



# HISTORICAL

## Special Interest Group Newsletter

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### LEARNING FROM HISTORY

Many years ago, I read a book by an eminent military historian, B.H. Liddell-Hart, called 'Strategy: The Indirect Approach'.<sup>1</sup> In it, Liddell-Hart suggested there were two forms of practical experience, direct and indirect. Direct experience is self-explanatory. In emergency terms, it is actually having some responsibility for planning or responding to it or being involved in its immediate aftermath. But there are two problems in relying on direct experience alone:

- Firstly, it can be very expensive in human terms, as has been seen time and time again.
- Secondly, although there may appear to be a number of opportunities for direct experience, particularly in today's complex world, research has revealed that to the individual, they are in fact, relatively rare.<sup>2</sup>

Indirect experience, on the other hand, is acquired by undergoing training, listening to others and, above all, by studying history. In the context of this editorial this means examining what happened, why it happened and how people reacted to disasters in the past. It is suggested that Henry Ford once said. 'The only thing you learn from history is that you cannot learn from history.' But, on the other hand, Bismark is alleged to have said, 'Only fools learn from their own experience/I prefer to learn from the experience of others.' Whilst not everyone would wholly subscribe to Bismark's remark, it makes infinitely more sense than that of Henry Ford.

***Tony Moore, President Emeritus and Acting Vice Chair***

### THE VALUE OF HISTORY

Historical parallels are, of course, never exact, but history can, and indeed, should be used in the development and teaching of current strategies for managing crises, disasters and emergencies, after making appropriate adjustments for organisational changes and technical developments that have taken place in the intervening periods. Taking, as an example, a case currently going through the courts, the Hillsborough disaster of 1989, it seems that useful 'experience' could have been obtained by all those concerned with the arrangements for the Liverpool versus Nottingham Forest Cup Semi-final in 1989, by studying the reports relating to the 1981 and 1988 Semi-finals. And the study of history should not be confined to a particular country. For instance, when the full story is revealed of the recent dam collapse in Brazil, there will almost certainly be some parallels with what happened at Aberfan in South Wales in 1966. A major problem for emergency<sup>2</sup> managers is acquiring a realistic vision of what it will actually be like when responding to an emergency. Human activity and behaviour, whilst

unpredictable on many occasions, shows common themes throughout history and the study of past emergencies can convey to people an idea of what it is like to be involved in the response to such an event, providing they are studied in accordance with three general rules. They should be studied:

- In depth, using all available resources;
- In the context of what was occurring in society at the time;
- In a spirit of critical awareness.

Such an approach to the study of a particular emergency can often reveal a clearer, more complete and accurate picture of the event than was apparent to those involved in the response to the emergency at the time. But, in order to learn from history, particularly from mistakes that have been made, there needs to exist a climate in which errors of judgement made in the

spirit of professionalism are readily conceded, rather than the more recent practice, which seems to be to find a scapegoat or scapegoats. Of course, history is not wholly reliable for a variety of reasons. It may be difficult to find out exactly what happened because of an absence of source material, or the whole truth may not have been disclosed because it would show people in bad light. The availability of facts may lend undue weight to a minor, but well-documented, incident whilst another more significant event lacks material. Finally, the value of history is invariably qualified by its interpretation. But, even given these limitations, history does have an important contribution to make because, in the context of emergencies, when all things are considered, it is the closest most people will get to reality until, suddenly, one day, they come face to face with the real thing.

## BUT WHY DO WE NEED SUCH A GROUP?

There are many reasons why the Institute has decided to set up a Historical Special Interest Group but there is room here to mention only a few.

At the first ICPEM Conference in 2009, which brought together Practitioners and Academics, Professor David Alexander pointed out that ‘although lessons were invariably identified after each event, frequently they were stored away and forgotten.’ And Andrew Goldston, from the Olympic Security Directorate of the Metropolitan Police, suggested that academia could provide help ‘to identify good practice and give advice gleaned from research into previous Olympic Games and other major sporting events.’<sup>3</sup> Dr Kevin Pollock carried out a review for the Emergency Planning College of 32 major incidents that had occurred in the UK between 1986 and 2010. One of the aims of the report he subsequently produced was to establish ‘a historical and contextual evidence base’<sup>4</sup> but it only covered relatively modern incidents, as will be seen from the dates. Pollock identified nine common causes of failure in responding to these incidents. Three of them relate to lessons:

- No system to ensure that lessons were learned, and staff taught;
- Failure to learn lessons; and
- Previous lessons/reports not acted upon.<sup>5</sup>

In his conclusions, Pollock claimed that ‘the consistency with which the same or similar issues have been raised by each of the inquiries [into these major incidents] is a cause for concern.’ He went on to say ‘that lessons identified from the events are not being learned to the extent that there is sufficient change in both policy and practice to prevent their repetition.’<sup>6</sup> According to Coles, writing in 2014, ‘it is well documented that the same mistakes are repeated time and again when responding to major emergencies’, and she describes the learning of lessons as a ‘universal problem’.<sup>7</sup> Part of the problem is the ready accessibility of many of the reports relating to emergencies, particularly the older ones. Many are lengthy which take time to read. And, given their increasingly busy professional lives, time is one thing many emergency managers do not have. So, one of the aims of the Historical Special Interest Group is to draw out the facts and the lessons from lengthy reports and put them in a succinct package of generally no more than 4,000 words. Some Terms of Reference have been drafted for the Historical Special Interest Group and can be accessed on the website by going into the tab that denotes Special Interest Groups.

## CALL FOR ARTICLES

The first aim is to publish a special edition of the Institute's Journal, Alert, hopefully, sometime towards the end of this year, from the Historical Special Interest Group. But to do this, we need at least six articles, each of around 4,000 words. I already have three, on Aberfan (1966), the Clapham Train Crash (1988) and the Bethnal Green Underground Station (1943). They can be about a crisis, disaster or emergency that has happened anywhere in the world; they do not have to have occurred in the United Kingdom. Anyone wishing to write such an article is advised to contact the Secretary, Tony Moore, at [tmdisman@gmail.com](mailto:tmdisman@gmail.com), merely to ensure that someone is not already writing about the same crisis, disaster or emergency you are proposing. You will also be sent some brief guidelines, as to lay-out, etc.

### CLOSING DATE FOR MATERIAL FOR THE NEXT NEWSLETTER

**Currently, it is proposed to circulate 2 or 3 newsletters each year. If there is a demand, this can be changed. The closing date for material for the next newsletter is 1 May 2019**

### Group Membership

Membership of the Group is currently confined to all members of the Institute of Civil Protection and Emergency Management, but this may be widened if there is a demand. Anyone interested in joining us should contact the current Secretary of the Group, Tony Moore at [tmdisman@gmail.com](mailto:tmdisman@gmail.com)

### CURRENT MEMBERS

- Professor David Alexander
- Alan Clarke
- Pete Davis
- Dr Ken Hines
- Bruce Kirkham
- Tony Moore
- Paul Murphy
- Dr Brian Robertson
- Paul Smith
- Tony Thompson
- Phil Trendall
- Robin Woolven
- Roger Young

### PUBLISHED ARTICLE REPOSITORY

We also require articles that members and non-members have written about, particularly crises, disasters or emergencies, which have already been published electronically to go in the repository which will be accessed via the Institute's website: [www.theicpem.net](http://www.theicpem.net)

### References

1. Liddell-Hart, B.H (1967). Strategy: The Indirect Approach. London: Faber & Faber.
2. Use of the word's 'emergency' and 'emergencies' throughout this paper includes crises and disasters.
3. Removing Hidden Barriers. Alert, Autumn 2009, pp. 4 - 5.
4. Pollock, Dr Kevin (2013). Review of Persistent Lessons Identified Relating to Interoperability from Emergencies and Major Incidents since 1986: Occasional Papers New Series No 6. Easingwold: Emergency Planning College, p.4.
5. Ibid, p.6.
6. Ibid, p.7.
7. Coles, Eve (2014). Learning the Lessons from Major Incidents: A Short Review of the Literature: Occasional Papers New Series No. 10. Easingwold: Emergency Planning College, p.4.

### LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Members of the Historical Special Interest Group are invited to write to the Editor of the Newsletter with their comments. If appropriate, the letter will appear in the next Newsletter.