



TWIN CITIES TRAGEDY

COAST GUARD RESPONDS FOLLOWING THE COLLAPSE OF THE I-35W BRIDGE IN MINNESOTA

STORY AND PHOTOS BY PS1 KEVIN ROFIDAL, USCGR

Just after 6 p.m. on Aug. 1, the I-35W bridge gave way and collapsed into the Mississippi River in Minneapolis, Minn. Resurfacing renovations were under way at the time of the accident, and there were several pieces of heavy construction equipment, building materials, and more than 100 vehicles on the bridge.

Several vehicles ended up in the water and on the banks of the Mississippi, leaving victims injured and waiting to be rescued. Many people were stranded in partially submerged vehicles with pieces of debris from the bridge structure scattered around them. Prior to the arrival of local police, fire, and emergency service personnel, private citizens made initial rescue efforts, saving as many motorists as possible. The quick thinking of these Good Samaritans and their courageous and selfless acts as the first witnesses on scene saved many lives.

The catastrophic failure of the 40-year-old bridge resulted in the loss of 13 lives and 100 people injured. Many who died were entombed in their submerged vehicles and construction equipment on the bottom of the river. Some of the rescuers were seen swimming in the swift waters as they moved from vehicle to vehicle in an attempt to save lives. A majority of the rescues can be attributed to the Minneapolis Police and Fire Departments. Credit also goes to the banded team of Minnesota Task Force One — an urban search and rescue team comprised of fire fighters, paramedics, nurses and emergency physicians designed to deal with specific problems like this challenge. After initial rescue efforts had been exhausted, it quickly turned to a recovery operation.

The Coast Guard Marine Safety Detachment (MSD) St. Paul received an early notification of the bridge collapse from reservist BM2 Brandon Kuske, who had been called to duty for the local police department. This helped cut the Coast Guard's response time. The MSD quickly sprang into action, staffing the Minnesota State Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and coordinating the response of Coast Guard assets. LT Carl Kepper, MSD Supervisor, represented the Coast Guard at the EOC serving as a liaison between command at Sector Upper Mississippi River in St. Louis, and local officials. Reservist LT Jared Angelle, recalled for this disaster, soon joined Kepper at the State EOC.

"It just didn't seem real, it kind of looked like a movie set or something," said Angelle.

MSD St. Paul, staffed by CWO David Swisher, CWO James Condra and MSTC Joseph Dentry, coordinated local operations and the recall of reservists for response boat crews. Coast Guard Auxiliaries Bob Smehta and Denny Sando also responded quickly with two Auxiliary boats crewed by members from Division 11 to aid MSD St. Paul with enforcing an initial safety zone.

A MSD St. Paul Reserve boat crew from three different states, responded quickly deploying the unit's new 25-foot RB-S approximately two hours after the collapse. The initial crews consisted of PS1 Mark Mirsch, BM1 Nick Bray, PS1 Kevin Rofidal, MK1 Eric Gadbois, BM2 Mike Arney, BM2 Jeremy Cummings, MK2 Chris Weik and BM3 Joel Bradley.

"When I saw the bridge, I couldn't imagine that here is a major interstate sitting in the river," said Mirsch.



A photo upriver shows the aftermath of the tragedy and some of the obstacles rescuers encountered.

Coast Guard crews worked closely with the Hennepin County Sheriff's Department, an agency with extensive experience operating on the river and conducting dive operations in the murky and treacherous waters of the fast-moving Mississippi River. The bridge collapse happened just a few hundred feet downstream from the St. Anthony Lock and Dam, which created further complications for rescue and recovery.

Within only hours of the bridge collapse, Sector Upper Mississippi River personnel — CWO Timothy Shouse, CWO Bill Perkins, CWO Lance Walton and LTJG Clint Townsen — established a Marine Transportation System Recovery Unit (MTRSU) at the request of the Sector Commander, CAPT Sharon Richey. The goal of the MTRSU was to assess economic, critical infrastructure and transportation disruption impacts to the local marine community due to a long-term river closure (the river was closed between mile markers 848 to 857). Working closely with the Department of Homeland Security, local agencies, and industry representatives, the team was able to identify primary and secondary impacts of the river closure and documented them in a brief given to the Secretary of Transportation.

Working alongside local law enforcement, Coast Guard boat crews established a security zone around the collapse, maintained around the clock for the next 20 days, as dive operations continued. An HH-65C helicopter crew from Coast Guard Air Station Traverse City, Mich. (serving TDY at Air Facility Waukegan, Wis.) also deployed to the scene, assisting with SAR operations.

Less than 24-hours following the collapse, boat crews arrived from St. Louis, Mo., Milwaukee, Wis., Two Rivers, Wis., Duluth, Minn. and Sault Ste Marie, Mich. The St. Paul crews operated all night until relieved by assets from these units in the Eighth and Ninth Districts. On Aug. 4, MSST 91106 from New York arrived, augmenting boat forces and allowing other crews to return to their duty

stations. On Aug. 11, boat crews arrived from Sector Lower Mississippi River, Sector New Orleans, Station Gulfport, and Station Aransas to relieve MSST 91106 until recovery operations were completed, Aug. 20. Boat crews enforced a seven-mile security zone, transporting investigators and responders to the bridge wreckage, and assisting Coast Guard Public Affairs Officers from D8 and D9 as well as the Pentagon Channel with access to the scene.

This event thrust Minneapolis into the national spotlight, and included visits from President Bush and media outlets from around the world. Within days, the U.S. Navy and FBI deployed dive teams who worked closely with the Hennepin County Sheriff's Office. Though hampered by inclement weather, dive operations continued until the last victim was recovered, Aug. 20.

Though the exact cause of the bridge failure is still under investigation, the U.S. Coast Guard worked closely with a number of agencies including the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), Minnesota Department of Transportation, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Highway Patrol, Minneapolis Police Department, Hennepin County Sheriff's Office, Minneapolis Fire Department, FEMA, Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM), Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA), OSHA, Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Navy, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the American Red Cross. Special Agent John Engle, a Coast Guard Reservist who serves on the Minneapolis Police Department, was on scene nearly round the clock for the first few days.

The support received from Sector Upper Mississippi River, ISC St. Louis, and ESU St. Louis greatly aided MSD St. Paul by providing exceptional operational support to the unified command. President Bush, the Secretary of Transportation, and Governor of Minnesota all extended a sincere thanks to the Coast Guard for their response to this tragic event.



The twisted metal and destruction in the aftermath of the bridge collapse that left 13 people dead and over a hundred people injured.