



# UNUSUAL OCCURRENCES

## HELPFUL HINTS & PAINFUL LESSONS

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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet is not intended to be a comprehensive document on all aspects of unusual occurrence planning, nor even a comprehensive discussion of the topics provided. This presentation is dedicated to those selected actions and behaviors that sometimes go sideways and create unnecessary difficulties. As someone who has been involved in scores of unusual occurrences, from major (riots, wild land fires, and earthquakes) to less than major (fuel spills, barricaded suspects, and large fires) situations, and as someone who still has scar tissue from my mistakes and those of others, I am confident that much of what I have to say has value!

During the presentation, I will be as candid as necessary to ensure that lessons are not diluted by political correctness, and may identify the agencies involved. However, please know that the intent is absolutely not to criticize another agency, but to learn by virtue of the mistakes that all agencies make. Our strongest lessons come from our greatest pains. I can assure all participants in the class that I am one of those individuals who should not throw stones because of my own glass house. Without exception, every agency mentioned is an organization that, in my judgment, is tops! We stay on top by learning from our mistakes, and sharing those hard-earned and painful lessons with others.

I have endeavored to place the various issues and lessons learned under the headings that are most applicable. However, much of the information is just as applicable under one heading as it is under another. I apologize in advance for any confusion that may result.

I hope that this information is helpful, and may minimize the pain and mistakes that subsequent leaders will experience, based on the pain and mistakes made by others that have preceded you in the leadership trenches!

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## ESTABLISHING AN ORGANIZATIONAL MINDSET

- **The First Person On The Scene Will Not Be An Expert!** This is the reason that first responder training is so critical. The chances are pretty good that the first person on the scene will be a relatively new employee with little or no UO training. Yet, it is his or her actions that will set the stage for most of what will subsequently occur.
- **Incorporate Unusual Occurrence Questions Into Every Promotional and Selection Process.** Oral and written. Get people in the habit of constantly thinking about how they would handle issues as first responders. Oral questions such as: “You are a day watch supervisor, on a typical weekday, about 2:30 PM, two small plains collide over the Downtown area, with debris and bodies in the Business District: What are the first three or four actions that you would take?” Consider similar questions for both essay and multiple-choice exams. The preparation for these types of questions will strengthen the knowledge and skills of your workforce.
- **Strive To Establish & Maintain Solid Organizational Relationships.** Too often, we fail to establish and maintain solid relationships with individuals and entities that we seldom deal with on a day-to-day basis, but with whom we will need to work closely in certain types of incidents (highway department, forest service, utilities, etc.). To the extent reasonable, endeavor to establish and maintain solid relationships. Unfortunately, there are also times when relations are strained between other agencies with the same mission, and this can be a real problem when mutual aid becomes necessary.

Lesson: The tense and difficult relationship that existed in the County EOC between the LASD and LAPD during the 1992 Riots.

## **BASIC TRAINING FOR ALL PERSONNEL**

- **Ensure That Appropriate Level Training Is Provided As A Requirement For All Levels Of Personnel.** Specialized Emergency Management Systems (SEMS) and Incident Control Systems (ICS) Training must be provided to all personnel, with the intensity and depth determined by the role of each participant in the organization. The days are long past when a significant unusual occurrence does not have these unified infrastructures.
- **Brainstorm In Briefings For Basic Unusual Occurrence Possibilities.** A regular part of scheduling for roll call training should include familiarity with standing plans for potentially predictable unusual occurrences, actions to be taken for unanticipated events, and first responder considerations.
- **Create And Distribute A Generic Unusual Occurrence Checklist For Your People.** There are a few critical tasks that are applicable in just about every type of unusual occurrence. Create and provide a pocket-sized checklist to all of your people. That little card, when pulled out and reviewed by one of the first few folks at an incident, can pay some pretty big dividends.

Enclosure: Enclosed is an exemplar of such a card. Certainly, it can be added to if desired.

## ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP TRAITS

- **Recognize That Your Day-To-Day Leadership Style Probably Is Not Adequate For That Of An Incident Commander!** By our very nature, we as police managers usually tend to place a great deal of confidence in our people, provide broad guidance and leave the details for our people, and avoid specific nitty-gritty details, and that is usually as it should be. But that approach does not work for Unusual Occurrence Leadership! ***The UO Leader needs to be very specific, precise, direct, and to ensure there is no misunderstanding in what is to be done! This is not the time to worry about being polite!***
- **Be Complete & Specific In The Guidance You Provide.** Make sure there is no misunderstanding in exactly what you expect and want to occur. Hints and suggestions do not work. Do not hesitate to ask the person to whom you provided instructions to repeat back to you his or her understanding of the guidance. You are the person whose must be clear about what is to be accomplished, and how other entities and individuals will coordinate. If the pieces do not fit together, you are probably the reason why.  
  
Lesson: UCLA Final Four Riots in 1982. Vague guidance at several levels, with too many assumptions, contributed to an incident that was not well handled.
- **Maintain Constant Situational Awareness.** Stay on top of all that is occurring, monitor frequencies, and insist on constant updates. If someone accuses you of micro-management, they will get over it.
- **Designate Persons In Charge Of Key Activities.** Those things that are everyone's responsibility seldom get done properly. From the very onset of a UO, make key specific assignment. Areas that fall into this category would include, but are not limited to: traffic control & diversion, outer perimeter, inner perimeter, media relations, and staging

- **Try To Exchange Liaison Officers.** There is a tremendous advantage in having a savvy person from another key agency(s), who has immediate access to a decision maker in that agency, in your Command Post. This will greatly facilitate the coordination of critical activities, and shorten the time involved.

Lesson: For the 2003 San Bernardino fires, having an AMTRACK and CHP representative in the Command Post enabled trains to move through the Cajon Pass during occasional limited opportunities when flames did not threaten the trains. Literally, a minute-by-minute coordination activity.

Lesson: For a 1982 visit to Century City by President Reagan, a lieutenant from LAPD's Intelligence Division, who was assigned to the Command Post, insisted that he was not permitted to provide intelligence information on the demonstrators to the LAPD Field Commander!

- **Be Selective In Who You Assign As A Liaison Officer To Other Agencies.** Good relationships can make or break your effectiveness. If he or she is a challenging personality, you have just made a problem even worse.
- **Develop & Maintain Strong And Accurate Communications With Key Public And Elected Officials.** It is imperative in serious incidents that key public and elected officials be kept apprised of what is occurring, as they may take actions or make requests, with the best of intentions, that are wrong and unnecessary.

Lesson: During the 1992 Riots in Los Angeles, the Mayor and the Chief of Police did not communicate or have confidence in one another. This was a dysfunctional relationship, was a poor reflection on both individuals, and absolutely contributed to an unnecessary action that made matters worse: the federalization of National Guard personnel.



- **Initiate An Advance Planning Process At The Onset Of An Unusual Occurrence.** You need to have some people anticipating what will be required, in increments, several days out. Resources, supplies, personnel, etc., etc. Start thinking about that after-action report, information that will be required, cleanup, getting people back into their homes, etc.

Lesson: Re-entry problems and confusion in letting people return to their mountain homes in the wake of the 2003 “Old” and “Grand Prix” fires.

- **Give Immediate Attention To Shifts & Reliefs.** It is common to commit all available resources at the on-set of an unusual occurrence, but twelve or so hours later your folks are going to need relief. Start sending an appropriate portion of your work force (ideally one half) home or to motels or whatever, as soon as possible, so you have that necessary relief shift.
- **Recognize That Bigger Agencies Are Often More Challenging To Deal With.** Just a reality with big outfits and big bureaucracies. Unless you are a real insider and know the organization well, you can really have a problem getting decisions made. There is often a long path from the person you talk with and the individual who makes the decision.
- **Do Not Depend On What You Do Not Control.** Be very careful about making assumptions, or even agreements, about initial critical roles to be played by resources that you have no control over.

Lesson: SBSD-CHP agreement for CHP personnel, upon activation of the “Mountain Fire Response Plan,” to immediately dispatch large numbers of CHP officers to key mountain intersections to prevent potential gridlock and to facilitate evacuation. When first activated, a lone CHP supervisor, who was unfamiliar with the understanding, cancelled all responding CHP units until he was able to assess the situation!

- **O'Toole's Rule Applies.** "Murphy's Law" states that what can go wrong will go wrong. O'Toole felt that Murphy was an optimist!
- **Plan For Video & Audio.** Designate certain folks to take videos and still pictures, and give guidance on what you want them to capture. Do not depend on their judgment. Same for audio, preferably on the video track.

Lesson: The 1982 Final Four demonstrations at UCLA. The field commander wanted videos of the instigators, but the video unit took photos of just about everything else. Also, the videographer was diverted by a command officer from another entity to record use of less lethal munitions, which was not bad thing. We did not plan adequately for video resources.

- **Seek Staging Areas Close To Food & Bathrooms.** Recognize that personnel will need to use facilities and seek food and beverages. To increase the likelihood to maintaining continuity of your organization, try to position your people in staging areas close to the things they will seek out during idle periods.
- **Organize Parking And Take Car Keys.** There are few command post headaches greater than numerous locked cars, parked helter skelter, with the drivers deployed elsewhere and still in possession of the car keys. This is a real mess. People will try to keep their car keys; don't let them! Besides, you may need that car for another assignment.

## PREPARATION IN GENERAL

- **The Initial Actions, Taken In The First Few Minutes Of The Unusual Occurrence, Will Likely Drive The Overall Effectiveness Of Your Department's Response.** Actions such as immediately restricting access to the overall area, establishing ingress and egress for emergency equipment, establishing the Command Post, and making appropriate requests and notifications are critically essential tasks that must be done immediately. *Every minute counts!*
- **It Is Not A Matter Of "IF," But Of "When."** In all conversations, help your folks to realize that critical and unanticipated unusual occurrences are in their future, and that training cannot wait until a problem develops.
- **Push Training Down To The Lowest Levels.** The chances are very good that the first person at the scene of an unanticipated unusual occurrence will be a relatively new and inexperienced individual.
- **Continuously Update Telephone & Address Roster.** Most rosters, to some extent, are out-of-date as soon as they are typed! At a very minimum, monthly attention should be given to ensure accuracy of this critical information. Now, with all the cell phones and other portable devices, this long historic problem has become even worse.
- **Can You Depend On An Emergency Operations Center Staffed & Management By Another Organization?** There are occasional instances where the command post or operations center of an agency is more functional and effective than a higher-level EOC to whom the former is supposed to be supported by. This is why it is important to give attention not only to your agency's emergency operations functions, but also those of other organizations to whom it is assumed that you report to and through. Every effort should be made to provide the support and

emphasis to help the higher-level organization develop effectiveness, but there are instances where you cannot depend on those to whom you are expected to depend. In these situations, you have to develop alternative measures to get the job done.

Lesson: Massive train derailment with long-term fires, toxins, high winds, massive traffic issues, and significantly interrupted freight.

## PREPARATION FOR ANTICIPATED EVENTS

- **Create And Continuously Update Standing Plans.** With adequate planning, there are very predictable givens that can be planned for. This “givens” range from predictably traffic issues, evacuations, likely bridge and structural damage, interrupted utilities, need for certain types of assistance, anticipated medical needs, and scores of other related issues. This information should be developed through tabletop and other related processes, and institutionalized in Standing Plans. These plans must be regularly updated to ensure continued applicability (certain vendors still in business, emergency numbers for public and governmental agencies still good), keys to school buses still in the designated locations, diversion traffic plans not affected by construction projects, etc.).
- **Double Check With Vendors & Contractors.** Is the outfit still in business? Are the after-hour contact numbers still valid? Do they still have the ability to provide the given services and/or equipment? Etc.

Lesson: During a Marine Corps’ Inspector General’s Audit, it was discovered that the communications equipment on hand at the Barstow Supply Depot was far inadequate to fill the needs of multiple units upon activation. All of the units involved had contingency plans that included immediate acquisition of items that did not exist (to some extent).

- **Conduct “Table-Top” Exercises.** With solid conference leadership, this activity will absolutely enhance preparation effectiveness. This is not a process where one or two people tell others how a situation will be dealt with, but rather using the synergy of all participants to identify all aspects of a given situation, and collectively determine courses of action. ***Every time this is done, the people involved get that much better!***
- **Rehearsals Sharpen Skills.** Command Post/EOC operations & procedures, and especially tactical skills, become stagnant unless

occasionally sharpened and rehearsed. Conduct periodic command post exercises and tactical coordination skills.

Lesson: An EOC in San Bernardino County continually insisted that command post exercises were not necessary. When a crisis developed, it turned out that many of the assumption that had been made were inaccurate, and planned upon resources were not available.

Lesson: The most recent LAPD problems in MacArthur Park where a coveted tactical unit performed poorly because of a lack of on-going field tactical training.

- **Create Written Understandings With Event Coordinators.** In situations with promoters of events, be very clear, and reduce to writing, what resources are going to be provided by event staff (“yellow shirt” security, paramedics, first aid stations, off-duty law enforcement personnel, traffic control, water points, shuttles, etc.).

Lesson: 2002 Rave Concert on the Chemehuevi Indian Reservation outside of Needles, California. Failure to provide necessary resources, and cross claims of responsibility between the tribal leadership and promoters, contributed to six deaths.

## COMMAND POST CONSIDERATION

- **Command Post Selection Considerations.** This is one of those “pass-fail’ exercises where you seldom get a chance to do it over, so you really need to get it right the first time! A few basic rules: Far enough away where you will not get in the way of the incident, or may have to move because of emergency traffic, not downwind from toxins, hard-line telephones, bathrooms, radio coverage, shelter from the elements, ability to get in and out without too much trouble, adequate space for all aspects of your Command Post, etc. Ideally, your Command Post will also be the staging area, rest area, etc. I personally try to find a command post location where I have a continuous visual over the incident, but such is not always possible.
- **Keep A Record/Log Of What Occurred & Decisions Made.** This record will be the basis for everything that occurs subsequent to an unusual occurrence, and should be as thorough and accurate as possible. The times are critical in the eventual establishment of timelines for the various things that occurred simultaneously. The key factor in a massive lawsuit, for instance, may boil down to a single entry. Keep those scraps of paper as well; they may be useful in reconstructing what occurrence. The importance of a log cannot be overstated.
- **Run A Tight And Disciplined Command Post.** An efficient and effective Command Post needs to be well organized, by functions and in a logical manner for timely and accurate flow of information. The noise level needs to be kept down, which will be a continuous challenge. Every scrap of paper needs to be retained in a logical location, and a chronological log continually maintained. Intelligence information needs prompt dissemination, and the various functions need to be kept appraised of that being performed by counterparts. A quiet area should be established as a conference room for brainstorming by the Field Commander, or as otherwise directed.

- **Keep Continuous Track Of All Personnel.** This is a big job and requires strong leadership and organizational skills. You need to know of everyone's status, how to contact them, time of arrival, time of assignment, time of end of watch, etc.



## COMMUNICATIONS

- **If You Cannot Communicate – You Cannot Command!**  
This is not negotiable! Any time that you are not able to immediate contact a key person or subordinate unit, that must be seen as an emergency that requires immediate action!
- **Plan For Redundancy.** Radios break and batteries give out, often when least expected. Have extra radios!

Lesson: The U.S. Forest Service has a radio technician, with a field repair facility and spare radios, as part of the command post cadre for wild land fires.

- **Key People Need More Than One Radio.** Regardless of how many channels your radio has in it, you can only talk and listen on one channel at a time! Key people need to have simultaneous open and dedicated paths of communications with certain other individuals and entities, and to be able to monitor other channels.

Lesson: A request for a 2<sup>nd</sup> alarm on a critical fire was missed, in the San Gabriel Valley, because the field commander had switched to another channel. These types of problems are very common.

- **Get Earphones To Deal With Noise Levels.** A radio that you cannot hear is useless, and many demonstrations, and other loud events, have been poorly handled because people could not communicate because of noise. Unfortunately, it has occasionally been used as an excuse for some folks who prefer minimal supervision. Plan for this reality and get the types of headsets that plug into the ear and have throat microphones.
- **Insist That Key Subordinate Units Remain In Constant Communications.** The field commander must be able to deploy subordinate units on a moments notice, and must insist that subordinate entities, unless otherwise directed, be able to immediately deploy when and where needed. ***Make this clear to subordinate supervisors and managers!***

Lesson: At a major demonstration in Los Angeles, the on-call platoon was delayed in responding because the platoon commander ran a quick errand, and did not maintain communications with the field commander.

- **Develop & Distribute A Communications Plan.** This can be essential if multiple frequencies are involved. Too often, we mistakenly assume that because we have multi-channel radios, that solid communications will result. Just because another person has a radio that is capable of talking to you, it does not mean that the channel is on, or being monitored, or not being used for another purpose.

Lesson: The fire service has really broken the code on this issue, and makes a “COMM PLAN” part of every major event.

Enclosures: An exemplar communications plan, plus a blank communications plan worksheet, are found at the rear of this material.

- **Do Not Depend On Cellular Telephones.** OK to use them, but do not depend on them, or factor them into your communications plan. The circuits are often overwhelmed and busy, sometimes sites are destroyed (fires, etc.), signals are often weak due to locations, and batteries give out (without field chargers).

Lesson: Cellular service was overwhelmed and unusable during portions of recent earthquakes, civil unrest, and wildfires.

- **Maximize “Line-of-Sight” Communications.** This is optimal as you do not have to worry repeater problems, or the signal going farther than is necessary or desired.

Lesson: Downtown Command Post in preparation for 2<sup>nd</sup> Rodney King-related trial. High ground Command Post with direct communications to subordinate units. Used “loaned” commercial radios for some channels.

- **The Media (and others) Will Be Listening.** Plan on it and be careful of what you say.

Lesson: SLA Shootout where a reporter actually went to the suspects dwelling seeking an interview. Death of John Bulushi and premature reporting of his death before relatives were notified.

## MISCELLANEOUS TIDBITS

- **Avoid Federalization!!!!** This is beyond bad. State forces have a great deal of latitude in tasks they can provide. Federal forces are greatly limited in what they can do.

Lesson: Federalization of the California National Guard, based upon a request from Mayor Bradley to Governor Wilson, then relayed to President Bush, was unnecessary, and greatly restricted the previous latitude of the National Guard with respect to tasks that could be performed.