
Fort Leonard Wood Trains on Emergency Response Operations

By Ms. Allison Choike

Coordination among response elements is a key factor when it comes to emergency response services at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Emergency responders put their coordination skills to the ultimate test during a chemical accident/incident response and assistance exercise on 29 August 2007.

During the exercise (conducted at the former post exchange complex), emergency responders reacted to a simulated hostage and toxic chemical-agent incident. “The exercise involved Soldiers releasing mock chemical agent to a terrorist organization [The agent was] later used on the installation (along with firearms) to take hostages in a public area,” said Master Sergeant Jason Mosher, the observer/controller noncommissioned officer in charge. “Law enforcement [personnel] took control, eliminating the immediate threat and securing the area so that the fire department could decontaminate all those affected. Chemical Defense Training Facility staff then recovered and accounted for the chemical agents that were removed, and medical staff treated simulated casualties”

Soldiers spent months planning and hours preparing for the most important part of the exercise—a realistic scenario. “Realism on the part of all responders in an exercise of this type is very important. Exercises of this nature allow responding organizations to practice working together and pool their abilities to overcome situations they are not equipped to handle on their own,” said Mr. David Schodlatz, a chemical surety specialist. Even the role players—initial-entry Soldiers with little experience in these types of situations—made the exercise more realistic and worthwhile. “I picked the Soldiers for two reasons: First, I needed people that would react like any civilian and not a regimented response to an emergency. Second, their [the initial-entry Soldiers’] availability. We don’t [sic] want to be training distracters, but there are a number of Soldiers not involved in training on any given day,” said Master Sergeant Mosher.

The exercise, which lasted a few hours, was less challenging than the planning that went into it. “The hardest part for me was keeping it secret while I was trying to coordinate all of the agencies to participate. In order to have an actual response (instead of a rehearsed one), surprise is necessary,” said Master Sergeant Mosher. But at the end of the day, the time spent on the exercise was rewarding. “The key players stated in the after-action report that they felt the event was the most realistic one that they had participated in” said Master Sergeant Mosher.

The objective of the exercise, according to Mr. Schodlatz, was to challenge the Directorate of Emergency Services Recapture and Recovery Plan by identifying strengths and weaknesses. “It is only through the challenges of an exercise of this type (where all of the support pieces are present) that everyone in the program can learn from each other and . . . make sure the proper systems are in place.”

Of course, no exercise (regardless of the realistic circumstances) can compare to a real scenario. “Everyone thought the timeline was very close to an actual one,” said Master Sergeant Mosher. “Once a real situation develops, it can roll like an out-of-control freight train.”

Ms. Choike is a staff writer for the Fort Leonard Wood Guidon.

