

# INTEROPERABILITY

The Post-9/11 buzzword.

BY S.E. SCHOPFER AND DICK WOOLF

It's two in the afternoon on a bright, clear day at your local ski area. You just heard a dispatch of your fellow patrollers to an accident that sounds serious. You head in that direction. The first patroller on the scene advises: "A non-responsive 25-year-old male boarder in a tree with facial injuries and difficulty breathing."

This article is not about emergency care and how to best handle all of the necessary things that need to be done for a successful outcome with this patient. This is focused on how your radio has made ski patrolling more efficient and patient care more coordinated.

Back to the accident, the ideal chain of events would go something like this: While performing emergency care, the decision is made for helicopter transport to the nearest trauma center. One of the patrollers is assigned the task to make this happen. Ideally, the patroller only has to switch channels on his portable radio to a frequency that gives him access to the PSAP (Public Safety Answering Point). The transmission that follows leads to county dispatch to call a helicopter to the resort's parking lot.

## Interoperability and Patrollers

"Interoperability" is defined as the ability to access and communicate with all of the necessary public safety agencies on predefined radio frequencies. Ski patrols, BLS, ALS, fire/rescue, aeromedical services, law enforcement, local government agencies, and specialty rescue (i.e., avalanche and SAR) all need to interoperate. Typically, the PSAP will coordinate the notifications and dispatch of the emergency services outside of the resort.

It doesn't make any difference if you patrol at a destination resort or a local ski area—training, equipment, communications and pre-planning are all part of the successful equation. The ski patrol

should plan for interoperability before the major incident occurs.

## Getting to Know Your Local EMS Dispatch Center Management

Nationwide, ski patrols are known as an integral part of the EMS system. Outside of on-snow activities, many patrollers are also qualified first responders, EMTs, paramedics, doctors, nurses, firefighters, etc. Patrollers have an important role to play in the eventual outcome of patient care, and need to be able to communicate with others in the public safety arena on a one-to-one professional basis.

If you have not done so, visit your local EMS dispatch center. Educate their management as to your credibility and what function you serve. Each has a different method of controlling access to their radio frequencies. Be part of that system. Take the time to educate local EMS and fire/rescue personnel about the work of ski patrollers. Explain the level of training and annual recertification/refresher protocols. Invite your local fire/rescue and EMS personnel to your training sessions, lift evacuation practice, etc.

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## Guests Dialing 911

Remember that because of elevation on the mountain, a guest's cell phone can probably hit multiple cell phone tower sites. Depending on their carrier (i.e., ATT, Verizon) and the elevation, they may connect with a PSAP many counties away from the center that has jurisdiction for dispatch at your ski area. Then they have to have their calls re-directed or transferred. All of this takes time. That's why it is recommended to have a direct local phone number at the resort that is answered by the ski patrol during operating hours. This phone number should be publicized on signage, trail maps, lift tickets, season passes and other visible places.



Interoperability is defined as the ability to access and communicate with all of the necessary public safety agencies on predefined radio frequencies, for example, a ski patrol calling county dispatch for a base area heli transport. Photo: © AW. Corum Photography

## The Ski Patrol-PSAP Interface

There are some technical compatibility problems that need to be worked out beforehand when accessing the PSAP by radio. Which frequency? Is there a tone squelch issue (PL/DPL)? Radio protocols and radio discipline? All of this can be agreed upon if both parties are willing and there is an obvious win-win for everyone.

## Multi Agency Incidents

There are occasional multi-casualty incidents at ski areas with lift failures, electrical issues, explosions/fires or other situations that will require a larger disaster response that we are normally faced with. However, if you have lined up all those ducks—trained with the local fire/rescue, EMS, law enforcement personnel and are able to communicate via radio directly with the key personnel at your incident—you will be part of the response. In this scenario, compatible

radio equipment and channels are of obvious importance.

## Make the Investment

Make the investment in incident command training and purchase the basic set of colored vests that denote responsibilities (i.e., incident commander, EMS, transportation, logistics). If your patrollers have the vest on and are doing the job, the incoming personnel will report to the incident commander and ask where they are needed. If your patrollers are not in colored vests and only in patrol parkas, the incoming responders will start their own incident command system as they have been trained to do. +

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