

Background:

I was first asked by Bill Nicholson to joint-assess this exercise in January after another 'assessor' declared himself unavailable. I had briefly met Bill during the course of an offshore exercise centred on Mokau, for that exercise I was acting as Operations Manager – my first time on that role here in New Zealand.

In this review, I will copy the headings, criteria and grade system as laid-out in the NZ SAR Secretariat KPI matrix.

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Objective #1

"To enhance multi-agency and inter-group co-ordination between the participating agencies and their supporting agencies & personnel within the Central Police District in the event of a large scale marine search occurring between Manawatu & Wanganui"

Call out procedures

Was it appropriate ? – Following the initial call from Sgt. Nicholson to the Marine Operations Centre (MOC) and their subsequent call to RCCNZ, and despite the incident being graded as Cat-1 there was still a considerable and unacceptable delay of nineteen minutes until the Incident Manager was contacted. (the subsequent actions of the Incident manager will be highlighted later).

Evaluation Grade 3

Resources

Were the correct resources used in a timely manner and in the correct order ? – Within the confines of the exercise the Incident Manager (IM), Keith Thompson paged and briefed all assets quickly and for the most-part appropriately.

It was noted that some more detailed briefing, especially for the first asset, would have been useful, however one needs to understand and/or experience the extreme pressure the IM experiences in the initial reflex stage of any maritime SAR mission. On the day the assets had enough basic info to get them going, and further detail could & would be relayed later through the usual means.

As a learning point, the IM could consider delegating the responsibility to brief the assets or delegating his immediate duties so he can brief the assets to another member of the Incident Management Team (IMT).

Evaluation Grade 8

Were resources tracked ? – Excellent (almost) real-time tracking was achieved throughout the exercise utilising the Track Plus system.

Evaluation Grade 10

I agree with comments in relation to callout procedure - it appeared there were a large number of issues in relation to comms between RCC, Police Comms, and the use of SOPs relating to callouts for this type of incident. Ensuring Police Comms treat all marine incidents as immediate threat to life is crucial. Regarding resources, the incident controller/manager did a good job of getting resources up and running as soon as he could. At the early stages of an incident like this often the incident controller is run off his feet and under-resourced himself for the workload. It is extremely important to delegate some of the roles as soon as possible, and to get someone to assist obtaining resources. DO NOT PLAN ALONE.

Objective #2

"To provide all participants the opportunity to refresh and practice their SAR Incident Management knowledge & skills during a full-scale operational exercise and to identify gaps & areas that need further development."

Information gathering

What notification was received and by who ?

How was it acted upon ?

Was this correct ? – The initial call was placed to the Police MOC they then advised RCCNZ where the incident was categorized Cat 1 SAR. RCCNZ advised MOC to contact Police Central Comms immediately.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was the correct information received ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was contact maintained with the informant ? – Not required as part of this exercise scenario.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Was the information analysis done correctly ? – The assessors were not privy to the initial analysis carried-out by RCCNZ, however as their immediate recommendation was to prioritise the incident as a Cat 1 SAR event, it must be assumed that their analysis was accurate.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was the information disseminated correctly ? – From the RCCNZ back to the MOC and then to the IM, yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was the information confirmed by independent means ? – Not required for this exercise.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Incident Management Team Set-up

Was the IMT established in a timely manner to reflect a real-time scenario ? – Yes. The assessors were extremely impressed by the ‘reality’ of this section of the exercise.

Evaluation Grade 10

Did the members of the IMT know their roles and responsibilities ? – There was a brief ‘moment’ at the outset when there was some slight confusion and overlapping of duties, however the assessors felt that this very accurately reflected the initial ‘chaos’ at the commencement of any SAR incident. The IM quickly redefined his teams’ roles, and they appeared to gel within five minutes of commencing the exercise.

Evaluation Grade 9+

How did the transition from Reflex Tasking to full & formal search planning go ? (OG-Full IMT) – It was the assessors impression that this transition was extremely brief and fluid. The reason for this was the geographical detail contained within the initial call which eliminated much of the ‘search’ required. There was an almost definite datum point to focus upon. *(This changed later as debris & casualties were found (too) quickly and then re-deployed. See Note #1 below).*

Evaluation Grade 9+

Was the room laid-out correctly to allow the IMT to work properly ? – Yes, however the IMT did not make full use of the excellent facilities which would have helped in their repeated briefings and updates for follow-on search assets and at hand-over later.

Evaluation Grade 7

SAR Plan

Was the Incident Action Plan appropriate for the scenario ? – Yes, entirely, this is evidenced by the speed at which a large proportion of the ‘targets’ were located by the first asset on-scene, (the Wanganui Coastguard Rescue Boat).

Note #1: Because of the rapid discovery of the ‘targets’ they were subsequently re-deployed to add a greater ‘realism’ to the exercise for follow-on search assets arriving later.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was the IAP checked ? – Yes. Acting as an ‘unofficial’ second-pair-of-eyes, I checked the search plans prepared by the Operations Manager and the local volunteer who was asked to transfer the plan to the chart. This

volunteer required some 'coaching' but was soon acceptably accurate in his plotting.

Evaluation Grade 8

Did the plan work ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Did everyone including the Operational Groups on the ground know the IAP ? – The key word is 'Initial'. Because the first asset located the 'targets' so rapidly, subsequent assets were not privy to the 'Initial' Action Plan, they were tasked using the subsequent search plan(s). It is therefore unrealistic/impossible to answer this question nor accurately grade his section.

Evaluation Response n/a

Logging of actions taken in ICP

Were actions logged using a simple system ? – Yes, written notes were taken throughout by both the IM and the LM. Wanganui Coastguard radio operators also kept separate notes (a radio log) during the course of the exercise.

Evaluation Grade 9

How was the passage of flow of information ? – The assessors were impressed by the flow of info between the immediate members of the IMT, however a serious breakdown occurred between the Coastguard radio operators and the IMT at 0919. A critical piece of information was (literally) lost after being brought in to the Ops Room and not brought immediately to the IM's attention.

Evaluation Grade 3

Radio Procedure

Was the correct radio procedure used ? – It was noted on a small number of occasions the agreed broadcast prefix "For Exercise" was not used. I did ask that the radio operators prepare (not broadcast) a Pan-Pan broadcast appropriate for this 'incident' for review. Due to the rapid evolving of the exercise this did not materialise.

The Coastguard radio operators passed-on information quickly and clearly, however some 'creative interpretation' of messages coming from the IMT to be relayed to the assets was noted. Operators, if in any doubt of the wording, must seek clarification from the IMT and not improvise.

Evaluation Grade 7

Was correct radio security observed ? – Unknown.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Communication & information

How good was the communication between members of the IMT ? – The assessors were impressed with the clarity and easy exchange of info between the IMT.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was the comms room manned to the correct level ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Documentation

Was the documentation kept in good order, adequate and legible ? – **detailed information was recorded by the Incident Controller as well as good use of whiteboards.**

Evaluation Grade 9

Did all managers keep a log of actions & decisions ? – The IM did, the assessors checked this discreetly during the course of the exercise.

Evaluation Grade 9

Was all takings written & collated with appropriate sign-offs ? – **taskings were passed by radio with eventual use of the NZSAR message forms - this improved as time went on.**

Evaluation Grade 7

At the end of the exercise collect all documentation as if they were going to Coroners Court ! – Are they adequate ? – Unknown.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Incident Controller

How did the controller perform ? – It is the assessors opinion that the Keith Thompson performed his duties competently and completely. It was noted that he was not 'afraid' to seek guidance from his Ops Controller especially and both assessors when (specialised) input was required.

In the 'perfect world' scenario, this is exactly how the assessors would want any incident (or exercise) controller to act.

Did he have control of the incident ? – The assessors noted two occasions where the IC briefly lost the initiative – the first at 0919 when the information from the Coastguard Radio Operators was lost – already mentioned above. The second occasion was a period between 1015 and 1100 where there far too many non-operational personnel in the Ops Room, in the resultant 'noise' a number of tasks were either not delegated or partially delegated. It is my experience that this situation is sadly 'normal' in Ops Rooms during weekend exercises both here in NZ and in the UK.

Evaluation Grade 8

Logistics

How did the logistics team perform ? – Exceptionally well in the given role, so much so that the assessors didn't realise he was there. That said, the assessors noted that the LC could have taken some of the operational 'load' away from the IC, especially during the second half-hour where more and more raw data was coming in to the Ops Room, that required turning in to usable information.

Evaluation Grade 8

Operations

How did the operations team perform ? – Again exceptionally well, although I did perceive a lack of pro-activity (after the initial targets had been found and re-deployed), to produce a 'Plan B', a second search pattern. However once the OC set-to-work, his 'Plan B' was thorough, specific and appropriate for the assets assigned.

Evaluation Grade 8+

How did the Sector Supervisors work ? – Unknown.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Did the Sector Supervisors work together ? – Unknown.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Scenario Analysis/Planning

How did the Planning Team perform ? – As a (minor) member of the Planning Team, it is not possible to accurately assess the teams' performance without prejudice.

Evaluation Grade n/a

Did they assess the 'What Ifs' ? – During the 'quiet times' in the course of the exercise the Planning Team discussed at length 'What If/Alternative scenarios. Enough discussion was generated at the time to begin initial planning for a potential 'carry-over' exercise.

Evaluation Grade 10

Did the Planning Team forward plan for the next operational period ? – Yes, as per previous paragraph.

Evaluation Grade 10

Objective #3

"To ensure that value is delivered to all personnel involved."

Personnel Involvement

Did participants get value from the exercise ? – It is the assessors observation from both the immediate 'hot' debrief and the later formal debrief sessions that without exception all participants from all agencies associated with 'Operation Sandtoft' received enormous value, ranging from basic message handling, to radio procedure to the optimum utilisation of SAR and sighting of Comms assets. (the South Taranaki Coastguard Comms vehicle again proved to be an indispensable piece of equipment).

Evaluation Grade 10

Did the participants know what was going-on ? – In a fluid and intense Maritime SAR situation, there are always missed communications and misunderstandings, this exercise was no different. (Again), from the 'hot' debrief feedback, some of the later deployed assets were struggling to understand that the 'found' targets had been re-deployed and needed searching for a second time.

The previously mentioned situation in the Operations Room where there were simply too many 'bodies' present also provided some confusion, even to those who were directly involved in the running of the exercise.

Evaluation Grade 7+

Risk Management

Did the unit consider risk management ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Were the correct decisions made ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Resources

Were resources crewed correctly – Yes at all times.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was Succession Planning done ? – Lifeboat crew changes were discussed at 1102 onward, plans were made in conjunction with David Pontin (Himatangi SLS), to utilise SLS rhib's to ferry replacement crews and Police observers on to both lifeboats.

Evaluation Grade 10

Briefing crew & resources

Were resources briefed ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Was that briefing comprehensive enough ? – As referred to above because of the fluid and occasionally chaotic nature of Maritime SAR incidents, there was some lack of detail in those briefings. Following the exercise this was remarked upon in the 'hot' debrief and accepted by the IMT.

Evaluation Grade 7

Were resources debriefed ? – Yes.

Evaluation Grade 10

Planning Meetings

Were planning meetings conducted ? – Yes, extensively and in full detail.

Evaluation Grade 10

During the meetings was the IAP reviewed and new objectives set for the next operational period ? – Yes, in concert with the full IMT, the oncoming IMT and the assessors.

Evaluation Grade 9

Summary from Tony Groome - all in all an extremely good training for all participants in marine search and rescue from Foxton through to Taranaki. It was great to get everyone together for the three occasions, the tabletop exercise, SAREX, and debrief. The largest benefit I believe was the networking of all of the different partners in marine search and rescue in

the Central Districts and I believe that this will definitely save lives into the future. Well done to Keith Thompson and the team in Wanganui for hosting this - let's do it again soon.