

On July 25, 2007 Hurricane "Tom" struck the Outer Banks in full fury. As Dare County emergency response teams sprang into action, their ability to coordinate and provide vital services to the community was severely hampered by damage to the existing communications infrastructure.

To fill this gap, U.S. Army North rushed an emergency response vehicle to the scene to provide connectivity from the scene to the National Operations Center the National Guard's Joint Command Center and other supporting agencies. First responders and decision makers monitored the situation through the Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN), which provided a common operational picture, and stood by to dispatch additional assistance.

Not a real incident, but a successful operational demonstration designed to demonstrate feasibility and refine requirements for the National Exercise Simulation Network, (SIMNET) linking federal, state, local and tribal emergency teams in an information sharing environment allowing them to develop and test response plans and to run exercises and training, using real-world operations centers, communications and procedures. Mike Nicholson, Director of the Transformation Office in the National Protection and Programs Directorate (NPPD), says SIMNET "represents an unparalleled coordination among the public and private sectors to raise the level of nationwide preparedness, reducing vulnerabilities to all hazards – terrorist attack and natural disaster alike."

Georgia Ellis of Dare County says, "We were glad that we could play a small part in the success....We really enjoyed getting into our 'roles.'" "Several of the participants were hesitant at first, and others jumped in with both feet. It was fun for us to be connected through HSIN, JABBER and the other sites," she says.

When fully mature, SIMNET will be backed by simulation-based computer "games" that will allow individual participants, local response teams and decision makers at the national level to design and run their own situations from their local workstations, dramatically lowering the expense of custom-designing table top exercises and cutting travel cost and schedule disruption.

In a collaborate effort, DHS' Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) is assisting NPPD and SIMNET to interconnect existing simulation models currently used by U.S. Joint Forces Command and National Defense University, as well as new simulations S&T is developing, to bring SIMNET to DHS and its partners rapidly and at minimal cost. American Council for Technology/Industry Advisory Council is pushing ahead with complementary spirals to incorporate Weapons of Mass Destruction, Pandemic and Earthquake scenarios, bringing in the capabilities of the appropriate specialized organizations.

Another of the spirals will introduce and test out proposed communication and collaboration hardware and software that seem like a good idea, but whose real value can

only be determined in an operational setting. SIMNET allows us to test our response and learn the lessons before rather than after an emergency.