

# **THE LARGEST HAILSTORM IN OUR HISTORY: THE COMBAT AGENCY'S PERSPECTIVE ON COMMAND & CONTROL**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

Late in the afternoon of 14 April 1999, an intense supercell thunderstorm formed south of Wollongong. It dumped hail in and around Kiama, Albion Park and Shellharbour around 5pm, but did little damage there. It then moved out to sea and travelled slowly north, but just before 7:30pm it suddenly turned inland near Bundeena and moved through the Sutherland Shire, Botany Bay, the airport and the suburbs in and around the CBD depositing very large hail as it did so. It then tracked north along the northern beaches and finally collapsed near Broken Bay at around 10 pm.

The most serious damage was caused by giant hail between Lilli Pilli on Port Hacking and Darling Point on Sydney Harbour in a band 25km long by 3km wide. Most of the damage was to residential property and vehicles. The total cost is likely to be in the vicinity of \$2,200,000,000 making this event almost four times more costly than the giant storm of 1991 over Sydney's northern suburbs. It also damaged more than four times the number of properties than that storm.

The April storm was the most costly thunderstorm ever to strike Sydney. Ironically the State Emergency Service (SES), which is the combat agency for severe storms (and floods) was in the process of preparing a State level Sub-Plan to the State Disaster Plan covering severe storms when the hailstorm struck.

The SES was preparing the Plan because all major storms require multi-agency responses. While the cooperation between the emergency services and functional areas has always been excellent, SES had experienced the occasional problem with coordination between the services, particularly following the larger storms. It is also appropriate to keep in mind that storms cause regular major responses from all the Emergency Services. Indeed over the last decade they have been our most costly natural hazard.

The decision to prepare a Storm Plan was therefore reasonable in the circumstances. The pity of it was perhaps that it was not in operation when the storm struck the most densely populated part of Sydney on the evening of 14 April 1999.

## **The Initial Response**

SES units from across Sydney were directed to the worst affected local government areas of Sutherland, Botany, Randwick, City of Sydney, South Sydney, Marrickville, Waverley and Woollahra. At the same time New South Wales Fire Brigades (NSWFB) units were responding to calls through 000 and Rural Fire Service (RFS) units from the Sutherland Shire responded to assist the Sutherland SES under local arrangements. There were over 400 personnel in the field on this first evening, but certain sections of the media claimed that the response was too slow with too few personnel.

## **The Task Forces**

By around midnight on that first night, less than five hours after the storm's passage, it was appreciated that we were dealing with a really major problem, so calls for assistance went from SES State Headquarters to both NSWFB and RFS Headquarters, and a schedule was drawn up of support from all 18 SES Divisions.

The SES concept of operations for severe storms sees Task Forces formed from the various emergency services, under their own command structures, being placed under SES control for tasking within allocated sectors.

A sector can be a single street, a group of streets, a suburb or even a whole local government area, depending upon the level of damage. For this operation it was decided that the SES unit areas of responsibility would be the sectors. These combined the local government areas of City of Sydney and South Sydney and Waverley and Woollahra, but left the other local government areas as individual sectors.

The Task Forces worked well, as the services were free to utilise their own command and control systems. Liaison was provided to each local SES headquarters to assist with the tasking. There was also a mix of skills in each sector which provided flexibility in dealing with the wide variety of roof damage encountered.

Several of the local SES units had difficulty coping with the enormity of the tasks they faced. They were responsible to collect and collate tasking information and in consultation with the other service commanders, to task response crews, including their own. In several cases their headquarters were not adequate and a lack of operational management expertise was evident in a couple of cases. On the whole, however, they performed and adapted well, considering their lack of experience of large storms within their areas in recent years.

Sections of the media began to clamour for the Army to be brought in and the SES failed to answer their criticisms adequately.

## **The Restructure**

By 20 April it had become obvious that a number of changes were needed to the operational structure. These were implemented on 21 April and were:

- ❖ A forward tactical headquarters was established at Randwick, mainly to deal with a hostile media.
- ❖ Allocation of the inner city areas where the majority of the high rise was located, to the NSWFB, in recognition that they had their own aerial appliances and as a permanent service could sustain operations more readily than the volunteer services.
- ❖ A reallocation of the other sectors between the SES and RFS.

There was some reallocation of resources between the sectors as completion rates warranted it, and SES and Fire Brigades resources from other states, the Army, the National Parks and Wildlife Service and the Volunteer Rescue Association were brought in to help. Initially, the RFS was allocated a sector on its own, but this was found not to be a good idea as their crews were the least experienced, so this was rectified.

Unfortunately during the transfer of responsibility in some areas, data about completed tasks was lost, and the response was slowed due to the need to recapture it. The local SES units should have been left with this task.

Throughout the operation, SES provided operational stores of tarpaulins, rope, plastic etc, establishing dumps throughout the operational areas. Each service looked after its own personnel support.

One of the more imaginative methods of securing the very complicated roofs was the formation of specialist teams from units/brigades/squads which were trained in vertical rescue. All services participated and this concept allowed many very complicated tasks to be completed quickly.

## **The Recovery Arrangements**

On 9 May control of the operation was handed to the Southern Sydney Recovery Task Force, although NSWFB and SES units remained in operation for several months to assist where tarpaulins needed resealing. They responded after every weather event to resecure tarpaulins.

Throughout the response, the recovery agencies did their normal excellent job from their "One Stop Shop" at Randwick which is still open as this article goes to print. No matter how busy they get, the response agencies must advise the Recovery Centre of anyone who looks as though they will need help.

The State level Recovery Coordinating Committee was formed on 19 April and the Southern Sydney Recovery Task Force was formed on 23 April. They both performed extraordinarily well and speeded up a return to relative normalcy by several months.

## **Some Common Misunderstandings**

There has been a great deal of comment and misunderstanding about the operation due to a poor knowledge in some quarters of our emergency management system.

For example, it has been suggested that the State Emergency Operations Controller should have been in control because it was a multi-service operation, and/or because it constituted an emergency. These interpretations are not correct. Severe storms are dealt with by the SES whether they are single service or multi service operations, and whether or not they constitute emergencies, because the SES is the designated combat or lead agency. Those who believe that emergency operations controllers must control emergencies are incorrect. Most emergencies in New south Wales are controlled by combat agencies.

It has been suggested that a state of emergency was declared. This also is not correct. It was of course considered but the fact that the local and district Disaster Plans are always active for storms was considered to be sufficient. Indeed our emergency management system was purposefully designed to allow most emergencies to be dealt with **without** such a declaration.

There has also been some confusion about what the Local Emergency Operations Centres should have been doing. In a combat operation they should be available to assist the combat agency in any way the Controller of that agency sees fit. They can be either open or closed depending on the individual circumstances. The best place for the LEMO in situations like this one is at the combat agency operations centre. The LEMO's role is to coordinate the provision of Council resources to assist the combat agencies.

## **Conclusion**

Let there be no doubt, there were enormous difficulties with this operation, due to its sheer size and complexity, and many lessons were learned. But, the response was the biggest and quickest by far to any storm ever experienced in New South Wales. It is significant that 80% of all reported tasks had been completed within seven days. The main problem in the first few days was not a lack of people, but a lack of ability to handle any more, coupled with the need to be able to sustain operations for a much longer time than is normal. There were also several bouts of severe weather to contend with after 14 April, which extended the response considerably.

The State Storm Plan will encapsulate the lessons from our biggest storm and hopefully remove any possibility of confusion in future operations. It will certainly include very specific arrangements to coordinate dealing with the media.

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