



Typical Volunteer Fire House in Japan

Is Volunteer Fire Service Prepared for Disaster?

Asahi Opinion Column on 2/16/95

Following article "Is Volunteer Fire Service Prepared for Disaster" was published in opinion column of ASAHI newspaper "Rondan" on February 16th, 1995. It was one month after Great Hanshin Earthquake hit Japan.

This article was again published in a book "Lesson from Great Hanshin Earthquake" collecting major articles regarding disaster control published in the paper.

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On November 27, 1993, I was among many volunteer fire fighters at Washington National airport waiting for a bus to NFA (education and training facility of FEMA). "What do volunteer fire fighters in Japan must do for disaster control?" This question was what I had kept in my mind since I became a volunteer fire fighter in 1985.

I took "Fire Command Operation" at NFA. My instructor told me "If you use ICS to daily incidents, you are prepared to big incidents." I will take "Community Fire Protection: Master Planning" at NFA from February 25, 1995. I know I am only a volunteer fire fighter in my town. However, I have been very much concerned about what volunteer fire department can do to our community at large scale disasters.

There are one million volunteer fire fighters in Japan. This number is ten times as many as that of career fire fighters in Japan. Volunteer fire fighters are emergency management people in your neighbor. They are expected to be the people who come to you when you need them in disaster especially at earthquake. Despite of our expectation, volunteer fire fighters was not able to conduct enough search and rescue at Great Hanshin Earthquake in January 1995. It is my opinion that volunteer fire system in Japan faces serious problems in its training and command structure.

Therefore, I would like to propose my suggestion of how we should change our volunteer fire system in respect to "fire suppression", "search and rescue", "EMS" and "command system".

First of all, all the volunteer fire fighters must have turn-out gear and SCBA to protect themselves in Japan. This means they do not have these protective equipment now. It is also important that all the attack truck must have at least 300 gallon water tank for offensive attack together with search and rescue possible. Hydrant failed at Great Hanshin Earthquake.

Secondly, volunteer fire fighters must have rescue equipment such as Open Jaws, Air bags operated by air pressure and hydraulic. By installing these extricators on their vehicle, volunteer fire fighter can save more lives. This means volunteer fire fighters do not have any rescue equipment in their vehicle at this time.

Thirdly, it is suggested to allow volunteer fire fighters to conduct EMS in Japan. Fire department in USA organizes "First responders". They are volunteer emergency medical technicians. About one third of all the

volunteer fire fighters in USA are EMT. The total number of EMT in Japan is very small. EMT just started two years ago in Japan.

At last but not at least, it is necessary to establish strong command system. Volunteer fire fighters arriving the scene initially takes command. He or she will control the scene and conduct initial attacks. In large area disaster, it is important to transfer the command to higher government level as soon as possible to receive more resources.

Municipal government must establish a staging area to receive mutual aids and other arriving resources. In order to have this system working, everyone involved in the disaster management know the same command system.

NFA teaches that standard operating procedure (SOP) is necessary give and receive instructions. SOP is a manual of what to do in emergency scene. To stay in command, each SOP must be conducted by people involved in disaster in an efficient manner. At Great Hanshin Earthquake, many citizen volunteers established emergency food and shelter service with great effort. It is necessary to construct a set of SOP based on what they have experienced for our future use.

Japanese volunteer fire system was organized as a means of civilian control during World War II. Therefore, all the training conducted by volunteer fire fighters are militaristic behaviors such as marching and saluting. Even pump operations has many discipline behaviors in itself. Many of the training done by volunteer fire fighters are even not practical at all. This is one reason that concerned fire fighters leave his or her fire department after few years of participation. It is important that we change our system of training and understanding of what discipline in fire service should be.

One million fire fighters are volunteers. The word "volunteer" does not mean that they are not professional. If they are trained properly, they can be as good as career fire fighters. It is also important that volunteer fire fighters and career fire fighters practice together. It is not wise to

discriminate them as we are doing right now in Japan. We must do our best effort to make our one million volunteer fire fighters equipped with best ability and best equipment.

Without volunteer fire fighters, emergency management system in Japan will not work.

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