On the way home from "Wildland 2000," last year's live-fire training exercise in Northern California, I was wondering: “Why do I do this to myself?” The many planning meetings over the months, the sending of letters, e-mails, the phone calls, the late nights followed right behind by early mornings... “Am I into self-abuse or just plain crazy?” I mutter to no one. Maybe I am just plain too old for this stuff. Each year I intend to participate in the Bay Area's other two major live-fire wildland exercises – the San Mateo/Santa Clara County "Wildfire" held in south San Jose and the long-running Monterey County Wildland Fire School. Never make it. I am usually too wrapped up in the Alameda/Contra Costa County live fire training planning to get away. Someday, that will change... probably after my retirement!

How it Started

In the early 1990's a few fire agencies in Contra Costa County, along with Mount Diablo State Park and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF), did a small prescribed burn/training exercise on the north side of Mount Diablo. Communications were handled out of a state Office of Emergency Services (OES) Fire and Rescue Communications Van. I had begged and gotten a few dispatchers to come help out. Pretty uneventful, and I had no idea that this would lead in a very few years to the biggest fire dispatcher training in California, and to the deployment of "Incident Dispatchers" to real incidents.

Around about the same time, the man who eventually became the founding father of the California Fire Chief's Association (CFCA) Communications Section (and IDT), Chuck Berdan from Sacramento Regional Fire/EMS Communications, found himself in another OES Comm Van at a very large fire complex in the north part of the State. Without a lot of help. As a result, he created a 16-hour class called "Incident Dispatcher" intending to certify and qualify fire dispatchers to be deployed and staff a mobile comm unit at a major mutual aid wildfire. Today, this class is bulging at 24 hours and is followed up by field experience at a live fire training exercise.
The following year, the Alameda County and Contra Costa County Fire Training Officers joined together for a live fire training exercise called “Wildland.” Once again I begged for dispatchers, and was rewarded with two dispatchers and a supervisor from the host agency, The East Bay Regional Park District, and two good friends, Chuck Barker from Placer County 9-1-1 and Bob Basset from Alameda County Communications, who came more to bail me out than anything else. Once again we operated out of the OES Comm Van. Little did the three of us know that within the next eight years, we would each serve two 1-year terms as Presidents of CFCA Communications, Northern Division, developing (among other things) Incident Dispatcher standards and curriculum.

Moving Along

In 1993 I assumed the role as Lead Instructor for the “Incident Dispatcher Workshop.” Over the next year or so, guest instructors were added. The first go around included Assistant Chief Paul Beckstrom from the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services, Fire and Rescue Branch (they manage fire & rescue mutual aid in California), who taught Mutual Aid as well as the role of the OES Agency itself in non-fire related incidents. Fire Captain Ron Gesner from the Contra Costa County Fire District spoke on fire behavior and a few related topics, and I brought in CDF Battalion Chief Mike Martin who gave an overview of CDF, its mission, services, and equipment. Bringing in these experts in their fields has added a lot of credibility to the Workshop and expanded its scope.

It was during this time that Alameda/Contra Costa County live fire training moved to the US Army Reserve Forces Training Area, Camp Parks, near Dublin on the county border. The exercise was extended to two days, burning about 200 acres and giving dozens of fire crews plenty of opportunities to learn and practice vital wildland firefighting techniques. Over the course of the two days, I had 16 dispatchers (just a little beyond my span of control!) but nonetheless, the Training Officers were pleased with our performance and the dispatchers left with that very important smile on their faces. The next year, dispatchers had the opportunity to flex their skills outside of the Comm Van, assisting with Staging, Check-In and Resource Status. This format remained the next few years, which each year drawing more and more dispatchers eager for a chance to dispatch outside of the control room. One of these individuals was Randall Larson, from San Jose Fire Communications, who had been the CFCA Secretary for some years and had taken our idea of training dispatchers for field communications to develop an Incident Dispatcher Team (IDT), responding to local events in San Jose. This added more field work for some dispatchers and has since opened doors across the country for local IDTs to be developed and deployed. Additional Comm Units have been called in, including the massive Mobile Comm Centers from CDF, to give dispatchers a chance to work in a variety of comm vans.

The Highway 58 Fire

In August of 1996, the State of California was hit with a series of lighting storms that literally had a good portion of the state on fire. On a hot August Saturday afternoon, I was called into OES Fire and Rescue Headquarters in Sacramento to assist my friend Paul Beckstrom with the state’s mutual aid coordination. It seemed like almost every county in the foothills and the Sierras had a major fire burning. Resources were at a premium, and agencies were starting to hold back on what they would normally commit to state mutual aid because of concerns about resource capabilities at home.

On Sunday I learned from OES Assistant Chief Jim Cox that one of these fires, The Highway 58 Fire in San Luis Obispo County, had jumped its containment lines and was heading for the town of Santa Maria in adjacent Santa Barbara County. We realized that already thin resources were about to get thinner. Chief Cox also advised that a request was going out for Communications Vehicles. I suggested usage of our Incident Dispatchers. A little while later, I got his request for two OES Comm Vans... and 16 dispatchers.

Now, at this time in the history of the state Incident Dispatcher program we hadn’t yet developed automatic proto-
Don Stabler displays just a little of the weariness his role as planning overseer/communications coordinator laid on him. He was assisted by Comm Unit Leader Kody Kerwin (Contra Costa County Fire) and COML trainee Nancy Cole (Santa Rosa Fire).

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...and Rescue Mutual Aid Coordinators. Obviously, having Chief Beckstrom, who, along with then-OES Fire Chief Neil Honeycutt, were strong supporters of the IDT program, and the rare chance of my being at Headquarters helping out, and having all my phone numbers with me was a lot of luck, fate, and the right people in the right place at the right time. When I looked at the cadre of people who were dispatched to San Luis Obispo – Chuck Barker, Dave Larton, Randall Larson, and Bob Jessell, to name a few – I knew that the program was going to work, because we had the right people. [See "Branch Mountain Relay" in our Mar/Apr 1997 issue, online at www.9-1-imagazine.com. – ed].

The following year, Randall joined me as co-Instructor in the Incident Dispatcher course, which was expanded to three days and revamped considerably. Our cadre, when travel and schedules allow for it, now includes retired San Jose Fire Captain George Bradford, who has been covering fire behavior for Incident Dispatchers, Chief Beckstrom, who still represents OES and Mutual Aid, and CDF Battalion Chief Steve Beightler who has been speaking eloquently about his agency's role in mutual aid management.

**Deployments**

Since the Highway 58 Fire, the dispatchers who have gone through the class have had several deployments. When lightning once again raised havoc in the north half of the state in August, 1999, I participated as a Communications Unit Leader to three different incidents and had Incident Dispatchers on two of them, the Cinder Fire and the Willow Fire, in Lassen County. Jeff Policynski, who had mirrored San Jose's local-based IDT by developing one concurrently for the Mountain View Fire Department, joined me on the Willow. Many other Incident Dispatchers, including my co-instructor Randall, were deployed to fires in Butte County. San Jose sent two dispatchers to the North Fork Fire in Monterey County last summer. Chuck Alexander, graduate of our Glendale class, worked on the Viejas Fire in 2000. Once again, another great validation for the program.
A few years ago, we discovered another place where our Incident Dispatchers were able to excel — at OES Headquarters helping out with mutual aid ordering and management. When floodwaters inundated much of the Sacramento valley and elsewhere, Incident Dispatchers were deployed to OES Headquarters. Ms. Alex Ruffin, now the Dispatch Manager for Solano County, was the first in a series of fire dispatchers from Solano, Marin and Contra Costa counties to answer the call at OES Headquarters.

Wildland 2000

Last year's exercise was our most comprehensive yet. We called in four mobile communications units — our mainstay from OES (Support 5262) and local units from Moraga-Orinda Fire, Santa Clara County Comm, and San Jose Fire. For the first time, we assigned Comm Units to each Branch to support its training activities, and it worked out wonderfully.

We had 40 Incident Dispatchers, 4 Incident Comm Center Managers, 2 Comm Unit Leaders, 2 Observers, and a host of support personnel and equipment from OES Telecommunications Branch in Sacramento, rotating through four positions in the command post as well as assisting in three training branches in the field.

So, as I drag my tired self home, the answers to the aforementioned questions come to me. They are the smiles on people like Amy Shelly from the City of Davis, who attended her first drill, but I suspect it won't be her last, or Stacy Warwick from Livermore, who attended her second in four years and has nothing but praise for the program and thanks for the chiefs who made it possible, or Kelley Dwyer, who worked for CHP but, as the daughter of an LA City Firefighter, had aspirations of being a fire dispatcher (and who now is one). And the veterans like Lolita Pedro from Palo Alto and Lisa Martin from Richmond who come each year and share their experiences and knowledge with the first timers. And then there are the mainstays, Bob Basset from Alameda County, Bob Gundrum from Palo Alto, Debbie Ford from Oakland, Randall Larson from San Jose, Bob Williams from Moraga, and so on. And then there is our boss, Assistant Chief Jim Marquis from our local OES Region, dotting the i's and crossing the t's that I missed.

And while one part of me says that enough is enough, the side that matters already has me in the planning process for next year. As for me being crazy...ask my coworkers!

Don Stabler — who as you read this is recovering from similar responsibilities at Wildland 2001 — just celebrated his 30th anniversary as a fire service dispatcher and his 20th anniversary with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District in Pleasant Hill California, where he is a Senior Fire Dispatcher. Don is a Master Instructor through the State Fire Training Academy, served in all capacities in the California Fire Chief’s Association Communications Section, Northern Division, and, is proud to be the Comm Unit Leader on California Interagency Incident Management Team #2. Don can emailed at 9-1-IDJ@prodigy.net.

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