

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

The Necessity of having a Mobile
Command Unit in the City of Sugar Land

A Policy Research Project
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Professional Designation
Graduate, Management Institute

by
Eric C. Robins

Sugar Land Police Department
Sugar Land, Texas
April 1998

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ABSTRACT

Mobile Command units are now a great asset to any emergency response situation. With technology now moving at such a fierce past, local law enforcement agencies are having a difficulty time keeping up. With the deployment of a mobile command unit with all of the latest features, it will allow even the small agencies to stay prepared for the unpredictable. Mobile Command posts have been utilized since as early as 1964. Some of them have been used in many different aspects, ranging from a communications vessel, to a jail holding facility to a S.W.A.T. van. With the varying range of the units, some of its amenities may include telephones, radio communication, lavatories, jails, desk, computers, televisions and video cassette recorders just to name a few.

The major purpose for the command post is to have ready response and technology in more accessible areas, thereby, aiding law enforcement officials in emergency disasters and crisis situations. This will allow officials to maintain poise, communications and unity in such a stressful situation. The purpose of this research is to provide the citizens, city council members and the police administration with detailed information on the latest technology in Police Mobile Command units and thereby convince them of the need for such a vessel.

In conclusion of my research, it will be most evident that having a Mobile Command Unit readily available to all emergency personnel within the Sugar Land Fort Bend jurisdiction would be most beneficial. Furthermore, as this city progress into the year 2000 and New Millennium, it will be imperative that we have all the modernized equipment to deal with all unforeseen emergencies.

INTRODUCTION

Every city in America has a great potential of experiencing a major catastrophic event. Such an event can quickly turn a quiet town into a fierce panic. The citizens in any town not only need great public safety response at such times, in most cases they will expect it. The tax paying citizen has the right to demand highly professional services in critical situations. In retrospect, the public safety officials are obligated to respond in a fast and expedient manner to restore order, safety and a sense of security to the community.

A Mobile Command Unit will facilitate the needs of the public safety personnel in a disaster. A Mobile Command Unit will be most beneficial in situations such as a large chemical spill from an over turned tanker truck on U.S. Hwy. 59, an explosion at one of our local chemical plants, and more importantly an uncontrollable disaster such as a tornado or a hurricane. This unit will benefit the citizens most effectively by helping officials expeditiously restore order and get things back to normal. This will also allow officials to maintain poise, communications and unity in such a stressful and critical situation. As we all know, in emergency disasters, confusion and turmoil can be our biggest detriment.

The purpose of this research is to provide the citizens, city council members and the police administration with detailed information on the latest technology in Police Mobile Command Units and thereby convince them of the need for such a strategy. The primary intent is to provide the latest technology and equipment that are available for these types of units. I will determine by size, cost and comparison with other agencies, which unit will be most economical

and beneficial for a city of equal size. I will also present the guidelines, policies and procedures set forth by other agencies with similar units to aid as a guidance for this department during the initial phase of implementation.

The information used to conduct my research comes from four primary sources. Initially, published information is used to determine the history and development of Mobile Command Units. Second, the results of a survey of departments with Mobile Command Units is presented to assess the current application of mobile command units. This information will be used to compare and contrast the different types of units. Third, information from vendors who make Mobile Command Units will show the different type of units there are for further examination. The fourth will come from news media personnel to gain video footage of recent disastrous situations to help illustrate my total project.

HISTORICAL and THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Mobile Command Units are not a new phenomenon. They have been in use with some police agencies since early as 1964. In Cook County of Illinois, many local police departments called upon to control civil disorders, have had serious problems in commanding and controlling the large numbers of men required to work together as an effective coordinated team. In an effort to prevent similar criticism of suburban radio frequencies, Major James McGuire, then deputy chief of the field of operations bureau and now superintendent of Illinois State Police, suggested the procurement of a vehicle to be used as a "coordinating medium" for a multi police department leadership during civil disorders (O'mara 1969). However, at the time it was termed "coordinating medium" the method of doing this in the field was simply by way of using some

type of mobile command unit. During this time frame, law enforcement administrators were beginning to see the need to serve their community in a more appropriate manner when it came to crisis situations. In 1970, the Detroit police chief received permission to start Detroit's police department's first study to obtain a mobile command unit (Carson and Richardson 1973). This evaluation came as a result of an explosion and fire at a chemical plant in Woodbine, Ga. In February 1971, which claimed 30 lives (Carson and Richardson 1973). Because of the riot in May 1972 at Florida University in Gainesville, Florida. The Emergency Command Center was committed to support Jacksonville patrol and helicopter units assigned to Gainesville during the disturbance (Carson and Richardson 1973). During this time period it was becoming more and more evident that this was the wave of the future. For a major portion of the nine days the unit was deployed in the field, the four-man crew ate, slept, and worked in the command center (Carson and Richardson 1973). Although this appeared to have been an extreme case, it is very important to understand the role of the mobile command unit and how it affected the outcome of their situations.

In more recent times, the state of Florida purchased a mobile command unit for special events and disasters in their state. The unit was a 56-foot long trailer/mobile command center. The unit was purchased by the state to be used for all local and county-wide emergencies. It was called SLEMAC- State Law Enforcement Mutual Aid Command Center. SLEMAC was developed after Hurricane Andrew proved there was a need for a mobile command center that could respond quickly to any kind of disaster (Lorow, 1997). When relating this to home, I will duly note the most recent tornado storms (Feb. 1997, and Oct. 1997) that hit not only once but

twice in the city of Sugar Land causing extensive damage.

Mobile command units can be used in several official and emergency functions. As noted natural disasters are the most common usage for the units. In Sugar Land some of the more prevalent needs would include chemical spills, hostage situations barricaded suspects just to name a few. They can also be used for bomb-squads, hazardous material incidents, search and rescue, disaster management and communications as well as for mobile recruiting units, substations and roadside checkpoints (Pilant 1994). There are as many uses for a special purpose vehicle as there are types of vehicles. The applications are limited only by the imagination of the department (Pilant 1994).

In recapturing some of the recent disasters, the head-lines alone were tragic. Oklahoma City, April 19, 1995, an apparent terrorist car bomb exploded outside a federal office building here today, collapsing the north face of the nine-story concrete building, injuring hundreds of workers and killing at least 31, including 12 children who attended a day-care center on the second floor. The news of the bombing had an unsettling effect on many Americans, who said that if such a thing could happen in Oklahoma City, it could happen anywhere (Pressley 1995). When the smoke cleared and the exhausted rescue workers packed up and left, 168 people were dead in the worst terrorist attack on U.S. soil (CNN Interactive). Definitely, the terrorist act was unpredictable, however, the attention shifted from the act to aftermath and how the public officials responded was critical. The question we must ask ourselves is are we ready?

The World Trade Bombing is a good example where the inter-agency coordination was on scene. When coordination is going to be on site, you need a mobile inter-agency command post

(Goldstein 1996). During the Hurricanes in Florida there was a strong need to effectively organize multi-agencies speedy to serve the needs of a community in turmoil. "In Hurricane Opal and Hurricane Erin, we had people coming in from N. Carolina, S. Carolina, Georgia, law enforcement resources, as well as utility companies, Mac Gregory said (Lorow 1997). Hurricanes are obviously one of the usages," he said, but it could be used in all kinds of disasters-both natural and man-made. It could be deployed if the capitol blows up-like the Oklahoma City bombing or it could be used in a disaster like the Valu Jet crash (Lorow 1997).

Since its incorporation in 1959, the population of Sugar Land has grown from 2,802 to 59,157 within the next five to ten years the size is expected to double. Sugar Land is made up of 21.82 square miles, located in Fort Bend County, which is ranked third in the United States among the fastest growing counties with populations of more than 250,000. Fort Bend County is reported to be continuing to gain in its population base and is expected to double its populous in the next decade (Fort Bend Publishing Group, 1998/99). The make up the city is primarily residents as it was built up around the Imperial Sugar Company. However, within the last five to seven years, there has been a large influx in commercial and industrial companies that have relocated to Sugar Land simply for its' prosperous economic community. As indicated by city administrators, there is much more growth to come as more commercial and residential property is being developed. Included in the business is the newly developed First Colony Mall which has four large department stores (Foley's, Mervyns, Dillards and J.C. Penneys) along with hundreds of other stores and shops, which increases the population in the city dramatically during business hours. Sugar Land also has a municipal airport that can land air planes as large as a 727.

Along with several highly traveled streets, there are two major state highways (U.S. 59 and State Hwy. 6) that goes through the city thus increasing the traffic flow and creating more potentially disastrous occurrences. Considering the make up, size and growing population, the importance of how the public officials respond and handle crisis incidents will increase dramatically in the near future. I submit that we must prepare ourselves for the inevitable by having a hi-tech state of the art Mobile Command Unit that will be ready for deployment at all times.

REVIEW of LITERATURE or PRACTICE

Several agencies get extensive use out of multi-purpose vehicles or command posts. Recently major events and disasters have required more flexibility and creation from law enforcement agencies. In January 1993, the Los Angeles Police Department received a smaller multi-purpose vehicle. It has been in almost constant use from the Los Angeles earthquakes to the fires in Altadena, where it was used in tandem with larger units. Even without such disasters, however, the vehicle is called out at least twice each month and that number is on the rise (Pilant 1994). The response from the citizens in every community toward the command units has been positive. Administrators around the county will not hesitate to speak on the positive responses they have been getting from their community. Special Agent Kent McGregor in Florida said, "It's pretty amazing to see the command center roll into town" (Lorow 1997). It's basically an office away from home, it enables us to communicate with any law enforcement agency in the country" (Lorow 1997). The World Trade Center bombing was an incident that required localized coordination. Inside of New York's Emergency Management Command Post has all agency operational frequencies and enough cell phones to accomplish the mission of

interagency coordination (Goldstein 1996).

While quick to point out some of the uses of mobile command post in some notable instances, it is obvious that the units are well received by all agencies involved in the crisis. Some other notable crisis situations where a mobile command unit played a significant role was the bombing of the Olympic Park in Atlanta Georgia during the 1996 Summer Olympics and the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma in 1995. Although these were some very tragic situations, expedient and effective communication and coordination of all local and federal agencies involved was imperative.

The different types of equipment in each unit can vary greatly depending on the needs of the department. A working command post will typically house a command center with dispatch equipments, computers, televisions, VCR's, cellular land-lines, telephones, fax machines copiers and in some cases the ability to directly monitor the local news coverage (Pilant 1994). All agencies have the options to install whatever amounts of equipment, however, as in most municipalities cost is always an important issue when making decisions. Another good example of adequate equipment for a department was with the purchase of the command center for the state of Florida. A mobile command center with a full spectrum of radio communications, two side-expanding conference rooms, four dispatch stations and a helipad observation station is ready at short notice to roll to anywhere in the Florida area if a hurricane strikes during this current storm season (Lorow July 1997).

Other agencies still continue to point out how much of an asset their mobile command units are to their departments. The Westminster, California, Police Department's new mobile

police station, designed to look like a United Parcel Service truck, will be a critical component of its problem oriented policing program. The mobile substation will be taken into high-crime areas- primarily those troubled by drugs and gangs-where it will house a sergeant and three to four who will work with landlords, property owners, apartment managers and city officials to clean up the area. According to officer Robin Kapp with their department, the vehicle was paid for by federal grant money. It was equipped with three to four work stations, a conference area, restroom, small galley, storage space and wiring for telephones, radios and fax machines. The vehicle will also be used as a command post during emergencies, has walls and cabinet fronts covered with dry erase boards, an exterior awning, floodlights, emergency lights and sirens (Pilant 1994). The Newport Beach, California Police Department (NBPD) paid for its mobile command post out of asset forfeiture funds, said Sergeant Bob Oakley. There are fax machines, two televisions, a VCR and a video in-link that lets the news stations feed directly into the command post so supervisors can monitor what is happening in the field. Sergeant Oakley further advised that the command post is in use at least six to eight times each year, a number that is expect to increase (Pilant 1994).

One of the leading vendors of the mobile command units and the necessary equipment is LDV/Lynch Display Vans. I conducted a survey of several agencies whom LDV have supplied multi-purpose vehicles and or equipment. The agencies that were surveyed were;

Burbank Police Department, Burbank CA., Midland Police Department, Midland, TX., Pima County Sheriff's Office, Tucson AZ., Overland Park Police Department, Overland Park, KS., Kenner Police Department, Kenner, LA., Houston Police Department, Houston, TX. They were asked the following questions:

1. What was your initial reason for buying your multi-purpose vehicle (M.P.V.).
2. Are you currently using your M.P.V. for what it was originally purchased for.
3. Would you say that it is cost effective.
4. Would you recommend your M.P.V. to another agency.
5. Are you satisfied with your M.P.V. (If no please explain why)
6. Approximately how much did it cost.
7. What is size of your M.P.V.
8. Please check the following types of events that you have used your M.P.V. for:
☐ Emergency response/Disaster, ☐ Hostages
☐ Parades ☐ SWAT (Tactical operations)
☐ Other please specify :

After speaking with all of the above mentioned agencies my conclusion was that they all have used their multi-purpose vehicles for activities and events other than what they were purchased for. Most of them advised they used them as substation and they were satisfied with them. Lt. Damon Shupp with Midland Police department advised that he felt the vehicle has more than served its purpose. While speaking with Lt. Damon, I learned that he attend the Law Enforcement Management Institute and his topic was on Mobile Command Post / Mobile Substations. He advised that he conducted a similar survey for his research project and his findings were the same as mine. He then faxed me a copy of his information. I learned from his research that Sgt. Driscoll advised that their unit was used more as a mobile storefront. It is

called the Neighborhood Policing Unit. Sgt. Driscoll further advised that they were making a difference in the neighborhoods that they serve. Captain Gary Cochran of the Baytown, Texas Police Department advised he was also very please with 10' x 40' trailer his department uses as a mobile substation (Lt. Damon, 1996).

DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

A trend is now being set among the nation in law enforcement to become the premier agency. The city of Sugar Land has recently pledged to its community to become the "Safest City in America (De Mangin, August 1996). Keeping this statement in mind it is only logical to believe that when an unfortunate disaster strike the reputation of this agency will be on the line. We are now at the point where we must position ourselves for that moment by purchasing a Mobile Command Unit. Disaster such as hurricanes, tornadoes, explosions, floods, airplane crashes and the like are unavoidable. The bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma was very unfortunate, however, the question to ask ourselves is are we ready for such an event?

There have been two tornadoes in the past two years both happened within less than a one year period. Sugar Land has a municipal airport where commercial commerce is growing. Thus meaning bigger and larger scale planes coming into our airport. During the summer of 1997, the city of Sugar Land hosted a parade for Olympic Ice Skater Tara Lipinski. This was a major event that received national attention. In an event of such magnitude, planning and organizing hundreds of officers participants and volunteers is critical. Although the parade was completed without much turmoil, preparing ourselves for a future event will be of the essence. Furthermore, on

November 5, 1998 through November 8, 1998, the city of Sugar Land hosted its first annual Sugar Fest, which is a local festival with live bands and arts and craft shows open to the public. The police department had an extremely significant role in this event maintaining security for the citizens, vehicle and other property as well. A command post was established however, the facility used for the command post was borrowed from another agency and was inadequate for the total needs for this department. Although the event was a success, as it becomes more popular in the years to come it will be imperative to have our own mobile command unit. If not for the department, at least for the safety of all of the citizens who will come to the city of Sugar Land to enjoy a well-planned function without the stresses of worrying about police organization. The above are some of the notable incidents that can create havoc in a normally sane and routine function.

As in any capital expenditure item considered for purchase by any police agency the financial aspect, size and detailed specifications must be analyzed. Large special-purpose vehicles command such a hefty price, ranging from about \$40,000.00 to \$400,000.00 departments must be pretty creative in financing their purchase. Possible funding sources include asset forfeiture funds, state or federal grants, private donations and creative arrangements with agencies that will be sharing the vehicle (Pilant 1994). Municipal bonds and private donations are also some other means of financing the unit. The following presented by Sergeant Oakley with the Newport Beach, California, Police Department gives a list of guidelines to consider when purchasing a Mobile Command Unit. While doing a cost analysis of a unit that will fit the needs of the Sugar Land Police Department I followed those guidelines. They are as follows:

- Keep the vehicle's use in mind-a vehicle intended for hostage situations will have different equipment needs than one that will be used for a mobile command post or a crime scene/evidence-gathering unit.
- Use interior and exterior materials that can withstand hard use and weather conditions.
- Insulate the vehicle against extreme weather to permit officers to operate efficiently.
- Design the vehicle to withstand the maximum number of officers and thousands of pounds of equipments.
- Try to duplicate the dispatch center in a mobile command post. This will prevent additional training for operators and keep the department from losing precious time in responding to an emergency.
- When possible, separate communications and conference rooms in a mobile command post. The noise from the communications may disturb strategy sessions.
- If possible, house the generator under the floor to keep it from taking up interior storage space. This also keeps the person who gets the generator started from getting in the way of the officers inside.
- Take advantage of exterior storage space and remember that awnings and pull-down tables can provide shelter from weather as well as additional work space (Pilant 1994).

I met with Sugar Land Assistant Fire Chief, R. Trevino and Sugar Land Communication Supervisor, G. Scarpa to review the above data along with the survey I conducted to determine what type of unit would benefit this agency most. Trevino and Scarpa had previously researched this information and shared their findings with me. They determine an exact size, certain specifications and generalized equipment needed. These were their findings:

The plan defines a vehicle with a "walk through" length of 28' and an overall length of 37'. Its width is 8' and its overall height is approximately 12'. The vehicle would be a latest model GM/Chevrolet forward control P6S042 chassis with a minimum gross vehicle weight rating of 28,000 pounds. It would be powered by a 427 CID Gasoline EFI engine. The requested equipment specification list is as follows:

- A four (4) position Communication Area in the forward portion of the vehicle.
- Full CAD(Computer Aided Dispatch) availability via remote dial in (hardware or cellular) computer stations with one at each communications position.
- Full radio system capability at 6 points in the vehicle.
- A center section with a radio equipment/galley area.
- An equipment area containing fax/copier/computer printer.

- A rear conference room section, capable of holding 6 persons for decision, meetings, etc.
- A self contained miniature PBX Telephone System.
- Mast mounted Closed Circuit Hi-Resolution Color TV cameras with video recording available.
- Video monitors and recorders switchable from CCTV to "Broadcast" TV.
- Exterior lighting for area around vehicle.
- P.A. System internal / external.
- Exterior Vehicle video/audio/ telephone inputs and outputs.
- Roof observation area.
- Rear view video camera / screen for driver assistance (backing)
- Emergency Vehicle Lighting (Red / Blue Lights-siren etc. (Scarpa. 1997.)

After carefully gathering all of the above data Scarpa and Trevino used this information to solicit bids from different vendors of Multi Purpose Vehicles. Lynch Diversified Vehicles (LDV) gave them a bid of \$377,141.00. Another company used was Four Alarm Fire Company. Their final bid was \$350,000.00. Both companies advised the life expectancy of their vehicles are estimated to last 20 to 25 years. Furthermore, the annual maintenance (scheduled oil changes tire rotation etc.) cost of the vehicle is fairly minimal considering its usage.

CONCLUSION / RECOMMENDATIONS

Putting this in proper perspective. Sugar Land is as likely a target as any other medium size city to have such traumatic event as previously mentioned. It is relatively easy to speak about what we need and what we will do in the future, but I submit to you that until we take a stand, move forward and start the process of getting a Mobile Command Unit, we are simply setting ourselves up for a very unpredictable and uncontrollable situation.

Safety of our citizens is our number one goal. We preach it, but do we practice it. In past history, several police agencies have shown that Mobile Command Units are very necessary in the planning, organizing and controlling of major events. It is proven that the City of Sugar Land is

growing at a rapid pace. The likeness and the potential of having a serious crisis is here. Major events being held in this city are also on the rise. Figuratively speaking, the future is here. Sugar Land is just as likely to become another statistic or news media headline for a critical incident as any other city in the country.

Throughout my research, I've shown how Mobile Command Units can be used in several different situations. Several agencies have shown and proven to have had much success as a result of purchasing their units. My research have also shown that Mobile Command Units come with all of the latest and most advance equipment necessary to perform in any given crisis. Although, most Mobile Command Units are costly, no price can be placed on saving lives in a crisis situation. I strongly believe that having a Mobile Command Unit is a necessary tool as we move into the new Millennium. We must take a proactive approach to committing to the safety of our community. Our citizens deserve it.

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