

TRAINING ON PERSONNEL, EXERCISES AND STUDIES OF CONTINGENCY PLANNING: PRACTICAL EXPERIENCES OF A BRITISH EMERGENCY PLANNING OFFICER

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Most discussions of training, exercises and studies of mass emergencies are by academic researchers, policy makers or overall disaster planners. This paper instead presents the perspective of a person who has been involved in the practical training for contingency situations in the United Kingdom, for the past eight years. As such, it offers a view of the assumptions and beliefs of persons who occupy positions much closer to the “firing line” than is usually the case.

Once a plan of intervention for major incidents has been prepared, it is necessary to train personnel in the content of the plan, the methods of implementing it and the specialist skills and procedures in relation to equipment for use at such an incident.

Unlike most training, we are, in this instance, concerned with instructing personnel in procedures relating to situations that have probable never occurred before and which individuals cannot easily envisage occurring in the foreseeable future. Thus the instructor is immediately faced with a natural lack of interest and unwillingness on the part of the student to accept that what he or she is being taught is necessary. It follows that careful and indeed novel forms of presentation are required if the interest of students is to be developed.

I have found that, until an area has experienced a major incident, interest of personnel is extremely lacking. My own force area has,

however, been faced with a number of major incidents in recent years and, as a result, students are now enthusiastically receptive to being taught their duties and roles in such an emergency. Furthermore, there is now no difficulty in convincing senior officers of the need for such training. Before the spate of incidents, there was very much an ostrich-like approach to the subject with a failure to accept that a major incident required adopting special procedures and techniques.

Sitting a student in a classroom or lecture hall day after day and speaking on the theoretical policies behind incident planning is bound to create disinterest. Wherever possible there must be physical participation by the student. The student must be given an opportunity to exercise one's thoughts and knowledge on the subject.

Take rescue techniques as an example. Whilst rescue is not a main task of police, it is desirable that they have a working knowledge of the subject in order that they can, if necessary, intervene properly in advance of the arrival of the designated rescue services. A short period of instruction in the classroom, followed by a lengthy period of practical training and the application of theory on the training ground will ensure continued interest in the subject. Moreover, if the need for such training can be related to its usefulness in everyday policing, the student will be even more willing to learn.

Similarly with administrative duties, it is necessary to teach the theory of the task and then let students participate by actually filling in forms, books and similar items as they would in a live situation. They will inevitably make mistakes, but during training these can provide useful discussion points. I have seen examples of bad mistakes in training, but the same student seldom makes the same mistake when faced with the actual emergency situation.

When considering the type of training to be given to individuals, some thought must be given as to whether particular training will be required by a particular individual in an emergency. It is of no value to train a student in operational aspects which, in a live situation, that officer will never be called upon to perform. A policy of training on a “need to know” basis is, in my view, of paramount importance. Senior staff will not only need to know their own responsibilities, but also those of all junior ranks if they are to be capable of supervising their personnel correctly. However, junior staff will not only need to know their own level of responsibility but also, and this is most important, need to know at what point they should hand over responsibility to a senior officer and why it is necessary for a senior officer to relieve them of their responsibility.

A plan must be tested and this can only be done by conducting some form of exercise. Exercises do not replace training, neither should they be used as a means of initial training of students. They are a test to see whether training has been successful and where any weak links exist. If they are used as an initial training method, the result will be a chaotic exercise with little, if anything, proven by the event.

Exercises can take several forms and each has its own merits and drawbacks. They can be broadly split into three main types:

- (a) The small exercises, designed to accustom an individual to emergency work as a member of a team;
- (b) Exercises limited to one particular

organisation with other organisations not actually participating but providing the problems and acting as numerous “observers” to detect the faults and shortcomings of the exercised organisation;

- (c) The full scale exercise, involving all emergency services and volunteer organisations, including, where applicable, the participation of industrial organisations.

Even the simplest exercise – the small team exercise – if it is to be staged properly, needs careful planning and preparation. The larger exercises require considerably more planning and a major exercise can involve several people and many months of preparation.

The small exercise can be staged in a classroom or confined to a small exercise area without the consequent disruption of the everyday life of the organisation and the population at large. This becomes extremely important in large cities where everyday commitments are unpredictable and no firm guide can be given beforehand as to the numbers of individuals that can satisfactorily be released for the exercise.

One of the smaller regular exercises in my own force area concerns the documentation of casualties and victims of an incident. This is a very important operation in police circles which, in the live situation, probably reflects the efficiency of the intervention more than the actual work at the incident itself.

The actual casualty bureau is used for this exercise with casualty and enquiry information being simulated and fed into the bureau from adjoining rooms. Naturally the “fed” information is not always straight forward and correct. For example an “enquirer” will be deliberately vague. As in a real operation, he or she will be uncooperative and will only give information on questions put to him or her. If the participating officer does not ask the correct question, the full information that would otherwise be available will not be obtained and it will be necessary to work harder to obtain it at a later

time. Whilst the exercise is played seriously we try to keep it light-hearted, feeding-in information and enquiries which, unless the exercised student replies in the correct manner, will precipitate a series of embarrassing situations requiring considerable tact to overcome a barrage of abuse from the enquirer.

Exercising one organisation can be most productive. In this situation one organisation, say the medical service, will mobilise as for a live situation whilst all other services will feed in information, mock casualties, etc., with known problems for the medical services to solve. All other services act as observers and directing staff, having been carefully briefed as to their future action according to the response of the medical service. The lessons learned from this type of exercise often result in the updating of plans which were previously thought adequate for the emergency requirement. For such an exercise to be really successful directing staff need to have a vivid imagination and previous experience of live operations in order to feed in the type of problems likely to be encountered.

Large scale exercises are staged by various organisations and services at periodic intervals. There are, however, many drawbacks to them. For one thing, it is extremely difficult to keep large scale exercises confidential until the moment of starting the exercise, thus all services have been primed and will have undoubtedly ensured that their personnel are aware of the exercise and what is expected of them. In many cases I have known of services actually visiting the exercise scene some days beforehand and deciding on their plan of intervention in advance.

Full scale exercises are costly to stage. Damaged trains, aircraft or vehicles have to be transported to the exercise location. Casualties, sometimes in their hundreds, have to be sought, their injuries simulated and during the exercise they have to be fed. This is apart from the cost of transporting them to and from the scene. Finally, if any lessons are to be learned, there must be a large number of observers and direct-

ing staff available.

In spite of some gallant efforts, there tends to be a lack of realism in the large exercise. Personnel will usually enter the exercise full of enthusiasm but, on finding the exercise dragging out and insufficient directing staff to observe and report on all aspects of the operation, however small, a loss of interest soon becomes apparent and participants start to "play games". On many occasions I have seen a "serious" casualty being carried improperly, often upside down or even deliberately dropped from the stretcher into a convenient stream of water. Thus the large expense of the exercise produces little valuable learning material.

The "Tactical Exercise Without Troops" produces the best value for time and money involved. Personnel are brought to a location and are faced with a simulated table-top incident. One example of this is the "Air Crash" procedure exercise. Participants are faced with a blank map of a fictitious area on which is staged a crashed aircraft showing models of casualties, victims and property scattered around. The various participants are allocated particular key tasks and then physically develop their work on the model itself, using small scale model equipment. The area is controlled and cordoned off, with traffic diversions being instituted. Casualties are recovered and despatched to hospitals. Bodies are labelled, marked and photographed in situ before removal. A search is made for the flight recorder and, once located, it is guarded. Personal property is located, marked and collected. Aircraft parts are left in situ for the investigators and then finally a sketch map is made of the incident area.

By this means a small directing staff can observe the action taken, ensure the full participation of all students, correct faults as they occur and finally verify that previous training has been absorbed. At the end of the day everybody feels that the effort has been well worthwhile and that they are now better prepared to meet the real thing.

Various other situations can be simulated on similar lines as the air crash, but it is my view that the area should always be depicted as a "fictitious" one. This avoids students becoming too engrossed in minor matters affecting an area that they can readily identify. It is surprising where personnel will place themselves when dealing with an incident on a table-top model. It is only when they can visually see the dangers of such action, for example, standing under an overhanging train which is likely to crash down on them, that students will start to appreciate the need for such exercises.

Recent developments in electronics and other more sophisticated presentation fields have resulted in the production of video film, use of closed circuit television, slide projectors and tape recorders to simulate exercise conditions. Whilst giving a wider scope for presentation, such systems are extremely costly and I have reservations as to the actual benefits derived from them. Personally I find myself concentrating more on the methods of presentation than dealing with the incident itself.

Finally, the "Study". This is a more academic approach to the problem and makes no attempt to simulate the conditions present at a disaster. Problems are set and considered in

theory and the proposed solutions discussed in a way which would probably neither be possible nor desirable in actual operations.

Attendance at such studies is normally limited to those who can make a definite contribution. They are usually held to advance planning and stimulate interest, particularly amongst senior officers, and to establish operational policy. Studies do not replace the physical or table-top exercise.

Whatever the type of exercise staged, it is important that a debriefing meeting or discussion is arranged afterwards whereby every service participating has an opportunity to state its own views on the lessons that could be learned and to hear the views of the other services representatives.

Such a debriefing should not be held too soon after the exercise. Each service must be given ample time to hold its own in-service debriefing. By adopting this procedure, the services' representatives at the main debriefing present not only their own views of the exercise but also the views of the many members of their own organisation and are thus better equipped to make a valuable contribution to the meeting.