

# Orange-County's successful fire department merger

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SF-Consolidation-Regional

In 1981, Orange County, Florida, had 14 separate fire departments. Today it has one. This is the story of how that merger was accomplished and what it means in terms of improved fire protection and operating efficiency.

By Rich Olsen  
Orlando, Florida

Orange County, Florida, is one of the leading tourist areas in the United States. Orlando is its principal city and Walt Disney World its main attraction. Until 1981, the county's unincorporated area was divided into 16 fire control districts served by 14 fire departments (two of the districts didn't have their own department). These districts represented a first-response area of some 680 square miles.

The 14 fire departments employed a total of 398 career firefighters who operated out of 24 stations. All told, there were 50 supervisors of the rank of battalion chief and above (in some districts, the rank of captain was equivalent to that of battalion chief). Each department had its own fire chief who made policy and determined the standard operating procedures for that department.

Only seven departments employed vehicle maintenance personnel. Much of the actual maintenance was performed right in the station or in inadequate facilities using inadequate equipment. When preventive maintenance was performed, no written records were kept to indicate what was done.

Fire apparatus were dispatched from eight different centers by a total of 29 dispatchers. Each fire department had a different phone number. If you lived in an unincorporated area of Orange county, you needed to know who served the area

you were in if an emergency occurred. If you were a tourist and needed the fire department, this could be a problem since the Orlando phone book covers all of Orange County.

These 14 departments used 13 different VHF radio channels with no uniform radio procedures between districts. If several departments were involved in a mutual aid response, problems developed. Firefighters from different departments at the same fire could not communicate with each other by radio because of the different frequencies in use. Furthermore, most of the radios were over 10 years old and had received very little maintenance.

This segmentation of fire service delivery was further aggravated by a rapidly growing population in the unincorporated areas. It became apparent to the Orange County commissioners that a better system was needed. Just as they accepted the fact that a countywide sheriff's department was necessary to provide law and order, so they saw that a countywide fire department was needed to provide a consistent and dependable level of fire protection to county residents living outside the incorporated limits.

James G. Cragan, formerly chief of the Rockford (Illinois) Fire Department, was hired to merge the 14 fire departments into one countywide department. Named to aid him in this task were James Dunham, former chief of the Union Park Fire Control District in Orange County; Douglas Bressler, also from Rockford, who was put in charge of operations; James Sims, from the Taft Fire Control District, who was named to head support services; and Edwin Spahn, former chief of the Joliet (Illinois) Fire Department, who was put in charge of the Fire Loss Management Bureau. Under these men, the Orange County Fire Department (OCFD) was founded on June 1, 1981.

During the past three years, many improvements have been made be-

cause of them, and many changes have taken place. For one thing, there has been a 22% increase in the area covered. Today the OCFD's first-response area is 830 square miles. The number of fire stations has been expanded from 24 to 27.

Instead of 398 career employees, there are now 538, an increase of 25%. While the number of firefighters has increased, the number of mid-to-upper level supervisors has decreased by 42%. Instead of 50 men of battalion chief rank and above, there are only 29.

The department is organized as follows: one assistant chief or assistant operations commander (AOC), one EMS chief, and five battalion commanders per shift; one floater chief to fill in during vacations; a chief in the communications bureau; a chief in the training bureau; plus the five upper level chiefs already mentioned.

From the beginning, the management team has made an aggressive effort to bring minorities into the fire service in Orange County. Today, without any court-ordered pressure, the OCFD fairly reflects the population mix of Orange County. A recent national survey showed that the Orange County Fire Department is second only to the New York City Fire Department in the number of uniformed female firefighters it employs.

The communications system has been updated. Today one central dispatch center houses fire, sheriff, and EMS communications for Orange County. You can reach the dispatch center from anywhere in the county simply by dialing 911.

The 911 system is keyed to a computer that can display the address of the caller to the dispatcher. To date, 90% of all people living in Orange County have their street indexed in the 911 computer. The remaining 10% will probably have been added to the computer by the time this article is published.

The central dispatcher also allows firefighters quick access to sheriff's deputies. If a deputy is needed, fire-

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fighters only need contact their dispatcher, since the sheriff's dispatchers are located just behind the fire dispatchers.

The OCFD's communications system has been streamlined, and radio procedures have been standardized throughout the department. Instead of using 13 different VHF channels, there are now five tactical channels in the new 800-MHz radio system. The 800-MHz system provides radio coverage to all 830 square miles protected by the OCFD. When mutual aid responses occur with other departments, including Orlando, the OCFD dispatchers are able to cross-patch radio communications so firefighters from different departments can communicate directly.

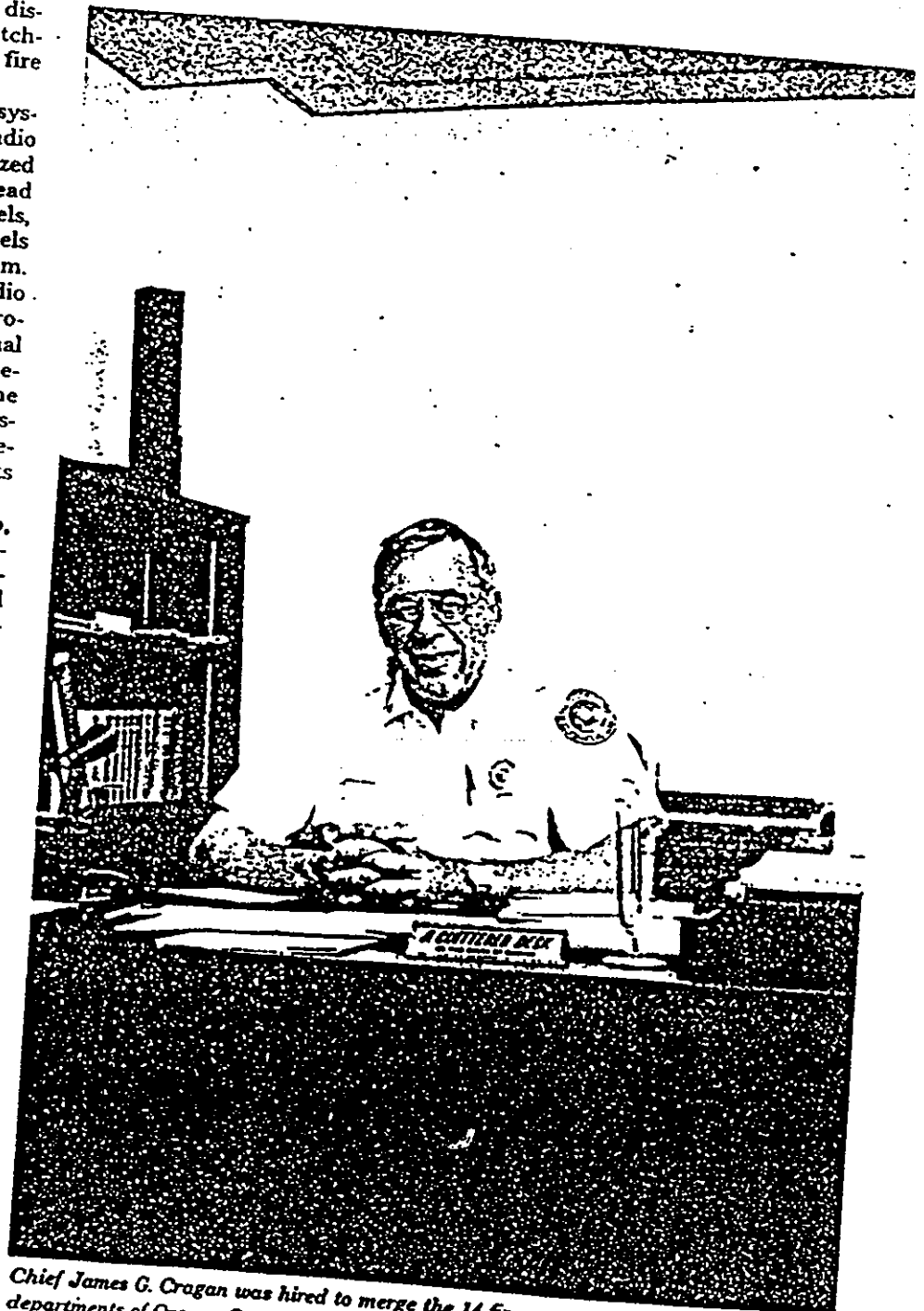
In addition to the mobile radio, each apparatus also carries a portable radio. This guarantees county-wide coverage by portable radio and constant and effective communications among firefighters and supervisors at any emergency scene.

Today all radios undergo a regular preventive maintenance program. A written record is kept so the program can be effective.

All apparatus also contain detailed map books of the county. These books are broken down into segments of nine square miles to a page. The dispatcher is thus able to give the exact page and coordinate numbers for the scene of any emergency. This system is very important in a first-response area the size of Orange County. The assistant chief and EMS chief respond to all major emergencies, and it is impossible for them to know the location of every street in the 830-square-mile area.

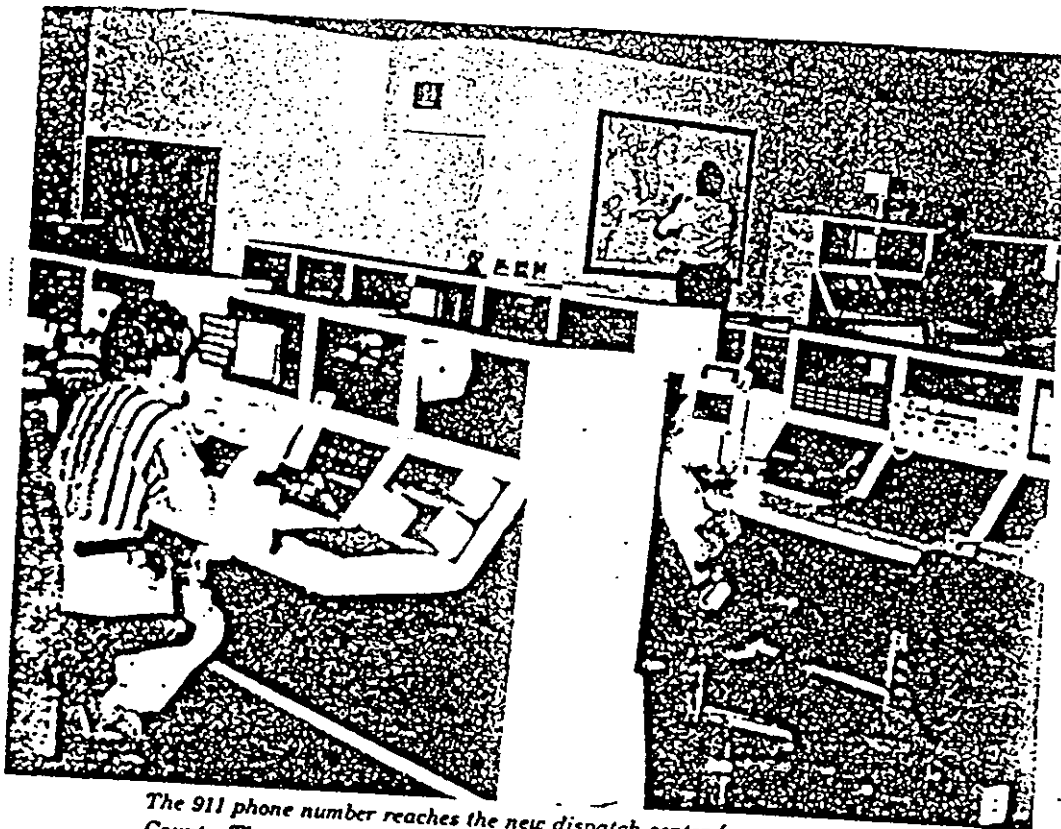
All radio technicians are now licensed. Public address systems have been upgraded in the stations, and a teleconference system has also been added to the communications system.

Maintenance has benefited greatly from merger. Today there is one central vehicle maintenance bureau with eight mechanics. They work two different shifts, which enables the maintenance department to be open



Chief James G. Cragan was hired to merge the 14 fire departments of Orange County, Florida, into one department.

For Chief 4/105



The 911 phone number reaches the new dispatch center from anywhere in Orange County. The one central dispatch center houses fire, sheriff, and EMS communications for the county.



Fire department EMS in action at a recent incident.

seven days a week. This arrangement cuts down on overtime.

Preventive maintenance programs have been established and the records are computerized to show when and when work was done. Purchases have been standardized, and stock inventories, quality control, and work orders implemented. Five apparatus have been completely refurbished at the maintenance site. Those vehicles that cannot economically be refurbished or are just too costly to keep on the road will be replaced with new standardized apparatus.

A countywide system of mapping and maintaining all fire hydrants has been completed, and rural water supplies for nonhydrant areas have been identified.

Before merger, not only were firefighters unable to communicate by radio in mutual aid situations, but equipment could not be interchanged because it was incompatible. Today equipment and hoses are standardized throughout the county. In addition, the OCFD now has standard adapters for all apparatus for mutual aid with other departments.

The chain of command and command responsibilities are clearly spelled out. In the past, mutual aid situations involving several fire control districts were sometimes touchy because command procedures were not clarified. This situation was intensified when a fire chief from another department responded with his men to an incident being commanded by a captain in the department of the first-response district.

Today such confusion has been eliminated. Command procedures are published in the OCFD operations manual, which clearly states who is in command when, thus avoiding ruffled egos.

Disaster planning has also been accomplished. The disaster plan facilitates a smooth transfer from incident command to an interagency disaster plan, again without hurting anybody's ego. A worst-case scenario has been established that involves the entire county, not just one fire control district, as in the past.

Merger has meant better fire and EMS protection for the residents in the unincorporated areas of Orange County. Equipment is moved up to other stations when fire and major accidents occur. This move-up guarantees quick response coverage to all the county, including the area where the emergency may be taking place.

Mutual aid contracts, which include joint first response, have been written with all incorporated areas of

Orange County. These are Orlando, Winter Park, and Maitland Mutual aid contracts also exist with Seminole County, Walt Disney World, and Disney Village. Because of station location, the OCFD has some first-response areas within the boundaries of Orlando.

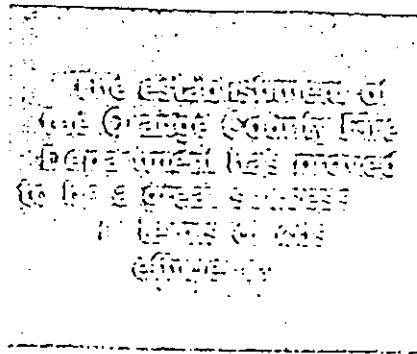
Merger has resulted in a standard response on all calls. Two engines, one truck, one rescue vehicle, and a battalion chief respond to all first-alarm fires in a single-family residence and all major accidents. One rescue truck and one additional apparatus are sent on most EMS calls. Merger has also meant extra equipment for high-risk fire and hazmat target areas. There is now hazmat protection for the entire county.

Under Deputy Chief Spahn, an effective Fire Loss Management Bureau has been established. This bureau insures that all new construction is properly protected as well as inspected. The bureau serves as a quality control agent for citizens, occupants, and the county. This bureau is the only agency that now monitors existing facilities.

The Fire Loss Management Bureau conducts investigations into all fires and hazardous materials incidents, not just those of questionable origin. In 1983, the bureau checked out 19,520 incidents. Investigators can also make arrests for arson. Eighty-one such arrests were made during 1983. This work is facilitated by the establishment of a uniform data-handling system, which is now in place for the entire county. This system is currently being extended to contract areas as well.

Bureau personnel also work with various public and private groups gathering, managing, and distributing data. They have begun several education programs in the areas of fire-safety, poison control, and general personal safety in cooperation with the county sheriff's office and the Orange County school system. The bureau uses the "Sesame Street Fire Safety Resource Book" to develop programs for day care and elementary school children.

In terms of accomplishments, the fire loss people have brought about a 250% increase in the number of fire protection systems in place. They have increased the number of occupancy final and maintenance inspections by 100%, and the number of fire investigations by 225%. All of these increases have been accomplished with only a 6.6% increase in bureau personnel. It is not surprising that the OCFD's Fire Loss Manage-



ment Bureau is respected throughout Florida and its organization much copied.

The Orlando-Orange Fire Training Academy was established before 1981. However, fire control districts in the northern portion of the county didn't fully utilize the academy prior to merger. Today any firefighter hired by the Orange County Fire Department who does not meet the state minimum firefighter standards must undergo complete training at the academy. The academy also offers a two-week course which all new recruits are required to attend. This course provides the training over and above the state minimum standards that is necessary to meet OCFD minimum standards.

All new recruits for OCFD must be state-certified emergency medical technicians. A drive is currently underway to train firefighters already employed by the department to the EMT level. Chief Cragan has earned his EMT certification to demonstrate his commitment to this goal.

Approximately 65%-70% of all OCFD responses are EMS-related calls. Realizing the increasing involvement fire departments will have in EMS situations in the future, Chief Cragan has established an EMS battalion chief on each shift. This officer is a state-certified paramedic. Unlike the EMS chief in many departments, the OCFD's position is not primarily an administrative one. The EMS battalion chief is expected to respond to all major EMS incidents as well as to all major fires. His responsibility at the emergency is to command the EMS operations.

The EMS chief is also a combat-rated battalion chief. Not only must he be able to handle the EMS function but he must also be able to perform all functions of a battalion chief. Under this system, the EMS chief can fill in for a vacationing or sick battalion chief.

Since merger, the sheriff's office and the fire department have coop-

erated in manning a helicopter to bring emergency medical services to the county's citizens and tourists. The helicopter is operated under the auspices of the sheriff's office, using a deputy as pilot. The fire department provides a paramedic to ride the helicopter on a 24-hour basis. These helicopter crews have been credited with saving many lives because of their ability to respond quickly during periods of heavy traffic congestion and to reach outlying and inaccessible areas within the county.

With all these improvements, it would be logical to conclude that fire/EMS protection now costs the citizens of Orange County a lot more money. This is not true. While manpower and coverage have increased 25%, costs have remained constant—and insurance costs have dropped.

According to a recent survey conducted by the *Orlando Sentinel* that compared Florida's 18 largest communities, Orange County ranks 2nd in area covered, 3rd in population, 12th in spending per capita at \$55.07, and 14th in employees per thousand.

As with any new organization, the merger was not accomplished without some problems. When you eliminate 14 fire chief positions and ask these chiefs to become battalion chiefs, problems will arise. Naturally, each chief would prefer to be a deputy or assistant chief, but there aren't enough of those positions to go around. But those problems have been resolved and are in the past.

The major problem facing the OCFD today is question of pay equity. The firefighters of the Orlando Fire Department currently gross \$4000 a year more than the county firefighters. The OCFD is losing firefighters to Orlando, and will probably continue to do so as long as the pay differential persists.

No one associated with the Orange County Fire Department or the county government believes that the merger was a mistake. The establishment of the Orange County Fire Department has proved to be a great success not only in terms of lives and property saved, but also in terms of cost efficiency.

Orange County, Florida, is one of the 10 fastest growing areas of the country, and one of the leading centers of tourism in the world. The Orange County Fire Department has made great strides during the last three years in improving the level of fire protection for this rapidly growing constituency. The future promises even more.

Fire Chief, 4/85/8