

9/11: Inside 20 years of disaster recovery efforts

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Texas Task Force One

Twenty years ago the members of Texas Task Force One rode in to the chaos of Lower Manhattan and became part of an unprecedented search and rescue effort.

Since then, the task force has been deployed dozens of times to search for survivors in the aftermath of hurricanes and earthquakes, as well as provide support during national security events.

KPRC 2 spoke with two Houstonians who were an integral part of Texas Task Force One and who have since dedicated their lives to public service.

“I was a member of Texas Task Force One during 9/11,” said Houston firefighter Richard Cole.

As Cole headed to Ground Zero, he said his thoughts were on the hundreds of firefighters missing underneath the remnants of the Twin Towers.

“That’s such a huge loss when those guys were just going to serve the public and enjoy a job we all love,” said Cole.

Cole is now an Houston Fire Department district chief and the memories of the first responders who lost their lives on 9/11 are honored through the photographs, newspaper clippings, maps, plaques, flags and a piece of steel beam from the towers on display at HFD Station 28 in southwest Houston.

“We always tell the families and we always tell our brethren, ‘you’re gone, but not forgotten,’” said Cole.

Houston doctor Matt Minson was the medical director for Texas Task Force One when the team was deployed to what would become known as ‘Ground Zero.’

“I think the thing for me was watching the smoke, there was a slow smoldering fire underneath that steel,” said Minson. “And every time those big clamps would pull the steel off, the smoke’s quality would change. The color, the texture, even the density of it.”

Minson remembers one of his first concerns when the Task Force reached Ground Zero was what his team would be breathing while spending hours searching the debris piles.

“At that time we had no data, we had no information and we were being told these things that ultimately didn’t make any sense,” said Minson. “To get the data that we collected I had to file a Freedom of Information brief because the (Environmental Protection Agency) wanted to keep it sequestered and I was like, ‘no, I have 70 men and women and dogs I need to take care of.’”

The answers Minson received eventually became part of the foundation for the World Trade Center Health Registry, which continues cataloguing the long-term effects of environmental exposures experienced by those who lived around, worked near or responded to Ground Zero.

“The towers were not a refinery, but they had, there was silica, there was glass; this stuff was pulverized and got further down in the respiratory tract than we would ever anticipate based on what we normally look at,” said Minson.

Since 9/11, Minson has worked to make sure first responders look beyond the obvious of chemical fires or refinery explosions, when considering potential environmental exposures in the wake of disasters.

“You have to be a little bit imaginative in these situations. Say, ‘what’s the situation, when was it built, what’s it made of?’” said Minson. “All of those types of events are going to have threats that we might not perceive at the moment of, that later on we figure out. That’s key.”

9/11 also propelled Minson into a life of service and he is an expert on disaster medicine.

“It’s something that sort of really altered what I was going to do with the rest of my life. I’ve never predicted it, I’m glad I did, I’m sad that it had to take something like that to make it happen,” said Minson.

In addition to his work with Texas Task Force One, Minson has served as the director for the state of Maryland’s Office of Preparedness and Response and was the senior medical officer for strategic initiatives in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Minson has also helped create national standards for responding to hazardous materials and weapons of mass destruction. Minson is currently the senior adviser for Health Affairs for the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service and the Texas A&M University Health Science Center. He is also the medical director for Superior Energy Services.

Cole remained with the Houston Fire Department and led the city’s rescue response efforts following Hurricane Ike.

Over the last 20 years, Minson and Cole have responded to dozens of disasters as a part of Texas Task Force One. The Task Force is based at Texas A&M and members train in what is called ‘Disaster City,’ where all manner of calamities are recreated. Both said this work is crucial since every disaster brings new challenges, new dangers and the goal is to never be complacent.

“One of things about any disaster or any large scale incident you go to is we all learn something from it,” said Cole.

Minson adds preparedness is crucial.

“You’re never done in terms of the preparedness,” said Minson. “We have perpetual disasters going on depending on where you look in the United States, so I’d say we’re going to need to be a lot smarter, more effective and hopefully more economical because the carry-over is we’re not done.”

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