

Who do you call when catastrophe happens?

**Kevin Cunningham**

reports on how crane operators, riggers, signal persons and specialized transportation professionals go above and beyond

**W**hen a building collapses, or a train wrecks, or bridge fails, or a city is flooded, unselfish rescue support efforts by the crane and specialized transport industries have been relied on since the 1800s.

### Historical perspective

As the industrial revolution kicked into high gear in America in the 1800s, the nation had to endure a spate of disasters and emergencies born of new technologies.

American resourcefulness responded, and the rigging industry was at the forefront of the emergency response. In 1851, New York machinist Richard Dudgeon patented a hydraulic jack capable of lifting 60 tons, which soon thereafter replaced the traditional ratchet and screw jacks when great weights had to be raised in constricted spaces.

The hydraulic jack found an eager market among railroad crews and factory riggers, and over time it became very popular among collapse-rescue specialists.

As the railroad industry blossomed in the 1850s, authorities had to deal with a corresponding surge in disasters and passenger entrapment. A wrecker guild was formed whereby the railroads fielded dozens of crews to clear the lines, and pick up the pieces, prepositioning large numbers of "wreck trains" that could reach any point on the main lines within a couple of hours.

By 1890, most wreck trains included a rail-mounted derrick crane, and its riveted iron boom exhibited a powerful, almost saurian look. The first generation of steam-powered wrecking derricks in the early 1880s could lift 20 tons with

working levers that directed power from reciprocating steam cylinders to a host of gears to affect the lift of wrecked trains. Each new generation of wrecking cranes scaled up with the mass of locomotives, the biggest of which -- appropriately called "Big Boy" -- hit the rails in 1941 at 595 tons.

### Firefighters connect

For the past four years, firefighters from all over California have been gathering in the Sacramento area for heavy equipment and rigging training. A three-day training session is focused on the emergency transport and set up of cranes and their operation in Urban Search and Rescue (US&R) situations.

The training was initially established as a preparation for natural disasters such as earthquakes, and now the program extends to cover terrorism incidents such as Oklahoma City Bombing or September 11-type disasters.

Captain Jay Coon, a 23-year veteran of the fire service and currently working for the Sacramento Fire Department, participated as a heavy rigger. "We prepare people for the worst of the worst of a natural or manmade disaster," he said.

The scene of the training sites is a barren facility with a collapsed building and a heap of steel beams and concrete slabs smashed on top of cars. The firefighters engage in this simulated disaster with an end goal of removing mannequins from buried cars without causing more damage and saving lives.

Cranes and specialized transport play a key role in the training program. According to Coon, within the first few hours on the scene cranes can be set up "immediately if we have access to hydraulic cranes or within hours for the bigger equipment." He described the positives of using a crane "as its ability to pick up a tremendous amount of weight -- is a huge asset in search and rescue efforts."

This kind of training is vital in saving lives, and it is sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Office of Emergency Services (OES). Coon maintains that "we couldn't put this training together if it wasn't for

# First



**Cranes from around the nation are still helping with rebuilding regions devastated by Hurricane Katrina**

the crane and transport community that contribute time and equipment to help us save lives."

### Katrina volunteers

When the levees broke and New Orleans was flooded, there were many volunteers of all types contributing to assist the unfortunate masses of people affected by Hurricane Katrina. Among the many contributors, Jim White of White Brothers Trucking went above and beyond the call of duty. White, president and principal owner of this well-established specialized transport operation, didn't just say yes, he personally took on the task himself, driving one of his large open trailer rigs more than 2,000 miles to haul medical supplies, food and clothing to assist Hurricane Katrina victims.

According to White, "If it is a job worth doing to help the unfortunate -- we believe it is our duty to contribute to the cause." White Brothers Trucking has been an active member of the Specialized Carriers and Rigging Association (SC&RA) for over 50 years, and White has made significant contributions to the industry, including a four-year stint contributing his time as a volunteer executive officer of SC&RA and culminating with his role as chairman of the board in 2007.

# responders



## Iowa River rescue

Back in the summer of 2009, a construction worker rigged to a crane made a heroic rescue of a woman from the raging waters of the Des Moines River in Iowa.

Rigged to an American 7260 crawler crane by a harness and makeshift chain sling, Jason Oglesbee was dangled out over the water and grabbed the woman, leading her to safety in a nearby lifeboat.

Oglesbee told the *Des Moines Register*, “They just harnessed me up and dropped me down in the water and I grabbed her and the crane dragged her to the boat and that’s it. It’s no big deal. The whole crew did it.”

According to the article in *Des Moines Register*, the construction crew rigged Oglesbee to a crane after an initial attempt to rescue the woman with the crane was unsuccessful. “The woman was too weak at that point to hold onto the crane or to life preservers being thrown to her by a fire rescue crew,” said Sgt. Joe Gonzales at the Des Moines Police Department.

The construction crew, which worked for Grimes, IA-based Cramer and Associates, was working on a pedestrian bridge. Robert Cramer, owner of the company, credits quick thinking and heroic efforts of the entire crew, as well as Oglesbee, crew supervisor Chad Coalbank and crane operator Joe Lowe, with saving the woman’s life.

## 9-11 disaster assistance

One cannot even imagine the feelings or the emotional torment of those who experienced the terrorist disaster at the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Many, many people graciously volunteered to help those affected by this horrible disaster.

However, one person above all put his personal feelings aside, left his family and his business and immediately went to Ground Zero to offer his assistance. James Lomma, president of JF Lomma, Inc., (specialized transportation) and New York Crane and Equipment Corp., dropped everything he was doing to assist the NY City Fire Department and FEMA with their search and rescue efforts.

After being appointed by Mayor Giuliani to head up the heavy equipment coordination, Lomma spent several days and nights (in a job trailer) at the site to ensure all that could be done to rescue lives was being accomplished.

Several other crane and heavy equipment operators also contributed to this worthy cause, including Kenny and Ray Bernardo of Bay Crane, and Frank Bardonaro Jr. of AmQuip Crane, among other crane and heavy equipment operators.

Even though these three referenced contributors are industry competitors, they put aside their own business interests to support the people of New York City and FEMA in order to save lives and to begin the long journey of cleaning up the worst disaster in the US history since Pearl Harbor.

## Contrary to media hype

In researching crane and transport industry contributions to search and rescue operations for this article, it should be noted that there are far too many additional examples of crane and related specialized transport stories to mention in this brief editorial.

And it comes to mind that the recent media hype surrounding a few very unfortunate accidents seems to have created an explosion of misinformation about our industry.

Maybe it is the ever changing speed of business and 24/7 news? News streaming across everyone’s television and hand-held



**James Lomma of JF Lomma Inc in New York City was among the first responders at Ground Zero**

technology and reporters classify every heavy equipment accident as a “crane accident,” or maybe it is simply the lust for drama to get better ratings from these misinformed reporters?

Whatever the reason, it needs to be corrected. This writer has underwritten the insurance exposure of the crane and specialized transport industry for the past 15 years, and the harsh reality for the misinformed media is that the character and integrity of our industry and those mentioned briefly in this article is above reproach.

So maybe when we see or read inaccurate stories about “cranes” – we should all send written communications to these “headline grabbing – at any cost” misinformation mongers to remind them that since the industrial revolution, our great country has relied on our industry to prosper and to save lives. ■