



# Preparing for Doomsday

**Stephen Prendergast** writes about the multi-agency training that is helping police and other emergency services prepare for a chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear terrorist attack

It's Tuesday evening, around 6.00pm, and the evening rush hour in a large UK city is reaching its peak. Suddenly reports begin coming in of a suspected terrorist attack at a high-profile location. Unlike conventional terrorist attacks, however, this attack seems different. There is something more sinister emerging, something that is setting alarm bells ringing throughout the emergency services and other agencies. Then word arrives: significant levels of a poisonous gas have been detected by officers attending the incident, and suddenly the nature of the emergency has changed in dramatic new ways. Injury and loss of life could be high, and panic could cause even more casualties.

This is not one of any number of Doomsday scenarios from the pages of cheap thriller fiction but the daily reality for which all emergency services must now prepare. 9/11 changed forever the terrorist threat; 7/7, 21/7 and recent other foiled plots have proved beyond doubt that the UK is now a high profile target; and threat warnings from the security services suggest that numerous plots for future

attacks are still being planned and, according to the Home Secretary, may yet succeed.

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In the post-9/11 era of asymmetric warfare, national territories have become new home fronts, battlegrounds where previously unimaginable scenarios of terrorist attack can inflict substantial loss of life and long-term environmental and economic damage. The potential threats from Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear (CBRN) attacks are now some of the most serious ever faced by the emergency services, taking them into previously uncharted crisis management territory.

Given this new threat, how do emergency services prepare their staff to respond effectively to the frightening new challenges of CBRN attacks within a multi-agency environment? The diverse, highly technical nature of the types of unconventional weapons that could be used – and the complex attack scenarios which modern terrorists have shown they are capable of mounting – mean new, specialised technical knowledge and incident command skills must be learnt and understood by large numbers of silver and gold command level officers across all branches of the emergency services throughout the UK.

## Multi-Agency Training

Ensuring that this critical public safety training challenge is met is the role of the Police National CBRN Training Centre (PN-CBRN) at Winterbourne Gunner, a specialised, multi-agency emergency services training organisation which develops and runs a series of intensive, high level CBRN training courses and

command exercises for the entire UK emergency service sector. The PN-CBRN Training Centre, established and co-ordinated through the Home Office's *Contest* strategy, is part of the wider Police National CBRN Centre. Responsible for training and equipping UK police forces to respond to and manage CBRN incidents, the Centre has established itself in four key sites: Ryton in Coventry, where the programme senior management oversee the increase in capacity and capability; the Scottish Executive, where a team manages elements of the project and the impact upon the devolved governments of Scotland and Northern Ireland; and the Home Office, where a procurement team manages the development and acquisition of new equipment. The fourth site is the CBRN Training Centre, which is co-located within the MOD joint services CBRN Training facility at Winterbourne Gunner.

A core principle of the Centre's ethos is multi-agency working, and to achieve this its staff establishment is unique within the UK, with Fire, Police and Ambulance staff working alongside each other to develop joint policies, capabilities and training from concept stage to delivery. The partnership working and support received from agencies such as the Chief Fire Officers Association, Ambulance Services Association, Department of Health, Defence Scientific and Technical Laboratory, Atomic Weapons Establishment and the Ministry of Defence, to name but a few of its partners, has been essential in achieving this aim.

Each month the Centre conducts a three-day silver or gold level multi-agency residential training course for senior officers from police, fire and ambulance services from throughout the UK. Following a programme of lectures and specialist CBRN training from staff at the Centre, officers, working in individual service groups as well as in multi-agency command groups, must then manage a complex simulated day-long CBRN incident conducted under the watchful eyes of experienced CBRN Training Centre staff and specialist external advisors. The day after the exercise, delegates participate in post-exercise analysis sessions, assessing how their responses could have been improved and recording lessons learned for possible future events.

Supporting these exercises with training and exercising software, scenarios, mapping, simulated news footage and exercise injects, along with exercise management expertise and command support technology (for example GIS mapping and Smart boards), is the leading UK training, simulation and command technology company VectorCommand, developers of the Emergency Command System family of emergency training and simulation products and services.

## Command Requirements

According to Dr Mike Griffin, technical director of VectorCommand: "Event and command realism are two key requirements for effective training and testing of emergency commanders. An exercise must seem real if it is to achieve its twin aims of: raising awareness of the typical types of multi-agency command, co-operation, communication, technical, legal and resource issues which would need to be dealt with in a major incident; and creating an authentic sense of the timing, scientific, medical, media and public opinion pressures which senior commanders would have to face when dealing with a CBRN attack.



Media communications need to be carefully managed

"Exercise participants must deal with technical issues, such as the specific threats posed by the use of various types of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear materials. They must also learn how to prioritise actions, responding decisively and dynamically in what can sometimes be a challenging multi-agency command environment, and make effective, considered decisions based on expert advice and evidence.

"To achieve this high degree of realism our Training and Exercise System, part of the Emergency Command System family of products, incorporates a facility for highly realistic injects, such as radio traffic, e-mail alerts and simulated news media incident footage. This footage, based on scripts prepared by our scenario experts, is broadcast 'live' into the exercise room from both the simulated incident location and a news studio. All of the typical media activities associated with terrorist incidents – 'expert' commentary, speculation, inaccuracy and sensationalist or alarmist claims – can be included in these broadcasts, at times determined by the exercise controllers, to replicate the kinds of pressures incident commanders are most likely to have to face."

## Media Realism

The media realism does not end with the simulated news reports, however. Individual officers participating in the exercise must also face the lights and cameras themselves,

responding to typical journalists' questions in a high-pressure press conference environment. These press conferences are filmed and the resulting footage 'broadcast' back to the exercise participants. Later, in the post-exercise debrief, these media appearances are viewed again and analysed with the assistance of an experienced TV journalist, who helps exercise participants assess strengths and weaknesses of performance.

The object is to learn valuable lessons, techniques and principles of incident media management from what has been, for many, a completely new – and sometimes painful – experience. Sincere, clearly expressed empathy from incident commanders needs to be a priority, even if there are limits on what can be revealed; simply citing secrecy rules and regulations will not do in the 24-hour a day media environment. A CBRN incident is likely to generate both national and international media interest, as well as central government political and crisis management involvement, so any media communications need to be carefully managed through a designated spokesperson. They also need to be well considered, credible and nuanced, to provide reassurance and avoid panic.

Legal issues are another key area of concern in CBRN incidents. If civilian victims are caught within an attack it may be necessary to confine them within a defined area until decontamination and other facilities are put in place. While this may be the correct procedure from a technical point of view, victims and relatives of the victims may object to having their loved ones exposed to an ongoing threat. Emergency managers dealing with a CBRN incident need to be able to anticipate these possibilities and be prepared to respond to these pressures.

The unique work done by the multi-agency team of officers at the Police National CBRN Training Centre at Winterbourne Gunner is an essential element in preparing an in-depth country-wide response to any type of terrorist chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear attack in the UK. Silver and gold level emergency service officers who attend the course go through an intense learning process, discovering that management of such incidents sometimes raises more questions than answers. The key outcome of such courses is that, should a CBRN attack occur, officers will have been well prepared in advance to deal with the many complex issues involved.

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For further information go to [www.emergencycommandsystem.com](http://www.emergencycommandsystem.com) or phone 02392 410400.