majority of the people that I pulled out were really in bad shape. They were trapped and caught up in all the debris," he said noting that he probably pulled out as many as eight people in 2-1/2 hours.

As they were being along the line of rescue workers, Lynch remembers, some of the victims slipped off the boards as they weren't fitted with rail bars.

It was then that he heard something.

"I kept hearing this -- what I thought was a fireman calling for something, and one distinct time I felt it came from below. I told everybody to be quiet. Generators went off and a fire rescue worker called out, 'Hey, is there anybody there, give a yell,'" he said, "And you hear this gurgle grunt. It was a guy down there calling for help, and we were actually standing on the debris that was on top of him."

Using saws to cut through the wreckage, it took 30 minutes to reach the trapped man. "The victim was all busted up, but he was alive when we pulled him out," said Lynch, indicating that he never found out if the man survived his injuries.

"People say, 'How was it inside that train?' The two analogies that I can give you is that it was like a human trash compactor," and like the scene in Star Wars where the heroes are nearly crushed to death in a large trash container, he said.

Lynch credits adrenaline for keeping him going during the ordeal, but he remembers when he stepped away from the wreckage, "I just laid on my back and just about passed out."

Since the accident, Lynch, who has worked in law enforcement for 21 years, says he has been able to cope with the haunting memories and, at times, the nightmares about the incident by using tools he learned on the job and the support of his family.

"One [good] thing that came out of this was the mutual aid from all the agencies," he said. "Metrolink, LAPD, CHP and the fire department...everybody worked together, and we might as well all have been in the same uniform that day. That was pretty cool. The mutual aid was significant," he said.

On Sept. 8, Metrolink officials paid tribute to the passengers lost in the Line 111 crash, and a second deadly incident, and to the first responders to the tragedy with the dedication of a plaque in the East Portal of Union Station. Other tributes are planned for this weekend.