

Post 9.11 expansionism

.....our predictions revisited by Ade Scott

In July 2005 we sent out our first Newsletter - somewhat more cobbled together than it is now and going to far, far fewer recipients than now. So at the risk of flogging a dead horse and knowing that a few thousand of you wouldn't have seen this the first time round we thought we would reprint this article. A lot has changed and continues to change but the rate of progress in some areas is painfully slow and virtually everything we said then holds true today. Bear in mind that it was written in 2005 so dates and figures are from 4 years ago. Any updated dates or information have been added in parenthesis [].

- In the past 8 years [since 1997] 12,000 beds have been cut from NHS hospitals in the UK
- Last Year [2004] the NHS in England was in the red by £140million This resulted in extended waiting times for trauma and surgical patients, A&E (ER) closures due to lack of trauma spaces, paediatric closures due to lack of Intensive Care facilities and staff cuts.

Rescue is unquestionably a 'sexy' trade. It's seen as heroic, scary and skilled, and sometimes it is. But more often than not it's routine, mundane even, sometimes hard work, sometimes dirty and sometimes traumatically messy. Such a trade attracts a lot of folk for reasons other than the welfare of our fellow man. Indeed in the pure rescue disciplines rather than the medical fraternity it's quite likely that the vast majority are in it for the adrenaline and maybe the kudos. Nothing wrong with that as long as the skill levels are high. My own involvement came indirectly, drafted from the early days of rope access 20 [24] or so years ago certainly not out of any sense of duty to my fellow man!! But it came as a huge surprise to learn that the professional (full-time) emergency services at that time weren't in the least bit technically proficient in specialist areas of rescue. The mountain and cave rescue folk were, of course, ahead of the game because teams generally 'employed' skilled sport climbers and cavers who knew their trade, knew the area and knew how their fellow outdoorsmen were likely to get themselves into trouble. These folk could rightly be considered to be 'pre-qualified'. Full time services like the fire service and police were a little different because they employ/ed folk that don't/didn't necessarily have any particular aptitude for heights, confined spaces or even trauma tolerance. These are things that ongoing training are designed to deal with.

But the thing about technical rescue disciplines, as we've continually pointed out in the magazine, is they don't crop up frequently outside of the key tourist/sport areas; areas invariably covered by a volunteer team of skilled locals. Elsewhere, incidents requiring technical rope work, confined spaces, difficult shoring, heavy load handling etc. are infrequent. Extrication is a different ball-game - this area of technical rescue is an everyday occurrence with little excuse for a lack of expertise or experience on the part of the rescue services. But for the victim requiring other specialist areas of rescue it has been something of a postcode lottery when it comes to how skilled, experienced or even how well equipped their rescuers are. Major metropolitan fire depts (mostly in the US & Canada) have tended to be better prepared than most because of their resources, manpower and call volume but for everyone else.....forget it. There has traditionally been neither the money nor the incidents to justify special rescue. Many have dabbled for a while in areas like water rescue, rope rescue and confined space rescue only to be sidelined years or even months later for budgetary reasons. There is definitely an element of 'flavour of the month' in the emergency services just as there is in every other walk of life. So if we want to improve the post-code lottery or regional skills imbalance particularly amongst the full time services how can we achieve it with a fluctuating or perhaps even absent budget? More on this later.

Following 9.11 there has been an immense knee-jerk reaction which has, in the short term, utilised an almost unlimited govt budget to set up specialist teams able to deal with massive structural collapse incidents. This was great for Technical Rescue magazine because technical rescue suddenly became mainstream rather than a 'cult'.

But we predicted then that five years on from 9.11 there will have been billions of dollars and pounds spent but probably only a handful of lives saved that wouldn't have survived equally well prior to 9.11. In the UK alone £188million was initially allocated to New Dimensions (USAR & CBRN) within the Fire service and this was just 3yrs of capital investment - it didn't take account of the actual cost of running and maintaining that capital investment!

To date [2005] that amounts to £188 million per life saved by post 9.11 expansionism.

We asked [in 2002] quite forcibly why such vast amounts of money weren't being spent on far more tangible risks like flood rescue and improved medical intervention. It wasn't through anything we ever said but common sense did begin to prevail and after a few years of (thankful) inactivity for the vast majority of structural collapse/USAR teams efforts were redirected towards a water rescue capability. This was largely centred on swiftwater rescue training though one of the lone voices in the wilderness, 'mad-dog' Jim Segerstrom was eventually heeded in his advice that swiftwater is but a small phase of any water incident and perhaps efforts ought to be centred more on a general flood rescue capability. And so the 9.11 legacy has evolved and is still evolving with virtually every fire service in the WORLD adding a range of technical rescue disciplines to their repertoire of firefighting, fire safety and extrication tasks. Police too have seen rapid expansion into specialist search skills based largely on technical rescue disciplines. Some of the command and control elements resulting from this new expenditure have been truly useful. Witness the recent London bombings [July 2005] where coordination of appropriate resources appeared to lead to a well managed incident with a wealth of support agencies and teams waiting in the wings to assist with specialist skills or to relieve London crews. But hang on a minute, this was a relatively enormous incident in UK terms and yet we again find that it was the medical crews and local police and fire crews rather than specialist teams that made the difference. I don't want to put us specialist teams out of a job because things could so easily have been different but from an accountant's viewpoint, they weren't. We can't justifiably use this latest incident [the last major incident in the UK as of May 2009] to improve that current £180,000,000. per head estimate for expenditure versus lives saved. (the one head we're including as a 'New Dimensions' rescue was a victim of the Glasgow explosion and even there, local Strathclyde fire crews, ambulance crews, Mines Rescue and International Rescue Corps might argue the point! We might again be decryed by self-interested parties for trying to imply that government expenditure on all things 'Urban Search & Rescue' and 'Homeland Security' is not money well spent and in a very limited number of incidents those detractors will be right. But in the main they are badly wrong and in addition, once central funding runs out, many fire services and police depts. are going to be left struggling to fund their initial enthusiasm from the local or regional budget.

They will begin to fail to justify their existence because jobs will be few and the result will be to [engineer tasks, send specialist teams to just about anything, which in the past has tended to alienate the regular crews that respond to all incidents,] disband or refocus. Then we're going to wonder why we didn't channel such an incredible amount of funding into the hugely tangible health and medical services and see how extra lives could be saved every single day rather than once in a blue moon. The parents of yet another baby turned away from an Intensive Care Unit through lack of beds and forced to travel half the length of the country probably wouldn't be aware that tax-payers money could be more efficiently spent. It's not that the efforts post-9.11 are completely wasted or that the skills learned won't be useful further down the line or even that the idea of a Technical Rescue capability in virtually every division of every emergency service isn't an entirely laudable aim in a perfect world. It's just that we don't yet live in a perfect world.

PREQUALIFICATION in RESCUE

So the money is being spent and these teams are now rightly looking around to see what else they can add to structural collapse and water rescue to justify their existence. This brings me onto another concern we have in all this - maintenance of skills. We mentioned earlier that the success of skilled voluntary sector mountain, cave and SAR teams often stems from the existing skills of the team members - active climbers and cavers carrying out their 'job' or past-time week in week out and not only maintaining their own skills outside of the team but bringing local knowledge and discipline-familiarity into play. Full-time agencies tend not to have this luxury though I'm not sure why sometimes.

Generally we have seen post 9.11 specialist rescue teams formed from scratch or based on a perceived similar team or even based wholly on strategic location of a station and its existing crews. One of the most bizarre concepts of recent years is that any rope team would make a great swiftwater team or that an aquatic team would make a good rope team or that a disaster response team will make good confined space rescuers or high angle team. Sometimes they get away with it but for the most part applying an inexperienced and infrequently trained firefighter (for example) to a specialist rescue is an accident waiting to happen - either for the 'rescuer' or the victim. We've already seen it and with tragic consequences, in fact we could quite justifiably argue that a fundamental flaw in thinking that leads to unnecessary death will further increase that multi-million pound cost per head. We firmly believe that a specialist rescuer operating in any region that doesn't see regular incidents needs to be pre-qualified for that role. It is a nonsense to take an individual with the minimum of swimming skills and questionable fitness levels, put him or her through a three day course and then declare them 'certified' swiftwater technicians. A similar scenario can regularly be applied to rope and confined space rescue technicians. But everyone seems to do it and the various agency managers seem content that this piece of paper solves their duty of care problems. If the certificate says my bloke is a qualified swiftwater technician then I'm happy that the protracted incident with multiple victims he's going to be dealing with in 9 months time will be properly handled. We disagree.

If your swiftwater rescue team doesn't comprise extremely fit individuals who are very proficient and experienced swimmers, preferably with a liberal sprinkling of surf rescuers, lifeguards, kayackers and boat coxes then I suggest that the pre-qualifications for your team are nowhere near stringent enough. Your water rescue team members need to be involved in water work/sport or rescue every week not occasionally/annually. And the less frequent the incidents in your area the greater the need for pre-qualification.

If your team is involved in structural collapse then your personnel should include a very liberal sprinkling of builders/demolition workers, (rough) carpenters and other tradesmen. In the case of full time agencies look for personnel who had that trade prior to joining the service or preferably still 'moon-

light' in a trade.

If your team is involved in rope rescue your personnel need to be predisposed to extreme height awareness not just the 50ft to the top of a ladder. A cold, windy night on an exposed 300ft swaying tower or slippery high rise building is not the time to find out that you're not as keen on heights as you thought. And believe me, this isn't uncommon! Use climbers, cavers, rope access workers and tree surgeons. This latter group have unquestionably given us our most useful pre-qualifications - proficient tree surgeons have on-rope skills, work on unstable structures, handle high loads, have rigging skills and are used to welding a very dangerous power tool in awkward locations. There isn't much that an experienced tree surgeon hasn't had to deal with. Climbers have excellent height awareness but rope skills are often so lacklustre as to require 're-training'. Cavers tend to have the best rope rigging and ascending/descending skills but not necessarily much height awareness. Confined space rescuers should obviously be used to extremely small spaces and working in breathing apparatus. Miners, cavers and divers are all well disposed to con-space rescue. Cavers have the added bonus of rigging skills. Divers have excellent low-vis capabilities, spatial awareness and technical air-breathing skills.

Whichever discipline you are involved in we believe that pre-qualification is a must and ongoing use of skills outside of the rescue team set-up is also a must. Our own Unit [Technical Rescue Unit replaced by USAR the following year!] require[d] prequalification plus a 2 year and 5 year probation before qualification. Even so, too many rescuers, (and we're all guilty of this), concentrate on certain areas to the detriment of others - if the only time you're training in these things is once every month or two or worst still, relying on on-the-job experience from once in a blue moon incidents you're very probably not good enough and it doesn't matter what that certificate on the wall says or the piece of paper in your personnel file **ONGOING TRAINING or EXPERIENCE is ALL-IMPORTANT.**

Ade Scott

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