

A Hero

Tad Agoglia **aids first responders** and expects nothing in return.

When Tad Agoglia, president of the First Response Team of America, walks into your emergency operations center and offers immediate, free disaster response assistance — complete with his own equipment and team — you may ask yourself, “Am I dreaming?” No, you are not. And no, you are not on *Candid Camera*.

Agoglia and his team go to disaster scenes to remove the obstacles that prevent local first responders from helping their community.

“We watch weather patterns, we watch radars and we decide when a storm is severe enough that we should respond,” Agoglia said. “And when we respond, we always work and serve for free under the local emergency and government officials.”

Finding the Need

In 2005, Agoglia created Disaster Recovery Solutions to clean up debris from man-made and natural disasters. Within three weeks to two months following a disaster, the for-profit company receives contracts to aid in long-term recovery.

BY ELAINE RUNDLE

Photos courtesy of the First Response Team



For Heroes

Tad Agoglia uses specialized equipment to clean up cities and towns immediately after a disaster.



After responding to hurricanes for a couple of years, Agoglia said he started wondering what kind of response follows directly after the storm. “I used to look at the news, and I would see a report of a big tornado that wipes a whole city out,” he said. “I would look at them and say to myself, ‘I wonder what those people are going through; that massive storm must have completely covered those roads with debris, houses and trees.’ I started out by saying, ‘I

But he saw a need for much more. “In the response phase — responding to a disaster just after it happens — I saw food and water coming in, but I didn’t see any heavy, specialized equipment,” Agoglia said. “And in fact, on top of that, I didn’t see any specialized equipment for dealing with storms coming in, which is what I have.”

The income generated from Disaster Recovery Solutions provides the funding for the First Response Team. In May 2008, Agoglia

that can each carry 120 cubic yards of debris weighing up to 155,000 pounds. Each truck has essentially 10 pieces of equipment — including a crane — molded into a self-contained unit that’s managed by one person. According to Agoglia, the cranes have massive, hydraulic claws that can demolish and clear away a home that’s blocking a road in only 15 minutes, or simply toss a car out of the way.

That’s not the only equipment the First Response Team brings. A hovercraft works as the rescue boat. “In the middle of America, if a city’s underwater, No. 1, there’s no boat ramp,” Agoglia said. “So I needed a boat that could go over sand, asphalt and gravel. I needed a boat that wasn’t going to get destroyed; that could keep on going after it hit the roof of a house, a street sign sticking out of the water or a car underwater because we’re dealing with trying to save people’s lives.”

The fleet also includes a large generator and a commercial water pump that can remove water from low-lying areas or a basement. Satellite phones and laptops enable communication, which Agoglia lends to local emergency and government officials. Specialized camera and audio equipment can snake through a collapsed building when looking for bodies under rubble. “It has cameras that work at night [and] can sense body heat, so if someone is unconscious and under rubble, we can sense their body heat and see if someone’s there,” he said. “It’s so



The First Response Team travels to communities that have been hit hard by disasters to aid local first responders. The team chooses which locations to help based on death tolls and amount of structural damage.

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— Tad Agoglia, president, First Response Team of America

wonder if I should just maybe go there for free and clear the roads for these communities, just so that ambulances, fire trucks and state troopers could get through.”

That’s exactly what he did in May 2007, when Greensburg, Kan., was hit by an F5 tornado. Agoglia headed there with a crane and some other equipment and removed debris from the roads to open them up for first responders. The experience reinforced his belief that debris removal was needed immediately after a disaster.

submitted the paperwork to make the team a nonprofit organization. As of October 2008, he said the nonprofit had only generated \$22,000 in donations, which covers about 10 days of operating costs.

Metal Battalion

The First Response Team has \$1 million worth of specialized equipment, which is hard to miss as it rolls into a disaster area. The most visible pieces are two black grapple trucks



The Team Evolves — But Not Alone

What was a disaster-care coordinator to do after a tornado hit a small, Missouri city and left a nursing home without electricity? After making many phone calls and contacting several people, Greg Gaines, Missouri Region D mass care coordinator of the Regional Homeland Security Oversight Committee, came up with the phone number for Tad Agoglia of the First Response Team.

“He kind of came to the rescue with a giant generator to run this building. The power came on a couple of days later, so I didn’t need it for that long,” Gaines said. “But I saw him as a valuable resource once I started talking to him and figured out exactly what they do.”

Gaines followed up with Agoglia and his crew in Springfield, Mo., where he became familiar with the team’s goal and equipment. “My mission was to get his foot in the door and get him and his people trained, so he could talk the same language as the emergency managers and other first responders; and he has done just that,” Gaines said. “People take him seriously now, as they should. What he does is a valuable service to the point that it can even save lives.”

Gaines has also taken on the role of advising Agoglia if the team runs into problems. If they encounter a roadblock — like being unable to enter a city that has just been hit by disaster — Agoglia calls Gaines for advice on the best way to handle the situation.

He’s also gotten the First Response Team involved in taking classes about the National Incident Management System and the Incident Command System. Gaines said the classes get the team speaking the same language as emergency management officials and help them become a cohesive part of the response effort.

“A lot of times, people who do what Tad does — emergency managers and people in that position — might be a little gun-shy because after disasters, people show up wanting to help and they all want something out of it,” Gaines said. “Tad literally does it for free and doesn’t want anything.”



sensitive that it can actually hear a baby breathing. And that same equipment can perform search and rescue underwater.”

Dirt bikes equipped with satellite phones and GPS allow rescuers to search farmlands for people who need medical attention. The dirt bikes can also use GPS coordinates to monitor levees, so at the first sign of a levee breach, a city can be evacuated.

“All of these resources are in one fleet and are ready to be deployed immediately, 24 hours a day,” he said.

Assisting the Responders

The four- to five-person team arrives at disaster-hit towns, and it follows a mantra, “Helping Heroes be Heroes.”

“The reality is, because we’re not a government-funded entity, we don’t have many bureaucratic restraints,” Agoglia said. “But we are very careful to work under the supervision and direction of the local government and emergency officials.”

As of October 2008, Agoglia said the team had responded to 20 disasters within the last 17 months. The team is there to not only provide physical assistance with its equipment, but also to share its knowledge of disasters. Agoglia helps officials determine what the priorities are and how to best respond to the challenges. In one instance, it was most important to citizens that they bury their dead, so the team helped dig graves before opening up the main highway.

The team travels to cities where the need is greatest. Whether it’s a large or small city, the decision is usually based on where the most deaths and structural damage occurred.

Agoglia said he wants to add a fire truck to his convoy in 2009, but the only thing stopping him is the money. “I want to provide the heroes with the resources they need,” he said. “And for

me, if [firefighters] don’t have the tools they need, they’re not going to be able to serve their community, and their community needs them.”

Many people wonder why Agoglia spends all of his time responding to disasters. They ask him: What’s in it for you? “I get a sense of fulfillment in this life to know that I lived for things that matter and also to make a difference in people’s lives and in America,” he said.

Agoglia doesn’t make a salary, he doesn’t have a home and he’s not independently wealthy. He spends his time and money trying to improve disaster response.

Agoglia was named one of CNN’s Top 10 Heroes of 2008, though he didn’t win the \$10,000 first-place prize, which he said he would’ve spent on new equipment. As he continues his nomadic life, Agoglia is just happy to help and wishes to someday have more teams dispersed across the country — with the capability to reach any location within hours after a disaster. +

