



F28 A Brief Discussion of the Formation of the National Disaster Mortuary Team (DMORT)

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The goal of this presentation is to show how the loss of a U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) ship, the *Cuyahoga* precipitated (in part) the formation of a national disaster team. The quest that eventuated in DMORT will be briefly discussed.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by highlighting the evolution of and formation of DMORT.

At 9:00 a.m. on October 29, 1978, the USCG ship *Cuyahoga* was struck by an Argentine coal freighter *Santa Cruz II*. The Coast Guard ship sank within minutes in 58 feet of water. Eleven crewmen were lost. This accident, along with previous occurrences caused the Coast Guard to realize the need for a specially trained group of personnel to deal with disasters. Due to the concentration of families with losses and casualties, morale was severely affected. The USCG formed a casualty assistance response team (CART). CART outlined the various personnel and other federal services that would be needed in disasters or large emergencies. This outline and document was approved in April 1979. The U.S. Navy was asked to assist in the endeavor. There were problems as the USCG is under the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Navy is under the Department of Defense (DOD). A memorandum of understanding (MOU) was initiated by the Navy, which outlined how they would help in the event of a disaster or large emergency.

In July of 1983, Dr. Everett Koope, the U.S. Surgeon General, requested a plan for a dental forensic team to be used in mass disasters. The request was given to Dr. Robert Mecklinburg who was the chief dental officer of the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS). Dr. E. D. Woolridge, serving in the USPHS, was chosen to serve as project manager. Two other individuals were also appointed. They were to write a position paper with the advantages and disadvantages of using a dental forensic team in disasters or large emergencies. This initial plan was submitted in the fall of 1983. In 1989 the USPHS requested a plan for a dental forensic team for mass casualty events and disasters. Dr. Woolridge and his team conferred with members of the American Board of Forensic Odontology (ABFO), members of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) and interested faculty with forensic training and backgrounds at various dental schools in the U.S. and Canada. They also met and had discussions with dental practitioners who also did forensic dentistry. Their final plan was submitted on 9-30-89 and approval came one month later. A MOU between the oral and maxillofacial pathology department of the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology (AFIP) and the USPHS was developed.

In the early 1980s a committee was formed within the National Funeral Directors Association (NFDA) to address disasters and the resulting mass fatalities that had occurred. This group had difficulty in small and larger disasters previously due to a lack of standardization in both methods and approach to these disasters. In these disasters the initial response was from funeral directors, but it was soon apparent that the job was too large to handle due to the federal, state and local problems they encountered. As a result of these situations the NFDA formed a non-profit organization open to all forensic practitioners. The NFDA also designed and purchased the first portable morgue for a national level response. After a series of aircraft crashes and other similar disasters the families of the deceased demanded and received a response from Congress. The Family Assistance Act was passed in October 1996 that required all US-based airlines (and was amended later to include all carriers operating in the US) to assist families in case of an accident.

Ultimately, because of the effort of the NFDA and the USPHS and other interested forensic scientists DMORT was formed. It was initially under the direction of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and then was transferred to the Department of Homeland Security and at present is under the auspices of Federal Assistance and Management Association (FEMA). The U.S. and its territories have been divided into regions, each of which has active training of the members to be able to respond to a call to action in the event of a disaster. DMORT has over 1,200 trained individuals in all regions of the U.S. ready to respond when ordered. Under the direction of the late Tom Shepardson, DMORT is now well organized and ready to respond. Evidence of this response was shown in the hurricane that struck the gulf coast recently. The dental section of DMORT made all examinations, radiographs, and identifications in a digital fashion with no paper or film involved.

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