

School Safety and Lessons from Rick Rescorla

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On the day of September 11th, 2001, the New York Port Authority communicated to the World Trade Center tenants that the towers would hold and to stay in place. Rick Rescorla knew otherwise, countermanded the Port Authority's decision, and gave the order to evacuate. In the book *The Unthinkable* by Amanda Ripley, the story of Rick Rescorla is highlighted regarding risk management and emergency preparedness, and his efforts that saved 2,678 lives on September 11th, 2001. Where does this story come into play for school safety though?

Rescorla was an Englishman who became a Rhodesian police officer. He moved to the United States of America and became a 2nd Lieutenant in the United States Army serving in the infantry division (Stewart, 2002). Rescorla started to learn about managing an overwhelmingly bad set of circumstances in Vietnam in 1966. At the time, Rescorla was serving with Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore (later retired General Hal Moore, deceased). Rescorla, and the rest of the unit were helicoptered into the Ia Drang Valley. The battalion-sized U.S. Army element was unknowingly being dropped into an area that was a stronghold and base for the opposing Division Vietcong. Many troops from the U.S. Forces, including Rescorla, credit their level of training as to why they were able to survive during this battle.

Moving forward in life, Rescorla was the safety manager for a Fortune 500 company (Morgan Stanley) in the New York World Trade Center. Rescorla, having learned about fighting through overwhelming odds in war, applied those same principles of mindset (it can happen to me and it can happen here), preparation, and preparedness within his new responsibilities as the safety manager.

Rescorla understood that he could not effectively do his job without delegating responsibilities amongst other people on the multiple floors the company was housed on. Additionally, since the business occupied elevated floors and during an emergency the evacuation route did not include using the elevator, this meant that the thousands of occupants of the building would be required to march down the emergency stairwells. So, Rescorla tasked individuals on each floor as safety marshals. Each of them had identifying apparel, safety gear, and ensured that each person in their designated areas of responsibility was able to evacuate in an effective manner.

Rescorla also successfully predicted two terrorist attacks towards the twin towers. Rescorla teamed with an old colleague, Dan Hill, from his Rhodesian and U.S. Army service who conducted threat assessments. Rescorla and Hill conducted a vulnerability assessment of the World Trade Center and it took very little time for them to conclude that the parking garage under the towers had very little in the way of security. In their assessment, they theorized that a truck or van could carry explosive compounds into the parking garage beneath the complex and towers and be remotely detonated. This plot eventualized in 1993 with an attempt almost exactly as described by Rescorla and Hill's report. Rescorla and Hill conducted a second vulnerability assessment and report, only this time they described an air cargo plane filled with aviation fuel being flown into

the sides of the towers. Both assessments had been submitted to the Port Authority and both were not acted upon.

On September 11th, 2001, when the first plane hit the World Trade Center tower that housed Morgan Stanley, Rescorla, and all the people he was responsible for, the New York Port Authority communicated to the tenants in the towers that the building was going to hold and to stay in place. Rescorla, however, made another decision, which was the people he was responsible for were going to evacuate and they were going to do it right then. Rescorla initiated the emergency evacuation plans. Although one stairwell was too hot to enter and utilize to evacuate, based on prior training, guidance, and drills, the employees quickly changed direction and used an alternative stairwell. Also, Rescorla knew that effective evacuation would not occur if all the floors evacuated at the same time. There would be a massive “log jam.” Guidance given by Rescorla and his team was to let the top floor evacuate first and then all the next floors below would go so there was not cross traffic and a “log jam.” In the end, his efforts helped save 2,687 people.

Rescorla was last seen on the date of the attacks going back into the towers to ensure that the people under his guidance were out. He unfortunately was one of the many victims that lost their lives on this date.

Takeaways from Rescorla:

Mindset

Based on his prior experience in the military and the Ia Drang Valley battle, Rescorla knew that despite prior training and preparation, you might still find yourself in an overwhelmingly bad situation. If you are in a bad situation, you must first recognize that you are in a bad situation, and then you **MUST ACT**.

Rescorla had the proper mindset, which led to effectively utilizing preventative strategies, preparation through proper training, and a tested plan of action.

Prevention

Rescorla knew that the World Trade Center Towers were a high value target for terrorism, which is why he conducted the vulnerability assessments and tried to remove the abilities of others to commit acts against them. Rescorla and his former colleague identified vulnerabilities of the parking deck that was underneath the towers. The assessment provided details of using a large truck and explosives being parked in the deck to affect the building foundation. The New York Port Authority received this assessment but failed to act on it. Rescorla and the same colleague conducted a second assessment, which was also submitted once again to the New York Port Authority. This time the assessment theorized a cargo plane filled with aviation fuel could be flown into one or both towers. Once again, the assessment was not acted upon by the New York Port Authority. Since Rescorla received a less than enthusiastic response from the Port authority, he suggested they move the offices out of the World Trade Center, but that also failed. Rescorla then did exactly what he did as a young U.S. Army Lieutenant, he prepared his people.

Preparedness

Rescorla knew that when bad things happen, prior preparation is key. Due to his level of preparedness, 2,687 lives were saved on the day of the attacks. Rescorla could not be everywhere at once and given the number of people he was responsible for, he knew he had to train key people and delegate the ability to respond, train, drill, and act to those people. At Rescorla's recommendation, the entire Morgan-Stanley staff (multiple floors) would drill every three months. Several times a year the entire staff would conduct a full evacuation, which meant using the stairs. Rescorla's designated safety marshals would lead the charge on each floor and ensure the employees were able to successfully evacuate. These preparedness drills set the tone for their ability to put the plans into action on the day of September 11th, 2001.

Action

Dependent on the circumstances, immediate action might need to be taken. Action is often directly related to Mindset. At times, our brains take a while to catch-up with things unfolding in front of us. We ask ourselves, "Is this really happening?" Gavin de Becker states in *The Gift of Fear*, "Only human beings can look directly at something, have all the information they need to make an accurate prediction, perhaps even momentarily make the accurate prediction, and then say that it isn't so," (De Becker, 1997). Rescorla saw what was happening on September 11 and decided to act. Also, when one group attempted to utilize the designated stairway, but couldn't because of the flames and heat from floors above, Rescorla's safety officers, who had plans in place and back-up plans if the primary plans failed, also took action and employees quickly used an alternative staircase and got themselves out.

Loren Christensen, in his book *Surviving a School Shooting: A Plan of Action for Parents, Students and Teachers*, makes an excellent point in line with Rescorla's efforts that saved lives, "Virtually no innovative thinking occurs under combat conditions. Think about this now when all is calm and quiet," (Christensen, p. 58). Christensen's statement and the story of Rick Rescorla really drive the point home that we must have the proper mindset and be as prepared as possible before tragedy occurs. Applying Rescorla's principles to a K-12 school setting perhaps will also save lives, just as Rick Rescorla did on September 11th, 2001.

Citations

Christensen, Loren. *Surviving a School Shooting: A Plan of Action for Parents, Teachers, and Students*. Loren W. Christensen: Books, 2008.

De Becker, Gavin. *The Gift of Fear: Survival Signals That Protect Us from Violence*. Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown, 1997.

Ripley, Amanda. *The Unthinkable: Who Survives When Disaster Strikes and Why*. First edition. Crown Publishers, 2008.