

> THE CITY'S USAR TEAM IN MISSISSIPPI

Bldg. and Safety: Safe and Sound

Robert Sepanian, Structural Associate II, and Charles Chang, Structural Associate III, both with Building and Safety, were the two engineers who joined the large LAFD Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Team that went to the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This team was separate from the LAFD's Swift Water Team that descended upon New Orleans.

Alive! spoke to the men shortly after they returned from duty, having spent approximately two weeks doing door-to-door searches and assessing the risks of entering what might be unsafe buildings. — Ed.



An Interview with Robert Sepanian & Charles Chang

Alive!: How do you describe what you saw?

Robert Sepanian: Total devastation. It's unbelievable. You cannot imagine it, not by looking at the news. It's difficult to understand how enormous and how big of an area it covers. It's almost like a natural nuclear bomb. Not only the buildings were down, the trees were dead, the signs were down, nothing left. Where we were it was just everything gone.

Charles Chang: You see the 100-year-old trees pulled out from the bottom.

Alive!: You were in Mississippi?

Robert Sepanian: We were in Mississippi, in Gulfport and Biloxi. Mississippi's pretty – I mean that's the first time for me and I think for Charles being in the South. Driving in is pretty green, very lush greenery. But when you get close to where this hurricane happened and where the seawater actually came in, you don't see any greenery. It's a very eerie feeling. When you stay there long enough you realize that it's not only not just the structures, but everything else. Every living thing is gone.

Alive!: Ten years from now, what do you think you'll remember the most as far as the devastation is concerned?

Robert Sepanian: Some of the people that we talked to. Not so much the buildings, but the people that came up to us and talked to us. We're standing on a piece of property; you wouldn't even guess that there was a house there. It was just a piece of bare land, and some lady came up to us. She drove up with her brother and gave everybody a hug and said that she [used to have] a house, on her property. She thanked us and she said she was very happy because she still had a job. She said she was looking for some kind of ...

Charles Chang: A milk bottle ...

Robert Sepanian: ... a milk bottle or something like that, that her father gave her. She said, that's the only thing she wants. She said if we found it, just put it on her property.

Charles Chang: It was the only thing that she was looking for. We knew that the milk bottle was floating [away] or buried in the debris. It's very sad.

Robert Sepanian: Very sad.

Charles Chang: They are very strong. There was an empty lot with nothing left, but everything was okay; they're okay, they're fine. They were not complaining.

People see us; We're from Los Angeles, and they treated us like heroes. We are not heroes, but they put their hope in us.

Alive!: You went with the Fire Department's USAR Team, right?



Building and Safety USAR Team Members Robert Sepanian (left) and Charles Chang.



LAFD Rescue Specialist and USAR Team Member Chris Cooper (right) with Medical Specialist Dr. Atila Uner from UCLA.

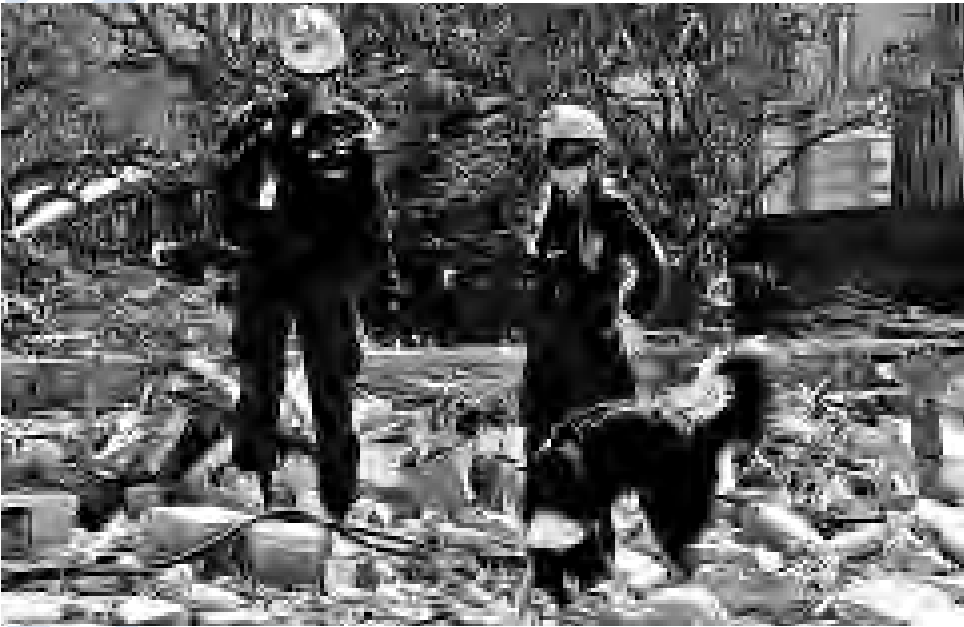


LAFD Tech Search Specialists and USAR Team Members Patrick Leising and Jerimia Spring at work in Mississippi. Patrick uses a Pomeroy to cut an access hole for the search cam. Jerimia uses a water pack to control the concrete dust.



An aerial view of the Biloxi/Gulfport, Miss., area.

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LAFD Canine Handlers and USAR Team Members Ron Wechbacker and Debra Tosch and their search dogs atop what had been a two-story apartment building, in Biloxi, Miss.



LAFD Tech Search Specialist and USAR Team Member Jerimia Spring holds a search cam.



LAFD Rescue Officer Rick Denning and DWP Heavy Rigging Specialist Mike Fennessey, USAR Team Members.



USAR Heavy Rigging Specialist Mike Fennessey, DWP, uses an excavator.



An aerial view of part of a casino barge that blocked the main coast highway in Mississippi.



An aerial view of damage caused by Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi.



The USAR Team lifts the floor of a collapsed apartment building after it was confirmed that there were no victims under it, in Gulfport, Miss.



USAR Team Members (from left) LAFD Rescue Officer Charles Butler and LAFD Tech Search Specialist Patrick Leising search a collapsed apartment building.

Sepanian/Chang Interview, continued

Robert Sepanian: Yes.

Alive!: Did you know these people before hand?

Charles Chang: No, but they treated us like brothers. We are like a family. We are from the Building Department, they are from the Fire Department.

Robert Sepanian: You become friends quick. They're a great bunch of people.

Alive!: Do you feel closer to the Fire Department now?

Robert Sepanian: I have a lot of friends there now.

Alive!: Tell me what a day was like.

Charles Chang: We slept in parking lot

Alive!: In a parking lot?

Charles Chang: It was a water park that they just opened. They were hit hard by the hurricane, so they couldn't operate. FEMA got a hold of them. They were very, very generous. They opened their facility to us. They have a big parking lot so we set up our base over there.

Robert Sepanian: We'd pretty much get up at dawn and have something to eat. We would have an area assigned to you by ...

Charles Chang: FEMA.

Robert Sepanian: There would be a briefing, and then we would go into a certain site. Then we took off from the base, and we go to that site, and we'd pretty much spend the day. Depending on most of the assignments, it wasn't like you would go there and you would be done in an hour or so; it was a daylong or two-day assignment. So we would go to that site and we would be there pretty much until dusk, and just get back to the camp, clean up, eat something, hit the showers, and go to bed.



LAFD Capt. and USAR Team Member Jaime Lesenski, front, enters a collapsed structure in Biloxi, Miss.



City USAR Team Members clear debris in Mississippi.



LAFD Rescue Manager and USAR Team Member Mark Akhoshi (right) assesses damage.

Alive!: Were you with the firemen all this time?

Robert Sepanian: We had the whole crew. There were also a U.S. Marshal escort with us wherever we went. Security was tight. And yes, most of the group would go out.

Alive!: What did you do at a site, typically?

Robert Sepanian: Our role is as the Structural Specialist. Before they enter a building, we are one of the first people to go in and make sure that the building is safe ... trying to point out the hazards, and trying to advise them on how to take care of some of these hazards before they enter.

Charles Chang: We don't want them to enter a building and have that building collapse.

Alive!: And they were looking for –people?

Robert Sepanian: Yeah. You assess the risk.

Charles Chang: We have to determine the potential occupancy. We have to see the use of the building, determine the occupancy load on the building, and based on the time of the date, and the use of the building, oversee the setting of the priority.

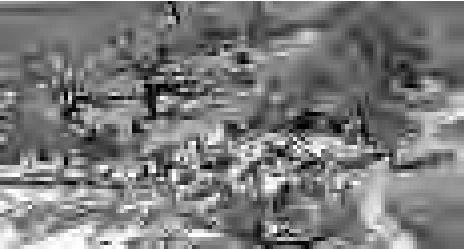
Alive!: So how would you do that?

Charles Chang: Based on experience.

Robert Sepanian: I'd say experience, basically. There was a building that we entered – me and Charles and one of the rescue people – it's a five-story building. You go in and you see things hanging from the ceiling. Part of the building was gone, and you're trying to make a determination, You're looking around and taking some chances going in. You have to take some risk to go in there.

Alive!: Your team was there to find survivors.

Robert Sepanian: Correct. When you go there, you do whatever you can. We help people with their belongings. There was a guy that had a boat stuck, and that was his livelihood. We helped him out with his boat. If there's a rescue you do a rescue. If there's something else, you just do what you can.



An aerial view of damage caused by Hurricane Katrina in Mississippi.



LAFD Capt. and USAR Team Member Jaime Lesenski emerges from a collapsed building in Biloxi, Miss. The person in back is not identified.



A flag, tattered but still waving, in Biloxi, Miss.

HURRICANE KATRINA RELIEF EFFORT: CITY HEROES

Alive! Special Section

THE CITY'S USAR TEAM IN MISSISSIPPI <



The City's USAR Task Force CA-TF1 poses on the last day at the base of operation in Gulfport, Miss.



Building and Safety Structural Specialist and USAR Team Member Robert Sepanian in front of a collapsed two-story apartment building in Gulfport, Miss.



LAFD Planning Manager and USAR Team Member Chris Kawai assesses damage.



LAFD Rescue Specialist and USAR Team Member Scott Sanders (closest to slab) searches for victims under the debris.

Alive!: How did you two get picked out of the entire Building and Safety Department?

Robert Sepanian: It's a volunteer position.

Alive!: You two volunteered for the USAR Team?

Robert Sepanian: Yes.

Charles Chang: Yes.

Alive!: How many days were you gone?

Robert Sepanian: Fourteen.

Alive!: How was it for your family?

Charles Chang: I got a lot of support I think from the office here. Not only for my work – they share the load. And my wife constantly got phone calls from the office, my office mates.

Robert Sepanian: My wife was very worried. A lot of people from work called and checked on her, and Charles' wife, almost on a daily



LAFD Hazmat Manager and USAR Team Member Randy Opperman.



USAR search tools ready for action.



USAR Team Members perform a decontamination procedure. Decontamination was required of all team members prior to returning to the base of operations.



LAFD Rescue Safety Officer and USAR Team Member Don Reyes. His job is to maintain the safety of the task force in both emergency and non-emergency conditions.

basis. They even offered to come and mow our lawn and take the trash out, things that we do on a daily basis, so support was great.

Alive!: Do you see things differently? Did your experience do anything to you personally that changed you?

Charles Chang: Yes ... we are very lucky. I learned to be more humble and to count the blessings that I have right now. I really wish that we could do more for them.

Robert Sepanian: There is a big task ahead to rebuild these areas.

Alive!: And that's not just New Orleans, but that's Mississippi, too. Was it the wind? Was it the water? What did the most damage?



LAFD Rescue Squad Officer and USAR Team Member Dan Rodriguez.



LAFD Rescue Specialist and USAR Team Member Mike Kammerer.



LAFD Rescue Squad Officer and USAR Team Member Rick Denning (second from right) gives instructions to LAFD Tech Search Specialist and USAR Team Member Patrick Leising (right). LAFD Tech Search Specialist and USAR Team Member Carlos Calvillo is in the foreground.



USAR Team Members (from left) LAFD Tech Information Specialist Rick Godinez with LAFD Planning Managers Tim Ernst and Chris Kawai.



LAFD Planning Manager and USAR Team Member Chris Kawai.



Medical Team Manager Dr. Greg Palmer from Northridge Hospital.



USAR Task Force Leader Craig Fry.



LAFD Rescue Squad Officer and USAR Team Member Charles Butler.



LAFD Rescue Specialist and USAR Team Member Larry Fiori.



LAFD Logs/Rescue Specialist and USAR Team Member Scott Mitchell.



Santa Barbara Fire Dept. Dog Handler Howard Orr.



LAFD Medical Specialist and USAR Team Member Tom Henzgen.

— continued next page

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Getting to the lower floors sometimes required removing debris by hand.



Performing a secondary search.



An LAFD search dog, hard at work.



City USAR Team Members "core" a hole for search cam access.



LAFD Tech Search Specialist Patrick Leising (left) and LAFD Planning Manager Chris Kawai, both USAR Team Members, confirm that the deceased have been removed from the building.



LAFD Tech Search and Rescue Specialist Larry Fiori, in the background. The person in left foreground is not identified.



LAFD Rescue Officer and USAR Team Member Rick Denning oversees the operation of an excavator.



USAR Team members use a rotary saw to gain access to a lower floor. A water sprayer is used to control the dust.



LAFD Rescue Officer and USAR Team Member Charles Butler enters the attic of a home to start a search. LAFD Search Manager and USAR Team Member Denise Jones assists.

Sepanian/Chang Interview, continued

Charles Chang: Everything, wind and water.

Robert Sepanian: We looked at some houses, and maybe a mile in [from the coast] you could see the house, and you could see the water-marks on the house. They had few steps that go up to the porch, and you would see the water-mark right at the porch light. And then you realize, wow, this area was totally under water.

Alive! And what about you Robert ... did it change you at all?

Robert Sepanian: You start thinking differently about people. You think these people are in the worst times of their lives, but they are still very nice people. You get a different perspective on people. People are generally very good ... I was very touched to see how helpful they were to my family and us. You count your blessings. ■



Building and Safety Structural Specialist and USAR Team Member Charles Chang stands in front of a casino barge that destroyed a two-story apartment and a five-story building (inset). LAFD Planning Manager and USAR Team Member Chris Kawai looks up to a casino barge that damaged at least two major buildings including the Biloxi Yacht Club.



Excavators move debris to give the USAR Team access to continue searching for victims of Hurricane Katrina. The USAR Team Member in foreground (right) is doing tool maintenance.



Medical Specialist Paul Schori on the way to Mississippi.



Members of the City's USAR Team enter a house to confirm if the search has been completed.

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DWP: Handling the Heavy Equipment

Michael Fennessey, a Heavy Rigging/Equipment Specialist with the DWP and Club Member, was part of the USAR Team that did building-to-building searches and cleared the devastated infrastructure. This interview took place at his work location in Bishop. — Ed.

An Interview with Mike Fennessey



Alive!: What was your first impression of Katrina's devastation?

Mike Fennessey: It was more than I expected. My experience on the team goes back to the World Trade Center, and that's the only benchmark I had to go on; the damage I saw there. As we got 100 miles out we started seeing trees snapped in half. The further you went in you started seeing RV trucks. The roads were closed and there were bulldozers everywhere. As we got into Biloxi it looked like the World Trade Center. When you got right down into Biloxi it looked the same, like tornado damage; everything was totally flattened. I'm sure you've heard that a lot, but totally flattened was about the size of it when you got right down there to the water. All you saw were slabs. All the buildings were gone.

Alive!: What is your specialty on the USAR Team?

Mike Fennessey: My position is called a Heavy Rigging Specialist and Heavy Equipment Specialist. I try to get heavy equipment and heavy equipment operators for the rescue team, and act as just kind of a go-between on the way that the team does business to make sure that everybody's safe mainly. That's what it all boils down to. The Building and Safety guys would go in and say what was needed to make a building safe for the rescue team to go in. They'd say we have to lift this or shore that, and then it would be up to me to go out and find the equipment, whether it would be cranes or excavators or bulldozers, to safely unstack the building and try to get the rescue guys in. The stuff I [use] is in the 50-ton range. We're set up to drill through those floors and lift them up with the air bags.

Alive!: What's the best thing about being on the USAR Team?

Mike Fennessey: Helping people. After Katrina, after the Trade Center, everyone wanted to do something. If you can just put yourself in that position, if there was an earthquake and your house came down all around you and you were lying in the wreckage and you saw some



o Mike Fennessey, USAR Team Member and Heavy Rig Operator, DWP, in the Bishop yard.

guy with a hard hat with a light on it looking down at you, you know your life just got better.

Alive!: How would you explain to our 17,000 other members what the destruction was like?

Mike Fennessey: It was worse than I thought it would be. I've been around a couple tornadoes when I lived in the Midwest and it reminded me of that. The damage was thorough and complete. It's like a tornado that goes on for hours. Roads were torn up, pipes were leaking, gas pipes, water pipes ... You wouldn't think that it would get to the infrastructure in the ground, but it was so thorough, all the vegetation and the trees. All those trees you see in the pictures are going to die from the saltwater immersion.

One thing that I thought was strange, and I

don't know if it's relevant or not, but when we got there we knew we were going to be living on the ground in sweltering heat and humidity and whatnot. You'd figure with all the dead animals and stuff all around ... but the whole time we were there I didn't see a fly. I didn't see any birds, insects or mosquitoes. The hurricane blows them all away.

Alive!: Did you work with search dogs?

Mike Fennessey: Yes.

Alive!: What is like working with search dogs?

Mike Fennessey: The dogs are phenomenal. They run the show. The dogs tell us where to go, at the Trade Center as well. The dogs are the heart of the whole team. If it wasn't for the dogs we'd be digging anywhere. You'd lose time, and time is of the essence. ■

Sanitation Districts Kick In

When Bruce Jones and Jon Reed first brought up the Katrina fundraiser prospect to Marviana Jones over lunch, they were just thinking about involving the West LA District only. But, Marviana took it a step further and contacted all of the yards, challenging them to contribute.



Joe Given, Refuse Collection Truck Operator, donates money to the Katrina fund.



Moniquea McKee (left) and Dionne Chappelle take part in the coordinating efforts at the South LA Yard, as drivers come into the office to donate.

The result was \$954 between the Western District and the South Los Angeles Yard, of the Solid Resource Collection Division. Jesse Cruz and Marviana presented the Red Cross with cash and checks. The fundraiser and donation process was so rewarding," Marviana says. "It feels

good to give and know that people will benefit. "I want to thank the Western District and the South LA District," she continues. "I am so honored to work beside all of you that have actively participated and contributed to the donation efforts of the Hurricane Katrina victims. I would

like to thank each and every person for thoughts, prayers, and monetary contributions for those affected. Please continue to give from the heart." The Club thanks Marviana for providing the information and photos. ■

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LAFD: Searching With Dogs

Deresa Teller, a Paramedic with the LAFD, is a search dog expert on the USAR Team. She took her search dog, Ranger, to Mississippi. With other dogs, she has helped search the rubble in Oklahoma City, the World Trade Center and La Conchita. — Ed.

An Interview with Deresa Teller

Alive!: What is your title?

Deresa Teller: Medic. I'm a single-function paramedic. I do not fight fires.

Alive!: O.k. And you are part of the USAR Team?

Deresa Teller: Correct.

Alive!: How long have you been a City employee?

Deresa Teller: A little over 26 years.

Alive!: O.K. And before you were a firefighter...

Deresa Teller: I trained guide dogs for a while.

Alive!: Oh. Seeing eye dogs? Guide dogs?

Deresa Teller: Right. And then I was an animal health technician.

Alive!: When did you get involved with the USAR Team?

Deresa Teller: I got involved with search and rescue shortly after the Mexico City earthquake, which was '85. I saw the dogs work there, and then got involved in the Los Angeles search dogs actually first.

Alive!: So the Mexico City earthquake inspired you to get interested in search & rescue?

Deresa Teller: In the search and rescue dogs. I had a wilderness dog, which was similar to the type of dog I have now. It is called a Belgian Sheep dog. And she would do wilderness only, and would have nothing to do with [searching for] cadavers. And it is funny; some dogs — just like some people — have different personalities. She would just not want to do cadavers. So she did wilderness only.

Alive!: Which is finding lost people in the woods?

Deresa Teller: Right.

Alive!: Tell us about Ranger, your search dog.

Deresa Teller: What is so special about him is he is so independent. The head trainer up in Gilroy said that, of all the dogs she has trained for this, one she would clone would be Ranger, because he is incredible. He just works and works. Of course, he is the perfect size. He is not really that big, and not that small. And his agility is unbelievable. His endurance is just unreal, and he just loves to search.

Alive!: The road-trip to Mississippi wasn't pleasant, right? It was hard-core driving and fast food.

Deresa Teller: Right, right. Going there was harder [than coming back] because we drove pretty much through two nights. We left Wednesday, I think around 4 o'clock [p.m.]. Drove all Wednesday night. Drove all Thursday night. Got to Dallas at, I think, 3 or 4 in the morning. And then we were held up for a few days.

Alive!: The Fire Department: Does it have its own dogs, or is this a dog you own?

Deresa Teller: This is my dog that I own. I do not know of any disaster dogs that are owned by the Fire Department.

Alive!: What did Ranger do in Mississippi? What



USAR Team Member and LAFD Paramedic Deresa Teller, with two of her search dogs.

was Ranger's main job? What does he do?

Deresa Teller: He looked for live people. Although we did not use them as much as I have used the dogs in the past. After 9/11, in Oklahoma City and La Conchita, we used them a lot more.

Alive!: That is because

Deresa Teller: There was not the necessity.

Alive!: How does it work?

Deresa Teller: When we go to a home search at a house, we get everybody out of the home, and we will actually send in an area dog like Ranger first, an area disaster dog that works off leash, looking for any human scent that is pretty much hidden. We would pull all the people — all the family, all the detectives, everyone — and just myself and maybe another handler would come in with me so we could watch the dog. We would only work one dog at a time. And we would send the dog into the house by himself looking to see if maybe there is a kid in a closet.

He is looking for any live, human scent. If five of us went and hid in different spots in the fire station, they would find all five of us in different spots.

Alive!: But once I leave, the scent is gone.

Deresa Teller: Oh, yeah, it is done.

Alive!: How would you describe what you saw in Mississippi?

Deresa Teller: I have seen several earthquakes, and I have seen the Oklahoma City bombing and the New York World Trade Center ... I thought the New York World Trade Center was huge, but this was even larger. It just went on for miles and miles. And, of course, it was a different kind of rubble, more survivable rubble for people as opposed to New York. What really amazed me were those humongous floating casinos that were on those big barges that were just brought up on shore by the big wave, or whatever. I mean, those things must have weighed hundreds of tons. I cannot imagine what it was like first looking out there, because when we were there at least the streets were cleared so that we could walk down the street. But, you know, there is no way that was like that when the those rescuers first got there.

Alive!: Were most of the people evacuated?

Deresa Teller: Not when we first got there. We had a cadaver dog with us on our team; some

teams did not bring a cadaver dog with them. We would use the live dogs for a certain amount. We worked in twos. We would just walk in a single line. We would check at the end of the block, and we would just walk the area. Sometimes we had an easy walk, and sometimes we had to go up and over whatever, and go through houses. We were seeing if we could find something, using our sense of smell.

Alive!: Was there a smell, a strong smell?

Deresa Teller: Here and there. It was not terrible, but I think the stronger smells were actually refrigerators that had been turned over. A lot of it was refrigerator and contents. If there was an area where we noticed those smells, we would mark an area and bring the cadaver dog. They know the difference between [humans] and refrigerator contents.

Alive!: Coming back from Mississippi, did it change you at all?

Deresa Teller: It makes me appreciate that we only have earthquakes. But how many of those [hurricanes] do they face every year? I would rather face an earthquake every 20 or 30 years as opposed to 10 to 15 hurricanes or tornadoes coming through each year.

Alive!: It just seems like they keep coming.

Deresa Teller: I hope there is an end to it.

Alive!: Why can't humans do what dogs do?

Deresa Teller: Because we do not have the sense of smell. [But] we have more emotions than dogs do.

Alive!: And physically, they can get around better than we can.

Deresa Teller: A lot better, because they have four-wheel drive. They are just agile. And they do not disturb the rubble as much as a person.

Alive!: What was different about this disaster, in Mississippi?

Deresa Teller: It was a different type of disaster, but emotionally it did not affect me differently.

Alive!: Is there a reason for that?

Deresa Teller: I do not know. I think maybe you get kind of hardened with this job. With all the stuff you see. I do not look at them differently being either natural or man-made, because you have to really handle them the same. ■