

## HRM joins Forces to prepare for crises

Halifax is no stranger to emergency and crisis in recent years: hurricane Juan in September 2003, the blizzard of February 2004; and even the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon caused airliners to be rerouted to Canadian airports, including Halifax International.

The many situations that could constitute an emergency or a crisis for the Halifax Regional Municipality prompted municipal authorities to take advantage of a military exercise to practise and refine their procedures and processes to meet the challenges of a major emergency.

The Halifax Emergency Response Exercise (HEREX) began early on Wednesday, June 27, at HRM's Emergency Operations Centre in Dartmouth. The exercise design team put the municipality's senior elected and administrative staff through their paces.

"The military exercise gave HRM an opportunity to dovetail with the military in rehearsing and validating how we meet emergencies and crises," explains HRM's manager of public affairs, Shaune MacKinlay. "This allowed us to build and confirm partnerships with other players in emergency management, including DND, Public Safety Canada, Nova Scotia Emergency Management Office, Capital District Health Authority, Emergency Health Service and the municipality."

The Canadian Forces have skills, equipment and resources that make them uniquely qualified to work with local and provincial governments for public safety and security. Each provincial and territorial emergency management agency has a military officer assigned as a liaison between provincial authorities and the military to facilitate the allocation of personnel and resources in major emergencies.

HRM emergency management co-ordinator Barry Manuel says, "The military is a strong presence in Halifax and these exercises ensure that we can continue and reinforce that relationship and work with them in their planning for emergencies and crises. ... (T)he military can offer certain resources at certain times and under certain conditions ... So these exercises help us learn in advance the mechanics and logistics of how to access what we need so they can be provided quickly and effectively."

The exercise co-ordinator, Commander (retired) Colin Darlington, notes that the first step is to conduct a "hazard analysis" to determine what is realistic. It is impossible to prepare for everything, and in fact, it's not necessary to prepare for everything, he says. Principally, the need is to ensure that requirements for public safety are met.

"Until recently," Darlington explained, "if I went to my bosses with an exercise scenario that included an earthquake, followed by a tsunami, followed by a major malfunction of nuclear reactors, followed

by a bad winter, I would have been told that this was simply unrealistic. Then March 11 last year, Fukushima suffered its series of calamities and catastrophes.”

HRM is 5,000 square kilometres, has one-tenth of the province’s landmass, one-third of the population and stretches from Ecum Secum to Hubbards. “When an emergency hits,” MacKinlay describes, “there are critical decisions that have to be made quickly, and the exercise allows this to be practised by the municipality’s elected and administrative principals.”

Manuel adds, “HEREX is one of a series of exercises in which HRM has participated with the military over a long time. This particular exercise is a larger format exercise for the municipality that allowed me to bring HRM senior staff together so they can see how the operation centre works and how their staff would work in an ops centre, should they have to come in and work in an emergency as well.”

Exercise controllers ensured realism and relevance during the half-day simulation. Mayor Peter Kelly, Police Chief Frank Beazley, Fire Chief Doug Trussler, Chief Administrative Officer Richard Butts and senior administrative and municipal department directors with responsibilities for public safety experienced the impact of their decisions within a simulated environment. Their actions included the scrutiny of a group of simulated journalists who peppered them with a series of scenario-based questions in a media scrum and a news conference.

The reward for the municipality resulted in 14 areas of work that will require attention, each with four or five “lessons learned.”

“Those are not necessarily areas that need improvement,” explains Manuel, “although there were several of those. But some of these points include best practices that need to be identified and assimilated. I expect this will take about six months. That’s how we get better.”