

ORGANIZED COMMAND STRUCTURE AT MAJOR INCIDENTS

By

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"YE KNOW NOT THE DAY NOR THE HOUR"

This extract from the Bible really sums up the need for contingency planning for an organized command structure at major incidents. It is too late to attempt such a structure when the incident occurs.

Man-made disasters occur with little or no warning, natural disasters may be preceded by a warning phase, but this will be too short for last minute planning to be thought about. There are some sixty different situations which may result in a disaster and without exception they will all demand some basic needs -- warning of the public in case of some disasters and the rescue operation in all disasters.

The United Kingdom definition of "Disaster" is:

"A serious disruption to life arising with little or no warning, causing or threatening death or injury to numbers of people in excess of those which can be dealt with by the public services operating under normal conditions and requiring the special mobilization and organization of those services."

No criteria casualty figure can be placed on incidents, each incident must be considered on its merits. Those involving public transportation may become "Major" merely because of the alarm caused to relatives of those who might reasonably have been expected to be using that transport, even though actual casualty figures may be small. In general, however, a casualty figure of 40 persons will require special mobilization of the emergency services.

The speaker will present examples of the more common types of incident which create problems for the various services and will indicate the responsibilities of the various services in relation to such incidents as follows:

- Building Collapse in a Shopping Precinct
- Main Line Railway Crash
- Air Crashes -- in open country
 - close to town
 - in a town or city
- Bombing and Terrorist Incidents
- High Rise Building Fires
- Industrial Explosions
- Overtaken Chemical Transportation
- Multi-Vehicle Road Crashes
- Flooding
- Public Demonstrations

Immediately following any incident there will be chaos irrespective of whether contingency planning has been made beforehand. Plans should be such as to permit a system of control and coordination becoming established as soon as possible. Plans must be common to all organizations so that each knows the goals of the other, thus avoiding the need for on-the-spot policy decisions.

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Plans must be made so that they are both simple and flexible and allow for personal initiative at the scene. They must follow the normal everyday procedures of the service and yet be capable of rapid expansion to meet the situation confronting the services at the disaster.

Overall control and coordination is essential and this must be in the hands of one person who has authority to act without reference to any governing body at the time of the emergency. That person must be seen to be capable of holding such a position. In the United Kingdom, all services have agreed that the senior police officer at the scene will assume such a role. He will be in direct command of his own police officers and will additionally coordinate the work of the other services. He must not interfere with the command of other services and yet always be readily available to receive progress reports from the other services and be prepared to make policy decisions affecting human life and property. Problems common to all services will be the responsibility of the senior police officer.

Police, because of their physical presence patrolling areas at all times, are most often the first emergency personnel to arrive at an incident. They will establish the initial intervention procedures, control of the incident and many other essential tasks pending the arrival of the expert services to whom they will subsequently hand over that responsibility.

There must be an agreed alerting procedure and most importantly a clear coordinated plan for dealing with casualties and their evacuation from the scene. The main problem at any incident is the release of public information, particularly that relating to casualties, where friends and relatives will be clamoring for news of their well-being or otherwise.

The main task of the British Police is the provision of a casualty information and enquiry bureau. This involves documentation at hospitals, establishing a central record system and informing friends and relatives of persons involved, whether it be an accident, terrorist situation or a natural disaster.

Heads of services likely to be involved in incidents need to get to know each other before an incident occurs; they also need to know how other services will react. A Joint Planning Committee goes a long way to achieving this goal.

Identification of key personnel is essential, in fact, all personnel working in a controlled incident area should ideally be identifiable either by their uniform or special identifying clothing clearly marked with the role of the person. Identification must be in full language and not initial letters, abbreviations or diagrammatic representation, which can usually only be identified by persons with an intimate knowledge of the organization.

Some incidents require special services, such as air crashes where there is a need to preserve the scene for professional investigators.

The speaker will present slides which clearly show the various aspects of disaster intervention and coordination. Apart from the typical disasters already mentioned,

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slides will depict the needs of property recovery, marking the dead, identification, recovery and mortuary activity and the running of a Central Casualty and Enquiry Bureau.

An attitude of "It could never happen to us" is doomed from the onset. Everybody must be in a position to say "Yes, we are prepared for any incident that might occur but, let us look at other incidents elsewhere in the world and see if we can still further improve our readiness, planning, control and coordination".