



In Profile:

Brian (Hori) Howard

Maj. Gen. Brian (Hori) Howard AO MC ESM (Retd.)

Just saying the words, “Maj. Gen. Hori Howard” to about anyone in emergency management in Australia brings forth a myriad of reactions. Whether soldiers of the Australian Army, erstwhile colleagues of the former National Disasters Organisation (NDO), executives of the NSW State Emergency Management Committee, volunteers and staff of the NSW State Emergency Service (SES), personnel of Emergency Management Australia (EMA) or members of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteers Forum, everyone has a story about the talented and colourful personality who has had a major role in forging the character and structure of the sector over the past two decades.

Erroneously describing himself as a ‘dinosaur of emergency management’, Maj. Gen. Howard has had over twenty years experience managing emergencies in various capacities. Modestly summing up his credentials he says, ‘I have been lucky enough over my time to have made most of the mistakes people need to make along the way – sometimes two or three times and, hopefully learning from these things, I feel I still have something to give’.

Forever the ‘soldier’, Howard has a profound fondness for his early Australian Army career—rising through the ranks to become a senior military officer—and along the way developing a significant military operational and training capability.

His first foray into the emergency management arena was when he was appointed to head the then Department of Defence’s NDO, the forerunner to EMA. The position was a late change in posting and a surprise.

While not realising it at the time, the role of Director General of the NDO set him up for his future roles exposing him to the State and Territory infrastructure, emergency management organisations, the civilian community and the State Emergency Service organisations.

After assisting Maj. Gen. Ron Grey, the then Commissioner of Police, with a comprehensive review of rescue services in New South Wales, Howard was offered the position of Director-General of the NSW State Emergency Service. Then in 1989 the Directors of the collective SES organisations appointed him as the second Chairman of the Australian Council of State Emergency Services. He was subsequently asked to stay on after he retired.

Reluctantly resigning from the Australian Army, he took on these new challenges as a civilian public servant. He says, ‘I didn’t get a terrible shock when I left the Army because the skill sets needed in the SES were much the same as I needed in the military environment—planning, intelligence, training, administration and management—they just needed to be applied slightly differently’.

Howard says that prior to that time, NSW didn’t really have an emergency management system and Gen. Grey discovered that heavy work needed to be done to reform the SES. ‘While there were good Units and volunteers doing good things within the SES, an Office of Public Management review said the organisation was under-funded and it also needed a complete restructure—the SES did not even have its own boss, it reported through a Pro-Director to the Commissioner of Police’.

He self-effacingly attributes much of the success of the change management of the NSW SES to Rick Haines, a former colleague from the NDO, who had a great hand in the daunting task of helping the organisation to get back on track.

In 1990 the State Headquarters of the SES moved from Sydney to Wollongong so Howard also relocated, taking his wife and two sons from Canberra to the Illawarra.

Howard’s career has provided many first-hand experiences of the larger and more notable emergency management operations of our time so he has some solid lessons to pass on.

Two to three weeks after he settled into the new role at the SES, the Newcastle earthquake, one of Australia’s largest disasters after Cyclone Tracy, occurred. Howard says, ‘I learned one of the great principles of emergency management from Newcastle and

that is there needs to be one central, authoritative person with local knowledge who coordinates the recovery effort’.

The head office of the NSW SES was in Sydney at the time and therefore Police Commissioner John Avery and Howard decided the Newcastle Police District Commander Russ Cook should be in charge of operations (under legislation of the day, the Police took charge of such emergencies). Howard goes on, ‘As Cook was on holidays an Inspector was chosen as the Response Coordinator for the operation as he was very experienced and had appropriate rank and qualities, until Cook returned and could assume control. The Inspector just said to us that there is no point trying to run things from Sydney, so just provide the resources he needed and let him run it. So that was the decision we made. Cook was a Newcastle person, he knew all the leaders of all of the services in the town, he knew all the departmental heads and they had run exercises together prior to the disaster, enabling him to cut through the bureaucracy. So even though the earthquake was ‘out of left field’ in magnitude and scope, all we had to do was pour resources into it’.

Howard believes the principles of running a big operation are simple. ‘Issues are always the same in a big operation—it all comes back to command and control. One can assume—and we can in this country—that the response agencies are reasonably well trained for what you are going to ask them to do. We rarely have difficulties providing resources in Australia—but they need to be coordinated and supported and that is where things are always more difficult, particularly when the structure of the organisation is not robust’.

Another observation is that sometimes things are unpredictable, as Howard found during the widespread flooding of Nyngan and

Warren in 1990. ‘Those floods were incredible and the level of flooding was unexpected. Because of the flatness of the countryside and the fact that so many little streams were tributaries into the river, accurate forecasting of river height was impossible for any agency. There was no local SES unit in Nyngan so they had no emergency capacity in the town. We appointed the then Bogan Shire President, John Hoare as the local controller who ran the whole operation with assistance from Martin Russell, the SES Division Controller based in Dubbo. From there we provided all the resources the town needed at the time. We didn’t know what would happen at Nyngan. The best advice the Bureau of Meteorology could give us was that we had to get the levee to a particular height by a particular time or the town would flood. It was also so wet that the roads and railway line were inoperable so we flew people in from Dubbo, thirty at a time, by RAAF Caribou. Unfortunately the water rose to a higher level than could have been predicted and the town flooded. We coordinated the evacuation of the town by appointing the Police District Commander, Lloyd Townsend and the Police Inspector in Nyngan, Jim Hampstead as the Controllers of Operations. The organisation of the evacuation helicopters was done by SES headquarters in Wollongong. The people of Dubbo who accommodated the roughly 2,000 people we evacuated from Nyngan, were also a big part of the recovery operation’.

‘The situation in Warren a few months later was very different as the river was more defined, the flooding was more predictable and the countryside was more accessible. We were also able to use earth moving equipment provided by the Department of Defence’.

Another lesson from these floods was the handling of the post-disaster appeals process. Howard says the outpouring of grief for the

communities and the consequent generosity was overwhelming. ‘Coordinating the appeals became messy. For example an appeal for furniture created a surplus of unusable items that needed to be thrown out, attracting a lot of media attention’. A standing committee was subsequently instigated in NSW to coordinate appeals through emergency agencies such as the Red Cross, as well as through regular government channels.

Howard acknowledges the opportunity that arises from one disaster, to pass on knowledge for preventing and preparing for future actions. ‘The thing that came out of Nyngan and Warren was the need for an audit of the height and the integrity of the levees in the several hundreds of towns in NSW that are protected by them. When the levee audit was completed it gave people a rather nasty surprise because some of them were not very good’.

He says, ‘You cannot underestimate the benefits of reliable levees and I believe there may still be a few that may not withstand a big flood. Of course, the trouble over the last few years has been the drought: how do you convince people that expenditure on heavy earthworks to re-build levees is important in the middle of the biggest drought ever?’

Howard has seen the emergency sector grow and develop over the years in Australia. ‘I think credit for a lot of that improvement should go to the work of EMA, including the Institute at Mt Macedon. I have been a critic of the Institute in the past but it nevertheless has facilitated improvement,’ he says.

Howard has given thought to future issues for emergency management in Australia. He sees the need to maintain a good balance between the attention given to crisis management (i.e. terrorism) and emergency management (disaster mitigation and response), ‘I see that the majority of attention at the moment is on the terrorism side

of the equation and through no fault of its own, I see EMA having difficulty keeping up with the other side of the Attorney-General's area. For example, the National Counter-Terrorism Committee has a budget and the Australian Emergency Management Committee (AEMC) does not. Consequently the AEMC cannot do much and they cannot cost anything—it is unbalanced'. He believes the two sides of the house need to come together to ensure Australia is fully protected in case of a major emergency. He adds, 'I guess I am one of those people who would say to colleagues that we *may* have a terrorist attack but we *will certainly* have a natural disaster. However, there have been some real improvements in certain areas of emergency management that have been hanging on the back of terrorism initiatives in this country'.

Howard believes the shift of EMA to the Attorney-General's portfolio is probably far more important than people realise because it puts both sides of emergency management under the same Minister. He says, 'Whether terrorism or a natural disaster, the approach to emergency management would be the same—although I suspect there would be greater community panic if it were a terrorism event'. He is quick to point out, however, that he is not a supporter of a Department of Homeland Security style of organisation which he thinks would 'bureaucratise' existing systems in Australia.

Howard is currently the Chair of the Australian Emergency Management Volunteers Forum, better known

by its members as just the AEMVF. He says there are some interesting challenges the sector will face in the future in relation to volunteers. 'The message I keep getting from most volunteer organisations is that they are being taken for granted and I think they're right. So the sector needs to be a bit more vigilant in recognising its volunteers. The failing is not deliberate, it's just that our volunteers are so good that half of the community thinks they are being paid as professionals to do the work they do', he says.

Modern volunteers also have changed expectations about the volunteer experience which will be a consideration for emergency management organisations into the future. 'Firstly, there are enough natural disasters in Australia to attract volunteers, who tend to want to be active and useful in the community. It is my observation however that the best Units are usually the busiest ones and the busy Units, in turn, attract the best people. Volunteers these days don't want to be wasting their time doing the administration and filling in paperwork. Modern candidates also are looking for organisations that are credible, well-recognised, well-resourced and well led. They are less likely to want to be based in dirt floor sheds as in the past. These days they want a nice Unit house or shed, as they spend most of their time there'. He says training and recognition are also important. 'Most organisations do well at these things but people are still being driven away because they become too engaged in administrative work. So organisations should endeavour

to recruit people specifically for the administrative work', he says.

Howard is also concerned about the image of emergency management. He says, 'I think there is a lack of understanding about exactly what emergency management is in the general community. Emergency management goes way beyond the organisations that people recognise as Emergency Services. A lot of the key tasks are actually undertaken by recovery agencies that the public rarely hear about and that does not help our image'.

Another thing causing an element of disquiet about emergency management is the degree of authority given to the role. 'When I was with NSW SES, I tried to convince the New South Wales Government that the State Emergency Management Committee should be located under the Premiers' Department because many of the member agencies were not under the control of the Minister for Emergency Services, and the Premier's Department was the one department which had control over them all. It was also where the counter terrorism responsibility resided, and the benefit of having both capabilities under the one department would, I thought, have been obvious'.

Without wanting to appear platitudinous, Howard sums up by saying, 'Emergency management is really a'all agencies, all hazards'. If we get that right, the rest will fall into place. It is not that difficult but we seem to have problems with it. It is really very simple'.