Moorgate train accident

February 2015 is the fortieth anniversary of the most serious train accident on London’s underground. Tony Moore describes the events surrounding the six-day rescue and recovery operation

A call to the London Ambulance Service (LAS): “Send an ambulance to Moorgate Station, a train driver has been injured,” signalled the start of the search and recovery operation nearly 20 metres below ground level at Moorgate Underground Station in London, UK.

Moorgate was at one end of a branch of the Northern Line; thus there was a dead-end tunnel at the terminal end of the platform. What no-one knew at the time was that a six-carriage train had sped through the station and ploughed in to the wall at 30 to 40 mph. Nearly 40 metres of train had been compressed into just under 22 metres of tunnel and it was estimated that there were around 300 people on the train.

Wreckage
The front carriage was in a ‘V’ shape with the front and rear ends facing up towards the roof and the middle still at ground level; the second carriage had ploughed underneath the rear of the first carriage and the third carriage had forced itself over the top of the second one. The emergency services built up their resources when the enormity of the accident became apparent and, over the next six days, a total of 1,324 firefighters, 80 ambulance personnel, 240 police officers, 16 doctors, 10 nurses, and numerous others from ancillary services took part in the operation. A joint services command area was established consisting of major incident command area and the forward command post were installed. The conditions were appalling. It was pitch dark and using their torches, rescuers had to edge their way over and alongside the wreckage, sometimes with 50cm or less space between the train and the tunnel wall.

A medical post was established in the middle third of the second carriage. From there, seriously injured casualties were passed along the tunnel by a chain of firefighters and taken to an emergency resuscitation area on an adjacent platform.

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By midday, 70 casualties had been removed; in the next three hours a further 11 were rescued by which time it was believed there were only two live casualties right at the front of the train. One was a young policewoman – a firefighter squeezed through a small gap in the wreckage to her and stayed with her until she was rescued.

The next four days saw a very slow recovery operation as it was essential for investigators that the front of the train where the driver’s body was located should be recovered without further damage.

By the third day 26 bodies had been removed from the wreckage and it was believed that 15 remained. The heat in the tunnel did not allow normal rigor mortis to occur; bodies had swollen considerably and exposed skin was blistering; damaged parts were beginning to break open. This swelling meant they became more secure in their trapped position, hampering removal.

Despite the air forced down from the surface, the oxygen content of the tunnel was sometimes as low as 16 per cent. Workers physically engaged in the recovery operation were only allowed to work for 20 minutes below ground, followed by 40 minutes at ground level. On the fourth day, all those physically involved in the recovery operation were directed to shower and don a complete set of new clothing before leaving the scene. Showers were set up immediately outside the station and discarded protective clothing cleaned and recycled.

To this day, investigators are still unclear as to the cause of the accident.

Author

Tony Moore is a Fellow and President Emeritus of the Institute of Civil Protection and Emergency Management. He is a member of London Historians and the Police History Society and a regular contributor to CRJ

The Moorgate Tube crash: London Ambulance Service provided rescuers with ‘shell’ dressings soaked in antiseptic, secured around the mouth and nose, to reduce inhalation of dust and foul air. A police officer said: “It was like trying to work in a sardine can.” A doctor said: “If there’s a hell, I’ve lived to see it.”