

CODE X - A HISTORY

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If you've been trained using Open Water Lifesaving – The United States Lifesaving Association Manual you're familiar with the Code X protocol for search and recovery. There's even a DVD on the USLA website for training. But where did Code X originate?

One spring day in San Diego in 1982 Lt. Frank Day assigned lifeguard Tom Harvey and me to take a life-

guard vehicle from Mission Beach to South Mission Beach. In those days our lifeguard service was not authorized to staff the main (two story) tower at South Mission Beach, except in summer, due to budget restrictions. As I recall it was a sunny day, with 4 – 6 foot surf and a substantial water crowd.

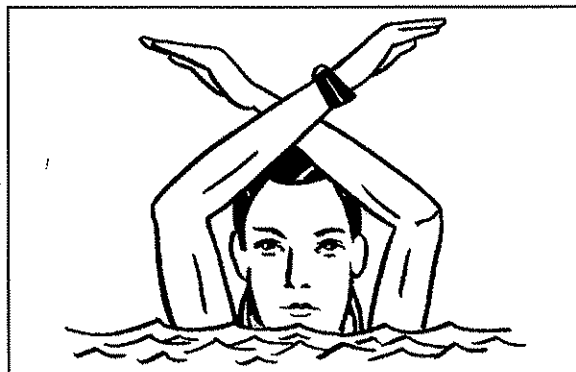
We were to sit in the vehicle as a mostly stationary patrol, watch the water and respond as needed. It was not an ideal situation because from that height our view of the crowd was intermittently obstructed by the surf. The alternative though, was to have no lifeguard there at all.

After an hour or so we spotted a swimmer in difficulty and Harvey went in with buoy and fins to make what we imagined would be a routine rescue. I stayed at the vehicle, reporting via radio that there was one lifeguard in the water on a rescue. I watched him go out, while keeping an eye on the rest of the crowd in case of another problem. I could only see Harvey irregularly between the waves, but at some point I realized he was outside the surfline with no victim, seemingly confused and swimming in different directions. What was going on?

Then I saw him raise an arm – the signal for “lifeguard needs assistance.” I radioed to the Mission Beach tower, about ¾ of a mile north that Harvey was requesting help and I headed into the water with buoy and fins. Backup was sent. Once I got to Harvey he told me the victim had disappeared as he was swimming out for the rescue. He was missing. We dove a couple of times and found nothing. Now I realized a full search was needed, but there was no way to communicate that to shore.

I told Harvey to keep searching and swam in to advise the responding backup lifeguard that we had a missing victim. He radioed in to initiate a full search and rescue response. I headed back out to continue the search with Harvey. Eventually a full search was conducted for an hour, according to our protocol, but the victim wasn't found.

The body was recovered days later and I was left to ponder, what if my fellow lifeguard had been able to let me know



right away that the victim was missing? What if I could have radioed that information before going in the water? What if a full search response had started before I left the beach? Would the victim have been found?

I was hired as a summer lifeguard in San Diego in 1979 while working winters at the Vail ski area. I started working as a professional ski patrolman there in 1981 and continued

through 1985, moving between ski patrolling and lifeguarding every six months. There were many similarities between the jobs, including the quick, individual actions that were often required in both professions to save lives and treat injuries. I learned from each and applied what I learned to both.

Perhaps the greatest emergency faced in the lifeguard profession is a missing swimmer. In the early days I was very occasionally called upon to be a member of a search and rescue team, or simply heard the drama unfold on the two-way radio. One of the things I noted was that in these rare instances the many potential elements of a successful search and rescue response were left to the split second decisions of first line supervisors, under great duress.

We had many potential items to draw from in our toolkit. We could call upon helicopters from various agencies to search overhead. We could respond multiple lifeguard vessels of varying sizes and capabilities. We could assemble our dive team. We could summon paramedics to stand by on-scene in case of a recovery. We could enlist police for crowd control. We could dispatch lifeguards from adjacent districts to help with the in-water search. And so on. But remembering, prioritizing and organizing them all takes experience and time.

With all that was going on in these cases the radio would quickly become clogged with requests, recommendations, and basic logistics inquiries. The on-scene supervisor had to juggle it all in the short time available to find and resuscitate a viable victim. It could be overwhelming. And there was no incident command system back then. Just rank, to determine who would lead.

Once the effort was over, successful or not, there were inevitably reviews, formal and informal, in which some component of the response was faulted. But it was hard to fault that single supervisor under great stress juggling multiple options in the breach.

For the Vail Ski Patrol there was a somewhat similar problem, exacerbated by gravity. Once you send ski patrollers downhill, they can't quickly return to the top of the moun-

tain for specialized rescue or medical supplies. So you need to dispatch personnel from the top of the mountain very strategically with all the equipment needed for the incident. That's especially true for the most severe incidents – heart attacks, avalanches, and ski lift evacuations – all of which require special equipment and extra personnel.

Patrollers long before my time had, through trial and error, come up with a simple solution. They'd created a prioritized checklist with each and every step the patrollers assigned to dispatching that day would need to consider, in order of priority, in these most serious of emergencies. Not every item on the checklist would be needed in each instance, but the checklist at least ensured that every option was considered and every appropriate and available resource could be sent. It worked very well. I experienced it while serving as a patrol dispatcher (we traded off) and as a responder. And while every emergency was different, rarely were critical options overlooked.

All of this got me wondering if we couldn't use a similar approach for our missing swimmer responses. And I couldn't get that problem with Tom Harvey out of my mind – offshore with no way to signal back what had happened.

We had a signal for "lifeguard needs assistance" (a raised arm), for "resuscitation case" (a waved arm), and for "OK" or "no further assistance needed" (arms overhead in a circle or one hand touching the crown of the head). We needed something clearly different and visible for a long distance. And so I thought, why not an X – as in X marks the spot of the missing person? Fortunately as well, while there were many codes used in radio communication I knew of no "Code X." It was unique, as it needed to be.

After mulling it over a little more, in October of 1982 just before leaving for another winter of ski patrolling I sent a three page typed memorandum to lifeguard Captain William Norton entitled, "Code X Proposal." (You can find that memo in the Lifeguard Library on www.usla.org or at www.usla.org/codexmemo.)

It started, "It is the objective of this plan to provide a comprehensive prearranged system for dealing with attempts to recover drowning victims. This plan will be titled Code X to coincide with a new arm signal which will allow the lifeguard in the water to communicate to those on the beach that the victim has submerged and can no longer be found."

The proposal went on to detail a recommended set of protocols when this signal was received or if a lifeguard on the beach received a credible report of a missing swimmer. Attached was a draft dispatch sheet with a time to log each item the dispatcher accomplished, much like the ones the Vail Ski Patrol used. The plan also included certain automatic response protocols (e.g. summon paramedics to stand-by) so that there would be no need to add radio traffic to accomplish them.

Each of the various resources was listed: lifeguards, harbor patrol, rescue boats, helicopters, paramedics, air ambulance, police, etc. As well, steps like announcing the incident on the radio and directing that radio traffic be limited to emergency communication were part of the listed protocols.

I realized it might be awhile (if ever) before our management responded to the recommendations of a very junior member of the team. Indeed it did take awhile and there was a certain amount of grumbling about the rookie lifeguard being the tail wagging the dog; but eventually, and I don't remember when, the plan was adopted. It was tested in real incidents, edited and updated to address shortcomings, honed to a reliable standard, and sat where it belonged on a clipboard in our 24-hour dispatch center, awaiting the dreaded call of the next Code X.

This tidy plan might have been one of those unique protocols of a single lifeguard agency but for my appointment in 1993 by USLA President Bill Richardson to chair the USLA Textbook Committee. We really had no USLA training manual at the time, except for Lifesaving and Marine Safety, an initial effort from over a decade earlier.

We secured a publisher who gave us a monetary advance that was enough to fund travel for a volunteer representative from every region of the USLA, plus our Medical Advisor. We spent five wintry days in a Chicago hotel room going through everything we thought belonged in the new USLA manual. There was plenty of give and take, along with very spirited dialog. Among other things we learned from each other how differently beach lifeguarding was being done in different parts of the country. Protocols and standards made their way into the manual based on consensus or at least majority vote.

Code X made it. I don't recall the discussion or the vote, but it has been part of the USLA's official protocols ever since that first version of the new manual was published in 1995.

In 2008, San Diego Lt. Nick Lerma, recognizing that some training videos were needed for Code X and other key subject areas, negotiated with a film company producing reality television shows featuring lifeguards in action. They owed the City of San Diego some training videos as part of their contract and Lerma used that obligation to arrange for them to produce a Code X training video for the USLA. It was masterfully done based on an actual Code X incident in Huntington Beach. You can order a copy from the Training and Certification section of www.usla.org.

And so a protocol that originated in part in another profession became a standard for American lifeguarding. It was born out of a desire to speed lifeguards and support to a missing swimmer, but reached wide acceptance only through the professional exchange that is the United States Lifesaving Association. If your organization doesn't use Code X, I'd recommend taking a look. It's a great way to preplan for the most serious emergency you are likely to face. It is but one example of how together we develop standards that make a difference.