AJEM 40: The First 10 Years

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"For some time, we have been aware of an information void within the counter disaster community".

With this observation, the then Australian Counter Disaster College (ACDC) at Mount Macedon introduced its first offering in March 1986 to address the need for a publication for ''operatives, planners, trainers and researchers in counter disaster/civil defence field''.

The first edition of *The Macedon Digest* (TMD) was a humble 5 pages long. In these was an overview of a training needs analysis conducted by the College, an announcement of new publications – *Flood Warnings in Australia, Fire Ecology and Land Management in Western Australia* – and the second Australian Disaster Research Directory, detailing all the disaster-related research across the country. The first edition also announced the establishment of the National Bushfire Research Unit at CSIRO, led by Justin Leonard, and highlighted some of the recent acquisitions of the ACDC Library, which included titles on nuclear war and winter, organisational dynamics, emergency medicine, and MacPaint Drawing Drafting Design.

The first edition posed the statement: "The success of the digest will depend to a large extent on reader reaction: contributions and comments on content will be welcomed and will help the Digest to evolve into a useful periodical for all who are involved in the humanitarian field of disaster management". The readers' reactions were clearly positive, reflecting the growth from this humble beginning to what is now the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM).

The second edition highlighted the importance the College placed on disaster studies, enabling teaching at the College to draw upon experience, case studies and information, and reflecting the view that planning can be improved by learning from experience. It goes on to provide an overview of Cyclone Winifred that affected the Innisfail area of Queensland in February 1986.

We can trace our detailed understanding of the human responses to disaster to a comprehensive series of articles across 9 editions by Ruth Wraith and Rob Gordon, drawing on their extensive experience of the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983 and the Maryborough bushfires in 1985. They powerfully set the human context in which we continue to work, helping us understand the human impacts of disasters, the reactions and behaviours they provoke and what we can do to support people through such events.

The United Nations speaks of the importance of early warnings in risk reduction and helping people make informed decisions. TMD foresaw this 40 years ago, with an excellent article by John Oliver in Volume 1, Edition 3 titled, *'Warning Lead Time for Disasters',* which covered bushfires, windstorms, hail, frost, earthquakes and tsunamis.

TMD was not without controversy. In March 1987, a seemingly uncontroversial front-page article was titled *'Emergency Management Education in Australia: The Philosophy and Objectives of Emergency Management Training and Education in Australia'.* This article set out some excellent principles for the future of the College, including the need for a systematic all-embracing approach to disaster management across the Prevent/Mitigate, Prepare, Respond, Recover (PPRR) framework, rather than the sole focus on preparedness and response. It emphasised that practice needs to be aligned with scholarship, advisory bodies are required, customers should not control access to the College and target audiences should be defined by function rather than occupation.

Somehow, it seems the article was not reviewed by the powers-that-be in Canberra. In response, the June edition opened with a bolded heading: Commonwealth Policy on Training and Education at the Australian Counter Disaster College:

> *The statements contained in the March edition reflect the personal view of the Director and the staff of the college, and not all of them are consistent with those of the Natural Disasters Organisation, the Department of Defence, or the Commonwealth. The CDC is not an autonomous institution, but under the policy direction of the Director General of the Natural Disasters Organisation. The following statement should clarify the situation…*

In the June 1987 edition, a short article appears at the bottom of page 2 titled *'The Greenhouse Effect'.* The summary, based on the article by Dr Jamie Pittock, outlined predicted changes by 2030 including wetter summers, drier winters, cyclones moving further south and more extreme temperatures. TMD highlighted these findings in Volume 3, Edition 1 with the headline, *'Greenhouse Effect Predicts more Cyclones'.* This quote is particularly poignant, seemingly crafted with the optimism of a scientist or problem solver who knows exactly what is needed to fix the problem and assumes the necessary action will be taken:

> *The insurance industry had closely monitored the scientific studies on greenhouse warming, and they accepted that it would probably occur within 50 years. At least the long lead time would give the community time to plan and adapt for the changes. If as predicted cyclones become more intense and more widespread, insurance companies would require new standards of housing and construction and design. But because of new technology and materials, they need not be much more expensive.*

I admire this quote from Geoff Boughton in Volume 5, Edition 2/3 (1990) that reminds us that disasters are not natural, but the consequences of human decisions:

> *Disasters occur because of either the past mistakes of planners and engineers in ignoring these basic principles or the occurrence of an event that is more intense than one anticipated in the planning, design and construction of the community. Disaster planning is required to deal with this scenario.*

A topic close to my heart is featured in Volume 3, Edition 1 (1988). The article outlines the National Registration and Inquiry System, a tracing service for those separated by disaster that was the forerunner of Register Find Reunite. One paragraph stands out, calling for system improvements and the "development of a more sophisticated phonetic search, highly desirable improvement in view of the multilingual character of today's population".

The late Philip Buckle – a former manager of mine – outlined Victoria's State Disaster Recovery Plan in Volume 3, Edition 1. What stands out to me is the practice we take for granted and which is sometimes claimed as 'new':

> *Area recovery committees, chaired by municipal representatives, with representatives of local communities foretold community centred recovery.*

Also fascinating is an example of the notion of build-back-better:

> *The need to link recovery from disaster with disaster prevention so that recovery processes "can incorporate measures" to reduce the likelihood of recurrence and prevention.*

Philip returns many times in the first decade, including his observation in Volume 7 Edition 2 (1992) that the cost of disasters and the benefits of prevention extend beyond saving lives. This is a concept that we have tried to embed in our preparedness frameworks over the past 40 years:

> *Anecdotal evidence and the informed intuition of disaster managers is that the costs of the losses of disasters (property loss, production loss, opportunity loss) as well as the direct and indirect costs of prevention, response and recovery are greater than many people imagine. There is also the suspicion that disaster prevention expenditure may reduce costs resulting from damage by minimising damage levels, and expenditure on direct recovery services may reduce costs which would otherwise be incurred bystanding social and medical services.*

Another former manager of mine, the late Kerry Gartland, outlined the recovery principles we all take for granted in Volume 4, Edition 3 (1990) in the article, 'State of the Art: Recovery from Disasters and Emergencies'. She also takes the time to reflect on the importance of public awareness and education.

Professor John Handmer, a regular contributor to AJEM over its 40 years, first appeared in 1989 with a piece co-authored with Denis Parker and Jeremy Neal on flood warnings and liability.

We begin to see the emergence of health and disaster planning with an article on the role of the health surveyor and disaster planning in Volume 3, Edition 1 (1988) followed by a special themed edition on health and disaster planning in Volume 6, Edition 1 (1991) dedicated to the social and health aspects of disasters and anchored around World Health Day. The issue focuses on infectious diseases, triaging, rapid medical response capability, hospital planning, exercises and, interestingly, an article titled *'Health Implications for Natural Disaster Management Arising from Predicted Climate Change'.* While it addresses fire, flood, storm, and drought, there is no mention of extreme heat.

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In Volume 3, Edition 4 (1988), we see ACDC begin producing knowledge-synthesis articles, including John Slater and Mike Tarrant's *'Computer Manipulated Census Data and Disaster Management',* and Pam Millican's *'Human Risk Perception',* heralding a shift in the role of the College to knowledge synthesis.

Volume 5 opens the new decade of the 1990s. The editions have more of a newsletter feel, announcing ACDC events and including sections on the Natural Disasters Organisation operational activities. However, in Volume 6 (1991) informative articles return.

As the decade progresses, an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the complexity of emergency management emerges.

"It is a fundamental tenet of emergency management that there is no hazard without people," opens an excellent first piece on recognising the need to understand community in planning for disaster by New South Wales State Emergency Service's Chas Keys in Volume 6, Edition 2 (1991). His analysis concludes with:

> *The underlying message which arises from this discussion is that there is no single public, but rather a host of them, society is differentiated along numerous planes, and we need to know how to identify the elements most in need to help before and in times of crisis. By understanding more fully the consequences of this pluralism, the emergency management "industry" will be able to serve its community more effectively.*

An interesting piece by P.R. Hughes in Volume 6, Edition 4 (1991) transposes the Newcastle earthquake from 28 December 1989 to 26 October of the same year and estimates that instead of 13 deaths, there could have been between 700 and 950 deaths with 200 to 300 of them children at school. This edition has a strong theme on the somewhat forgotten seismic risk and the Newcastle earthquake.

One piece that resonates with me, particularly as I often speak about how simplistic Hollywood-style disaster narratives shape our responses, is Nicholas Kanarev's 1992 article *'Thematic Approaches to introduce a disaster story'.* The media, communications and disasters are examined in a special issue in Volume 8, Edition 2 (1993). The journalist, Rodney Cavalier, imparts this sage advice at the opening of his article, saying ''I wanted to say, by way of preface, we need to put even disasters in a scale of importance in the ongoing lives of people''.

In Volume 9, Edition 4 (1994), we see the emergence of another longstanding contributor to AJEM – and another former manager – Andrew Coghlan. Together, with Philip Buckle, he provides a detailed overview of a community-based recovery program, applying the community development model that was embedded in Victoria's disaster recovery arrangements, including the employment of community development officers across flood affected communities in the north-east of Victoria.

Gayle Cullinan's *'Understanding the Emergency Worker'* (Volume 9, Edition 2, 1994) presented at the Women in Emergencies Symposium in Brisbane in 1992, is a powerful piece, both for the breadth of topic it covers and for addressing the hyper-masculinity of emergency services.

Tucked away on page 21 of the winter 1993 edition, Ian Duggan, a Western Australian Police Inspector, presents the following conclusion to his article, *'Recording Dreamtime Disasters':*

> *Emergency management planners often study disaster events of the past in their planning. Yet one important source has traditionally been neglected. Investigating Aboriginal historical sources dealing with disaster may contribute to the creation of a new risk map for West Australia from Aboriginal folklore, language and art.*

Then, in its 10th year, Volume 10 morphed from TMD to AJEM. The then Director of the Australian Emergency Management Institute (AEMI) commented:

> *This change does not herald any significant alteration of content, style or editorial policy, but merely reflects what the publication now represents within the Australian emergency management community. When it started life, The Macedon Digest was primarily a summary of the doings and opinions of the staff at the, then, Australian Counter Disaster College. The publication has grown enormously in quality, variety of input and the range of issues addressed. It is no longer an in-house newsletter but a widely read magazine, both in Australia and overseas, which addresses a broad range of issues of relevance to all sectors of the emergency management community. The new title reflects this status.*

The initial decade of TMD reflects many firsts and provides the foundations on which we base our current work. It also reflects much of what we try to do, as the successor to ACDC and AEMI: sharing information about training through updates from AIDR; providing best practice guidance via the Australian Disaster Resilience handbooks; sharing knowledge through *What's New in Knowledge*; and offering incidents overviews in the *Major Incidents Reports.*

Let's see what the following decades bring.