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Disaster management: HUSAR teams, governments stage mock terrorist attack

Written by Laura King

On a frigid November morning an ear-splitting blast ripped through a network of financial office towers in the fictional community of Constellation, Ont. More than 2,200 employees work in the buildings but no one knew how many were inside when the suspected terrorist car bomb blew through the concrete.

The scene, reminiscent of the 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City that claimed 168 lives, was a mishmash of debris and rubble, fire, dust and victims, meticulously crafted to resemble the real thing.



PHOTO BY JOHN HANLEY

Capt. Pat Kline with Halifax's Can-TF5 climbs through a hole in the wall in the parking garage beneath the structure where the explosion occurred.

The site – the old Constellation Hotel near Pearson International Airport in Toronto, which is set for demolition – was eerie, cold, dark and swarming with hundreds of members of emergency response teams participating in the largest mock disaster ever staged in Canada.

Four of Canada's urban search and rescue teams, from Toronto, Halifax, Calgary and Manitoba, along with provincial and federal medical teams, collaborated to stage the massive exercise. The newest disaster-response team, Ottawa-based NOHERT, the National Office of Health Emergency Response Teams, which had close to 200 medical specialists on scene, was

formed after 9-11 and the 2003 SARS outbreak in Toronto.

All told, more than 900 people participated in the three-day, round-the-clock drill, including about 200 college students posing as disaster victims.

For the highly trained firefighters on the Canada Task Force search and rescue teams, the \$2 million exercise was a key opportunity to work together and learn from each other's experiences.

Mock disaster participants

USAR/HUSAR

Canada Task Force 2 – Calgary

Canada Task Force 3 – Toronto
Canada Task Force 4 – Manitoba
Canada Task Force 5 – Halifax
OPP PERT K9 unit

Medical

Ontario Emergency Medical Assistance Team (EMAT)
Ontario Provincial Police Provincial Emergency Response Team (PERT)
Public Health Agency of Canada – National Office of Health Emergency Response Teams (NOHERT)
Health Emergency Response Team (HERT)

CBRN

Toronto Joint Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Response Team

"The exercise was an extremely valuable experience that allowed the four teams to function as a cohesive unit in dealing with an overwhelming event," said Coby Duerr, team leader for Calgary's CAN-TF2 search and rescue team. "These exercises are designed to test our teams' abilities but more importantly to allow us to learn from one another and work together to get the job done."

It was also the first test for the teams of co-operation with the NOHERT and Ontario's EMAT contingents. As is the point of all training exercises, there were plenty of lessons learned.

"As far as the operation of our team actually going in and extricating

patients out of the rubble, we always find that piece of it goes really well," said Doug Silver, special teams co-ordinator for Toronto HUSAR/CBRN. Although a formal debriefing hadn't occurred by press time, Silver and representatives of the Calgary and Halifax search and rescue teams noted that the major difference with the exercise was the number of external agencies involved.

"Normally we'll do an exercise with the OPP PERT team and maybe the Ontario fire marshal," said Silver. "But this one was quite interesting because we brought in NOHERT and EMAT, organizations that aren't necessarily familiar with the [Incident Management System] IMS unified command structure.

"We can't assume that they understand our command – they're not used to operating that way. So probably table-top exercises leading up to real exercise, so that a unified command has a chance to evolve, would have been a good idea. I think that was a very big point."

Calgary's Duerr agrees.

"These additional departments gave us some insight to working with outside agencies at a disaster scene," he said. "There are hurdles that must be overcome when dealing with outside agencies, that include but are not limited to communications, logistics, functionality, etc."

Capt. Chuck Bezanson with the Halifax USAR team said the exercise gave the Maritime team a chance to better define the roles of its members and to determine what areas need work, including logistics, planning and financing. He too noted that having the medical teams on site was a new experience and recommends separate encampments for the search and rescue teams and the medical teams to avoid confusion.

Manitoba Fire Commissioner Doug Popowich said the exercise was a valuable opportunity to again work with other search and rescue teams under the unified command system.

"We saw that our decision to support our staff in the way that we do – providing hot meals, adjusting shifts in the hot zone to accommodate fatigue and weather conditions – was and is the right decision," he said.

Popowich added that more work is required to ensure that all participants in type of multi-agency, multi-casualty incident have a good understanding of incident command and, in particular, how unified command works.

NOHERT's Don Campbell notes that the federal response team is in its infancy and needs to learn from EMAT and the search and rescue professionals but says the exercise was a critical step in the evolution of disaster-response management in Canada.

NOHERT

The Public Health Agency of Canada established the National Office of the Health Emergency Response Teams (NOHERT) within the Centre for Emergency Preparedness and Response to improve its ability to respond and support provincial, territorial and local government management of health emergencies. NOHERT is leading the federal efforts to establish and train Health Emergency Response Teams (HERT) to be located in regions across Canada. HERT units are trained and equipped to respond to disease or injuries caused by national disasters. The first HERT team is in Ottawa and comprises doctors, nurses, paramedics and other medical professionals who volunteer for up to two weeks of training and exercises each year. Each HERT team has up to 185 members and can be deployed anywhere in Canada within 12 to 24 hours. The team can sustain itself for up to 72 hour before needing to be re-supplied. HERT units are deployed in three configurations:

1. HERT mass casualty unit, which includes a rapid response team, a medical response team and a mission support team;
2. HERT specialized unit, comprising primary health-care workers to address an epidemic or CBRN incident.
3. HERT air mobile unit, designed for rapid deployment by air to remote regions of

Canada and including a reduced medical response team and mission support team.

"There's no question in my mind that if we were deployed in a real event we would have been in a position to save lives," he said. "We had the right people

there and the right mix of skills and the right logistics. What that does is help us move to the next steps if we needed to deploy."

NOHERT will assess the data from the exercise to determine how well its medical professionals completed in the field the tasks they normally do in hospitals. An advisory committee of medical professionals is evaluating whether the team had the proper equipment and tools and another group is determining whether the right kinds of emergency medicine were on hand for the team to contribute to a an emergency situation anywhere in Canada.

For Toronto's HUSAR team next steps include exercises in the spring and fall and a major leap forward with talks with the Department of National Defence for air-lift support.

"We need to find a carrier that can load our team on a plane and move us from point A to point B, so that's very high on our radar screen for the first quarter," said Silver. The team hopes to complete an exercise this year during which it moves its personnel and equipment via aircraft to a HUSAR scenario.

What's clear from Caduceus Major is the level of provincial and federal support for disaster response, a direct result of 9-11.

"For Toronto HUSAR, 9-11 was a catalyst," Silver said. "In the way of financial support for the team, that was basically the time that the federal government requested communities such as ours to host a team. Toronto HUSAR was around before that but we certainly didn't have the financial support as great as we did before 9-11. Since 9-11 we haven't stopped. We're completely focused on getting this team developed."

Please visit our [Photo Gallery](#) to view John Hanley's photographs of the mock terrorist attack.

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