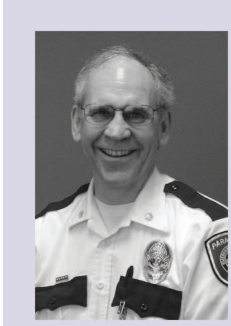
On the COVER

Managing Chaos Amidst the Unbelievable

Cover Photo by Heather Munro
Eyewitness Text by Tom Ward, EMS Supervisor, Hennepin County Medical Center Emergency Medical Services



The scene was unimaginable. It was impossible to make sense of it all or to grasp the magnitude of the disaster that spread across the river gorge. I remember thinking, THIS is not an exercise! I tried to give dispatch a scene size-up but couldn't say, "the whole bridge is down," because all I could see from my limited viewpoint was the absence of the bridge, not that it had tumbled into the river. There was smoke in the distance and I could see a precariously perched school bus.

My role was to command the emergency medical response to the collapse. There was a flood of radio traffic, confusion over locations and directions, and not enough time to process what was happening. In some areas, surprisingly, few people were seriously injured, whereas in other areas crushed vehicles and their occupants lay scattered in every direction surrounded by very real hazards. Some rescuers were so preoccupied and isolated in their operations that they did not understand that the entire bridge had collapsed.

The exhilaration of being part of this amazing rescue effort was tempered by the reality that 13 people died in the wreckage and that many suffered serious physical injuries and emotional trauma. Each of us came away exhausted and frustrated that we weren't able to do more and yet we had, together, triumphed against amazing odds.

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