

## **Emergency Management: An Interview with Timothy McDermott**

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Originally from Dartmouth Nova Scotia, but having travelled and relocated multiple times throughout his life as a military brat, Tim lives an hour North of Halifax on a small Hobby Farm with his wife, youngest daughter, and menagerie of dogs, cats, goats and horses. He currently serves as a civilian member of the Halifax Regional Police, as their Emergency Manager. He has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Law from Carleton University in Ottawa and a Master's Degree in Disaster and Emergency Management from Royal Roads University in Victoria. He served as a Naval Officer in the Royal Canadian Navy from 1979 to 2015 and a Volunteer Firefighter and Medical First Responder in his community from 2004 to 2014. Tim has been working in the Emergency Management field since 2004 and offers a unique perspective based on his career portfolio and experiences. IAEM (International Association of Emergency Management) contacted Tim and interviewed him for one of our IAEM Canada Emergency Management features. Continue reading to hear more about what Tim has to say when it comes to the Emergency Management field, his greatest challenge, his greatest accomplishment and much more. But first, let us take this opportunity to provide more insight into Tim's career and history in the military which lead to his interest in Emergency Management.

Throughout his career in the Navy, Tim served in a wide variety of positions on just about every class of ship in the fleet. Everything from being a Bridge Watchkeeper, Diving Officer, Demolitions Officer, Above Water Warfare Officer and Combat Officer, to leading Naval Boarding Parties searching for terrorists and narcotics. Ask him where he's been with the Navy and he'll tell you it would be faster to list the places he hasn't been. Back in 2004, Tim finally ran out of ships to serve on and excuses not to be posted ashore. He found himself assigned a post at Maritime Forces Atlantic Headquarters in Halifax, as the Senior Staff Officer Submarine Escape and Rescue (SSO SUBSAR). In this position Tim was responsible for developing contingency plans and procedures in the event of a submarine disaster. He was also responsible for overseeing the execution and exercising of those plans. In 2009, when the Canadian Forces reorganized, and created Canada Command, Tim was transferred to Joint Task Force Atlantic (JTFA) Headquarters where he assumed the position of Operations Planning Officer.

It was there that Tim really began to develop an interest in Emergency Management. Realizing that there was a whole "hockey sock of training, knowledge and experience" beyond his military training and education, he started taking emergency management training courses. By taking these courses he had the opportunity to develop contacts and establish relationships with the key influencers and decision makers in the emergency management community.

As the JTFA Operations Planning Officer, Tim created a network of military Liaison Officers who were embedded on a full and part time basis into the four Atlantic Provincial Emergency Measures Organizations (EMO). The creation of this network provided the EMO's with subject matter expertise in operational planning, and provided JTFA with early warning of potential requests for assistance from Provincial authorities. Tim realized early on that these military Liaison Officers required specialized training in Emergency Management and developed a training program and course for prospective Liaison Officers. Tim's responsibilities also required him to liaise with other Federal Government Departments and Agencies and act as the JTFA representative to the Federal Coordination Group (FCG) in Atlantic Canada. In his capacity as FCG representative, Tim planned and organized JTFA support to

other government departments for everything from assisting the RCMP with counter narcotics seizures, to assisting Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) with fisheries patrols and providing support to Transport Canada for aircraft crash investigations.

In 2014, Tim was dispatched to the RCMP Incident Command Post (ICP), in Moncton NB, to provide military liaison to the RCMP during a shooting incident that claimed the lives of three Mounties and resulted in the largest man hunt in Atlantic Canadian history. He's also been involved in several emergency activations over the course of his military career. Including everything from responding to a sinking ship during a hurricane, to being part of a Canadian Naval Task Group dispatched to Hurricane Katrina, Operations Planning Staff for an earthquake in Haiti; Hurricane response in Nova Scotia for Hurricane Juan and Newfoundland for Hurricane Igor; and operational planning for forest fires in Labrador.

When it came time to retire from the military back in 2015, he returned to school and completed a master's degree in Emergency Management at Royal Roads University. Upon graduation in October 2017, Tim joined the Halifax Regional Police as their Emergency manager, took on responsibility as the IAEM Atlantic Canada Region Secretary and President and founded an Emergency management consulting firm, Rusty Anchor Consulting.

With Tim's unique, rich and exuberant career, we invite you to continue reading our interview Q and A focusing on the Emergency Management field and some of the skills to develop, lessons learned and changes we can expect.

**IAEM (HM):** Why do you enjoy working in the Emergency Management Field?

**TM:** Working in the field of Emergency Management allows me to give back to my community. It gives me the opportunity to contribute to community resilience and make plans that hopefully save lives, minimize suffering, and prevent loss.

**IAEM (HM):** What are some of the challenges working in this field and what are some of the lessons that you've learned over the course of your career?

**TM:** I think the most important lesson I've learned over the course of my career(s) is the importance of flexibility in planning. There is an axiom in the military that says, "no plan survives first contact with the enemy."

What I take from that is that contingency planning must be flexible and responsive to be effective. To be responsive and flexible, plans need to be validated and tested. This is, I think, the one of the most significant challenges facing Emergency Managers. We live in an environment where first responders are focused on what's happening right now. Few first response agencies have the resources or the luxury to assign resources to long range and long-term planning. It is often difficult to find the resources and personnel to put emergency and contingency plans to the test. The larger the plan, the less likely it is that resources are available to exercise and validate that plan.

**IAEM (HM): a)** Which of the four pillars (planning, preparedness, mitigation, response & recovery) in emergency management do you feel is the most important, why? and **b)** How have building relationships and contacts supported you throughout your career?

**TM: a)** I think each pillar of Emergency Management is an essential element. I think the recovery element has perhaps received the least amount of recognition and has the most lasting impact on communities because the Emergency Management community tends to focus on response. Having said that, we have all seen the exponential rise in disaster related costs associated with weather related disasters. We are, in my opinion, on an unsustainable path when it comes to disaster response and recovery. We need to focus scarce resources on prevention and mitigation measures to help minimize the impact of disasters and help build resilience into our communities.

**b)** One of the most fundamental skills one must have as a professional emergency manager is the ability to forge relationships and build trust. The Emergency Management (EM) community in Canada is a relatively small one and many EM professionals know each other on a first name basis. I have found IAEM to be an essential tool in forging relationships and making introductions. Here in the Atlantic Region, we have worked hard to establish a community of practice when it comes to emergency management and to build relationships with all levels of Government and the private sector.

**IAEM (HM):** Do you consider Business Continuity to be a big part of Emergency Management?

**TM:** In addition to my CEM certification through IAEM, I also have completed Business Continuity Planning training and certification through DRI Canada. I can say emphatically that Business Continuity is an integral part of Emergency Management and an important component of every organization in both the public and private sector. Business Continuity affects everyone from small mom and pop convenience stores to large multi-national corporations. Often, BCP is given lip service in many organizations but increasingly it is being recognized as a vital part of a business organization. If one looks at the examples of Fort MacMurray and Paradise California, it is easy to see how business plays a critical role in the ability of a community to recover from a disaster. Unless and until businesses are able to resume operations, recovery is almost impossible. People need jobs to return to, and places to buy essential goods and services. They need government, health and community services. In an age where just in time delivery has become the business model for much of our essential goods and services, communities and businesses that don't plan for disruptions are incredibly vulnerable. Business Continuity Plans (BCP) need to be robust and need to consider all the possible circumstances in which they might have to activate their plan. There is no point having a BCP that plans to have people work from home, if those homes are dark and cold from a lack of power, and the internet service is out. Do you really have a plan if it doesn't survive first contact with the enemy?

**IAEM (HM):** Being in Emergency Management you've seen a lot. Describe what you believe to be is the most important thing that needs to change in this field, to improve the Emergency Management industry?

**TM:** Unfortunately, with the growing threat of climate change, Emergency Management is becoming a growth industry. As a profession, we need to lead that change, and push for investment in prevention and mitigation. We need to be able to influence planning and development options, and drive improvement of building codes and standards. We need to develop awareness of risks and hazards and foster a culture of planning for disaster. We need to be tireless advocates and consummate politicians. It can sometimes feel like we are pushing a rope, or trying to herd cats, so above all else, we must be patient, and relentless.

**IAEM (HM):** How has technology and social media improved the ability to respond to emergencies?

**TM:** One advantage young professionals have over the older generation of Emergency Managers, is the ability to recognize how new technology and social media are changing emergency management for the better. In many ways, the Emergency Management establishment is playing catch-up when it comes to technological change and utilizing social media. We've seen plenty of examples how emergent volunteers have harnessed different social media platforms to communicate and organize emergency response. I vividly recall the speed at which volunteers from around North America were able to organize rescue teams during Hurricane Harvey using social media platforms such as Facebook, What's App and Zello. These response teams were able to organize, plan, and execute rescue operations throughout the impacted areas of Texas. As the Emergency Management establishment struggles to catch-up, adapt and make use of technology, such as drones, young professionals have an advantage they can leverage.

**IAEM (HM):** What is the one piece of advice that you would offer young professionals entering the world of Emergency Management?

**TM:** I don't envy young professionals trying to break into the Emergency Management field. By and large, the Emergency Management field is dominated by older, experienced professionals who are working on their second or perhaps third career. Because we are a relatively small community it can be difficult to compete for many Emergency Management positions. It can be equally difficult to develop the life experiences that many long-in-the-tooth Emergency Managers bring to the game.

My best advice to young professionals is to look for opportunities to volunteer for any and every disaster. There are many volunteer organizations that are starved for the knowledge, skills, enthusiasm and perspective you can provide. Whether it's the Canadian Red Cross, Salvation Army, Global Medic, Team Rubicon, faith-based charities or another humanitarian or disaster related NGO (Non-Government Organization), there are many opportunities to gain experience and pad your resume.

I also strongly encourage young professionals to begin building your social networks now. Become actively involved in organizations such as IAEM, or your provincial Emergency Management Association. Join Emergency Management social networks; create your Linked In profile. Write letters, articles, and opinion pieces. Be proactive and relentless.

**IAEM (HM):** In your experience, what is the key to developing a good team?

**TM:** At the end of the day, being an effective Emergency Manager isn't really about management, it's about leadership. Leadership isn't barking orders or bossing others around. It's about being able to motivate people to do things that they aren't necessarily comfortable or trained to do. It's about recognizing the strengths and weaknesses in others, and providing them the tools and opportunities they need to succeed. It's about being able to effectively influence the decisions of those who you support. It requires diplomacy, patience, and a good sense of humor. Most importantly, it's the ability to build trust and mutual respect. A good team is one that communicates effectively, that trusts one another and supports one another. Being an effective leader is about inspiring others to rise to the occasion.

In closing our interview, we asked Tim, a true Emergency Management professional, with exceptional experience and knowledge one final question: what is your greatest accomplishment? To which Tim responded, "convincing my wife of 30 years, Valerie McDermott, to marry me". Warming our hearts and

reminding us that even while responding to events and being in the Emergency Management field, the most important thing is the ability to connect, build trust, and be there for loved ones.

We'd like to take this opportunity to thank Timothy McDermott for his time and effort in supporting IAEM by accepting this offer and being our first Emergency Management feature. We also want to take this opportunity to thank Timothy for his years of service and the contributions he's made to the Emergency Management Profession.

If you have any comments or would like to recommend someone to act as a Feature, please contact [IAEMCdnComms@gmail.com](mailto:IAEMCdnComms@gmail.com).