



“I think it would a huge challenge if we were to have an incident take place at multiple sites.”

Jeff Shelberg

Lessons from London

By Andrew Berkman

The report released to the British Parliament last month into the 2005 London Bombings highlights the delicate balancing act rescue teams conduct when responding to a major incident.

Cannon Hill based QFRS Manager, Special Operations Gary Littlewood, said the report supported the ongoing development of a multi-agency strike team

“The London report is an interesting insight and there are certainly some procedures and issues there that we can look at and learn from,” Gary said.

The report into the July 7, 2005 terrorist attacks heaped praise on London’s first responders for acts of bravery and courage following the attack which claimed the lives of 52 people, injured several hundred and left thousands more suffering lasting psychological trauma.

The coordinated suicide attack was carried out on three commuter trains and a bus.

However the report was critical of key areas such as communication, medical supplies and patient record keeping. Many of the findings conflicted with those of officials, who said, in the days following the incidents, that police, ambulance and fire services had worked quickly, smoothly and cohesively throughout the incident.

Perhaps the report’s main finding was a recommendation to move away from processes which were put in place following the 9/11 attacks on New York.

“In New York on 11 September 2001, many people died and few survived. The situation on 7 July was the opposite: a relatively small proportion of victims lost their lives, but there were hundreds of survivors. Because emergency plans following 9/11 are based very much on the lessons learnt from that specific incident, they tend not to consider the needs of survivors.”

It continued: “Emergency plans should recast to the point of view of people ... A change of mindset is needed to bring about the necessary shift in focus, from incidents to individuals, and from processes to people.”

How would DES First Responders react if faced with a similar challenge to their London counterparts?

“Because emergency plans following 9/11 are based very much on the lessons learnt from that specific incident, they tend not to consider the needs of survivors.”

Gary Littlewood

“Every incident is different and requires the flexibility to react accordingly,” Gary said.

“We train our first responder teams in many different scenarios, but they are also able to react to any situation.

“Our strike teams can come together very quickly. Their challenge is to get information coordinated quickly, such as: This is going on, this is a possibility and this is how we need to respond to this area.

“If we get our information together quickly, we can respond cohesively.”

QFRS is in a good position to respond because “that is what we do on a smaller scale on a day-to-day basis,” Gary said.

The next challenge for the Special Operations unit is to coordinate other agencies that are likely to be involved.

QAS Director, Special Operations Jeff Shelberg said paramedics would join the strike team to ensure a multi-agency approach.

“Even an ambulance service the size of London struggled to cope with four separate incident sites with only a fast response unit and one ambulance available to respond to one of the bombing sites,” Jeff said.

“I think it would be a huge challenge for QAS if we were to have an incident take place at multiple sites.

“At the moment we have the capability to resource two different sites with 50 patients at each site, plus walkers or self help patients.”

While the Department of Emergency Service teams are among the best-

trained first responders in the world, Jeff said resources required to fully manage a major incident would have to come from elsewhere.

“We have the capability to launch an initial rescue response to an incident the size of London or New York, but we aren’t a London or a New York fire service,” Gary said.

“Within Brisbane we have the capability to put 64 USAR staff on the ground but that strips a lot of capability from our firefighting force.

“After the initial response we are going to require assistance from outside the region and most likely outside the state.

“However we recognise that a major long-term incident will drain our local resources so we have put systems in place that allow us to mobilise other USAR teams from other areas of Queensland and other states very quickly.”

Seven steps towards change

1 Lack of communication between train drivers and the London Underground Network Control Centre. Also emergency service radios did not work underground.

Our trains do have the capability for the driver to speak to the control centre. The quality of that communication depends on the severity of the incident. Communication is always the major issue for any emergency response. There is nothing on the market at this stage that we can say 100 per cent for sure, will work deep underground. – Gary Littlewood

2 Better communication between the emergency services and London Underground Network Control Centre could have avoided some of the confusion on July 7, when the various services each declared “major incidents” at the scene of each explosion.

Our planning allows all departments to come together very quickly to a forward command >>

» post. All the agencies coming together quickly allows us to overcome many possible communication problems. Each agency has its own call signs but with everyone working from a central point the message is getting out clearly and cohesively. – Gary Littlewood

3 Individual members of the London Ambulance Service were unable to communicate with their control room so ambulances, supplies and equipment did not get through. Frontline staff did not know which hospitals were still receiving patients.

Most of our [ambulance] units are full most of the day. The challenge for us would be to free up our vehicles to mount a response. At the moment we have the capability to resource two different sites with 50 patients at each site – not including walkers or self help patients. As far as on-going support we would call resources from about four regions to task in the event of multiple sites. – Jeff Shelberg

4 Some hospitals weren't officially notified of the incident.

Our link would be back through Queensland Clinical Coordination (QCC) centre at AF Comm. The moment we get a major incident they are advised and they are the link into the hospital system. We are continuing to talk with the Department of Health about this issue to continue to shore up our processes when it comes to disaster planning. – Jeff Shelberg

5 Many survivors were allowed to wander off without any attempt at collecting their contact details.

This is a police issue, certainly in Australia. Ambulance personnel would identify and document all those who we treat. If a person doesn't require treatment or elects to leave the scene then it becomes a police registration matter. – Jeff Shelberg

6 The message "go in, stay in, tune in" continued to be replayed on the broadcast media even though it had been withdrawn.

The media is a really important area for us to work with and we do work very closely with our media day-to-day anyway. We can get information out to the public that way quicker than any other way so we have to make sure that the media is on board. In an incident we would have set times that we meet the media and during an incident we will give them all the information that we've got. This will ensure the message continues until we feel it's safe to do so. – Gary Littlewood

7 Mobile phone networks crashed or became clogged up because of the volume of calls.

We avoid using mobiles as much as we can. At any major incident they can prove to be a downfall because the networks get clogged. The flow of information also becomes distorted over mobile phones so there's a risk of getting mixed messages. – Gary Littlewood

- See next month's *Emergency* for more details on the QAS Special Operations Response Team.



“It can be frustrating, tedious and very slow, particularly when you're down on your hands and knees looking for very small pieces of evidence.”

USAR's international challenge

Urban Search and Rescue teams from around the region were back underground at Whyte Island last month as part of the QFRS Special Operations training program.

The USAR training cell, one of the finest training facilities in the Southern Hemisphere, tested candidates from QFRS and QAS as well as USAR personnel from the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Tasmania, Singapore

and Hong Kong.

“The cell itself is designed to be 100 per cent safe but tests candidates to the limit when it comes to shoring, safety and working in a confined space,” said QFRS Manager, Special Operations Gary Littlewood.

This year's course is the seventh conducted by QFRS at the site, six have been conducted by QFRS, along with one national course.



SES crucial to forensic searches

By Sarah Oppenheim

A recent spate of successful forensic searches has highlighted the importance of the SES in uncovering valuable criminal evidence.

Following a bank robbery in Bundaberg, the local SES was tasked to scour the scrub of Tomato Island on Burnett River and succeeded in finding a number of items that the masked bandit had allegedly discarded.

Calen SES was of particular value to the Queensland Police when their Group Leader Noel Vollmerhause uncovered a rifle butt in the ankle deep mud of a mangrove swamp.

According to Bill Daniels, Local Controller for the Bundaberg Unit, the value of the SES in such forensic searches cannot be underestimated.

“We provide a great deal of manpower and a large number of working hours,” he said.

And the work isn’t easy.

“Forensic searching requires a lot of individual discipline,” EMQ Duty Officer for the North Coast Region, Bill Watt said.

“It can be frustrating, tedious and very slow, particularly when you’re down on your hands and knees looking for very small pieces of evidence.

“It’s like looking for a needle in a hay stack – except sometimes you don’t know what the needle looks like! It could be a bullet shell or even a person’s contact lens. And when you start getting into long grass, those small items become extremely hard to sight.”

David Strutynski, Local Controller for the Mackay SES Unit, believes the hardest part of forensic searching is remaining systematic and thorough when the search area is particularly rugged or varied.

“We’ve done searches through suburban streets where you’re looking over fences and roofs and into people’s backyards. It’s a real challenge to keep your search line straight and your spacing even so that the area is covered systematically.”

There are also significant legal parameters within which the SES must operate.

“Just because you don’t find anything, doesn’t mean it’s not a successful search. It means the police can eliminate that area, and often that’s equally as helpful.”

“It’s crucial that when we do find items of interest to the police that we don’t disturb the surrounding area or the items themselves,” David said.

But finding such evidence is not always the only measure of a successful search.

As Bill Daniels says to his team, “Just because you don’t find anything, doesn’t mean it’s not a successful search. It means the police can eliminate that area, and often that’s equally as helpful.”