



Ambulance officers had plenty to do soon after the Red Hill train accident in which 50 people were injured.

RED HILL

It WAS the real thing

PORT Broughton St. John planned an exercise for the night of July 11 this year. A simulated fire would trap a person in the pub. Another person would have a heart attack there. Ambulance and first-aid would deal with the mock emergency.

When the duty ambulance crew received an urgent call from the St. John Mid North Regional Communications Centre soon after three o'clock that afternoon, their response was, "Don't be silly - it's not eight o'clock yet."

Craig Winton, duty communications officer at the Port Pirie headquarters, had to explain to the crew that no-one was playing around. This was the Red Hill train accident, a head-on collision between the Indian

Pacific and BlueBird passenger trains, and up to 50 people were injured.

The Port Broughton crew moved immediately, as just one part of an operation described by Mid North regional superintendent Wayne G. Jackson as "the biggest incident we've ever been involved in, and probably the first time ever in South Australia in which St. John played THE major role".

Under the State's counter-disaster planning and management structure, the service most involved takes control. People were hurt, said Supt Jackson, who was ambulance service incident commander, so it was St. John's job to assume responsibility. "Usually we have a minor part treatment and transportation. But

there was no fire and no major chemical spill, so no fire service; no great problem with trapped people, so State Emergencies Service involvement was minimal; no traffic hazard or crime, so police had little to do.

"We were calling the shots. From 3:15 until 9, when we felt able to stand down all people, what I wanted done, was done."

For 100 staff and volunteers in the nine-branch region, which extends just south of Red Hill, midway to Port Augusta and north-west to the New South Wales border, the accident represented a new challenge.

"Bushfires, in the long term, are logistically hard," Supt Jackson said, "but we have the depth and degree to react. Here we had intensity in the short term." ▸

As Port Pirie branch superintendent and Red Hill ambulance site commander Bob Ward says: "Even in our experiences in exercises, we might have half-a-dozen casualties. But 50 to 60!"

All told, 35 St John personnel attended Red Hill, with out-of-region ambulances on stand-by as far away as Kadina, Moonta, Wallaroo and Maitland. Volunteer and career staff worked side-by-side in a good display of co-operation.

St. John believed within half-an-hour there were probably only eight casualties with relatively serious injuries, Supt Jackson said. "They were fractures and head injuries - not life threatening, but from our point of view any person's injury is considered quite serious. The bulk of

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people needed transportation for sutures or even tender-loving care."

The seriously hurt were away from the scene in quick time, but the operation was not without its minor hassles - small hitches from which some good may come.

For more than an hour, regional training officer Bill Birt, the original ambulance site controller, was told

by AN staff that nobody aboard the Indian Pacific was hurt. When finally allowed on board, he found a further 14 casualties - one with serious head injuries and another with a cardiac problem.

"It's railway policy to lock trains so that no-one is lost," said Supt Jackson. "All railway staff are trained in first aid, and if they recognise someone bleeding they will let us know. But they are not trained to the degree they can make judgments. Often injuries don't come to the fore until an hour or so later. We are trying to get the railways to appoint someone on every train who is clearly marked as authorised to give access."

The Indian Pacific impasse could have had more serious consequences. According to Supt Jackson, people in

"I've never been so nervous"

It was the worst trip Leonie Dohnt has made to Red Hill. A few minutes before, she had been pottering around the family farm near Snowtown, doing the simple odd jobs. Now she was on her way to a major train crash 16 kilometres away - alone.

"I've never been so nervous," said Mrs Dohnt, secretary of the Snowtown and District branch, and a veteran of 11 years with St. John.

"I was on duty and my pager went off, so I rang the Snowtown Hospital. A nurse told me two trains had collided. She said the hospital would send an ambulance, but I had to go there straight away.

"I asked how many were injured. She said at least 50! "Usually you go with another crew member, so you can talk and plan. But I didn't even know what I would find when I got there."

When Mrs Dohnt arrived with her trauma kit, the crash scene looked "like a battlefield". Some railway workers told her all the injured were on board the Bluebird - which turned out not to be true.

"Someone there knew something about bandaging, and a trained nurse was looking after



Mrs Leonie Dohnt.

the more seriously injured. My first job was to find out how many were injured, but people were saying, 'Come and have a look at this one.'

"Eventually, with another person I did the count and asked an AN employee to use the train radio to contact train control in Adelaide, who got onto St. John."

After "what seemed like 10 minutes", but she can't be sure, Mrs

Dohnt was joined by Mrs Ruth Slattery, another Snowtown St. John member.

"I was jolly glad to see her."

Soon other St. John help arrived, so Mrs Dohnt moved in to ambulance transport. Later, with other St. John members, she went back to Snowtown Hospital to mingle with the injured people and to calm them.

"We try to do the job the best we can as circumstances dictate. I think the passengers appreciated what we did, and it was a marvellous turnout by St. John people in the district. Some of them had to come long distances."

For Mrs Dohnt, working for St. John is a personal thing. "We are doing something for other people. We are a happy group of St. John people and we look forward to our training nights and getting together."

On the night of the accident, Mrs Dohnt, a widow, arrived home after 11pm to an empty house. With her son away, she felt she needed to talk.

"So I rang one of my daughters late at night.

"When something like this happens, I think you need someone to talk about it with, don't you?" □

‘If the same thing were to happen again tomorrow, I’m sure we’d perform even better.’

other services made decisions without consulting St. John. A bus was cancelled by someone who believed it wasn’t needed for five casualties.

Then Bill Birt managed to get into the Indian Pacific. Another bus had to be brought from Crystal Brook - by order of St. John.

“The little conflicts are part of things like this,” said Supt Jackson, “and the ability to resolve them is part of management technique.”

Overall though, he said the operation was “an outstanding success. We should be extremely proud, and we are holding our heads high.

“People probably don’t realise the advantage South Australia has in its Ambulance Service compared with the Eastern States. Gladstone, with less than 1000 people, has two ambulances. I’d be surprised if similar places in Victoria and NSW have anything at all.

“We’re not really technically better, but the way we run it - with a large component of fully-integrated volunteers - has a distinct advantage,” Supt Jackson said.



Point of impact ... a head-on collision between the Indian Pacific and a BlueBird.

- Photo courtesy of The Advertiser

“Everyone deserves a pat on the back.”

Supt Bob Ward agrees. “We worked our way through some initial lack of control to a fairly calm situation,” he said. “We had never had anything like this before. Most of all, if the same thing were to happen again tomorrow, I’m sure we’d perform even better.

“And we’re all pleased in the knowledge that no-one was very seriously hurt.”

By day’s end, the Port Broughton St. John ambulance, called away from the make-believe to deal with

the real thing, had taken six patients in two trips to safety at Snowtown Hospital.

But even a major rail accident that took away its ambulance did not stop the St. John first aid volunteers completing their exercise that night.

NOTE: A more comprehensive technical account of St. John’s role in the Red Hill train accident can be found in Supt Jackson’s debrief report. In it he says “the involvement and management of the Ambulance Service function in this major incident was the easy part. Writing this report is a lot harder.” □



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