

MASS EMERGENCY PROBLEMS AND PLANNING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE POLICE

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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 if we are to effectively deal with the unexpected emergency when it occurs.

Disasters do not generally occur as the result of a single malfunction. There are generally a number of contributory factors which, had they happened on their own, would not produce an emergency situation, but, because they sometimes occur simultaneously produce an emergency situation of disaster proportions. Not least amongst these factors is the human failure to correctly react or respond to circumstances when the occasion demands. It therefore follows that disasters can to some degree be obviated by the training of staff in their emergency action procedures and the efficient supervision of staff and processes. However confident one might be regarding the effectiveness of such training, one must still be prepared to meet the disaster when it occurs. Natural disasters cannot be prevented, but contingency planning can reduce the consequences of such disasters by enabling an advance warning of the pending situation, such as flood, hurricane, etc., to be given and for the rapid intervention of evacuation plans designed to protect the individual and lessen the effects of the disaster.

My research has shown that in the United

Kingdom some 60 different situations can produce a disaster scene. These situations invariably occur when a combination of events happens simultaneously. One such example occurred in England in 1975. A light aircraft lost engine power on take-off from an airport because of the chance presence of a flock of birds. The pilot decided on an emergency landing in nearby fields and this would probably have been completed successfully without loss of life and with little damage to the aircraft. However, the emergency landing path did involve the pilot crossing a road. At the precise second that the aircraft crossed the road at almost ground level a car was driven across its path. The aircraft struck the car, killing all the occupants and, whilst the pilot still managed to land his aircraft without further loss of life, considerably more damage was occasioned to the aircraft than would have been the case had the car not been present.

TYPICAL DISASTER INCIDENTS

Let us look at some typical situations which in the past have produced a major disaster:

1. A Building Collapse in a Shopping Centre

Usually some advance warning might be expected from a surveyor or architect, but occasionally a building will collapse without warn-

ing. Had it collapsed in the middle of the night when shops were closed there would have been few, if any, pedestrians about and the incident would not be classified as major. What though, would be the case when the incident occurs on a Saturday afternoon in a shopping precinct busy with pedestrian shoppers? We are faced with a situation where the number of persons involved is unknown and therefore a complete clearance of the debris becomes necessary before the emergency services can assure themselves that no casualties remain. In this instance only five persons were killed and ten injured – a small number considering the surrounding circumstances. Had the shop been displaying television sets showing an important sporting event there would probably have been many more pedestrians watching the display and thus a much higher casualty figure would have resulted.

2. A Main Line Train Crash

The essential ingredient to such an incident is the fact that there is a railway line running through an area. Where there is a railway then a plan for dealing with such an incident should be required. Emergency services can survey the route of the track during planning and record the best access points to various sections, thus ensuring a rapid mobilisation. Should such planning not have been undertaken one can imagine the services arriving at the scene only to find their access made difficult by the presence of a high embankment or deep cutting. Planning might have revealed access by a level crossing some distance away as being more suitable for an approach. Like the collapsed building, this type of accident must be fully searched before the services can be confident that nobody remains in the debris.

3. An Air Crash in Open Country

Unlike the train crash, nobody can predict

where an aircraft will crash. Whilst statistics show that the majority of crashes and incidents occur at or in the vicinity of airports one must plan for a crash taking place anywhere in the country or in the coastal waters surrounding the country. A crash in the country often presents the rescuers with few access roads but, being isolated from the densely populated areas, the ever present band of sightseers will not be immediately on the scene, thus giving the emergency services reasonable access to the site and affording sufficient time for large scale area closures to be instituted. Crashes in the country generally only involve the aircraft and thus the number of persons involved can be accurately known from the information provided by the operating airline.

4. An Air Crash Close to a Town or City

This kind of situation presents similar problems to the previous case. However with the generally better network of road communication and proximity to a populated area, sightseers often reach the scene before the emergency services and thus not only create a problem of their control but also effectively delay the arrival of the urgently needed help at the scene.

5. An Air Crash on a Town or City

Such a situation presents problems of sightseers, access by emergency services and the many possibilities of persons on the ground being involved. There is no fixed number of casualties or victims, the services are faced with unknown figures of shoppers in stores, residents in houses and passing vehicles involved. All action has to be geared to the complete search of the affected area and will undoubtedly result in numerous enquiries being received by the police from anxious relatives and friends of persons possibly involved. One can envisage all manner of combinations in relation to an aircraft, but the

following description is one that might well occur.

6. A Large Passenger-Carrying Aircraft Crash on a City

In March, 1974, a large capacity aircraft crashed in France north of Paris with a death toll of 346 persons. Had that aircraft remained in the air for another twelve minutes and then crashed, the experts tell us that it would probably have landed on London. Even before this incident the Police Force had conducted a study on the results of such a crash in the City of London. The study was based on data provided by a major aircraft manufacturer obtained from an actual crash in open country. The damage data was divided by four as it was thought that a heavily built up area like the City would have effectively reduced the spread of wreckage. Even then the area involved remained too large for a practical study, so it was decided to restrict the study to a triangular area of about 150 yard sides with its apex at the point of impact. The study showed that during a working day there are upwards of 5,000 persons working in offices within the triangle thus presenting a very high casualty figure. It takes little imagination to consider the numerous problems which would be involved in such a situation. Looking at the casualty situation alone, local hospitals would be unable to cope with the casualties and it is anticipated that, if we are ever to be confronted with such a situation, we would be obliged to send the lightly injured casualties to hospitals up to 30 miles away, keeping the local hospitals available to deal with the serious injuries.

7. The Bombing Incident

This kind of event presents yet another planning consideration. There is a need for an instantly operational evacuation and protection plan and, should the bomb detonate,

then a crime investigation plan coupled with a search plan to ensure that even remote casualties unable to help themselves are rapidly located and given emergency aid treatment.

8. The High Rise Building Fire

Whilst it is acknowledged that the United Kingdom has the most rigorous fire safety regulations and escape procedures, one cannot overlook the natural human tendency to move upwards away from fire and smoke if one finds oneself confronted with a situation that effectively prevents the logical movement downwards through the building. On reaching the rooftop a person would find no further means of escape and thus it becomes the task of the emergency services to effect rescue of such individuals. The modern building is sometimes of such a height that conventional fire ladders will not reach rooftop level. Where no buildings abut the affected building there are no means of escaping sideways and thus an alternative means of escape and rescue must be forthcoming. Such means will usually come from a helicopter which, if uncontrolled, can result in a number of machines flying round the building like bees round a honey-pot. Planning must therefore be considered for controlling the use of helicopters in such circumstances.

9. The Industrial Explosion

The devastating explosion at Flixborough in June, 1974, presented the emergency services with hitherto unprecedented problems. A very large area was devastated, initially an unknown number of persons were on the site at the time and all records relating to them had been destroyed in the blast. Added to this was the need to evacuate persons from damaged residential property and later further evacuation considerations were necessary due to the possible effects of chemical laden smoke clouds.

10. The Overtaken Chemical Tanker

Such an incident can present equally serious problems to those of an industrial explosion, especially if the incident occurs in a densely populated and built-up area. There is a need in such incidents to rapidly identify the danger, to organize a quick evacuation of the immediate area, if necessary, and furthermore, to treat those casualties that have been exposed to the effects of the chemical. If further casualties and damage are to be avoided there is a need for clear planning and training of personnel on their intervention and identification procedures.

11. The Multi-Vehicle Road Crash

Once again this presents the situation of an unknown number of persons involved and the need for complete search and assessment of the incident. Vehicles concerned could be carrying a variety of different chemical products which, if allowed to mix together, could produce noxious fumes and potential explosion. The nature of the road layout often dictates the means of access by the services. Where motorways or isolated country roads are involved this can often present a considerable tail-back problem with the consequent obstruction to the arrival of emergency services at the scene. By pre-planning and establishing flexible but workable access plans the services can be given the ready intervention access that they require.

12. The Flooding Menace

This is an example of a natural disaster. Planning can provide for a warning to be given to the public whereby action can be taken to minimise the effects of the pending flood. Such incidents usually persist in their effect long after the flood waters have subsided, presenting a residue of silt, health hazards and long term disruption to public services.

It is often many weeks, sometimes months, before normal life can be resumed in such areas.

13. The Large Public Demonstration

One can be excused for not immediately considering such an event to be a form of major incident. However, each demonstration contains the essential ingredients for a disaster. Whilst organisers and police in the United Kingdom invariably plan such events amicably there is always the possibility of uncontrolled movements, possibly toward a series of pedestrian stairways. Such a movement need only involve a single person tripping on the stairways and falling to the ground thereby effectively presenting another "Ibrox Park" type of disaster where the oncoming crowd, oblivious of the obstruction ahead of it, continues its onward movement, causing more persons to fall over the initial obstruction and causing numerous, sometimes fatal, injuries.

14. The Complete Unforeseen Incident

The Moorgate Underground Disaster of February, 1975, is an example of such an incident. It presented all the emergency services with hitherto unprecedented problems of access, control and public demand for information. Perhaps this incident clearly illustrates the need for contingency plans to be kept simple in order to afford flexibility and the use of initiative by the intervention services.

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF AN INCIDENT

It is inevitable that there will be initial chaos following any incident. This is encouraged by the everyday training of the police officer in the United Kingdom, who, right from the day of joining the service, is taught to act on his or her own and make his or her own decisions. Naturally, every officer will initially continue such a policy and afford

such assistance as is immediately necessary in his or her own eyes. No amount of planning can overcome such reaction but the plan will contain a policy of police officers working as groups instead of individuals on such occasions. Where this type of plan is in existence, a progressive establishment of control and co-ordination can be achieved in a comparatively short time.

The foregoing gives some idea of the range of activity that disaster can present to the various emergency services. There is no doubt that the initial activity at the scene can affect the long term intervention at the outset. A plan which ensures a rapid response by police to an incident, especially one that ensures a police presence within ten to fifteen minutes will considerably help to both reduce the number of casualties and also the amount of damage to property. It will, furthermore, ensure the future success of the operation with its rapid establishment of essential control and co-ordination.

In the United Kingdom such an early response is often the sole presence of police officers at the scene before the arrival of the other services. This is not because the police are more efficient, but because the other services are not normally operational on the ground throughout the 24 hours of a day, but waiting in their respective stations for notification of an emergency. Quite often the police officer is considerably nearer the scene when the initial message is received.

Before the arrival of the other services, apart from the general responsibility of the police, the primary duties are:

- Protection of Life and Property;
- Rendering First Aid to the Victims;
- Initiating Evacuation when Necessary;
- Searching for and Rescuing the Injured;
- Cordoning off the Affected Area;
- Establishing Emergency Services Approach Routes;
- Preventing Looting in the Area;

- Ensuring that the Other Services are Informed;
- Controlling Panic at the Scene;
- Controlling and Utilising Sightseers;
- Classifying Casualties According to Their Injuries;
- Activating a Mutual Aid Plan for Assistance, Organising and Directing Volunteers;
- Determining the Scope of the Disaster;

and meanwhile continuing police cover elsewhere in the Force area.

Amongst the primary duties are those of first aid to victims, searching for and rescuing casualties, and classifying casualties according to their degree of injury. These are not normally police tasks in a disaster situation, but, in the absence of other services, the police will naturally undertake them. If later confusion is to be avoided the police must be trained in the operating principles of other services thereby enabling them to establish a procedure that will not be subsequently changed when the specialist service arrives and takes over the tasks.

Once the remaining full time emergency services arrive at the scene the primary police tasks tend to change in character and the secondary and long term duties are undertaken as follows:

- Recovery and Protection of the Dead;
- Maintaining a Log of Events;
- Completing Damage Reports;
- Recovery and Safeguarding Property;
- Identification of the Casualties and Victims;
- Notification to the Next of Kin of Dead and Injured;
- Controlling Entry into the Affected Area;
- Recording the Scene by Photography and Documentation;
- Keeping in Touch with the Press to Ensure Accurate News Coverage;
- Recording Details of Persons Reported Missing.

By this time the first aid responsibility has been assumed by the ambulance service; search and rescue by the fire service and classification of casualties by the hospital service.

PLANNING FOR DISASTERS

It is therefore apparent that there must be a strong liaison between the various emergency services and this becomes one of the biggest tasks of the planners. Whilst the police must ensure that their own personnel have a working knowledge of the operational schemes of the other services, so the other services must have an operational knowledge of police methods of intervention. Plans must not therefore be made in isolation by any one service. There must, during the planning stage, be frequent discussions between all services and organisations likely to become involved in a joint intervention at a disaster. Such discussions will avoid the duplication of effort by the different services and will establish an agreed division of responsibility.

Planning can best be achieved by the establishment of a Joint Services Planning Committee on which the fire, police, ambulance, hospital and local authority organisations are represented. Naturally there are many more organisations who have a part to play at disasters, but it is my view that these should be co-opted or invited to attend particular meetings of the Committee when the Agenda contains items of interest to a specific body. By establishing the small committee with its members being those persons who have a definite role in an emergency, decisions can be made rapidly and the need to adjourn for discussion by individual services is overcome.

Not only must a particular geographical area have joint planning, but its plans must also link in with the plans of surrounding areas especially in the field of casualty documentation and press liaison procedures. It must be remembered that an incident will not acknowledge boundaries and might well occur

straddling two or more authority areas. It is on such occasions that a fully integrated inter-service plan will prove its value.

Whilst incidents can cover a vast field it is important that there should be only one overall general plan which must be kept simple, short and concise. Such a plan will provide the essential backbone to any operation whilst additional appendices regarding a particular type of incident should be available to elaborate where necessary on the overall plan.

A major incident is a comparative rarity, probably only occurring once in the service of an individual. Therefore personnel, in general, will not have the opportunity, other than through training and exercises, to gain skills and develop expertise on disaster management. In so far as it is practicable, the major incident plan should be based on everyday working methods and procedures but employing them on a larger scale to deal with the disaster.

Plans must be kept flexible, thereby permitting a supervisory officer to readily adapt the basic procedures to suit the incident at hand. The plan will enable the detailing of personnel for a task without the need for explicit briefing because they will have been trained on the specific duties required under that plan. For example, if an incident produces casualties, then the police, through traditional acceptance, require details of those casualties. Where a formal plan exists the supervisor can quickly instruct an officer to go to a hospital and document the casualties. The officer needs no further instructions, he knows that on arrival at the hospital he must obtain documentation forms from a police storage cupboard, complete them and then ensure that the information is sent to the Police Casualty Bureau, either by telephone or motor cyclist. Where no plan exists the supervising officer would have to devise a procedure on the spot, fully brief officers in how to deal with the situation, and still leave the officer in doubt as to what is sup-

posed to be done and why he is doing it.

Having produced a plan, it cannot be supposed that it can be locked away until it is needed. Planning is a continuous process. Policies of an organisation can change, the experience of others might reveal shortcomings in plans, the topography of an area might change by the introduction of new industry, roads, services, etc., and above all telephone numbers have a habit of being changed overnight. On this last item there is a need to make a regular check. This means not just a check against a telephone directory but physical contact with the subscriber, thus ensuring that the person is still on the receiving end. Apart from verification of the number such a policy ensures that the organisation or service being contacted (and it might be simply a manufacturer or supplier of special equipment) is reminded that they are on the list of emergency agencies with whom the police have made a call-out arrangement or facility for the supply of specialist equipment.

Another simple, yet important point to be remembered is the danger of allocating certain tasks in the plan to named officers. The personal name of an officer should not be mentioned in the plan, the official appointment, the position involved, should be used instead. This avoids the ever necessary amendments to the plan because officers have been transferred to different everyday tasks.

From the foregoing it will have been gathered that there is a considerable amount of contingency planning that must be undertaken by the police, not only to ensure a full and adequate command of personnel, but also to ensure that plans exist which will rapidly ensure that the following tasks are taken care of without delay:

- Effectively closing the area around the incident;
- Controlling sightseers and diverted traffic;
- Policing every junction on the essential ambulance routes to and from hospitals

- so as to ensure a smooth and uninterrupted journey for the casualties;
- Establishing a working liaison with the press and news media to ensure that they receive positive and reliable information;
- Documenting the casualties, victims and survivors at the hospitals, mortuaries and the scene and informing their next of kin;
- Maintaining a list of agencies that are able to provide specialist manpower and equipment which is not stockpiled by the various emergency services;
- Establishing a full co-ordination plan whereby all services tender their ideal operational requirements to the police who decide which facilities are best suited to each service without unduly affecting the work of another service and avoiding duplication of effort.

“Should the United Kingdom have a National Disaster Organisation?” The question has been posed many times in Parliament and elsewhere and after consideration the same answer “No” has been given. The various services in this country have shown that, when an incident occurs, they are able to effectively deal with it from local resources backed up by mutual aid arrangements with their adjoining organisations. To consider having a national service will involve establishing, amongst other things, regional or other designated intervention centres. If the country was to rely on such centres, albeit that they would presumably be well equipped, it is likely that a considerably longer delay would result before the “experts” attended the scene of the incident.

Having said this, there are certain avenues of standardisation that could be adopted, for example on the format and detail contained in casualty and enquiry record cards. Standardisation in this one respect would undoubtedly result in a more efficient service to the public and more especially the relatives and

close friends of persons believed to be involved in an incident. It would also ensure that, where more than one force was involved in an incident, one force could establish the central casualty bureau with the knowledge that neighbouring forces would be feeding into the bureau identical cards, not only in format but, more importantly in size, thus enabling them to be inserted directly into all index systems.

There are always lessons to be learned from both disasters and training exercises. Currently debriefing reports and papers on the lessons learned are invariably only distributed on a local basis. In this sphere of operations the experience of others could be made available to all forces by the establishment of a central index of reports on incidents and exercises. The index could be geared to ensure extraction from reports of the details of lessons and experiences useful to others and circulated by a digest to all forces for their information. The inherent concern that others would mock

the mistakes of their colleagues could be removed by the simple use of reference numbers, which would be unrelated to the originating force and, would encourage originators to really set out in detail in their papers the full lessons learned from an incident or exercise.

There is nothing new in the concept of contingency planning. The earliest reference that can be found appears in the Bible: Genesis, Chapter 6 Verse 14:

“Make for yourself an ark out of wood of a resinous tree. You will make compartments in the ark and you must cover it inside and outside with tar”.

An attitude of “it could not happen to us” must be avoided at all costs. All too often following an incident occurring somewhere in the world others become concerned for their own area, shake the dust off their old, stored-away plans and consider updating them – sometimes this happens too late and the disaster strikes an area when it is least prepared.