



# THE NICWGA EXPERIENCE:

## A MATURATION OF INCIDENT COMMAND

*By Neil DuBord*

**I**ncident commanders are responsible for the management and resolution of high-risk/critical incidents. In an ever-changing and fast-paced world, the events associated with incident command have become increasingly complex. High-risk events often occur in dynamic and chaotic environments requiring incident commanders to be capable of critical thinking, disciplined decision-making and innova-

tive problem-solving. Critical incidents are high-impact situations and the goal of incident commanders is a reasonably successful resolution of the event. There is no doubt the job of an incident commander is a challenging position.

Organizationally, high-risk critical incidents can sway public confidence and trust, as well as ultimately impact the police agency's credibility in the community.

Personally, incident commanders may be faced with life and death decisions with potential to affect them professionally and psychologically. Although incident commanders accept these risks, the variety of media, combined with global accessibility of information, has amplified public scrutiny of high-risk incident resolutions, resulting in increased critiquing of commanders' decisions.



Scenarios day

History has occasionally been an unceremonious teacher for incident commanders. The study of past incidents through inquiries, after action reports and incident debriefings has provided a forum for continuous learning. As a result, whether it has been a catastrophic episode such as Waco, or smaller and more localized incidents involving suicidal barricaded suspects or hostage-takings, incident commanders have evolved high-risk incident strategy to a standard capable of withstanding the scrutiny of the legal system.

In December 2007, the incident commanders of an armed and barricaded incident in Eureka, California were indicted on criminal manslaughter charges for decisions made from the command post on April 14, 2006. Chief David Douglas and Lieutenant Zanotti ordered their tactical team to execute an entry into a subject's residence in an attempt to rescue a mentally disturbed woman. As tactical officers carried out the mission they encountered a lethal threat and fatally shot the subject. Sheryl Schaffner, Eureka City Attorney General, said, "it gives one pause to think what this most extreme kind of second-guessing will do to chill their (police) willingness to keep facing those dangers for us." On August 26, 2008, more than nine months after the indictment, Humboldt County Superior Court Judge John Feeney dismissed the involuntary manslaughter charges faced by Douglas and Zanotti. A conviction of Douglas and Zanotti would have established

a shocking precedent throughout the law enforcement community, specifically for incident commanders managing high-risk critical incidents.

### **A means of mitigating risk**

The incredible amount of responsibility and accountability placed upon incident commanders must be recognized, and police organizations must take all steps possible to ensure their commanders have the necessary education, experience and training to be capable of fulfilling the role. Modern risk management strategies identify both foundational and ongoing training as the single largest component for mitigating risk and potential liability.

In 2003, the Critical Incident Program of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) undertook a comprehensive review of their incident command training program with an eye towards the development of a national standards and policy. It was clear that the policy and training needs of incident command cut across geographic and organizational boundaries and required a coordinated approach with all Canadian police partners.

In February 2004, the first National Incident Command workshop was held with representatives from ten municipal, regional and provincial policing agencies. The workshop identified strategic issues and challenges in managing critical incidents and developed a working plan to move forward. The first step in this plan was to conduct a

needs analysis in an attempt to identify the priority requirement for a new national-level incident commanders training course. A comprehensive review was conducted of some of the current courses offered by the Canadian Police College (CPC), the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP), the Edmonton Police Service (EPS), the Calgary Police Service (CPS) and the Justice Institute of B.C. (JIBC). Based on this review, the National Command Working Group supported the idea of cooperating with the Canadian Police College and RCMP Learning and Development to develop a course serving to bring police organizations closer together on incident command at a national level.

Subsequently, a national-level problem-based learning incident command course was developed using the Ontario Provincial Police model. The pilot course was delivered in the fall of 2004 with two subsequent deliveries the next year. Each time the course was delivered it was subjected to a rigorous evaluation resulting in modifications.

By the fall of 2007, the RCMP Learning and Development team, along with subject-matter experts in incident command from

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across Canada, finalized a comprehensive course training standard. It had taken three years, but finally a national standard in training for incident commanders had been developed. The completion of the course quickly led to discussion on how the course material and curriculum could be facilitated and sustained. It was recognized that the synergy created by bringing the subject-matter experts from within the National Incident Command Working Group together, in the design and development of the Critical Incident Command course, should not be lost. The energy and technical competence of this working group needed to be captured to steward the course in subsequent years.

In September 2007 the National Incident Command Working Group was formally incorporated as a non-profit organization called The National Incident Command Working Group Association (NICWGA), and was comprised of police executives involved in incident command from across Canada. The mandate of the group was to serve as a caretaker and advisor group to the Critical Incident Command course. NICWGA functioned as a think tank to develop solutions and recommendations for common issues and challenges in incident command situations and funnel these ideas back through the incident command training program. There were 16 directors on the board of the NICWGA representing the interests of police services from across Canada.

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Since 2007, the NICWGA Critical Incident Command course has become the national standard in Canada for the training of incident commanders. The course has several prerequisites that must be met prior to a candidate's application being considered. The prerequisites are:

- The applicant's organization must have a full-time tactical team.
- The applicant's organization must have a negotiation team.
- The applicant must have attended/observed their organization's negotiators and tactical team training and/or exercises.
- The applicant must provide a resume documenting previous experiences identified as helpful in their potential role as an incident commander.

With seating limited to 16 students per Critical Incident Command course and only two courses per year, every effort is made to ensure the police officers selected to participate have the competence and background identified as necessary for success. In the early stages of course delivery, several organizations sent senior leaders who had no interest in commanding high-risk events. Instead, they considered the course to be a resume builder and a requirement for promotion. The Critical Incident Command course prerequisites, intense work load and strict testing environment quickly eliminated these candidates.

The NICWGA Critical Incident Command course consists of 90 hours of training over two weeks. The curriculum includes topics on:

- Theory of incident command
- SMEAC
- Court preparations and risk management
- Review of case law and authorities
- Negotiation theory
- Negotiation practical application
- Mental health professionals
- Tactical options
- Tactical planning
- Tactical capacity demonstrations
- Phases of hostage rescue
- Command post simulations

- Technical support
- Media

The course candidates work through a series of five problem-based scenarios building in complexity and difficulty. These scenarios were all developed from real occurrences where lessons affecting incident command were learned. The scenarios involve:

1. High-risk search warrant
2. Barricaded persons
3. Hostage-taking
4. Active shooter
5. Rural weapons complaint scenario

The NICWGA Critical Incident Command course culminates with a fully integrated 90-120 minute test scenario. The candidate must successfully complete the numerous actions and activities that have been categorized into six technical competencies of incident command:

1. Assess the nature of incident
2. Assess the need for resources and order all required resources
3. Establish effective command post and command structures
4. Decision-making
5. Identify criminal investigative requirements and authority
6. Ensure completion of all operational plans

The evaluators for the test scenario are three certified commanders from across Canada who use a rubric to assess the competence of the student. If the candidate does not successfully meet the learning objectives of the course it is recommended that they continue their learning and return to a three-day workshop where they will receive one-on-one coaching. It has been the experience of the NICWGA that 25 percent of candidates participating in the Critical Incident Command course return to participate in the workshop. After completing the three-day workshop, over 95 percent of candidates are successful in meeting the course objectives.

## The future of the NICWGA critical incident course in Canada

In February 2010, the NICWGA partnered with the Canadian Police College (CPC) to facilitate the delivery of the Critical Incident Command course. The teaching of the course is resource intensive; however, the value of producing competent incident commanders has been deemed worth the expense. In order for the course to sustain its high credibility and standards, it required a permanent home where all Canadian and international police agencies could access the program. The NICWGA and CPC have displayed great leadership in designing a business model supporting the delivery of two Critical Incident Command courses per year, each with 16 candidates, at the Canadian Police College in Ottawa.

In 2010, Canada experienced three large-scale global events requiring significant incident command presence: the Olympics

in Vancouver, British Columbia and the G-8 and G20 in Ontario. The leadership required to successfully maneuver through the hazards of these three events demanded the best incident commanders from across Canada. A large percentage of the incident commanders who led these assignments received their training from the NICWGA Critical Incident Command course. They shared a common framework regarding incident command and risk mitigating decision-making, permitting agencies and units to work cohesively together across organizational and jurisdictional boundaries.

Moving forward, the NICWGA, in partnership with the CPC, remains committed to providing methods for police officers across the nation to be "students of incident command." A Web site has been developed as one way to assist with the sharing of information and experiences of incident commanders across the country.

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It provides a central repository for the collection of information on training, equipment, research, policy and experiences of incident commanders.

The NICWGA and CPC Critical Incident Command course save lives. Police leaders owe it to the communities they serve to make the necessary commitment to train key personnel to be the very best incident commanders. After all, one mistake can change a person's life forever. ◀

### About the author



#### Superintendent Neil Dubord

has been a member of the Edmonton Police Service for 24 years and is currently the commander in charge of the West Division. He is a past president of the National Incident Command Working Group, from 2007 to 2010. He instructs and assesses nationally on Critical Incident Command at the Canadian Police College. Superintendent Dubord is a graduate from Class #236 of the FBI National Academy, holds a master's degree specializing in leadership and training from Royal Roads University and a Ph.D. from Northcentral University in Arizona.

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