



USAR goes for the real thing

It was as near to the genuine article as it gets when the Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) Task Force was tested in a recent 10 hour training exercise, Operation Validation.

USAR Officer Andy Lane said the scenario of a bomb laden car crashing into a unit complex was devised to showcase USAR experts in action.

"The simulated impact had triggered significant structural damage, with victims becoming trapped inside the building," Andy said.

"It was a no notice incident that included tasks ranging from mobilisation and call back procedures to breaching through walls to locate casualties.

"The Department of Housing helped us add authenticity to the exercise by providing the venue which comprised two unit complexes in Bentley that were due for demolition.

"Each was two storey and contained three individual units, with the location

at the end of a cul-de-sac providing ample space for the USAR equipment cache.

"We were able to set up designated work zones, together with all the support services that operate in conjunction with the Task Force, and this contributed to the overall success of the exercise."

Andy said the Task Force Engineer guided the demolition contractor on where the excavator could be used to carefully knock down the front half of the buildings, and also advised what walls could be removed without causing a total collapse.

"The scenario involved the car being driven into the middle unit, with detonation of an explosive device on impact," he said.

"This caused part of the ceiling slab to fall on to the vehicle, leaving two victims trapped either side of the collapse zone on the top floor."

As the USAR Reconnaissance Team arrived on scene they immediately became aware of the dangerous situation with concrete slabs, bricks,

roof tiles and timbers precariously perched and ready to potentially fall on rescuers.

A hot zone was set up and a Safety Officer appointed to liaise with the USAR Survey Team on their arrival.

WA Police (WAPOL) Tactical Response Group Bomb Squad robots were used to gather video and still footage for a handover from WAPOL to the Task Force leaders.

The light footed Zena and Saxon from the USAR Canine Team carried out a quick search for live victims.

Meanwhile, teams commenced shoring of the ground floor and construction of a timber work platform so that walls on the first floor could be breached to gain access.

Technical search cameras were used to locate victims under tonnes of debris that was carefully removed to allow access for the USAR Paramedics.

Members of the WAPOL Disaster Victim Identification Forensics Team collected 'body parts' from around the incident site.



Pilbara USAR cache increases NW capability

The exercise was repeated 10 days later on the second building, to enable the remainder of the Task Force to attend.

Andy said that the exercises on both days had proven extremely beneficial.

“We achieved our aim of testing and demonstrating USAR specialist skills and showcasing them to a number of agencies,” he said.

“This included representatives from WAPOL, Department of Housing, St John Ambulance, Australian Defence Force and Local Government, along with senior FESA managers.

“Using an actual building instead of a safe prop also ensured that the USAR Task Force was responding to a realistic incident scenario.

“Not only did the participants treat the exercise very seriously, but they also came away with a far better understanding of the dangers they may face in a similar or more complex emergency, such as an earthquake.”

A new supply of Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) tools and equipment, dubbed the Pilbara cache, is on standby in Karratha to enhance response capabilities in northern parts of the State.

USAR Officer Andy Lane said the cache provided a strategically based operational resource in the North West.

“This cache will allow for a faster and enhanced functional response to all hazards where USAR operations are mobilised,” Andy said.

“It is designed to provide rapid first strike action for USAR Task Force members and will allow them to hit the ground running.

“If further resources are required or if it is a long duration incident, the appropriate USAR caches will be mobilised from Perth by road or where possible, air.”

The cache houses a complement of first strike USAR inventory including specific tools for concrete breaching, structural shoring, tree felling, fire-fighting, technical rescue, command, control and communications, and allows self-sufficiency.

It is staged for pre-deployment and rapid deployment in northern regions to all hazards arising from cyclone, earthquake, tsunami, excavation, flood, erosion, subsidence, terrorism, explosion, fire, building collapse and transport accidents.

Opportunely, the Pilbara cache was commissioned and arrived in Karratha the day before Tropical Cyclone Lua crossed the WA coast.

This allowed the USAR pre-deployment team easy access to equipment, including hot sticks for checking power, and a selection of hand tools suitable for accessing damaged buildings and isolating services and UHF radios.

The Pilbara cache is currently reserved for use by the USAR Task Force during incidents. Where local resources are fully depleted, access can be requested through the chain of command.