

Preparing for Terrorism

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Those who were paying attention instead of playing politics could have predicted the events of 11 September 2001. No, they could not have predicted the exact tactics used by the terrorists that horrific day. But, the fact that international terrorists were bent on targeting United States soil should have been obvious.

Most in the intelligence, law enforcement, and military communities are certain that the WTC and Pentagon attacks which killed thousands will NOT be the last such acts of aggression to be experienced in our lifetime. While our nation and its allies are currently enjoying much success in ridding Afghanistan of the Taliban and al-Qaida, Afghanistan is not the only country to host terrorists, nor are the Taliban and al-Qaida the only terrorist organizations we need to deal with. In fact, for the foreseeable future we, as a nation, would be well advised to maintain vigilance at all times.

If one agrees that future terrorist attacks on our soil are possible (some think probable), then it is important for all of us to prepare to meet the effects of those attacks. Much has been learned from the 9-11 experience that will be helpful should future attacks occur. I read a number of police and fire professional journals and it is clear those professions have learned much from WTC and the Pentagon. Amateur Radio operators responded to those events, and the lessons learned and passed on by the Ham volunteers who assisted at those venues should lead to changes within Amateur Radio as well.

Hams were not the only non-paid volunteers to respond to the carnage of 9-11. There were reserve police officers, volunteer firefighters, and unpaid emergency medical responders as well. In the professional (law enforcement and fire) journals I have read and discussions I have had since that date it has been clear that some volunteers responded in inappropriate, and in a few cases harmful, ways. Certainly, they were well intended. However their lack of caution (the "John Wayne Syndrome") and lack of familiarization with the command system in use serve to the detriment of their potential contribution. To the credit of Amateur Radio, I have not heard or read of the same criticism concerning the Amateur Radio response. That does not mean, however, that there are no "learning points" for the amateur community as a result of last September's events.

What should we in Amateur Radio be doing NEW to prepare ourselves for future responses to terrorist incidents? There are a number of things. First, as has been discussed many times in many places, affiliate with an "official" Amateur Radio emergency communications (EMCOMM) group. In New York and Washington it was the Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) and other legitimate groups that provided service. Very few, if any, amateurs acting as individuals were able to provide effective assistance.

Second, develop a survival-oriented "mindset." That is what paid, professional, emergency responders do. It is the correct mindset, i.e. the will, training, preparation, and the attitude to survive and perform their tasks, that enables success. Third, be aware that terrorist acts are different from other natural or man-made disasters. With terrorist acts ONE MUST CONSTANTLY ANTICIPATE SECONDARY/FOLLOW-UP ATTACKS! I do not intend, in any way, to criticize or "Monday morning quarterback" my colleagues who lost their lives, heroically, entering the WTC to save lives. Had they anticipated the first airliner to crash into the structures would be followed by a second it is likely their actions would have been different.

Experience is often a cruel, but effective, teacher. We now know that one horrible terrorist act may well be followed by a second. As EMMCOMM providers, we are "first responders" much like police, fire, and EMS personnel. We need to learn the lessons they have learned. Approach all incidents with caution. Take time to assess what has happened and to anticipate what might yet happen in the immediate future. Had NYPD, FDNY, Port Authority Police, and others thought of a second suicide plane they

might well have held back on entering a doomed structure. The harsh reality is that had they done so, the death toll might well have been 350 less than it was.

One thing clear from the tragedy of 9-11 is the ABSOLUTE NEED for all responders to such events to be intimately familiar with the "Incident Command System" (ICS). ICS was used exclusively by federal, state, and local agencies to coordinate the efforts of responders who descended on the various scenes.

Amateur Radio operators are responders. We need to respond effectively. To do so we must be conversant with ICS and how it works. There are two easy ways to gain that familiarity. One is to enroll in the ARRL's Continuing Education EMCOMM courses. They are now offered "on line" or, in many places, in the classroom. The second is to take the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) home study course on basic ICS. It is available via the FEMA web site: www.fema.gov. A third, but slightly less convenient way to gain the necessary knowledge is for your ARES, RACES or other group to be trained by your local fire department or law enforcement agency.

Traffic handling is the major contribution, which amateurs will make at and near the scene of terrorist incidents. The ARRL numbered radiogram format, which, historically, has been what amateurs have learned, has a role to play. That role is in regards to Health and Welfare traffic passed on behalf of organizations such as the Salvation Army and American Red Cross. Participation in the National Traffic System (NTS) will help make you proficient in that type of message handling.

There are other kinds of communications (administrative, operational, and tactical messages) that are even more commonly used in the response to events such as we experienced in September. Those types generally do not use the ARRL format. For that type of traffic, "radiograms" are too cumbersome and our "clients" (agencies and organizations we serve), do not want more than brief, accurate, verbal messages. To be an effective communicator for those types of messages, you need to learn and practice "plain language" message handling skills. Your local ARES or RACES VHF net is an excellent place to engage in that endeavor.

The attacks on 9-11 "raised the ante" on past incidents (previous WTC bombing, USS COLE bombing, U.S. Embassy bombings, etc.) The next level, which we may well see, will likely include weapons of mass destruction (WMD), WMD events can be biological, chemical, or nuclear. We know from the anthrax mailings that biological assaults are both possible and deadly. The government of Iraq has used chemical weapons. Nuclear materials are available enough that terrorists can manufacture "dirty bombs". A dirty bomb is an explosive charge with radioactive materials attached. While not a nuclear weapon in the common sense, such a weapon can, never the less, contaminate the immediate area of the explosion with fatal doses of radioactive material.

It is now common practice in any suspected terrorist incident for specialists from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the military to respond immediately. One of their functions is to sweep the area for any evidence of WMD's and, if found, to implement the necessary precautions. Such personnel did respond to both the WTC and Pentagon sites. Fortunately the planes' hijackers carried aboard no contaminants.

What is the learning point here? In future terrorist incidents Amateur Radio EMCOMM responders may be delayed in deployment to "ground zero" or elsewhere until scene safety can be established. Further, EMCOMM personnel may be required to wear issued safety gear (biohazard suits, breathing apparatus, etc.) perhaps for prolonged periods of time. That will require a level of fitness exceeding the level required in the past. Responders may also need to take prophylactic medications (ala the military's controversial anthrax vaccination) as a measure to prevent becoming victims themselves when working in a potentially contaminated environment.

There is much to be learned from the past if we are to adequately prepare for the future. It is indeed unfortunate that for Amateur Radio EMCOMM personnel the future may well include more responses to terrorist incidents. Now, perhaps more than ever before, it is time to take our preparations seriously.