When Lives are at Risk

Emergency responders are dedicated to serving the people of Illinois.

Emergency personnel monitored Mississippi River levees during the recent flood, and quickly responded when the levee near Gladstone breached, stranding several people.

(Photo courtesy Traci A. Lemay, DeKalb Fire Department.)

Story By Kathy Andrews

Nobody plans to be a hero. No jobs exist in Illinois where heroism is legally required. Yet, on those sudden occasions where individuals rise to perform truly exceptional acts of bravery while working, their own explanation is often the same.

"I was just doing my job."

Such was the case on June 16, when a team of dedicated emergency responders became heroes in the eyes of many Henderson County residents.

A round-the-clock watch was in place to monitor levees up and down the flood-swollen Mississippi River. Residents had been evacuated from several communities. Roadways, railroads and bridges were closed. Hazardous navigation conditions were declared. More than 1,400 men and women of the Illinois Army and Air National Guard, and untold volunteers, diligently filled tens of thousands of sandbags in an attempt to protect homes, businesses, roads, bridges and farmland.

When the call came in at 5 a.m. that the District 2 levee had breached, leaving six people stranded on the levee and a man and his dog marooned in his truck, there was no hesitation on the part of the night watch to rush in. Years of training kicked into action.

Patrolling less than 2 miles from the levee, and among the first on the scene, were Department of Natural Resources Conservation Police Sergeant Jim Dever and Conservation Police Officer Steve Francisko, followed minutes later by Region 1 Conservation Police Captain Greg Hunter and CPOs Scott Avery and Matt Hoogerwerf.

(Photo by Steve Francisko.)

Conservation Police Officers patrolled levees and roadways during the flood.

(Photo by Scott Avery.)

Flood waters rose so quickly after the levee break that boats were launched from roadside ditches.

Within moments, two 16-foot DNR johnboats and one operated by the Lomax Fire and Rescue Team were dealing with strong currents, 3-foot standing waves and cross-chop. Torrential flood waters poured across the farmland, creating a dense mat of corn stalks that proved difficult to navigate.

Hit by a wall of water, the truck flipped, tossing man and dog into the water. Unable to swim, he fortunately stayed afloat as the current swept him into a small grove of trees where he was able to grab a branch. His dog climbed onto debris wedged in the trees.

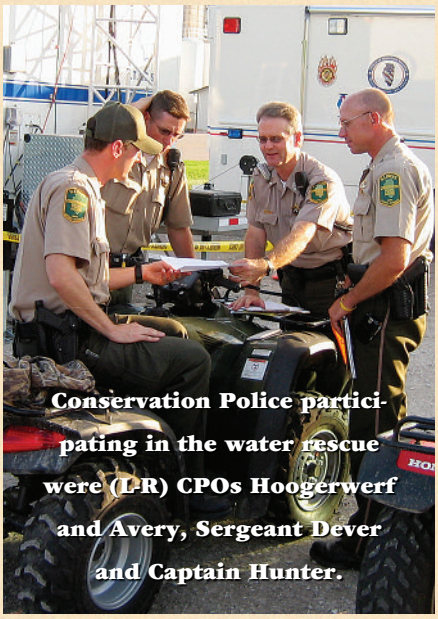
One boat maneuvered into position and the man was lowered into the boat. From the second boat, an officer snagged the dog's collar and lifted it to safety.

"It was an incredibly surreal situation," recounted CPO Francisko. "Every animal you could think of was running for its life across the road, and we probably saw nearly 100 live deer floating past, the water moving so fast that they couldn't swim."

Sergeant Dever coordinated the field operations that morning, although his command post was relocated every 10 minutes as flood water expanded onto the floodplain.

"The six men on the water really directed our activities, telling me what they needed and I coordinated with the headquarters to get it to them," Dever said. "Without take-out points for the boats, and high land a premium, we were fortunate to have Illinois Department of Transportation and the Burlington Med Force helicopters at our disposal to help with evacuations of several people, including those stranded on the levee."

Ensuring that the emergency responders could work safely and efficiently was the role of the Illinois Emergency Management Association's Incident Management Team. Bruce Harrison, assistant fire chief of the DeKalb Fire Department, led the multi-agency effort, with support from DNR (Conservation Police, Division of Fisheries personnel and the Big River State Forest site superintendent), Illinois State Police, Village of Lomax Fire Department, Henderson County Sheriff's Department, IDOT and others.



(Photo by Steve Francisko.)

Conservation Police participating in the water rescue were (L-R) CPOs Hoogerwerf and Avery, Sergeant Dever and Captain Hunter.

"The six people on the water that morning went without hesitation, doing what they're paid, and have trained, to do," explained Captain Hunter. "In my 21 years with the state, this was the smoothest and best-managed operation I've participated in. I'm proud of the system we have in place, and what our officers and all others involved did for the people of Illinois."

CPO Francisko, one of the officers patrolling the levee when it breached, considers the water rescue he participated in as a "defining moment in my career."

From his perspective as leader of the effort, Harrison praised the responders for their actions.

"The Conservation Police helped the community have a prepared response for any and all contingencies, some of which were high hazard, such as levee failure, levee patrol and water rescue," Harrison said. "They demonstrated fantastic cooperation in planning with the local community, and even more was their phenomenal response to get people out of water in a timely way so we didn't incur any injuries or fatalities. Because their actions were planned, a prepared response took place rather than responders reacting to a situation. In my estimation this was undoubtedly the challenge of those officers professional careers."

CPO Hoogerwerf summarized their role much like the other officers did: "It felt good to be able to make a difference and I'd definitely do it again—and without hesitation. After assessing the situation and knowing that lives were at risk, there wasn't a chance that we weren't going to put the boats on the water."

"We just happened to be in the right spot at the right time, with the right equipment to get the job done," CPO Avery said. "When you put trust in your equipment and the people you work with, you hope good things turn out."

It was all in a day's work for the emergency responders.

A very fine day's work for Henderson County and the state of Illinois.

(Photo by Scott Avery.)