



New Zealand Fire Service

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29 November 2016

Alan Thompson

By email: fyi-request-4875-2df42fef@requests.fyi.org.nz

Dear Alan

Official Information Request - Failure of Incident Ground Communications

I refer to your official information request which was received on 02 November 2016.

In accordance with the provisions of the Official Information Act 1982 (**OIA**) the relevant information held by the New Zealand Fire Service Commission (**NZFS**) in relation to each of your questions is set out below:

1. *Confirmation that the paid brigades of the NZ Fire Service brigades [sic] located in Hamilton and who responded to this chemical spill incident in September 2015 were equipped with UHF incident ground radios as their primary IGC capability.*

All front-line appliances in Hamilton carry both VHF and UHF radios: ie one VHF and four UHF radios.

VHF is used as the primary communication method between paid and volunteer crews when responding into volunteer districts outside of Hamilton City.

In addition, the Hazmat/Command Vehicle that responded to this incident also carries a linking device that links VHF and UHF and has high capacity aerials.

2. *Confirmation that the Cambridge Volunteer Brigade who were the first response/arrival and their OIC was the IC for the incident were equipped with and used VHF IGC radios.*

This is correct.

3. *See overleaf.*

3. *Any notes, reports, emails and other documentation prepared during the operational review that addressed and identified the reasons why IGC radio communications could not be established with the IC located at the incident location and the following arrivals who were at the SFP (a very short distance away and in line of sight).*

This should include any such records confirm that the IGC communications problems were a result of the arriving appliances trying to contact CAMB441 using UHF IGC radios that were incompatible with the Volunteer's VHF IGC radios.

The NZFS does not hold any documents that specifically relate to this query, perhaps because the question assumes that radio communications could not be established which is incorrect. An IGC radio link was established on the VHF band between the OICs at the first safe forward point and the incident ground.

References in the operational review to communications challenges were not related to an inability to establish a working radio link. Rather, they related to challenges arising from radio, as opposed to face-to-face, communications. For example, the OIC may have been busy and not able to respond, or may have missed, some of Hamilton City's radio calls. An incident ground has a lot of noise and distractions, especially in the early stages and it is not uncommon to miss or even temporarily ignore some message requests whilst trying to manage other initial priorities of the incident. When consulted during the processing of your request, the National Operational Efficiency Manager, Trevor Brown, stressed that the IGC radio performance was not the main concern for this incident or the reason why commanders were not speaking to each other as the review team would otherwise have expected.

The VHF link that was established was intermittent, as were LMR and mobile phone communications in this area which is a known 'black spot'. The performance of the VHF link may have been in part attributable to the state of the old Simoco VHF radios carried by the Hamilton City crews. These may have lacked strength to communicate clearly in the environment of the distance and the hills. Although there was some line of sight to the flashing lights as described in the operational review report, the OIC of Cambridge would have been moving around the incident and possibly into blind spots that were not in the line of sight. The Cambridge Volunteer Brigade was using a VHF radio that they brought themselves that was of a higher specification than the old Simoco VHF units. The Cambridge Volunteer Brigade was working on the correct VHF channel (FIRE 1) to communicate with Simoco users and also had the capability to talk to their Station on a private channel.

4. *After some hours of confusion and delay communication were established from the SFP and the IC at CAM441. I request any information specific to IGC that identifies how this communication was subsequently established (eg on VHF ESB, UHF ESB, local Repeater, etc).*

The first safe forward point was originally established just within sight of the incident, but was then moved north down SH1 about 1 kilometre or more from to the Kentucky Road intersection.

As the incident developed, the safe forward point was subsequently moved again: this time some 7 kilometres to the north on SH1 to an intersection (near Karapiro Road and the Mobil service station) where it was safe and not directly down wind.

During this move, all NZFS personnel used a mixture of LMR, mobile phones and handheld radios to communicate between themselves and the Communications Centre.

A third safe forward point was established on the upwind side of the incident, where the Hazmat/Command Vehicle set up communications at the incident. VHF and UHF were linked but most communications were face-to-face and via site briefings. Mobile phone and LMR coverage was limited but worked.

I trust this satisfactorily addresses your queries.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Leigh Deuchars', written in a cursive style.

Leigh Deuchars
Acting Director, Office of the Chief Executive