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MARCH 2009

# Advanced RESCUE TECHNOLOGY

## HAITI SCHOOL RESCUE

■ School Bus  
Over a Cliff — Part 2

■ Vehicle Extrication  
With Multiple Victims

Supplement to

**Firehouse**

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The challenge: How to take disparate rescue teams and resources and integrate them to successfully accomplish a complicated rescue scenario. The solution: A day-long field training exercise designed to mitigate a complex vehicle-and-technical-rescue scenario.

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Santa Barbara County firefighters were dispatched to a traffic accident in the foothills north of the City of Santa Barbara that involved a single vehicle that left the highway and landed on its roof, trapping two occupants inside the auto in a drainage ditch 20 feet below the highway.

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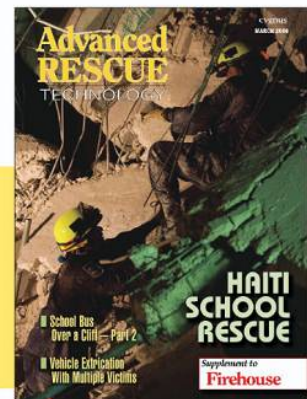
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## COVER

Rescue workers from USAID search for survivors in the La Promesse school after it collapsed in Petionville, Haiti. The school collapsed during classes, killing nearly 100 students and injuring many more.

Cover photo : AP Photo/Ramon Espinosa

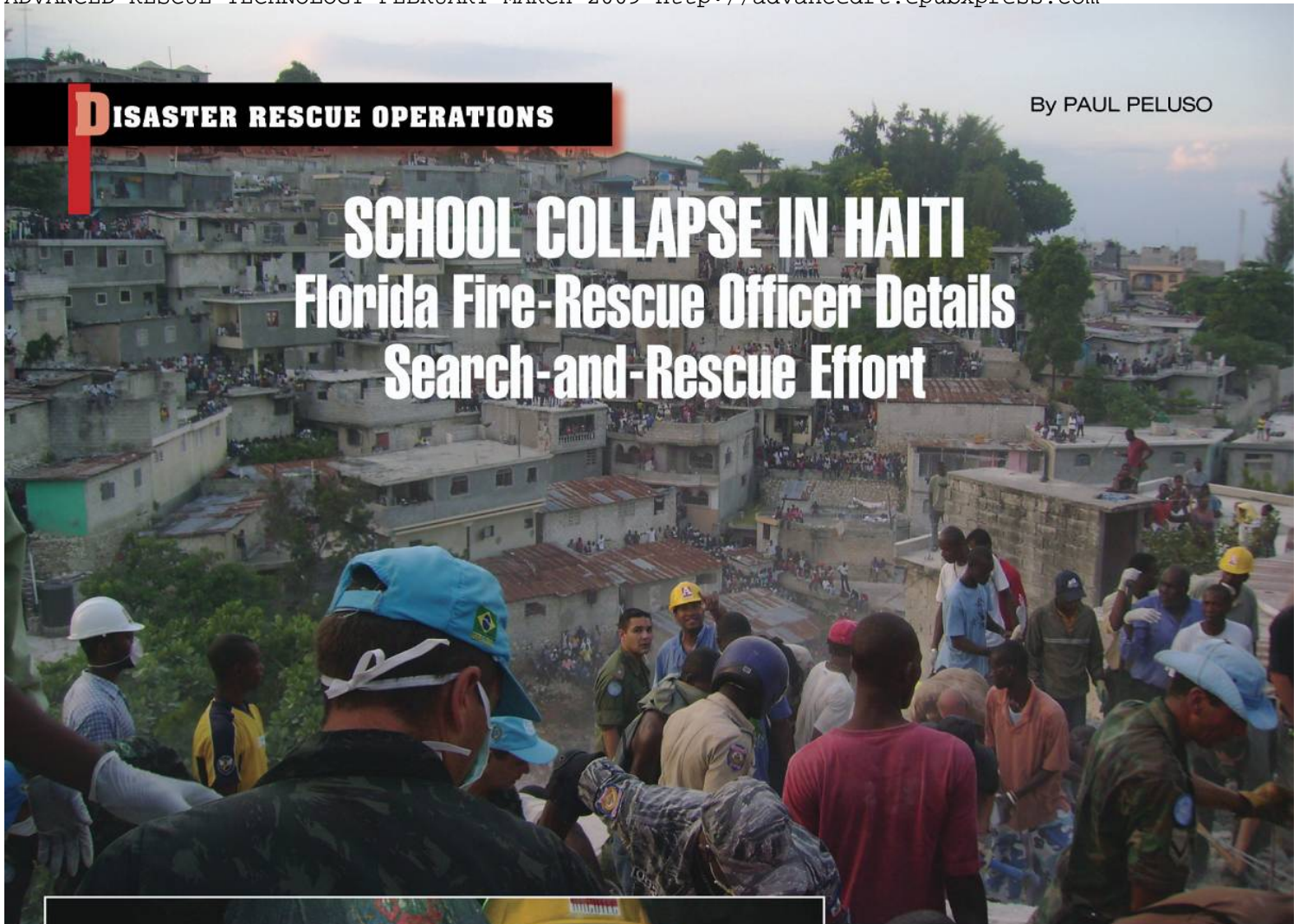


## DISASTER RESCUE OPERATIONS

By PAUL PELUSO

# SCHOOL COLLAPSE IN HAITI

## Florida Fire-Rescue Officer Details Search-and-Rescue Effort



West Palm Beach, FL, Fire Rescue Lieutenant Nate Lasseur carries a young boy named Enel who was rescued from under the rubble of a school that collapsed and killed nearly 100 children in Petionville, Haiti.  
*Courtesy of Nate Lasseur*

Rescue workers at the scene of the La Promesse School collapse.  
*Courtesy of Nate Lasseur*

A Sawzall, pieces of rebar, car jacks, a metal club hammer.

These aren't traditional extrication tools used by urban search and rescue (USAR) teams, but for West Palm Beach, FL, Fire Rescue Lieutenant Nate Lasseur and the Haitian firefighters and emergency workers he assisted following the Nov. 7, 2008, school collapse that claimed close to 100 students, it's what was available.

During the more than 15 hours he was on scene, four children were rescued from the rubble that housed the La Promesse School in Petionville, Haiti.

"Those guys don't have equipment, but they are very talented. They use what they have," he said, mentioning he saw some of the firefighters use car jacks to lift pieces of the rubble during the rescues.

"Sometimes we take things for granted here," the Haitian-American firefighter/paramedic said, looking back on the event. "Firefighters; we adapt and overcome. The firefighters in Haiti; their whole lives are about adapting and overcoming."

Lasseur arrived in the town of Port-au-Prince the previous day. It is a trip he makes as part of his nonprofit organization, Inter-

national Firefighters Assistance Inc., at least twice a year in order to deliver donated gear to the impoverished country's fire service (<http://ifare-lief.org/>). The following morning, he met with Fire Chief Gregory Donald Williams. The chief soon received the call alerting him to the collapse, but the magnitude of the incident was unknown at that time.

Lasseur planned on meeting the crew at the scene, mainly as a spectator. Little did he know he would soon take part in the most intense rescue of his life. He received a phone call from Cap-Haitien Chief Ardouin Zephirin, who also helps coordinate emergency response for the country. The chief explained the scope of the incident to Lasseur and told him to pick him up so he could gain access to the scene.

When they arrived at the school, Lasseur said, there were so many people there that they had to park about a mile away. He had the equipment he brought in tow.

"When we got on scene, it was so chaotic. There were so many people there," he said. "There were a lot of United Nations workers and police. Haiti has a history of...civil unrest and rioting. There's always lots of police around – but they weren't ready for something like this."

Lasseur said it became an all-hands situation, and that the civilians could not be told apart from the first responders. He joined with Zephirin and Williams to assess the situation and devise a plan of action.

There were just close to 20 firefighters on the scene, seven of whom were flown from Cap-Haitien.

"At that point, we surveyed the scene around the back of the building where the collapse of the school took place," he said.

As they did this, rescues were already being made; bodies were already being recovered. The scene became so loud and chaotic, that he told Zephirin to call on a police officer to use whistles and air horns to quiet the crowd.

Finally, there was silence.

A young boy's voice could be heard screaming for help. A 6-year-old boy was trapped in a triangular void space less than two feet wide and right above the space was a crushed body, its foot dangling below.

Lasseur said he remembered learning about similar void spaces often referred to as "The Triangle of Life" in past training and as soon as he saw it, he knew exactly what it was. He said the main reason the boy sur-



The front of the collapsed school. Photos courtesy of Nate Lasseur



Six-year-old Enel is seen trapped in the rubble of the school collapse that killed nearly 100 of his fellow students.



Makeshift shoring was used to rescue the boy, who was trapped in a triangular void space less than two feet wide.



Rescuers used whatever tools and implements they could find to dig through the rubble.

## DISASTER RESCUE OPERATIONS

vived was because he was located in the protective space.

"The location of where he was – there was no visual – only noise," he said.

The front of the boy's head was not accessible as he was positioned with his back to the opening and only had his right hand exposed to his rescuers. Once Lasseur was able to communicate with him by speaking Haitian Creole, the boy told him his name was Enel and that he just wanted to get out.

With no traditional extrication tools at his disposal, Lasseur and the rest of the crew had to improvise. Kyrk Baker, a volunteer with the Baptist Mission, had a Sawzall with only one spare battery that he began to use with Lasseur's direction.

Before exhausting the final battery, the men cut pieces of rebar that were used with a metal head club hammer to chisel away at the concrete that trapped the boy. No cribbing was available to build a proper vertical shoring system, so as the rescuers made progress, they used pieces of wood and other materials to shore the void of the expanding hole.

Once the men gained access to Enel's

back, Lasseur – who is also an EMS supervisor – established an IV of Lactated Ringer's to the boy's free arm. Since no tourniquets were available, he used a shoestring that was given to him by another rescuer. When the boy was hydrated, Lasseur removed the catheter and bandaged his arm.

As hours passed, more progress was made and the crew members were finally able to free Enel to the point where they could turn him around, but his legs were still trapped. They continued chipping away and little by little, Enel could move his legs. Lasseur directed him to push himself up using his arms, and he was able to remove himself from the void.

"Everybody just wanted this kid out," he said. "It was agonizing to hear him screaming. Whenever he would get quiet, everyone would get scared."

The collapse of the school building occurred around 10 A.M. and Enel was found at approximately 3:30 P.M. It would take over five hours to free him from the rubble. Once the boy was freed, Lasseur placed him in a truck that transported to the local general hospital. He tried to find the boy

the following day, but was unable to.

"I feel like God's purpose for me being there was to rescue that kid," he said. "There were so many people influential in saving this kid's life. I definitely didn't do this all by myself."

When he returned to the scene of the collapse on Saturday, he began to assist with recovery efforts along with French firefighters and the Fairfax County, VA, Search and Rescue Team.

As the dangerous conditions worsened, Lasseur left the scene after helping recover close to 20 bodies.

"I've been a firefighter for almost 12 years and this is definitely the biggest incident I've been involved in," he said. "I don't think my department has ever been involved in anything with 100 deaths without it being a natural disaster."


Lasseur didn't realize the magnitude of the incident until he saw an image taken by an Associated Press photographer of him holding Enel that was shown on CNN.

*Paul Peluso is a staff writer for Firehouse.com and has covered a wide range of public safety topics as a journalist.*

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