In the Loop
Hertfordshire Constabulary Stakeholder Newsletter
Western Area

IN THE LOOP - Edition 3, December 2005

RESPONDING TO THE BUNCEFIELD OIL DEPOT EXPLOSIONS

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Chief Superintendent Jeremy Alford – Western Area Commander 'Partnership Working at its Best'

The past ten days have posed tremendous challenges for the Constabulary, and the Western Area in particular, in the aftermath of the massive explosions at the Buncefield Oil Depot in Hemel Hempstead. International media attention was focused on the incident for a prolonged period, and the response of the emergency services working in conjunction with national and local agencies and authorities was under massive scrutiny.

Above: Chief Superintendent Alford at Buncefield Oil Depot.

This is without doubt the biggest incident with which I've been involved in 25 years of policing. The leadership, commitment and professionalism demonstrated by Western Area officers and staff was exceptional at a time of unprecedented pressure. The Constabulary also received tremendous support from the Metropolitan Police Service and Bedfordshire Police which enabled policing in the remainder of Dacorum, Three Rivers and Watford to continue.

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I would like to pay tribute to the magnificent job carried out by Hertfordshire firefighters, supported by their colleagues from neighbouring counties. Their skill and resourcefulness in tackling the biggest fire ever seen in peacetime Europe was a credit to them all. Having seen first-hand the scale of the blaze and the damage caused, I have nothing but praise for the incredible job they did.

The multi-agency operation swung into action seamlessly and the response by all the relevant organisations was testament to the joint training and close working practices we have developed in recent years. This was partnership working at its best and we are receiving requests for information from across the world regarding how we managed this incident together, which is a tremendous tribute.

I would like to conclude by saying that the way the community of Hemel Hempstead joined together to support each other at this most testing of times was remarkable. This has been a worrying and difficult time for local residents, business owners and employees, and their patience and co-operation has been fantastic.

The hard work will continue throughout the festive period, but may I take this opportunity to send you every good wish for Christmas and the New Year.

Superintendent Al Thomas – Deputy Western Area Commander
'Turning Strategy into Action'

As 'Silver Commander' for the Buncefield incident, it was my role to ensure that strategic decisions taken by chief officers and organisational leads, who were working from Police Headquarters, were implemented.

Above: The Silver Control Centre at Watford Police Station

During the first few days the majority of the effort was focused on the emergency response, ensuring that public safety was maintained whilst the Fire Service continued to tackle the fire and that those evacuated from their homes were given the necessary support. As the week continued, the emphasis of the effort shifted to a recovery operation, enabling residents to return to their homes and trying to restore some level of 'normality'.

Throughout the operation, the co-operation from partnership agencies was tremendously positive, and I would also like to pay tribute to voluntary groups such as the Salvation Army who made themselves available to those who needed support.

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Inspector Barbra Campbell – Head of Hemel Hempstead Community Team
'The work continues'

Above: Fire fighters tackling the blaze at Buncefield

Clearly last week's explosions will affect the local community for many months to come. The Community Team based at Hemel Hempstead Police Station is committed to supporting the regeneration plan as this develops.

At this time, we continue to have officers on cordons surrounding the immediate area of the blast whilst the Fire Service carry on dampening down the tanks. Once this phase has concluded, the Health and Safety Executive will move onto the site to proceed with the investigation into the cause of the blast. The investigation will be supported by the Constabulary, which has committed detectives to assist with statement taking. It will take some time before the cause of the explosion is fully established.

Officers in the Community Team have many combined years of experience of policing the Hemel Hempstead area and their local knowledge was invaluable at a time when we were receiving additional back-up from other forces. The value of the neighbourhood policing model really proved itself when the demand for a highly visible, reassuring policing presence was paramount. We have also made maximum use of the mobile police station to assist with this operation.

As the Community Team has built excellent partnership working at base line level, co-operation 'on the ground' was much easier. For example, we are on first name terms with several Dacorum Borough Council staff who, along with us, form part of the Dacorum Community Safety Partnership which aims to reduce crime and develop community safety initiatives to reassure the public and improve their quality of life. These close working relationships proved particularly valuable as we liaised at the evacuation centres to provide necessary support to those residents most affected by this incident.

I would like to thank all those local businesses, including Tesco's and McDonalds, for their support in providing food and drink to the emergency services.

We will continue to work with the local community to provide whatever policing support proves necessary in the coming months.

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