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NDMS DMAT Deployment to Atlanta for the 1996 Olympics

...a journal by Gary Johnston, KI4LA, Communications Officer, DMAT KY1

[Note: NDMS - National Disaster Medical System, part of PHS - Public Health Service; DMAT - Disaster Medical Assistance Team. This is an account of the Atlanta Olympics bombing from the perspective of a medical team member deployed to Atlanta to support an FBI swat team.]

Fellow Communicators,

I'm here in Atlanta. The drive was ok on Sunday (7/21/96), but we did encounter some **really** heavy rain on the way down from northern Kentucky.

I have been placed on special assignment. I am not permitted to say more than that except that I am not in a hotel or motel where I can be reached by phone. I do check my AOL mail a few times each day to keep in touch. We found a phone line we can tap into for short bursts of data.

We spent the first night at Dobbins on cots. Not much sleep was had! We were up and out to our deployment by 6:15 am. Dobbins is located NW of Atlanta. There were welcome signs for the Clintons when we arrived. Bill, Hillary and Chelsea stayed here when they came in for the opening ceremonies. I bet they had better sleeping accommodations than us!

It's pretty hot and humid here. Thank goodness that we spend most of our time indoors in air conditioning! We have already been through a chemical warfare training session on how to treat exposure to a number of chemical and biological agents, though some of them are so potent, the best treatment for people at ground zero is to just put their head between their legs and kiss their wachacallit goodbye!

Our strike team motto:

Why stand if you can sit.

Why sit if you can lie down.

Belly full.

Bladder empty.

More to follow.

Gary Johnston KI4LA
Communications Officer DMAT KY1
EMT-D BTLS
7/22/96

PS I'm on a 4-person team with members from CA2 and FL2. Nice folks!

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It's Tuesday morning 7/23/96. We feel refreshed after a sort anyway...

Last night at 10:00 pm, after 40 hours without showers for our team, we walked to a hospital, took over a few unoccupied rooms and took off several layers of sweat. That was followed with a solid night's

sleep, albeit on cots still and in spite of 95 db snoring!

Our first crisis was trying to call the MSU by phone. After trying every combination we could think of, we discovered you don't have to dial a '1' when calling between the 404 and 770 area codes. I would have never guessed that as a possibility. Sparky (GA3) said the 404/770 call area was the largest toll free area in the US. Pretty neat. But it would still be a drag to live in a divided city that took 10 digits to call across the south to north dividing line. I guess the free calls became the consolation prize for the residents.

We have a great team and we all work well together. Jerry from CA2 is our team leader. He is an ER doc and a medical director for an ambulance service. Neat guy and a good leader. We have two nurses, Julie and Al. Julie is a surgical nurse from FL2 and AL is a prison nurse also from CA2. On this deployment I am serving as an EMT rather than my normal communication role. I am learning a lot from these very experienced health care professionals.

It's a little rough with work - sleep - showers in different locations, but it's cake compared to a GP medium tent in a field. The humidity and heat are really rough and the local ER said they are getting a lot of heat related cases. So we really appreciate being able to function in air conditioning.

But we are decked out in our BDU's and ready for that deployment. We have our med kits and other gear laid out for a <5 minute call to response and in the air scenario. We have walked through the routes and know the routine cold. In short, we are ready to roll!

More later.

Gary Johnston KI4LA
Communications Officer DMAT KY1
EMT-D BTLs
7/23/96

It's now Wednesday morning. Our team (#3) is refreshed after a good meal, a good nights sleep, and a refreshing morning shower. These things sound pretty matter of fact and ordinary until you are deprived of timely meals (we missed supper Sunday night due to shuffling), deprived of good sleep (40 hours without), and placed away from showers and a place to shave.

Last night was spent in a hospital room bed with two of us per room. The showers (located in our rooms) were great. Although the rest of the KY1 DMAT folks were in motels, we were housed in what the other teams referred to as "the dungeon." This was in the basement of a hospital. [Note: location and details of team #3's particular deployment are still classified until after the Olympics.]

Yesterday team #3 reviewed BTLs procedures and hashed over potential scenarios. We discussed who would do what in a variety of situations with a variable number of patients.

Dr. Susan Briggs visited our location around 1340 hours. Susan is a Mass General trauma and vascular surgeon. She is the commander for the Massachusetts team and, on this deployment, is the MSU Medical Director. I might add she is a ball of fire, a good listener, an effective administrator, and a thoroughly nice person. She ran down the history and funding history of this mission and told us she had solved the bed problems with the hospital administration. Then Jerry, our team leader, briefed her on our status and ran down our team's list of positives and potential needs (we had a information sharing

session before she arrived so we could organize, prioritize and effectively present our thoughts to her). She was accompanied by Gary Lindburgh, the commander of the FL2 DMAT. Upon her direction, he dutifully took notes and assisted in her initial presentation.

Among the suggestions Jerry passed on to her was that the DMATs be uniformly trained in certain field necessary medical skills (such as BTLs). He also suggested that DMATs actively enter into a public health information and education program while deployed to give locals hygienic procedure information following a disaster. Tactical training options for teams (treat "behind the wall") was suggested as well as a training module for "hot" deployments. It was also suggested that nurses and other hospital workers who might not be familiar with the problems of pre-hospital care (used to more equipment options, etc.) all receive BTLs training in rapid assessment and transport with emphasis on the symptoms and signs in the field that would demand a load-and-go response.

About 1600 hours Jerry presented a heat survival guide to the persons at our location (again, sorry, I can't give any more specifics now). It was very timely since the temperature is typically 90 degrees+ and humidity such that the wet bulb temperature is off the scale. Hydration is a must.

A deployment drill is scheduled for Wednesday.

During dinner, after our duty shift, we discussed the differences between our DMAT organizations. FL2 is sponsored by the Red Cross and they meet alternately at a hospital and the Red Cross building - things like that. It was pretty interesting.

We went for a walk (can't say where) before retiring to bed. We have to stay together as a team at all times 24 hours a day. We made cell phone calls home to ease our isolation. We have no contact with the other deployed teams whatsoever.

Our spirits are good. We are still getting along well as a team. Why stand if you can sit. Why sit if you can lie down. Belly full. Bladder empty.

Gary Johnston KI4LA
Communications Officer DMAT KY1
EMT-D BTLs
7/24/96 1100 hours

email from home 7/27/96:

> Glad you're OK, Gary. We saw pictures of the bloody bomb site, and my main thought was, "If he had to go down there, I hope he wore his gloves."

You bet! Yes, I was on the scene for the morning shift (7:00 am) Saturday, though the night team worked overtime and we deployed in late morning. It was indeed a mess. Lots of blood and nails. We were not involved with the cleanup though; it was evidence at that point. And the injured had long since been transported to local hospitals via local EMS. our 4-person medical team (1 ER physician, 2 nurses and 1 EMT {me}) was there to provide medical support to the investigators in case there was a subsequent explosion.

It was interesting getting through the perimeter security. We drove a government van. It was searched inch by inch - underside with mirrors as well. Everything was filmed by tons of press and amateur

videographers as we were being searched by the Army. I guess they were all trying to get that shot that would be replayed on CNN! So we disappointed them by not blowing up.

We were stationed only a stones throw from the audio tower. Before our shift was up, we were taken to the EOC (located above ground zero and about a quarter block away) so we could see the site in detail.

It was very interesting seeing the crime scene investigators and evidence officers at work. The GBI, FBI and ATF were working in concert. Agents were everywhere. Each minuscule bit of evidence was placed in pink plastic bags by latex-gloved agents, then labeled and cataloged in a laptop computer. There were tiny bits of who knows what, wallboard nails, rectangular masonry (concrete, case hardened) nails, and parts of the pipe bomb. The largest part of the bomb I saw was about the size of your hand. It was jagged and irregular, but otherwise flattened by the force of the blast.

They said they found a piece of the bomb that had penetrated the 1/2 plywood side of a booth, cut through a fluorescent light fixture end to end, entered and exited a full box, then exited the booth through another piece of 1/4 inch plywood. If this thing would have exploded outward more rather than taking the path of least resistance and blowing upward, the death count would have been quite high. The guard and policeman who placed the bomb in the trash receptacle and moved people away (about 40' by the time of the blast) saved many lives.

Most of the rest of the story I'm sure everyone has heard 50 times on CNN. But it was interesting seeing it all first hand. My tour of duty ends at 1900 hours EDT tonight and I head home Tuesday morning. It has been an assignment to remember. As soon as the Olympics are over and the crowds dispersed I can tell you more about our team's specific assignment and location. As for now, that information remains classified.

Gary Johnston, KI4LA
EMT-D BTLS
Communications Officer DMAT KY-1

Final communication.

[Confidential until after August 5, 1996]

7/30/96

Our team's part of the Olympics deployment is over and we're heading home. Jerry and Al (CA2) left by plane this morning. Julie (FL2) is staying on until the last day. Trish (KY1) is also staying on (as Donna (KY1) had already arranged) and Kathy Smith (KY1) and I are driving back in Trish's car. For me, it's over.

Centennial Park reopened this morning (Tuesday 7/30/96) at 8:00 am after being closed for evidence gathering ever since the bombing. A memorial ceremony for the victims was scheduled for 10:00 am this morning. With some caution among the crowd and thousands of security officers the park is again open for business.

So what was this mission? A radio announcer announced this morning that there were more physicians, nurses, paramedics and EMT's in Atlanta on call for the Olympics than any of us will ever know. He played the song, "The Angels Among Us" for the health care workers in Atlanta wherever they might be.

Indeed, there were thousands. At Dobbins AFB there was a Mobile Supply Unit (MSU) with a full staff and about 30 teams at any given time rotating in 12 hour shifts for 9 day periods. There were also teams at Crawford-Long Hospital and the FDA building. Our team was in a 'secret' location at City Hall East in a bunker-like section of the building protected by National Guardsmen, metal detectors and x-ray machines. We were assigned to an FBI SWAT team.

There was a SWAT team from Atlanta and one from New York that rotated shifts. As a 4 person medical team our assignment was to deploy with them and provide medical support. We were a 'behind the wall' tactical designee, they were the very definition of a hot zone. They carried automatic sub-machine guns, pistols and knives. They were protected by shields and flack jackets.

Every day or so they would blow the air horn and initiate a drill. Each team member would bolt up and leave the room like a shot. We went over and over our deployment procedures; where we were to go, who we were to report to, what we would take, and what was our purpose. It was a carefully planned operation. We drilled on hostage scenarios (I was a hostage on one of them) and various scene securing tactics. When they move, they mean business.

In between drills and the eventual deployment, we watched movies, the Olympics (of course) and socialized. I was truly surprised at how friendly and willing to talk the agents are. They went way out of their way to greet us and make us feel at home with them. And my biggest surprise was the super friendliness of the New York team. So much for stereotypes.

They had two TOC (Tactical Operating Center) mobile homes. One had been seized from a drug dealer who used it as a moving meth lab! They had video equipment, VCR's etc., radios capable of communication on a wide spectrum of frequencies, a satellite dish, and a forest of antennas. They did not just view these vehicles as transportation There was considerable pride conveyed as the techs showed us details of the equipment. It was a neat experience just being around people so dedicated and enthusiastic about their work.

None of the agents were droll Elliot Ness types. They were vigorous and focused men and women. None of them were full-time SWAT team members. They were regular agents who volunteered for SWAT team training - kind of weekend warriors. I spoke with agents who investigated bank robberies, fraud, public corruption, and drug cartels. They said they only came together for a full blown SWAT function a couple of times per year.

On Friday (the night before the Saturday 1:20 am bombing) we all had a big barbecue. We all told stories of past encounters and laughed and cut up. But the seriousness of our mission was never forgotten. The air horn was never far from our minds.

On Saturday morning tragedy struck. In a succession of events better related in newspapers coast and CNN, a triple pipe bomb explosion sent scores of masonry nails and wallboard screws flying through the air. Two died (one from a coronary arrest), over a hundred were injured. A city and nation mourned.

The SWAT team was deployed at 2:00 am with the night medical team. They were to serve investigative and evidence-gathering functions rather than as a SWAT team per se. The medical teams purpose again was to support the SWAT teams. Local EMS had already cleared out the victims. We began our regular shift at 7:00 am. The night team worked late and so we actually deployed to the scene in the late morning. We entered the scene with full equipment and went through a thorough security search. [see report #4]

After our deployment things were never quite the same. Some were convinced that the bombing was merely a diversion for the real terrorist action to appear later. The joy of the Olympics was dampened both by public fear and outrage and rain. It really poured Saturday morning. Fortunately the FBI had 6 dry hours for evidence collection before the rain.

We did several more outside drills where the early assessment team (ERT) and the TOC deploy in concert. One time we deployed to a park where 4-5 people were walking their dogs. I wonder what went through their minds when a caravan of government vans pulled up and 20+ federal agents in black flack jackets with sub-machine guns leapt out.

The radios presented an interesting challenge in a multi-agency deployment. We were issued Secure Saber Motorola VHF radios on 143.625/140.025 PL118.8. These are standard Internet-published FEMA frequencies as coordinated by the Department of Commerce (the "FCC" for federal agencies). The radios had three modes: analog, digital, and digital encrypted. Getting on the correct frequency and mode at the right time was difficult since they were all settable (by untrained fingers) from the top of the radios. The FBI used their own set of 90 or so frequencies while each other agency involved with the ATF, GBI, APD, etc. had their own frequencies, PL tones and encryption schemes. Agency to agency communication was difficult, but the FBI van ops guys had it all worked out.

Digital encrypted mode was wild. From an analog radio like my Alinco, it sounded like an intense rush of wind when they were talking and a motorboat when they were waiting for the repeater carrier to drop or between sentences. The Motorola HT's were all field programmable by flipping bits algorithmically. They say an entire field office can be reprogrammed in a relatively short time, making a stolen radio unusable.

The Atlanta FBI office had commemorative pins, hats and shirts made up for the Olympics. The New York guys had their own pins; an FBI badge in an Apple (the big apple). They also brought some Saint Patrick FBI pins - the badge in a clover. The Atlanta pins were in the shape of the state of Georgia with the Olympic torch and FBI all in gold. The word was they were going for between \$100-300 on the street. Only FBI personnel could buy these items. I had to drive to the Atlanta field office with special call-ahead permission from Pat Johnson, our unit head, before I was permitted to buy any pins. But when I got there with orders from our medical team, the pins were gone.

Since the SWAT team people had been so nice to us, we decided to do something for them. After a long discussion of options, we decided to get them pies. There was a kitchenette, so we put the pies there with a thank you sign. They seemed to be appreciated inasmuch as they disappeared quickly!

On the morning of our final departure from City Hall East, the FBI guys called to us to wait. They all put on their flack jackets, helmets, radios, sub-machine guns, side arms and knives and surrounded us for pictures. Both us and the FBI took pictures. First was a shot of the FBI SWAT guys and Jerry, the team physician. Jerry was on the ground on his face with a SWAT guy's foot in his back! Then came shots of us standing with the SWAT guys. We thought it was over then, but nooooo. They dressed us up in the whole nine yards of equipment and took a shot of the four of us so decked out. It was wild. I like to dropped my drawers when they were dressing me and said, "here hold this," and stuck a sub-machine gun in my hands!

In reflection, it was a great honor to have been specifically chosen for this mission. It is an inspirational thought that we as citizens are protected by such dedicated and skilled individuals. We were truly impressed by them, and we hope they viewed us favorably and we will again have the opportunity to

serve our nation in this capacity.

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7/30/96