

****AFTER ACTION REPORT****

25 May 2012

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Forever 15: Tragedy on the Water

Inaugural Event

May 22, 2012

Part 1: Background

Each year, there are over 357 million visitors to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' recreation areas. There are 422 lakes in 43 states, with over 55,000 miles of shoreline. Public safety at Corps lakes is of the highest priority, and the Corps is making great progress in its water safety efforts. By focusing on education and enforcement, the Corps has made it a primary goal to provide the public with safe and healthful recreational opportunities.

Between 1998 and 2007, there were 1,643 water related fatalities on Corps lakes. Half of those were under the age of 30. In 2011, SWD set a regional goal of decreasing public fatalities by 50%. Unfortunately, water related fatalities increased from 50 to 85 from 2010 to 2011 in this district.

Historically, the Corps' water safety message targeted young children, ages 5 - 12. This is an important demographic to reach out to with a water safety message, but data shows that a large percentage of drownings occur in the 15 - 24 year old age group. This is a difficult audience to reach with a water safety message because they are greatly influenced by peer pressure, and base decisions on fitting in, rather than by what is the smart, safe choice.

As an agency, the Corps has struggled to develop a program to reach this audience, and to deliver an *effective* water safety message to them. Many young adults truly are unaware of the dangers they face when they swim or wade in the lake. Unfortunately, in many instances, this lack of awareness continues up until the moment it's too late, and a tragedy occurs. In light of that, Park Rangers at Waco Lake have developed a hard-hitting, realistic program which we feel will provide eye-opening information to these young adults.

Part 2: Development of the Program

We were familiar with Shattered Dreams, and its impact on students, so our first call was to Jeff Wilhelm. Jeff works for Waco Fire Department, but voluntarily coordinates almost all of the Shattered Dreams programs in the central Texas area. We had a sit down meeting with him and pitched our idea

for a mock drowning. We spent some time discussing the logistics of staging the drowning itself, and the coordination of responders for such an event. He provided some insight that we didn't have regarding putting on a large, multi-agency event, and overwhelmingly thought that it could be done, and be done successfully.

With Jeff's support and guidance, we set out to find a school who would agree to be a part of program which had never been done before. It's hard to sell the idea of an out-of-the ordinary program which involves the mock drowning of a student to a school administrator. The first principal we talked to listened to the first five minutes of what we had to say and then basically ushered out of his office with a promise to be in touch. We never heard back from him.

Bosqueville ISD Superintendant Hopper was our next contact. He was much more receptive, and recounted to us an experience he had in which a person drowned at a lake he was visiting. He also told us that his district is 70% surrounded by water, and that he felt it was important to make kids aware of the dangers of lakes and rivers. He facilitated us meeting Ms. Mynarcik, BISD principal, and she was 100% on board from the start.

Our next hurdle was our own agency. We are constantly being told to "think outside the box", and to come up with new ideas, but we found that there are definitely limits to how far outside of the box we were allowed to go. We wrote up the Program Guide, sent it through the chain of command, and waited for a response. It seemed like most of the concern came from the Office of Counsel, followed by the Safety Office. Ms. Morgan, from the Safety Office, began attending planning meetings in early April, and that seemed to make a significant difference in the support we received from above. Office of Counsel wrote a list of concerns, and Operations responded to them, and that correspondence is included with this document at Attachment A. We finally received official support of the program, and forged ahead.

In all, we had 6 planning meetings, 3 parent meetings, and 3 pool sessions with the kids. Planning meetings were for all the coordinating agencies and school officials, and parent meetings were with parents, students and school officials.

Timeline of Events:

2 Feb 12 – Planning meeting

22 Feb 12 – Planning meeting

29 Feb 12 – Parent meeting

21 Mar 12 – Planning meeting

21 Mar 12 – Pool session

2 April 12 – Pool session

16 April 12 – Pool session

18 April 12 – Planning meeting

3 May 12 – Planning meeting

3 May 12 – Parent meeting

4 May 12 – PRE-FILMING

16 May 12 – Planning meeting

21 May 12 – Parent meeting

22 May 12 – FOREVER 15 EVENT

The planning meetings started off in February discussing ideas and concepts, and by our final meeting, we were sorting out the small details. All the agencies worked together remarkably well from the beginning to the end. All the responders and agencies played important roles, but without Jeff Wilhelm, Sara Mynarcik, principal, and Jennifer Ingram, counselor, this program wouldn't have been as successful as it was, and might not have happened at all. Mr. Taverner and the Waco ISD film crew were also key in the production of the YouTube video, the how to DVD, and the PSAs.

Part 3: The Program

Selection of Actors

The principal or other designated school official should select students to be the “actors”. The students should be popular, well liked, well known, but also well behaved. They will have to be trusted to keep quiet about the program, because not knowing what to expect on the day of the event will significantly increase the impact of the program. Typically, a group of 10-12 students will be selected to participate.

Parent/Student Meeting

After actors have been selected, a meeting will be arranged with the students and their parents. The principal (or school official who will be coordinating the event), and at least one counselor should also be present. **This meeting is mandatory.** If a student or parent cannot attend, they may not participate.

Goals of the Parent/Student Meeting:

- Provide an orientation of the program as to purpose, requirements, and schedule of activities
- Complete all administrative forms
- Provide parents and students with a thorough understanding of the program and their responsibilities

- Encourage discussion between students and parents about water safety, peer pressure, and decision making
- Choose dates for swimming ability tests
- Discuss swimming ability test, and go through the specifics of it
 - Ask students and parents how good of a swimmer they perceive themselves to be
 - Most people overestimate their swimming ability, and this can lead to drowning or near drowning
 - Often, people who were good swimmers as a youth, lose endurance as they get older
 - Encourage parents AND children to participate in swim evaluation
 - Swim evaluation is MANDATORY for any students or parents who will enter the water during the pre-filming or at the event
 - Go through the specifics of the swimming ability test
 - 50-meter non-stop swim
 - 10-minute tread
 - Swim underwater to bottom of pool and pick up brick, bring brick to the surface, bring the brick to edge of pool
 - Rehearse the mock drowning
 - Swim evaluation will take place in the controlled environment of a swimming pool, with lifeguards on duty (Doris Miller YMCA, Waco)
 - “Victim” will be chosen based on swimming ability and attitude

Pre-Filming

Safety

The pre-filming will be done by Waco ISD film school students, supervised by Mr. Bill Taverner. It will be done on location, at Airport Beach Park. Prior to students entering the water, there will be no less than the following on standby:

- Waco Fire Department Water Rescue boat with 3 personnel
- 3 YMCA certified lifeguards (1 on shore, 2 in boat)
- 2 Woodway DPS divers, suited up and ready to deploy

All above rescue personnel will be staged just outside of the film view, and will be prepared for rapid deployment in the event of an actual emergency during filming.

Events (will be edited into a 3-5 min video)

Students (boys and girls) are at the lake, and are playing catch with a football, and sunning on the shore of the lake. They are not in a designated swimming area, and there are no personal flotation devices at their location. The parents of one or more of the kids are at the park as well, enjoying a barbeque at a picnic site, while the kids are playing by the water. It is a warm day, and the kids decide to enter the

water. They are splashing and having fun and several of the boys are getting farther from shore and into deeper water. They continue to play and dunk one another and horse around. One of the boys begins to cajole another into racing to a distant buoy. He is hesitant at first, but finally gives in to peer pressure. They take off swimming toward the buoy. One of the boys gains a considerable lead, and the other falls behind about halfway to the buoy. The one in the rear begins to quietly struggle in the water, and turns back toward shore. He swims a short distance and then begins to tread water and not making forward motion. He goes underwater once, and comes back up and yells for help. No one is close enough to assist, and the lead swimmer doesn't realize there's a problem. The boy goes under again, and doesn't come up. Kids on the shore begin to scream and the lead swimmer comes back to look for the missing boy. He dives underwater, but without success. Student on shore makes 9-1-1 call. Parents run to the water's edge, and may enter the water to assist with a search.

The Event

The student actors who participated in the filming of the event will not be at school this day. The students will know a field trip is pending, but ideally, they will not be aware of the particulars of the event. Several certified lifeguards will be mingled with the crowd playing the role of bystanders to ensure the safety of the students. Counselors will be on scene as well, as the events are very life-like and emotional support may be necessary. School officials will try to identify any students or staff which may be particularly sensitive to a mock-drowning scenario ahead of time to prevent any unnecessary emotional distress.

- Students will view the 3-5 minute video of the drowning event at the school
- A frantic 9-1-1 call from one of their fellow students will be broadcast over the school PA system.
 - Caller will hysterically state that his/her friend went under water and didn't come up, and to please hurry
- Students immediately load buses and drive to Airport Beach Park
 - While en route to park, buses are passed by emergency responders running code
 - Once at the park, students gather to watch the emergency operations
 - Emergency responders continue to arrive by land and by water
 - 2 fire department boats
 - Fire Truck (engine)
 - Game Warden boat
 - Game Warden truck
 - Several Waco PD vehicles
 - ETMC ambulance
 - Park Ranger boat and vehicles
 - Helicopter
 - Fire Department/Game Wardens establishes command of the incident
 - All radio traffic is run thru a PA system set up on location so the students can hear what is being said

- Lots of activity going on around them to keep them engaged
 - Dragging operations begin
 - Divers enter the water
 - Game Warden/Waco PD begin interviewing witnesses (student actors) and taking statements. Interviewer is miked up and conversation is heard over PS system
 - Media shows up as if it is a real incident and conduct interviews
 - Victim's parents/siblings/friends show up and are very emotional
 - Asking the kids that were there what happened
- Approximately 10 minutes into the incident, Grim Reaper appears, and lurks in the background behind students
 - Can arrive in fire truck or ambulance, and slip out unnoticed
 - As time passes, Grim Reaper makes his way to the edge of the water very slowly and deliberately. He stands very still watching the recovery operations off to the side of the group of students. He should in no way acknowledge them or anyone else on the scene
- If helicopter is on scene, command will release it when it is apparent there will be no need to transport (stated over PA system: "operation is transitioning from rescue to recovery")
- Recovery operations continue for around 30 minutes
- Justice of the Peace arrives on scene and is miked up
- Divers "find" victim and this is announced over the PA
 - Victim will be aboard a rescue boat the whole time, and will remain low and out of sight
 - Victim will have been airbrushed with paint to make him look deceased
 - At the appropriate time, he will slip off the boat through a dive door or off the back of the boat out of sight of students
 - He will remain out of sight until the diver has a hold on him
 - Diver will swim the victim to a rescue boat, making sure he is in plain view of the students on shore while doing so
 - Diver will hand the victim off to rescuers, and victim will be loaded into the boat
 - It is imperative that victim be limp and remain in character during this process to make it as realistic as possible
- Grim Reaper begins to slowly walk toward the courtesy dock as soon as victim is located
- Operations personnel will facilitate moving the group toward the courtesy dock (approximately 50 yards) following the Grim Reaper
- Once victim is aboard boat, boat SLOWLY moves toward dock, ensuring the group arrives at about the same time
- Boat ties up to dock, body bag laid out on dock, victim laid on body bag
- Grim Reaper stands off to side of the dock out of the way of family and rescuers
- Parents/siblings walk onto the dock to view body and are very emotional
- Students observe from the concrete area above the dock

- Justice of the Peace pronounces the death – heard over PA system
- Hearse arrives
- Victim is zipped into body bag, loaded onto stretcher and loaded into hearse
- Hearse leaves
- Students get on buses and go back to school
- All aspects of the event will be video recorded

After the students return to school, they will eat lunch. Counselors will be on site to provide emotional support, if necessary. At 1:00pm the same day, a mock memorial will take place at the school. Student actors will not return to school until the time of the memorial service.

Mock Memorial (22 May 2012)

This portion is primarily organized by the school. The funeral will take place in an auditorium or similar area where all students can gather. Casket will be closed, and a memorial slideshow of the victim will be showing as the students enter the auditorium, and as they are waiting for the service to start. A local minister will deliver a short service just as he would a real funeral (if victim attends church, his own pastor will be asked to do the service). A family member of a local drowning victim will speak for 5-10 minutes about the impact the drowning had on them and their family, and what could have been done to prevent the tragedy.

At the end of the service, the “victim” rejoins his classmates.

Distribute t-shirts, answer final questions.

Student/Parent Debriefing

This portion of the program is an opportunity to discuss what went right, what went wrong, and how to improve it in the future. Student actors, their parents, and school personnel will be invited. It will be held immediately after the memorial concludes.

Planning Committee Debriefing

All members of the planning committee will be invited, as well as emergency responders and volunteers who participated in the event. We will discuss the responses from the students and their parents, and what improvements can be made to the program. The meeting will likely be conducted in the week following the event.

Part 3: Getting the Message Out

The event itself will reach only a small part of our intended audience. We feel strongly that this message is important enough that it should reach as far and wide as possible. To facilitate this, the footage will be edited into a short video, and posted on YouTube. CDs of the event will be distributed to all participants and sponsors. Posters and banners will be developed with the **Forever 15** graphic, and the YouTube address will be across the bottom. A smart phone barcode will be incorporated into the posters as well. Posters will be distributed to all the area schools for display, and to other receptive locations (YMCA, hospitals, retail stores, mall, churches, libraries...etc.) Banners will be put up at park entrances and other high visibility locations, and possibly on a roadway billboard(s).

Part 4: Lessons Learned

Selection of Actors

The school principal, Ms. Mynarcik, hand selected these students based on her knowledge of their personality and character. They were the perfect choice for the program. They were all very mature, eager to do a good job and to make the program successful. Selection of the student actors is critical to the success of the program. Selected students must be counted on to remain quiet about the program, and to stay in character for the pre-filming and on the day of the event.

Parent/Student Meeting

In total, we had 3 meetings with the parents. The initial meeting was introducing ourselves and giving the parents the information about the program. We made sure they understood the details of the program, and the commitment required for it to be successful. We also made sure they understood that a program like this had never been done before, but that it would be similar to Shattered Dreams. All of the parents were immediately on board with the program, and indicated that they were excited for them and their kids to be a part of it. The second meeting occurred the day before pre-filming to ensure that everyone understood how the pre-filming would take place. Kids and parents were nervous, but excited and ready to go. The third meeting took place the night before the actual event, again to discuss details, and to give them the opportunity to see the pre-filmed portion.

Swimming Evaluation

We met at the pool three times. The first time we did the swimming test stated above, and quickly determined who our strong swimmers were. We also determined who our weak/non swimmers were. During the second pool session we practiced doing rescues and rehearsed the drowning scenario. Afterwards, the kids got to play water polo. It was a fun exercise for them, and it gave us the opportunity to evaluate swimming abilities – after significant exertion in the water. In the third pool session, we concentrated on rehearsing the drowning scenario, and made our determination on who would be the victim. We had 2 boys who both did a good job, but one did really exceptional at being limp and “dead” even when being lifted from the pool and onto the concrete. Because of this, he was our “victim”, and he did an outstanding job.

The swimming evaluation was, by far, the most important thing we did to ensure the safety of the student actors. Not only did it identify who our 2 “swimmers” should be, it also let us know who needed extra supervision during the lake portions of the event.

Pre-Filming

Overall, pre-filming went well. We had several boats and divers in place during the pre-filming, but we found it was difficult to keep them out of the camera shot if they were actually close enough to assist should an emergency arise. Again, knowing the abilities of the actors from the swimming evaluation allowed us to be confident that they would be safe during the “race” portion of the pre-filming.

One thing we would do differently would be to have parents engaging in more natural looking activities while on the shore. They are all sort of standing around, and it just doesn’t look right. Providing some picnic tables for them to sit at and giving them better direction about what to do would help.

One suggestion for pre-filming was to have some PFDs available (laying on the shoreline) but for no one to be using them – to bring home the importance of wearing PFDs.

Some of the footage was shot from the water looking back toward shore, and there were several pieces of good footage that had a camera man inadvertently in them. Most was edited out, but there is one place in the YouTube video in which a tripod and camera is visible. Better communication during this portion would help. We were never sure what was being filmed and by whom, because there were several cameras going at any time.

The Event

Overall, we feel that the program was very successful, but we identified several minor things we would do differently next time.

Communication:

We depended on the City of Waco Radio Shop and Emergency Management to provide communications for the event, and overall, they did an outstanding job. There were no communication issues that affected the success of the program. There were some small glitches, but the only one that would have been noticed by attendees would be that the helicopter arrived before being requested- almost before the incident had gotten started. Due to a radio programming error, the flight crew was unable to communicate with incident command, and therefore didn’t know when to arrive. The IC did a good job of getting on the radio and requesting the helicopter as soon as it became apparent they were circling to land. Waco Radio shop personnel provided a summary of communication issues which will be included with this report. Again, they were minor and had no significant impact on the success of the event.

General:

The dragging portion of the event took longer than we wanted. This is due to several factors:

1. Response times for vessels took too long. They need to be staged closer to the event location.
2. Divers were instructed to be completely geared up prior to leaving the staging area. They failed to do so, and time was spent while they got their gear on after arriving at the event location.
3. The boat intended to be used to get the victim in the water is equipped with a dive door to facilitate his covert exiting of the boat. On the morning of the event, that boat went down with mechanical failure, and we had to utilize a FD boat (without a dive door). Because the victim was going to have to go over the gunwale of the boat, we determined that the other two boats should place themselves between the victim's boat, and the shoreline as he exited. It took a little longer than expected to get this lined up.
4. The victim was wearing bright, neon pink swim trunks. This made it even more challenging to get him out of the boat and into the water without being seen. For future events, we recommend a more neutral color for the swim trunks of the victim.

-The dock was very hot, and we laid the victim on a canvas tarp provided by the FD. However, his foot was off of the tarp, and was almost burned by the aluminum. In the future, we need to ensure that we place something wet down on the dock, or take other measures to prevent the victim from getting too hot and uncomfortable.

-Remove the Grim Reaper from the program. It was referred to as "a bit of comic relief" by the Waco Tribune commentary, in an otherwise glowing article. Many of the students also mentioned the GR in their post event writing, and they thought it was cheesy.

The Memorial

This is the portion of the program that we received the most feedback about. The minister did a great job, and delivered a solid message about actions and consequences, but almost everyone we spoke to said it was too long. We were contacted by a couple of the parents in the weeks after the event, and they had some really good ideas that we will probably incorporate next time.

Instead of having a memorial service for the "victim", have a responder speak briefly to the student body about what took place, and why, and re-introduce the student "victim". Then have a guest speaker who has lost a loved one to drowning tell their story, and have a slideshow of the life of the "real" victim. The speaker at this memorial did an outstanding job of conveying her personal pain. Giving the students the opportunity to get to know her son through photos might bring the message home more than sitting through a mock memorial. We would follow this up with important water safety statistics, and ways for the kids to be safer when they visit the lake.

Part 3: Final Thoughts

Overall, we feel that this event was a success. Upon return to class, the students were encouraged to write their feelings about the program, and the comments were overwhelmingly positive. Several stated that the program had a significant impact on them, and it would always be in the back of their mind while they were at the lake.

The media coverage that Forever 15 received was excellent. It was all positive, and well received by the public, judging by the comments we heard. The video was uploaded to YouTube was viewed 1,355 times in the first week it was posted. We also posted 2 related PSAs on YouTube at the same time, and they were viewed 173 times, and 108 times in the first week.

We are currently working to publish poster and banners.