The Sydney hailstorm: the Victorian experience

The organisation and personnel involved

The Victorian SES is an organisation with both emergency operations and emergency management planning responsibilities. It has a small staff of seventy people and a trained volunteer force of approximately 5,000. These volunteers, based in 145 'Units', are the operational arm of the Service and respond to storms, floods and road accident rescue. They also perform operational tasks in support of other agencies including land and marine search and rescue on behalf of the police.

The management of the Victorian response to the Sydney hailstorm was shared between many people, both staff and volunteers. In the initial stages of activation, when systems had to be developed and proper responses organised, virtually all Victorian SES staff were involved. The task of determining volunteer availability and then organising pick up and travel was monumental, and one the Service had never faced before. It is a credit to the staff and volunteers that a response force was mustered and despatched in such a short time.

As already mentioned most Victorian SES staff were involved, but coordination was mainly borne by Gary Thwaites, Manager State Operations. Task Force One was lead by Paul Jerome and Task Force Two by Bob Cowling.

The response

On April 14 1999, Sydney experienced a severe hailstorm that caused significant damage to properties in the southeastern suburbs. The various agencies were stretched to their limits in responding to the damage and on the April 21, a request was received by the Victorian State Emergency Service (Vic SES) from the New South Wales State Emergency Service (NSWSES) for personnel to assist in Sydney. Organisational and government approval was granted very quickly and the process to identify types of tasks to be done, resources required and availability was begun.

The initial request was to provide assistance for the period to April 25, but deteriorating weather conditions resulted in two further requests to extend

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assistance until May 2, 1999.

At 8:30am on the April 22, a party of Vic SES staff flew out from Tullamarine airport, and at approximately the same time a convoy of 24 vehicles and volunteers departed the outskirts of Melbourne. A second convoy also left from north Victoria and both convoys travelled via the Hume Highway to Wodonga where they met. At approximately the same time a third convoy left from Gippsland and travelled via the Princes Highway to Sydney.

A party of volunteers also flew out of Tullamarine on the afternoon of the same day and these, with the staff and volunteers who had travelled before, made up what became known as 'Task Force One'. This consisted of 16 staff, 244 volunteers and 24 vehicles.

By April 29, due to normal work commitments of the volunteers and general exhaustion, it was decided to change the personnel in Sydney and flights of volunteers and staff resulted in 'Task Force Two'. Most of the vehicles that had travelled to Sydney with Task Force One remained for the use of the second task force and one specialist vehicle was added. Task Force Two then involved 11 staff and 178 volunteers.

All personnel and vehicles had returned to Victoria by May 2, and during the next 3 weeks de-briefs were carried out in regional centres. From these de-briefs has come the 'Victorian Experience' which will form the basis of procedures and protocols for Vic SES task force response in the future. It must be emphasised that although the operation in question was the first Vic SES experience of travelling in numbers interstate, the lessons learnt will be applied to any large movement of personnel from one location to another, including within Victoria.

Organising personnel etc.

As with any operation, and the determination of 'how many and who?' is crucial. There are a few questions that

need to asked such as:
- What are the tasks, and what are the skills and attributes required?
- What is the anticipated duration of the operation?
- How urgent is it?
- What resources, other than people, are required?

Due to the remote (from Vic SES's point of view) location of the scene it was more difficult than usual to answer some of the questions posed above. In particular, there was considerable debate as to 'urgency versus when to leave'. Although there were a considerable number of people ready to respond that evening it a decision was made to delay response until the next day with, hopefully, more organisation. In retrospect, it may have been better to delay departure even further and allow volunteers discussion time with their employers during normal business hours. This could have afforded those managing the operation the opportunity to include the ongoing availability of the various volunteers into their planning.

The initial request for assistance anticipated a duration of a few days and many decisions were made based on this perception. Subsequently, some of these decisions were proven to be inappropriate when the operation was extended and it probably shows that despite the 'difference of the operation', basic premises should be maintained. For many years the Vic SES has determined that when making decisions on operations, such as rosters, catering, resources etc., one should assume the duration of the operation is infinite. In this way, if the planning is based around continual provision of the functional areas, one cannot be caught short when the operation extends past preconceived limits.

Although knowledge of the various skills of volunteer members is held in a variety of ways at Unit level, that information has never been comprehensively collated. It is also a fact that the Service has never succinctly defined the criteria for performing many operational tasks and relies on the regional/Unit knowledge to match people to requirements. In the case of this operation, where a large number of people were required without

much warning, and there was a distinct possibility that the normal Unit 'supervising group' would not be there supporting, it is obvious that some people who responded were not appropriate. It is hoped that the development of national competencies, the inclusion of operational experience in the system of maintaining competency, and the recording of skills on databases provided by the Vic SES Extranet system will assist in tackling this problem in the future.

It was essential, particularly with relation to specialised vehicles, that the operational 'home base' was not denuded of resources to the detriment of the operational response in that area. It was a credit to the people involved, particularly those in Unit management, that despite the widespread response to Sydney the operational viability of the state was not compromised.

The convoy

Although Vic SES had in the last few years moved reasonable numbers of staff and volunteers around the state for operational purposes, the Sydney operation was the first time that such a number of vehicles had travelled together. With some staff and volunteers having experience in the Army, there was scattered knowledge of the protocols required for travelling in convoy. There was a hurried attempt, particularly for the convoy that left from Melbourne, to issue convoy instructions but the reality was that the Service was less than prepared and untrained for travelling this way. Despite this, all vehicles arrived safely in the Sydney area although locating their final destination was difficult due to heavy rain and lack of local knowledge.

Some of the areas identified for improved procedures in the future include:
· Provide staff travelling with the convoy with the means to pay all expenses
· Ensure communications intra-convoy and between the convoy and nominated headquarters.
· Plan protocols as regards to rest breaks, travelling speeds etc.

Operational management

In the last few years Vic SES has spent considerable effort in developing an Operational Management System (OMS) and training people to use it. It is based on the premise that no matter the size of the operation, or how many people involved, there are certain functional areas to be managed.

As OMS training has enhanced the operational management skills of staff and volunteers there has been an obvious improvement in the ability of people to operate away from their home base. It is now possible for a significant proportion of Vic SES personnel to walk into another regional or Unit operational headquarters and be productive almost immediately.

In Sydney, however, personnel were faced with a different system. Victorian staff had been briefed before they left and in that briefing it was emphasised that they were going to assist NSWSES and should fall in with whatever system was present. This did cause some difficulties, and with tasking still remaining with NSWSES and uncertainty about systems within the operations centre, operational management amongst the Victorians was less than perfect. Initial staff also worked shifts that were too long, although in the circumstances it was understandable. Their NSW colleagues were exhausted and it was imperative to provide real assistance as soon as possible.

As it became obvious that the visitors were basically dealing with their own area of operation, staff decided to implement OMS as far as they were concerned. They had carried with them electronic versions of the OMS stationery and within a short time were operating as they did at home. This had immediate benefits for staff and volunteers and, hopefully, for the people of Sydney who were receiving the fruits of their efforts.

What are the lessons from this? When possible, within the context of the particular operation, it is preferable for visiting groups to operate as autonomously as possible with systems that are familiar. This means that they must carry with them the resources to operate those systems. In the future, any Vic SES team moving interstate will carry with it resources, including notebook computers, that can facilitate the implementation of operational management systems. If it is not possible to use them in the circumstances, so be it, but they will be there just in case.

Of course, there is always the possibility of all SES organisations around the country actually using the same operational management systems!

Teams and their leaders

As mentioned before, the individual skills of volunteer members are not as well documented outside the Units as they could be. This includes the ability of those individuals to lead teams in various types of operations, and there was a problem in Sydney with the formation of teams and selection of leaders. Where particular volunteers were recognised leaders within their own Unit and staff from the member's home region were in Sydney, they could apply that knowledge to the selection process. In the main, however, staff were flying blind and it took some days before all teams were of optimum construction.

The national competencies referred to above include 'team leadership', and this will contribute in some way to alleviating this problem in the future. Another way to address this problem, and it was raised a number of times at de-briefs, is that future groups operating remotely from home consist of pre-organised teams. In other words, whether the teams are from single Units or a combination of Units, the team construction has been planned and its leadership, skills and other attributes are pre-defined and documented.

Communications, equipment and clothing

When Vic SES members travel far from home; what do you take with you? This was the dilemma facing the members and those assisting and briefing them. The uncertainty of duration of the operation was a contributing factor to the decisions made in this area and it was obvious that some people travelled without even the basic essentials for being 'away from home'.

With the Vic SES teams that operate in a land search role, particularly in the alpine areas, there is an unwritten rule as far as self-sufficiency is concerned. Members do not leave their bases unless they are '24 hour self-sufficient', and it is probably appropriate to extend this philosophy to other areas. The basic philosophy that must be applied to providing assistance to others is not to become a burden on those you are trying to assist. Self-sufficiency has to be an important element of this.

NSWSES radios were provided to the Victorian teams but training on how to operate them was extremely limited. There was also a problem with channel allocation for the (trunked) NSW system, and the Vic SES UHF frequencies were not approved for operation in the Sydney area because they conflicted with local users. This meant that teams operated for some time without adequate communication. Are we once again facing the dilemma of a 'national emergency frequency' for interstate use? Easy to propose but hard to solve!

The wash up

The Victorian Experience has made indelible marks on the systems of Vic SES and the way it will operate in the future.

As with all de-briefs, the process often involved discussing what went wrong but did not emphasise the things that went well. There is no doubt that many of the problems had not been faced before, but more importantly, temporary solutions were found and permanent solutions were placed on the agenda.

It is probably appropriate to record the general comments by Vic SES members after they comprehensively dissected the areas mentioned above, and their thoughts about the whole operation. They ranged from 'magnificent' to 'best experience we have ever had' and were incredibly positive. Of particular note was the report from Vic SES staff and volunteers of the marvellous hospitality and reception by their NSW colleagues and the general public. As one person commented:

'I have always been proud to wear the Vic SES uniform but I did not expect to get a standing ovation from members of the public when going for a meal in the evening.'

About the author:

Gareth Davis is Deputy Director of the Victoria State Emergency Service (Vic SES) and has been with that organisation for more than twenty years. Amongst other things his duties encompass the operational aspects of Vic SES and he has overall responsibilities for the regions. Gareth travelled around Victoria to de-brief the staff and volunteers after the Sydney operation.