

Multi-agency rescue after flash floods

In his article on page 32, news presenter and journalist Alex Thomson notes how impressed he was with the media operation during the Boscastle flooding in August. For readers unfamiliar with the incident, here is a report and pictures of what turned out to be Britain's largest recorded maritime rescue in history



ON MONDAY, AUGUST 16, 2004, the Environment Agency issued flood warnings for North Cornwall. Between 1200 and 2300, up to 100mm of rain fell in Boscastle, with the majority falling over a two-hour period.

At Cornwall County Fire Brigade the Incident Commander, Ted Simpson, was called into Fire Control. Fire Control Operators were dealing with vast numbers of people in distress: people trapped in trees, in cars, on top of houses and on low-lying ground.

A major flood incident was declared for

Boscastle. The Brigade mobilised several vehicles, informed Emergency Planning and started the major incident plan. Things then started to deteriorate further as all communications with the retained crews already at the scene were lost, due to a combination of factors: the extreme weather conditions; the geography of Boscastle; and the only mobile network in the area being overwhelmed with callers.

Fire control then received a call via a landline from Station Officer Mark Saltern, who informed them that the scale of the incident was huge and

Buildings were washed away and cars were swept into the harbour on August 16, 2004

that his crew were engaged in multiple rescues. StnO Saltern and his crew had pulled a number of people to safety and were on the second floor of a building with around 30 other people. "At the back of my mind, I couldn't help worrying how long it was going to be before the wall collapsed downstairs," he said after the incident.

DO Simpson gave him safety instructions regarding himself and his crew, then the line went dead and was no longer available.

DO Simpson made his way to the incident: "On arrival I observed a scene of complete chaos. People and cars were everywhere. The rain was

torrential and I was quickly soaked to the skin. Seven helicopters were flying above rescuing people from rooftops and cars. Buildings were being washed away and cars were careering along a wall of black water completely out of control. This was an extremely dangerous situation.”

The rescue of the public continued until late into the evening, with all seven helicopters winching residents and emergency services crews to safety. Subsequent search and rescue efforts for missing persons, and checking of wrecked and buried vehicles continued for more than 72 hours.

Agencies involved

This search and rescue operation involved Cornwall County Fire Brigade, Devon Urban Search and Rescue, Specialist search teams from Wales Fire Service, Marine and Coastguard Agency, Ministry of Defence helicopters, RNLI, Devon and Cornwall police, Yorkshire police, North Cornwall District Council, Environment Agency and others.

Meanwhile a conference call had been held between senior officers in the emergency services, North Cornwall District Council and Cornwall County Council. Cornwall County Fire Brigade noted that the incident was declared ‘major’ at 1646.

Following this official decision categorising the incident as ‘major’, Gold Control was opened at Devon and Cornwall Constabulary’s headquarters in Exeter.

DO Simpson had now met with two other senior officers from the Ambulance and Police. Lines of communication with individual control rooms were established and the police Superintendent took the role of Chair of Silver Command.

An Emergency Rest Centre was opened in the nearby town of Camelford. The residents of Boscastle found accommodation with friends and family, but a large number of tourists were involved in the flooding and over 150 were accommodated overnight.

By the next morning (Tuesday, August 17) reports from Silver Control indicated that 16 people were unaccounted for. The police casualty bureau was operating and, by 1300, only one person remained unaccounted for. Searches continued in Boscastle among the wrecked buildings and cars. Several vehicles had been washed into the harbour and dive teams inspected these. No bodies were found.

Firefighters from Cornwall County Fire Brigade continued to assist in the clean-up operation and on Wednesday, August 18, residents were helped down to their homes to collect provisions. Control was handed to the Chief Executive of North

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Top: Cornwall County Fire Brigade stayed at the incident for seven days

Above: Six firefighters were among the 155 people rescued by military helicopters

Cornwall District Council on Thursday, as the continuing priority of the operation had shifted to restoration and recovery.

Cornwall County Fire Brigade stayed at the incident for seven days and 29 stations out of 31 were involved.

An unknown number of people were rescued/

evacuated by the firefighters and 155 people were rescued (including six firefighters) by military search and rescue helicopters. There were no reported deaths and the only recorded injury was a broken thumb in what has been reported as being the largest recorded maritime rescue in UK history.

CRJ