

Operation Braidwood

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**Letter to the editor. Not peer reviewed.*

Dear Editor,

As the Head of the London Fire Brigade's Technical Rescue, International SAR and Overseas Operations capabilities, I am well drilled in responding to sudden onset disasters and capacity building missions for rising tide events. These challenges have, to date, been met by identified and trained relatively small teams who are well practiced in personal administration, deployment protocol, cultural awareness etc as well as the obvious specific technical skills.

However, how would you or your organisation deal with a request for support to, in effect (given the timeframe) a sudden onset disaster where large numbers of staff without experience, specific skills or cultural (organisational) awareness are required to deploy for an extended period? The outbreak of the Global Coronavirus pandemic presented me with such a challenge and led to the greatest blue light collaboration ever seen between London's three emergency services with 450 volunteers identified, training and deployed into partner organisations within 3 weeks.

What follows is an outline of how this challenge was met. Whilst not directly related to SAR, I'm sure that you can draw parallels with the process, obstacles and achievements which you can either relate to or use for future demands of your own. In March 2020 the London Ambulance Service (LAS), Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and local authorities asked the London Fire Brigade (LFB) for assistance in response to the unprecedented demand placed upon them.

I was asked to explore ways in which the LFB could support blue light partners and a list of options was drafted for discussion at the Commissioner's Continuity Group (CCG) and then presented at the multi-agency GOLD/Strategic Coordination Group (SCG).

Once agreed, I led the LFB response, named Operation Braidwood, which was delivered by operational staff volunteers across three distinct areas:

- Ambulance Driver Assist (ADA) – Using volunteer Firefighters to co-crew additional ambulances procured in response to the pandemic.

- Pandemic Multi Agency Response Team (PMART) – Multi-Agency teams responding to Covid related deaths in the community to investigate the circumstances of the death, certify the death and prepare the deceased for undertakers.
- Mortuary Body Handling (MBH) – Providing assistance with body handling at temporary mortuaries.

Additional roles were also developed for non-operational volunteers to support their operational colleagues:

- Initial Callers to support the welfare of operational staff in their volunteer roles
- Call Handlers to answer calls at Control to alleviate staff shortages

Ambulance Driver Assist

This involved over 300 operational Firefighters detached to the London Ambulance Service for an initial 3 months to act in the role of driver/assistant. Wembley Stadium was the venue selected to conduct familiarisation training for LFB volunteers. In groups of 40, each 'batch' underwent familiarisation in:

- Ambulance driving
- Ambulance stowage
- Use of equipment
- Casualty handling
- PPE issue

The Firefighters were then allocated to an LAS 'hub' where they observed two full shifts before starting in role. In the first 7 weeks of Op Braidwood, over 25,000 incidents were attended by LFB volunteers. At peak, an extra 168 ambulances were available to Londoners as a result of this arrangement. Firefighters continue to operate from 22 LAS hubs across London responding to every type of emergency. Feedback from the LFB volunteers and the LAS has been extremely positive, strengthening the relationship between the two agencies. The additional benefit to this arrangement will be the return of over 300 more confident and competent Immediate Emergency Care technicians to the LFB.



Figure 1: Wembley Stadium was the venue selected to conduct familiarisation training for LFB volunteers.

PMART

The Pandemic Multi-Agency Response Team is a Police led initiative to address the surge in Covid related domestic deaths. Each of the 17 teams are formed of 2 police officers (1 Detective), 1 clinician and 1 Firefighter.

Their roles are as follows:

- The Police Detective role is to investigate the circumstances of the death.
- The role of the Clinician is to confirm the death and start the recording process.
- The second police officer and the Firefighter are responsible for wrapping the body in accordance with strict protocol set by the Police.

The teams operated from six police hubs across London. Five of these operated on a 24 hour basis and a central hub that operated during the day. The 96 LFB volunteers undertook an intensive 'warts and all' briefing at the LFB HQ which included information regarding each role, PPE protocol and the body wrapping procedure. They were then allocated to a police hub where they underwent further familiarisation with their team.



Figure 2: Crews underwent an intensive training day at LFB Headquarters.

Initial planning prepared to respond to an anticipated peak of 280 incidents per day. Fortunately the figures came nowhere near this total. In the initial 7 weeks that PMART operated, more than 750 bodies were attended to. The capability was official 'stood down' (as opposed to shut down) on Friday 15th May. Teams remain ready to stand up again within 24 hours of a request.

Mortuary Body Handling

A request was received via the Strategic Coordination Group for the LFB to provide another 50 operational staff to assist at temporary mortuaries with body handling. This would include bodies collected from the PMART teams. Initially, a request was submitted for the Military to perform this role, however, that request was never signed off. Various non-government agencies were being used to build the temporary mortuaries and handle the bodies.

At this time the LFB were receiving a lot of enquiries from recently retired LFB staff expressing an interest to help with the cause in some way. The MBH role seemed an ideal opportunity to use those ex LFB officers and fulfil the request for 50 staff. One of the agencies involved with organising this role was *Team Rubicon*. Arrangements were made to sign-post LFB retirees to work for them directly. However, fortunately, the actual need never reached the anticipated fatality levels so this request was withdrawn.

Welfare

The welfare of volunteers is a hugely important element of the project. The support system was divided into 4 levels. A cadre of 60 non-operational staff were recruited to undertake 'buddy checks'. This was a simple phone call after the first couple of shifts to remind volunteers that they were supported. It was then up to each volunteer to agree their bespoke contact programme.

The second level of intervention is the Hub Liaison Officers (HLO). These officers are allocated a cluster of hubs to manage. This provides continuity of both face-to-face and remote support. The HLO's are able to address practical issues such as improvements to the temporary workplace, additional uniform etc. Any issues that they are unable to resolve are escalated to the Silver or Gold officers for resolution. Supporting the 'buddy checks' is a cadre of 10 qualified Mental Health First Aiders (MHFA). These provide the first level of mental health support to volunteers who are dealing with some particularly unpleasant experiences. Providing the third level of support, they make regular contact with each volunteer on a 'candidate led' basis.

Finally, the Brigades Counselling and Wellbeing section which is available 24 hours a day to provide experienced counsellors to support staff. The MHFAs will escalate any complex cases to this group. In cases where staff have reported exposure to particularly unpleasant incidents, this group will make contact immediately without the need for a staged escalation.

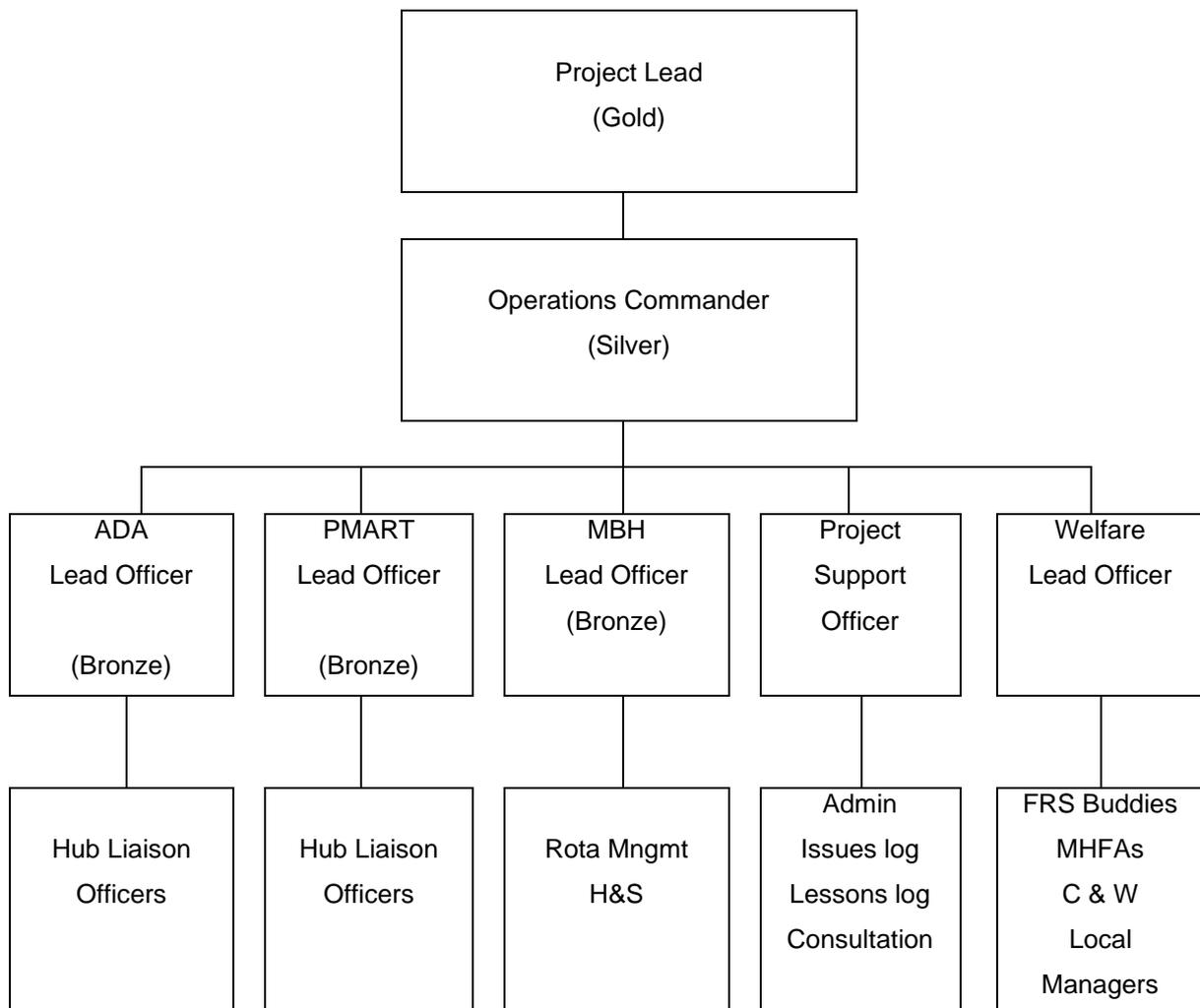


Figure 3: Organisational Structure of the Operation

The Operation Braidwood project team.

Such a complex project working with multiple agencies required a strong project team. A total of 20 officers formed the core project team supported by other elements from within the LFB and across the blue light partnerships totalling some 100+ staff. The urgency of this project required the secondment of staff from various departments within LFB HQ and required unprecedented collaboration between the Brigade and our blue light partners, alongside the NHS, City Hall and local authorities.

The success of Operation Braidwood could not have been secured without the support of staff and Representative Bodies to prepare and secure risk assessments, PPE, training, operational guidance, rota management, facilities issues and welfare. Whilst initially viewed by some as obstacles to success, having robust documentation, clear agreements and comprehensive support laid solid foundations for long term support.

Reflecting on the project, it was apparent that by having clear objectives, defined timelines, regular communication and a committed project team was fundamental to it's success. Whilst it would not be possible or efficient to practice this on such a scale, the blue print for success can now be adapted to suit future large scale demands to meet other crises brought on by terrorism, weather or natural disasters.

P.S. The significant numbers of detachments have only been possible due to unprecedented staff levels due to cancelling of leave, non-critical central and local training.

Abbreviations

ADA	Ambulance Driver Assist
CCG	Commissioner's Continuity Group
HLO	Hub Liaison Officers
LAS	London Ambulance Service
LFB	London Fire Brigade
MBH	Mortuary Body Handling
MHFA	Mental Health First Aiders
MPS	Metropolitan Police Service
PMART	Pandemic Multi Agency Response Team
SAR	Search and Rescue
SCG	GOLD/Strategic Coordination Group

About the Author

David O'Neill is a Principle Officer in the London Fire Brigade (LFB) currently working in the Operational Policy & Assurance department responsible for teams developing operational tactics and policy for Immediate Emergency Care, Technical Rescue, international rescue response, Government liaison, and overseas capacity building projects.

David joined the LFB in 1993 serving at operationally busy fire stations, training department and Headquarters posts. In 2006 David was awarded the coveted Higgins & Langley memorial award for excellence in the field of swiftwater rescue.

After various Station Commander posts, David returned to Brigade Headquarters as a Group Manager responding to major incidents as a National Urban Search & Rescue (USAR) Advisor and National Flood Tactical Advisor.

DAC O'Neill is a deployable expert for the EU Civil Protection Mechanism and NATO and has deployed on response and capacity building missions to countries including Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Bhutan and most recently Chile.