



Prepared for the worst

by Dawn Bennett Robson '84

Regardless of title, just about every one of us can expect to deal with crises on the job. If we're lucky, the worst calamity is an untimely copier breakdown.

Imagine making crisis management—of the worst kind—your career. For George Wallace, Class of 1995, oil spills, plane crashes,

anthrax threats and the terrorism of September 11 come with the job.



George works for a company that sells an unusual service: emergency preparedness and response. Miller Environmental Group, Inc., (MEG) has more than 30 years experience helping utility, transportation, petrochemical and other companies and agencies plan for

and, in some cases, deal with their worst-case scenarios. As the manager of client services for MEG, George is out front, working closely with clients to solve their toughest dilemmas.

Interning with his home county, Cape May, NJ, while earning a bachelor's degree in environmental health helped George prepare for his position, but much of his training has been on the job.

Just six months from graduating and landing a job with National Response Corporation (NRC, MEG is one of its independent subcontractors in the Northeast), George was called to respond to the crash of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island, NY. His mission: recover the spilled oil and retrieve and transport the airplane parts that washed up on the beaches.

"I had a number of smaller events with the company under my belt leading up to that, so I had a little bit of understanding of what my role was going to be," George recalled. "It was really challenging to use all the skills I had learned."

It was also a chance to develop a knack for dealing with many different parties at once. George's team worked with numerous government agencies, as well as TWA, who was the responsible party for the entire response.

"We learned how to work in a very unique, confidential environment," said George. "We were, basically, handling evidence not yet inspected by the FBI. We had to really make sure our team protected it along the way. Nothing was compromised between the time we collected a piece of the airplane and the time it was handed over to the authorities."

Since then, George, who said the majority of his skills are in environmental health and safety project management, has dealt with many other disasters, both natural and man-made, including cleaning up after a major oil spill in New York Harbor, responding to the anthrax scare, and dealing with the decontamination of personnel, vehicles and equipment during the World Trade Center response effort.

"I tend to have a very calm personality," said George. "To be able to take that phone call saying 'we have an emergency,' and being able to respond quickly and professionally is important."

It was on behalf of Federal Express that George responded to the anthrax scare that followed September 11. According to George, MEG was alerted that some 100 to 125 letters containing a white powdery substance—discovered to be baby powder—had been shipped to Planned Parenthood clinics via FedEx. MEG responded in the New York metro area by immediately sending in a HAZMAT (hazardous materials) team to cordon off the area, decontaminate the premises (using a solution that would kill any anthrax if it was present) and package evidence.



The job of decontaminating the recipients of those letters was infinitesimal compared to the clean up that followed the attack on the World Trade Center.

George was at his desk at company headquarters in Calverton, NY, preparing for a late morning meeting in Manhattan—12 hours away—when he heard the news. It wasn't until the following Monday, however, that he was called to mobilize his team. The federal Environmental Protection Agency needed MEG to establish wash-up stations to clean the noxious concrete dust and other pulverized building materials from the personnel, vehicles and equipment leaving Ground Zero.

For four days, George walked the site, surveying the scene, meeting with officials, getting security clearance for his personnel and putting his team in place.

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“My role was to get in and establish the health and safety program for the company and establish protocols for all the different activities that we were originally going to provide,” said George.

Keeping on task wasn't easy. “It was an incredible disaster. Quite often, we found ourselves having to almost put on blinders to get the job done. We had to just focus on our jobs,” said George, who returned the following weekend, again sleeping on site, to fine tune the process after additional requirements were made by the U.S. EPA and FEMA.

MEG employed about 130 workers around the clock to staff a dozen wash-up stations, which together handled up to 4,000 workers and 800 vehicles per 12-hour shift. In addition, it kept a rapid-response trailer on site to respond to vehicle and other accidents at the scene that might involve a petroleum spill. MEG was also employed by the FBI to provide support to their evidence recovery efforts. Later, MEG also worked for Con Edison, cleaning out lines damaged by the collapse of the Twin Towers. All told, the team remained on site for more than eight months, until all the clean-up efforts officially ended.

Much has changed since 9/11.

For George, there were new disasters. In November 2001, his company responded to the crash of the commercial flight that had been en route from New York to the Dominican Republic. That same month, his team respond-



ed to a large warehouse fire that contained a wide variety of chemical explosives.

There would be more crises to follow and, according to George, there is now even more focus on preparedness, even more effort toward anticipating potential emergencies and preparing an effective response. For example, his team is studying the risks of bioterrorism and working to educate various local and state agencies on his company's response capabilities. He's currently working with a municipal client to develop methodologies for on-site decontamination of victims prior to transporting to a hospital so that contamination can be contained.

For George Wallace, who's witnessed the worst of the worst-case scenarios, it continues to be all in a day's work.

For more information about the Miller Environmental Group, log onto www.millerenv.com.



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