

Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority response

by Craig Coombs, Chief Executive Officer, Port Arthur Historic Site.

‘Planning for disaster’ is how I would like to title and treat this article. It’s an ironic statement because, with the benefit of hindsight, I don’t think it is entirely possible to properly put into place the complete system necessary for dealing with the full range of disasters and tragedies that can befall the community and their businesses.

Port Arthur suffered a disaster and, while it was a wholly unnatural one, it was one suffered without warning — one wreaking destruction similar to that of Cyclone Tracey in Darwin or the Newcastle earthquake. Port Arthur suffered more than the combined shootings of Hoddle Street and Queen Street. And in all of these events, was there a master plan for emergency services? If there was it didn’t appear for a period of time after the onset.

From this we can infer that what is uniform in any disaster is an initial period of chaos — the period of time where the management structure, chain of command and emergency systems are unco-ordinated. How effective is our planning under these circumstances? Port Arthur faced this ‘anarchy’.

Our planning for a disaster, however, was mostly non-existent. Should we have been better prepared? I guess in hindsight the events have given many emergency service managers, other decision makers, and ourselves the impetus to put in place systems for dealing with such a disaster in the future. But will these systems be effective? Can we ever be fully prepared? That is a question I do not have an answer for. I can only say the people of Port Arthur and the survivors of the tragedy pulled together and reached beyond their training and skills and, thankfully, managed this tragedy to the very best of anyone’s ability.

Organisation structure

Port Arthur is located on the Tasman Peninsula in the State’s south-east, a little more than an hour’s drive from Hobart. Its history is almost as old as settlement in Tasmania, serving firstly

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in 1830 as a timber milling station, before becoming the State’s principal convict station in 1833. Eventually abandoned in 1877, the site almost immediately became a tourist attraction.

Since 1987, the Port Arthur Historic Site has been managed by the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority. The Authority is a quasi-government instrumentality governed by a specific act of the Tasmanian Parliament empowering the Authority to manage the tourist and heritage infrastructure in accordance with broad operational parameters. The Site has a delegated parliamentary Minister, to whom the Authority is ultimately responsible. Prior to 1987, this was under the control of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. More recently, in June 1995, Port Arthur became a Government Business Enterprise, authorising the Site to implement a plan to adopt the philosophies of corporatisation. This strategic document, and consequential management changes, has projected the developmental needs which, along with any necessary changes, will make it possible for the Site to become self-sufficient and self-determining allowing Port Arthur in the near future to divorce itself from political intervention.

The Authority manages its tourism programs and conservation and heritage preservation activities by dividing its core functions into four business units:

- *Visitor Services* — responsible for maintenance and expansion of the tourism and visitor functions on-site
- *Support Services* — the administration department at Port Arthur
- *Heritage and Asset Management* — empowered to manage the conservation and preservation programs
- *Commercial Operations* — concerned with the retail functions at Port Arthur.

Each division has a departmental manager who answers directly to the Chief Executive Officer.

On the tourism front, the Site attracts 210,000 day visitors per year and, until the shootings, 55,000 evening Ghost Tour visitors.

The Port Arthur Historic Site spreads across 600 hectares, with 40 hectares forming the historic core of the Site. This core comprises 81 buildings, and the Authority employs up to 180 staff in the peak season (or 88 ‘full-time equivalents’). At the time of the event more than 90 per cent of the staff were employed from the local area and many were related. In some instances, children of staff are employed.

The visitor to the Site pays an entrance fee of \$13.00 (\$6.50 for a child), which includes a 40-minute walking tour and a 30-minute harbour cruise.

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This Sunday was a typical Autumn day, mostly fine with the temperature a pleasant 18°C. A little cloud reflected that it had been a very wet summer, with the Tasman Peninsula receiving its total average annual rainfall in the first three months of the year. By 1.30 p.m. there were about 500 visitors on-site. It just so happened that ten of my most senior staff were heading away for a two-day training seminar to Swansea, a seaside resort on the State’s east coast, about two hours from the Site. There were 20 staff working under the supervision of the Weekend Supervisor.

In under 30 minutes, Martin Bryant killed 35 people, forever changing the lives of almost every resident of the Tasman Peninsula and single-handedly creating history as being the cause of the world’s worst single-person massacre.

The events of the day

The Authority had in its employ a part-time security person whose main responsibilities were to transfer cash between locations, to supervise the parking of cars, and to check that visitors had tickets to enter the Site. The procedure of having a security person rostered on for the weekend had been part of the Authority’s policy for the management of cash and visitors since

late 1995. The person who had the security job was trained and registered as a security guard, but was unarmed, as had been the practice since he was employed in 1995. He was the local unit manager of the SES and group captain for the fire brigade.

The security person first noticed Bryant when he refused to park his car where he was directed. Bryant said he wanted to park in the lower car park.

The parking at the Site is tightly managed to ensure that a maximum number of vehicles can be accommodated. The lower car park is usually set aside for the tourist buses and coaches, and for the large hire motor homes.

After directing Bryant to the correct place to park his car, the security person then went about his usual duties. Sometime later he heard 'unusual noises' from the Broad Arrow Cafe, and saw dust rising from the external rock walls, the dust being created by the shooting occurring within the cafe. He approached the cafe only to be confronted by Bryant and the carnage he had caused. He retreated and commenced attempting to evacuate the Site.

The problems he encountered were as follows:

- *disbelief* —people thought it was a re-enactment
- *lack of planning* — there had never been any planning of where to evacuate people to, and any normal evacuation would have probably been planned to muster people onto the oval, which in this case would have been disaster
- *language* — there were about nine different nationalities and many visitors became confused and didn't understand what was happening.

The staff member nearest the phone dialled '000' and was connected to the police, who showed reluctance to believe the call until gun shots could be heard in the background. This line was then kept open until about 5.00 p.m. and proved to be an invaluable link with the 'outside world'.

Once Bryant had left the Site those staff in the immediate vicinity administered first aid. Over 90 per cent of the staff are trained in Level 1 first aid and 20 per cent in Level 2.

Within 30 minutes, visitors started to assemble in the car park. Staff appeared to go into remote control. For example, the weekend supervisor, who had lost her daughter in the Cafe, bravely managed the site until I arrived at approximately 3.00 p.m.

By this time staff were comforting visitors, supplying tea and coffee, and treating most people for shock. There were many relatives of the dead who were very distressed, so I quickly established that it was necessary to separate them from the mass. Consequently one of the historic homes was opened and manned by senior staff and these people were escorted to the house. These relatives stayed until about 7.00 p.m., at which time they were removed by bus to the Police Academy at Rokeby. Staff that could be relieved from duty were stood down and sent to another house, as I wanted to keep them together and readily accessible for a debriefing.

The response from official agencies appeared to take a long time and was exacerbated by the lack of accessible communications with people on-site. Local emergency services were the first to respond but lacked co-ordination. The main immediate responsibility was to close off the Site and to stop people from using the Arthur Highway.

A senior police officer arrived on-site at about 4.00 p.m. and took control of the crime scene. Many of the tourists were anxious to get out of the place as disbelief turned to reality, and many tourists were booked on outbound flights that evening. There was an immediate need to establish who were witnesses and who were not.

As there was no public address system I was forced to stand on the back of a 4-wheel-drive vehicle and shout requests and instructions. In hindsight I realise that I failed to adequately identify myself. I wasn't in uniform and I only had a nametag to identify myself and lacked the necessary authority to take full command of the situation. In the debriefing it was established that visitors were only obeying those in uniform and doing so without question. An 'off-duty', interstate policeman and staff started collecting names and addresses of people who were on-site and the witnesses were asked to stay.

At about 5.00 p.m. a report came through that Bryant may have broken out of Seascope and was heading back to the Site. Shots were then reported as coming from across the Site.

This caused widespread panic and most, on reflection, saw the next 30 minutes as the worst in their life. By this stage I could feel myself going into shock but then it got very busy.

Unfortunately during this period the Broad Arrow Cafe remained open. The cafe should have been closed off, because

those who entered it have suffered both physically and emotionally since.

The only communication off the site was a public pay phone. There was a long queue and the phone quickly jammed with money, and do you think anyone could find the key? There was also a direct phone-line in the cafe that was manned by a visitor of great skill who later just disappeared into the night. He acted as an operator just relaying messages on and off the site. This worked very well because there was no social chitchat and call length was kept to a minimum.

At this stage (about 5.30 p.m.) the day was drawing to a close. We were assured that there was a group of SOGs arriving by helicopter to secure the site. I hoped this would help to settle people down and give them hope. I felt at this stage a strange feeling that I was not going to be shot, a feeling shared by other staff members. I moved out in the open and without fear commandeered three 4-wheel-drive vehicles and had them ready to transport the SOGs to secure the site. Driving the vehicles to the edge of the oval, we awaited for the helicopter to arrive. The helicopter contained two young police women who had come off the beat in Hobart.

It was then resolved to move those remaining on the site, mainly witnesses, to the Port Arthur Motor Inn, where they could be fed and housed, because it looked to us as if it was going to be a long night.

At this time I attempted to contact the Minister responsible for the Site to see if everything possible was being done to get us help. I spoke to his wife who assured me that it was, and that he was in fact at Police Headquarters with my Chairman. It was at this point I think I realised it was a much bigger picture than just the site and the magnitude of the disaster began to set in. In hindsight, the tragedy was just the tip of the iceberg of what was to come over the coming months.

We then resolved to close down the site and relocate the crisis centre to the youth hostel off the site away from the crime scene. All during this period you could hear the gunfire as Martin Bryant, holed up at the Seascope, kept shooting at police. By this stage (7.30 p.m.) there appeared to be as many police as witnesses and they were arriving by the busload. I was quite happy to just sit and give support to the operations officer, in the form of local knowledge, as required.

At about 10.00 p.m. a debriefing team arrived from the Department of Community and Health Services and a long session was held with staff. The staff were then allowed to go home, ending the darkest day for all of us.

Following this, the Chairman and other board members arrived and a board meeting was held. The meeting resolved that there was to be maximum support available for the staff and that the site would be closed until further notice. Signage and a press announcement advising of the closure would be arranged in the morning. A full meeting was set down for the next morning.

During the rest of the night I continued to assist the police and to ensure the historic fabric of the Site was not being compromised.

The next morning (Monday) a Board Meeting was set up. The Board received a briefing by the Police Commander and a plan for the next three days was established. It was agreed the site would remain closed until the police had finished with the crime scene and all bodies and any other reminders (blood, etc.) had been removed. The site reopened on Thursday as a township in mourning. There was no charge for accessing the site, and the front steps of the Broad Arrow Cafe became a makeshift altar.

This was a very difficult period for everyone as the size and impact of the event became recognised and accepted. DCHS supplied counsellors and many of the clergy offered support.

Because of this chaos, no Authority accounting was kept during this period and many mistakes were made. In fact it has taken us nine months to get this area back on track.

By the end of this first week, people were now out of shock and wanted to blame someone. Human resource management became a major issue.

The workers compensation company took up a very active role looking after the physically and mentally wounded. They had three counsellors who took up a 24-hour roster and this was in place for three months. This worked well but they themselves quickly became tired. Staff would feel comfortable with one of the counsellors and would refuse to see the others. This became hard to manage and anything that went wrong soon became the fault of the Authority. The grieving cycle was moving rapidly from the grief phase through to anger and blame, only we didn't recognise this at the time.

Post-tragedy, from the two- to six-month stage, it appeared the Authority couldn't do enough for anyone. No matter what, you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't.

Media handling was made especially difficult because of the confusion on-site and the existence of a management structure where the site is administered by an Executive, who report to a Board of Management, who are in-turn controlled by a Minister.

The Offices of the Minister and the Premier supplied valuable external resources and helped handle much of the in-bound media and community enquiry, however there was confusion over the lines of demarcation. The Site PR person had to nonetheless attempt to satisfy a ravenous media with interviews from a traumatised site staff.

The media, while all understanding the magnitude of the tragedy, had their own agenda. For most, this agenda was not disciplined by 'a respect for the victims', but rather by the search for ratings. Many of the media would have great difficulty justifying the intrusive, penetrating and all-pervasive attitude they took to the human tragedy that occurred in a sleepy corner of the globe.

The site has been subjected to intense intrusion, criticism and confrontation. Over-worked and 'still not properly grieving' staff attempted to provide the media with as many opportunities to access staff and the victims as it could. But the very process of being interviewed stressed the already shocked and distraught local community. It was never win-win for the victims or the Site. If we impeded the media we were branded as protecting and obstructive. When we gave access it was never enough, or the 'talent' was so traumatised we couldn't put the pressure back on them to talk to the media.

The exercise of dealing with the media and the trauma of the tragedy finally took its toll on our PR officer. She took leave after six months and was offered a good position on the mainland. This experience, we are told by the specialists, is likely to be repeated, to the point where Port Arthur may turn over up to 80 per cent of its positions in the next few years.

The experience of the initial three months was repeated as the court date came closer. By appointing external consultants, the Site decided to more carefully manage its communications and media liaison. Both consultants became accessible to the media seven-

days a week and 24 hours a day. The Site's staff were invited to utilise the expertise of the consultants and they participated in interviews, providing a buffer and counter to the media's sometimes intrusive and unfeeling attitudes towards victims.

We also resolved to appoint a special management team to deal with all matters external to the day-to-day running of the Site. It took six months for this resolution to be agreed upon. It probably took us six months to realise the work load being handled by the Site was not sustainable.

We put in place a new management structure and divided the Site up to more effectively deal with issues and internal command and communications structures. It helped to have an Army Colonel as a member of the Board, but it is a good lesson.

To separate the event from the daily management tasks allowed everyone on-site to focus on the jobs they were employed to do. Now it was possible to see light at the end of the tunnel.

By Christmas, just three months after the team began, we had all our projects and developments under way, Site-specific reviews had been completed, and the Site was running more efficiently again. The team leader also dealt with many of the niggling media enquiries that usually had to be funnelled through the Chairman and the Minister, and while both still participated in the process, we now had two able communicators based on-site.

The communications strategy that was developed as a process of dealing with the tragedy also identified that visitors needed to be asked to respect the feelings of the Site staff. This was communicated through a leaflet, which turned into a brochure, which was handed out at the tollbooth. The result was a quick reduction in the number of upsetting incidents on-site. We also erected signage and put the message on the Internet.

Media management was then the focus. At this point there was some very vocal community criticism of the Port Arthur Historic Site and the Management Authority. This criticism continues today, and is very much a problem related to unresolved anger.

As the twelve-month 'anniversary' approached, we faced a new trauma, but this time through experienced eyes. It was resolved to restrict the media's access to the Site and to facilitate their enquiries, not on an individual basis, but

through media releases and media conferences.

Many of the staff actually complained of being smothered in kindness. Everyone wanted to help but there was very little for them to do. This resulted in a lot of frustration.

A Memorial Service was held in St David's Cathedral in Hobart on the Wednesday after the tragedy, which was broadcast across the nation. I personally found this very hard. Everyone wanted to go but there was only limited seating and, on reflection, this is when the 'us' and 'them' feeling started to develop.

It was also resolved that a community service would be held for the staff and 'locals'. This was a great success and everyone felt very bonded at that time. The emotional effect on 'insiders' who hadn't been to the Site since the event became very emotional and this was very hard to handle and manage whilst trying to keep one's own composure.

The Site reopened the following day as a township in mourning. The steps of the Broad Arrow became the centre for grieving. We found that counsellors were required at the steps for 12 hours a day to help console the public, and staff were only able to assist for short periods.

The administration systems were completely overloaded, with the phone and fax unable to handle the demand. About 500–800 items of mail were arriving each day and no day-to-day work was being done.

The cafe staff became concerned that they had nowhere to work and their long-term security became an issue.

The Authority had insurance to cover the additional cost to do business in such an event. However, to resolve the insurance process is very complicated. The largest cost apart from personal human effect was the loss of productivity. Eleven months after the tragedy our normal productivity was only just returning. Nobody wanted to take responsibility for anything but all wanted to stay. It was fortunate that the Authority had a well-documented corporate plan in place before the event and this became the guiding tool during the period of chaos and having staff on remote control.

From a management point of view, tiredness and frustration were the two biggest hurdles that needed to be overcome. It seemed everything was grey, with no issues that could be defined as being either black or white.

There were many community meetings, set down for just about every night,

and not many had any outcomes. They mainly seemed to serve as an opportunity for people to speak and vent their anger. At the time they were very important, but I wonder now what would have been the consequences if there weren't so many meetings.

It quickly became clear that there needed to be a focus point for people's remembrances. It was decided that a temporary memorial should be established and this has worked very well. We now face the problem that there is likely to be concern about plans to move the memorial. We are considering the temporary memorial may become part of the permanent memorial.

The laying of flowers and other memorabilia where people actually died still presents a problem as the public and staff find it very hard. This is especially so where Nanette and her two girls died, which is on the main entrance to the Site. A policy was quickly created which evolves the staff taking down the flowers and such at the end of each day, for which we copped public criticism.

A major memorial service was held the Sunday prior to the Site reopening, even though this created a lot of work. It was very beneficial in keeping people busy and gave them focus, although they mourned right through the process. It was more of a public relations exercise than a grieving process. This was helped by the beautiful day. It certainly helped to tell the world that Port Arthur was again open for business and acted as a milestone in the recovery process.

The community established it would like to have a 'family picnic day' to encourage locals back to the Site, as many were still apprehensive about how they would react. It was advised that the sooner they returned to the Site the better. This experience proved true and there was a large turnout. The goals were achieved and it is likely that this will become an annual event.

As time moved on it became possible to recognise the waves of tension that flow through the organisation. In the early days it was common to see people fighting over a 'yellow sticky pad'; now people just appear to over-react to situations and take things far more seriously, especially if it is personal. In the early stages you could walk in offices and the person would be staring out in space and you would be lucky if they even realised you were there.

It was impossible to enforce any degree of discipline as people would over-react and break down and then you

jeopardised their long-term recovery process. It was all too easy to take one step forward and three steps back.

The fragile environment didn't help anyone. I feared that staff were always wondering when their turn would come. For management it was the fear of not knowing how we would react and what would happen if we were break down.

The size of our organisation doesn't help either, because it is neither a small business nor a big business, and consequently we have a relatively flat management structure with no 'reserve seating'.

Because problems were so broad, by the time an external consultant was brought in and up to speed, it was easier to deal with the problem yourself.

Conclusion

In any disaster there is likely to be a sequence of events and a systematic chain of human reactions.

Port Arthur has moved and continues to move through this cycle. The lessons and the challenges that are continually posed to the Management Authority are not yet completed.

There is another chapter to be told, at some time in the future, about lessons that are worthy of passing on. All we can hope is that you may never have to face the kind of disaster with which our staff and service personnel had to deal.

Lessons learnt to date

- Regional disasters raise a lot of additional problems that need to be addressed.
- Get outside help quickly in the professional area and quarantine normal staff to an area where they can perform a duty that is not critical.
- Have a standard operating procedure for accounting (and everything else that you can).
- Have funds for personal emergencies available quickly as people don't have any reserves.
- In fund raising, obtain a title that tells the donor exactly who is getting the money.
- Critically look at your insurances and try to consider the likely affects the different events could cause.
- Try to establish milestones in the recovery process. Have a plan and try to stick with it.
- Relocate staff if you can.
- Get people away from the environment.
- Keep life as normal as possible, avoid reacting to situations, as often by the time you have reacted to the situation, it has changed completely.