

CALLING IN THE TROOPS

The Salvation Army has been called the most effective organization in the country.
New York City now knows why. **By John Sedgwick and Loch Adamson**



IT WAS ONE OF THE SALVATION ARMY'S

largest mobilizations ever on U.S. soil. Within an hour of the September 11 terrorist attacks, about 200 officers in their epaulet jackets and blue caps started scrambling to the three disaster sites, assisted by 5,000 more Salvation Army volunteers. In New York City, they came first from divisional headquarters on 14th Street, then from outposts in Brooklyn, Queens, and Nassau County; from upstate New York; and finally from New England, the mid-Atlantic states, the South, and the Midwest. All to “serve the servants,” as national commander John Busby puts it, by offering the rescue forces the Army’s unique kind of balm: coffee, hot meals, a change of clothes, words of comfort, an occasional prayer. Or whatever else might be needed: American flags to drape over a refrigerated truck bearing the remains of a fallen policeman, hundreds of teddy bears to comfort the children of the victims, Vicks VapoRub for the rescuers to smear inside their nostrils to cover the acrid stench of death and burning metal. Small things, but, as the grateful recipients declared over and over, they made all the difference at ground zero. And because of its history, mission, and culture, the Salvation Army was uniquely equipped to provide them.

“As soon as we knew that one tower got hit with an airliner, it clicked on us: This is big,” says Moises Serrano, the Salvation Army’s director of disaster services for New York City. “And we started pulling people in from all over.” Army personnel were so attuned to pressing need that some arrived before they were bidden. The Army set up 21 “canteens,” or mobile feeding stations, to provide hot food, energy bars, water, socks, soft drinks, toothbrushes, and aspirin to firefighters, policemen, and rescue personnel, serving 300,000 meals in the first 72 hours of the crisis alone. Its trucks, bearing the distinctive red Salvation Army shield on their gleaming sides, were symbols of order amid the wreckage. One immense tractor trailer, capable of serving 1,000 meals an hour, was driven in from Florida; another came from Chicago to become an emergency command center across the river in New Jersey. For the first 20 hours, Captain Serrano’s assistant, Steve Hirshberg, accompanied the fire department’s incident commander, keeping his finger on the pulse of the rescue operation. The Army’s New York Temple Corps, adjacent to the divisional headquarters on 14th Street, set up 40 temporary cots for the overworked staff of nearby St. Vincent’s Hospital and made room for spent rescue workers and their tired search dogs as well. The Corps members also performed outdoor religious services, and a brass band, tears streaming down its members’ faces, played “Amazing Grace” and “God Bless America” for the rescue workers.

Dozens of Army grief counselors hurried to makeshift morgues to offer whatever comfort they could to the emotionally drained rescue teams. Watching from a distance, Salvation Army personnel might spot only a tattered bit of a suit or a shoe when a body bag flapped open. But they saw more distinctly the drawn

faces and tight lips of the rescue workers crushed by their grief. The Army fanned out to minister to searchers combing through the rubble and to the victims’ families searching desperately for news of their loved ones. “I’d start by saying something like ‘You look tired,’” says Major Molly Sholtzberger, a veteran of the TWA Flight 800 crash off Long Island, who was the head of the counseling team. “If they want to talk, I let them talk. And then I try to reinforce the feeling that whatever they’re feeling is okay.”

The Salvation Army commandeered 24 warehouses—one of them an unused hangar at Kennedy Airport that Wal-Mart agreed to organize—to provide about a million square feet of space to handle the overwhelming influx of in-kind donations from Americans eager to help. Trucks lined up by the hundreds, loaded with goods: 10,000 sandwiches, 400 50-pound bags of food for the rescue dogs, half a million cases of water, thousands of bottles of eyedrops. Filene’s sent \$30,000 worth of shirts, jeans, and socks for the emergency workers. Tyson Foods sent thousands of frozen chickens and a cooking station for preparing them. While much was helpful, much more was not. What to do with 15 brand-new lawn mowers? But the new all-terrain vehicle that arrived unexpectedly proved wondrous for driving over fire hoses. Still, the Army quickly found itself overwhelmed by useless goods that it nonetheless needed to sort and store for eventual distribution to any of its facilities that could use them. It quickly put out the word to America: Stop.

The Army worked instead with local businesses to help provide items that were needed. At a Wal-Mart store that was still awaiting its grand opening in nearby Union, New Jersey, employees swept the shelves of all bedding, T-shirts, charcoal respirators, tables, and chairs to rush them to the rescue effort. A local Home Depot donated \$13,000 worth of picks and shovels. When the Salvation Army needed ingredients for thousands of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, officers had only to go to the nearest supermarket and grab whatever they needed for free. The Army arranged a spirit-boosting visit from the New York Jets, who pitched in for a few hours, some at the Army counseling center at Pier 94. And it got student chefs from the French Culinary Institute to prepare 1,500 dinners a day for rescue workers.

Meanwhile, the organization provided food and makeshift shelter for some 50,000 travelers stranded in Canada. It also had to act quickly to restore the 800-SAL-ARMY number and the servers for the Army’s Web site, both of which had crashed, overwhelmed by the response of a public eager for information on how to help. A million dollars a day in donations flooded in at the local level; national headquarters fielded the bigger contributions, such as the \$10 million that came in from the Lilly Endowment foundation the day after the crisis struck. Nationwide, the Army also set up extra phone lines to handle calls from an anxious citizenry needing prayers and reassurance.



The Salvation Army's distinctive red shield is right up there with the Coca-Cola bottle and the Nike Swoosh logo as one of the best-known and most trusted branding symbols around the world.

Captain Moises Serrano, director of disaster services in New York, was put to the test his first month on the job.

pledged to continue to assist the families of the victims for years, if need be.

Although the Salvation Army may seem as local, and as American, as the nearest firehouse, it is in fact an international organization, headquartered in London, that operates in 108 countries around the world. A high-Victorian divine named William Booth formed the order in 1865 to offer "soup, soap, and salvation" to the slum dwellers of London's East End. His Salvation Army spread to the United States in 1880, when a party of eight set foot in New York City's Battery Park, just a few blocks from where the twin towers would later be built. The religious ambassadors knelt, planted the Salvation Army flag, and claimed America for God.

The early Salvationists succeeded by grafting themselves onto American culture—changing the lyrics of the song "My Old Kentucky Home," for

THE SALVATION ARMY,

with its 9,222 centers and 45,096 employees coast to coast, is probably best known for its work with the homeless, the addicted, and the poor. But beginning with the Galveston, Texas, flood of 1900, the Army has been on the scene of virtually every U.S. disaster. In recent years, it was there for Hurricane Andrew in 1992, the Oklahoma City bombing, and for the many Midwestern floods of the 1990s. Besides the Red Cross, the Salvation Army is the only national organization to be routinely welcomed at such scenes; it served nearly 2 million disaster victims last year.

It was in the aftermath of Hurricane Andrew that the Salvation Army, always on the lookout for an unmet need, extended its commitment to disaster relief. The Army decided to stay on in Homestead, Florida, for three years after the hurricane struck to work with Habitat for Humanity and other organizations, helping rebuild the many destroyed homes. In the current crisis, Commissioner Busby says, the Army's disaster-relief operation is committed to staying in New York City and Washington for as many months as it takes to clear away the devastation, and it has

instance, into a Salvationist hymn—and by providing good newspaper copy with their military attire and fervent ways. But the organization didn't begin to fully integrate itself into American life until the First World War. General John J. Pershing had been immensely grateful for the Salvationists' help after a fire ravaged his San Francisco home in 1915, killing several members of his family, and he allowed 250 Salvationists to assist troops near the front lines. There, they offered doughnuts and coffee and many of the small kindnesses that are now so appreciated in New York City and at the Pentagon site in Washington. The tender and compassionate "Sallies," as the female volunteers were known, were not forgotten when the servicemen returned home.

Such high-profile good works have proved to be the best form of advertising. Even now, the Salvation Army has no marketing department and no extensive public relations staff. Its actions are allowed, if not required, to speak for themselves. In the current disaster-relief campaign, the Army is certainly grateful for the banner ads that Yahoo and a number of other Internet sites have placed on their behalf, but they have not solicited them. Such nobility comes at a cost, however. Whereas in the first two weeks



It's two hours from here to ground zero; they leave every morning at six and return at eight in the evening. The decor is spartan, the food plain, the hours long. No one complains.

Major Molly Shotzberger's counseling team provided a calming presence amid the chaos in New York City.

dispensing funds (nonprofit experts put the acceptable minimum flow-through rate at 60 to 70 percent). Peter F. Drucker, author and co-founder of the Drucker School of Management at Claremont Graduate University, has called the Army the "most effective organization in the United States. No one even comes close to it with respect to clarity of mission, ability to innovate, measurable results, dedication, and putting money to maximum use."

The Salvation Army is not a social-services agency such as, say, the American Red Cross or Goodwill Industries, to pick two organizations with which the Army is often compared. Nor is it, as some might assume, a branch of the military. It is, in fact, a Protestant church in which the officers are all ministers; its theology has over the years migrated away from the tub-thumping Methodism of its founder toward something closer to Christian fundamentalism.

after the disaster the Salvation Army gathered just \$21 million for its relief efforts, the American Red Cross and the United Way, working with New York Community Trust, have collected more than \$330 million between them.

Yet at least until recently, such modesty—reinforced by the consciously retro quality of those old-fashioned uniforms and the non-sense spirit the military style implies—has been a winning formula. By virtually every measure, the Salvation Army has emerged as the GE of philanthropies, the most admired and most successful charity in the land. The Army's distinctive red shield is right up there with the Coca-Cola bottle and the Nike Swoosh logo as one of the best-known and most trusted of branding symbols, not just in the United States but around the world. And for eight straight years, the Army has owned the No. 1 spot on the Chronicle of Philanthropy's list of the country's most popular charities. More impressively, with \$1.4 billion in private contributions last year, the Army took in more than twice as much as the No. 2 charity, the national YMCA, which garnered just under \$700 million. With an extraordinary 85 percent flow-through rate of contributions applied directly to charitable services, the Army is also a leader in

ism. The Salvation Army still preaches an everlasting hell and a literal interpretation of the Bible. This strict theology led to a rare public relations disaster last summer when the *Washington Post* reported that the Army was pushing for exclusion from state and local laws against antihomosexual bias, in exchange for its support of the Bush administration's "faith-based" initiative. The resulting Beltway ruckus was probably exaggerated. No one ever claimed the Army refuses to help gays; it is reluctant only to hire them as officers—and therefore as ministers—because of what Salvationists see as a biblical injunction against sex outside of marriage. (The Catholic Church, of course, has equivalent prohibitions against ordaining women.) But any ill will has been dispelled by the events of September 11. "The American people can see where our hearts are," says Busby.

If it weren't for the religious impulse, the Salvation Army's disaster-relief efforts would probably be almost indistinguishable from those of the American Red Cross, which likewise tries to salve the psychic wounds of disaster victims and their rescuers. The Red Cross is far more a professional organization than a religious one. The Salvation Army officers, by contrast, passed out

Bibles along with the hot meals at the canteens and distributed small angel pins. Most Salvation Army facilities contain a church sanctuary, or, in its parlance, a "corps." The Sunday after the Pentagon was struck, the facility in Arlington, Virginia, held its usual services—this time for an overflow crowd of 200—even as dozens of Salvation Army personnel were busy organizing the Pentagon relief effort in the next room.

The religious dedication is not just for Sundays, though. It is the constant electricity on which the organization runs. It accounts for a good deal of the Army's fabled fiscal efficiency. It means the Army can pay its officers and employees a small percentage of what they would earn in the for-profit sector, largely because, like monks and missionaries, they believe it is compensation enough to be doing God's work. Commissioner John Busby, head of a national enterprise with a \$2.1 billion budget, is paid only about \$13,000 a year—a fraction of the \$450,010 commanded by Bernadine Healy, the president of the American Red Cross. "It's really more a living allowance than a salary," Busby notes, pointing out that all Army officers are also provided with free company housing and transportation. (When officers are transferred, they simply take down a few personal pictures, gather up their clothes, and walk out the door. Everything else, right down to the sheets and silverware, belongs to the Army.) "I don't miss anything you can buy with money," Busby says. "I'm in the will of God, doing what he wants me to do. There's no higher purpose than that."

On an organizational level, such passionate dedication further tightens an already military-style cohesion. Paul G. Schervish, head of Boston College's Social Welfare Research Institute, points out that Army directives from central headquarters are not dissipated as they travel down through the ranks but "amplified and reenergized." Why? "Because the Army's officers are bearers of the core mission, not just employees," he says. "They're motivated with a missionary zeal, every one of them." Engaging in none of the dispiriting cynicism that saps most large organizations, the Salvationists accept what other professionals would regard as deprivation—such as their billets in the barracks-like Camp Tecumseh, in small, rural Pittstown, New Jersey, where many of the bused-in Salvationists are being housed during the rescue effort. It's two hours from here to ground zero; they leave every morning at six and return at eight in the evening. The decor is spartan, the food plain, the hours long. No one complains.

But this religious impulse has operational implications too. Schervish's "bearers" take it upon themselves to make the mission statement a reality every day. While many organizations claim a bottom-up mentality, the Salvation Army regularly exhibits it. The whole vast organization is not structured as the usual pyramid. It is more like a giant ball that rolls about depending on circumstances, putting virtually anyone at the top on any given day. In the beginning of the New York City crisis, it was Serrano, who had accepted his position only the month before, who became the national organization's point man, making command decisions about the deployment of equipment and personnel on the fly, without any second-guessing from the higher-ups. The moment Serrano heard about the terrorist attack on the radio, he got word to the divisional commander, his putative boss, Major Carl Schoch, who in turn conferred with his boss, the territorial commander Joe Noland,

who is in charge of the entire Northeast. Commissioner Noland in turn called national headquarters. All the way up, the only question from superiors was "What do you need?"

IN NEW YORK CITY

the Salvation Army soldiers on. The initial hope that survivors would be found in the rubble has long since given way to the grim realization that, as Serrano puts it, "this is a recovery, not a rescue mission now." The acrid air around the vast pile has thickened with the stench of rotting food from surrounding apartments and grocery stores whose power was cut off in the blast. The memorial roses and daisies duct-taped to the streetlights have wilted; the photographs and descriptions of the missing have started to tatter and fade. For days now, Captain Steven Lopes, the head of a facility in Waltham, Massachusetts, has been commuting to his ground zero canteen from Camp Tecumseh. He's exhausted; every muscle aches, his eyes are rheumy from fumes, and some of the clothes he's wearing are streaked with ash. It's hard to stay strong. When a fireman who had come to his canteen heard that Lopes was an ordained minister, he hugged the Salvationist and burst into tears. "That's the kind of pressure these men are under," Lopes says. "I'm frustrated we can't do more to fix it." His colleague Captain Eduardo Zuniga tells the story of a couple of firefighters who, moments before, had come upon two bodies. "The men just lost it," Zuniga says, and then he starts to cry too.

Such despair challenges one's faith. The scale of the devastation is so monstrous, the meaning so elusive. With the bodies not just pulverized in the twin towers' collapse but incinerated in the 2,000-degree fireball of burning fuel, the remains are not necessarily under the wreckage but literally in the air, in the dusty particles that descend on everyone like nuclear snow. In the face of such horror, ordinary people inevitably falter. The Salvation Army personnel are not immune. "There are two or three we've had to pull out of there," one official admits. But most of the rest have been able to offer something that is, at such times, invaluable: a sense of constancy, a sense of the human amid the ruin.

It's a vicious irony that the terrorists brought such destruction in the name of their god, and now the Salvation Army officers (among many others) are trying to bring peace in the name of theirs. Time and again, the Salvation Army officers speak of the many ways their god has sustained them through the crisis, and, through them, has sustained others. "We bring a calming presence," says Molly Shotzberger. She felt it herself the first haunting evening at ground zero when she heard someone scream "Run!" because another building was falling. "I ran with everything I had," she says. "I thought, This is it. But still, all I could feel was this tremendous sense of peace all around me." Through the efforts of the Salvationists, that peace may envelop others too. Already there has been an outpouring of love amid the smoldering rubble of what used to be the World Trade Center: the hero's welcome given to the rescuers, the camaraderie between departments that were more inclined to feud just weeks ago. This is not all the Salvation Army's doing, but it has certainly done its part. Sometimes small things can indeed make all the difference.

John Sedgwick's novel, The Dark House, has just appeared in paperback from HarperCollins. Loch Adamson is a staff writer for Worth.