



HERALD PHOTO BY DAVID ROSSITER

Ted Buffington was the presenter during training in Command Leadership Effectiveness for Awareness and Response (CLEAR) Friday at the Lethbridge Lodge.

# Clarity the key in a crisis

Expert in crisis situations speaks to southern Alberta emergency response professionals

By **NORM LEBUS**  
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A Texan who's a Vietnam War vet, sports psychologist and author was in Lethbridge, Friday, talking to emergency response professionals about grammar.

"It's all in the language," Ted Buffington told a crowded room of southern Alberta emergency response professionals and volunteers.

"Language is all you've got to achieve clarity. If you can't speak it, you can't fix it."

When disaster strikes, emergency response personnel gather with different experience levels, expectations and confidence. In southern Alberta's rural/urban mix, there's also the potential for gaps in communication between volunteer emergency responders and professionals who live and breathe disaster response to the point where it's ingrained but difficult to articulate.

"What tends to happen in a crisis is that everybody shows up with their (thinking) patterns, their experiences

and their point of view, and the dysfunction occurs when there is not enough clarity about the goals, roles, processes and procedures," Buffington said.

Buffington spent the morning instilling simple but effective thinking patterns to help achieve clarity during crisis. A large part of that process is in overcoming what he calls interference — logistical factors relating to a particular crisis, gaps in experience levels, personality and communication style — to achieve clarity, then consensus in emergency response procedures.

"Clarity is power and we're the most powerful when we're clear," Buffington said. "We spend a lot of time training and developing competency to respond to major crises but we're not spending a lot of time preparing people mentally to be confident."

Fifty emergency response personnel from throughout southern Alberta attended the event.

Lethbridge regional police Staff Sgt. Dary James called the day a welcome refresher course. As an incident commander, James has extensive emergency response training.

"This puts together different perspectives because sometimes we fall into that habit-forming tunnel vision," she said.

Because Lethbridge is a regional hub for disaster response, area towns and municipal districts were included in Friday's session to help level the playing field, Lethbridge fire department deputy chief Mike Ross explained.

Buffington's stunning resume added credibility to his message, many felt.

"You really trust that here's a guy who can help us out through all of the stuff we study and get to some nuggets," Lethbridge fire department member Roy Poltmuller said.

"When he says everything is about communication, you sit back for a minute and realize, it is — it's all we have."

Friday morning's lecture gave way to a tabletop exercise in the afternoon. While Buffington conceded live events contain a randomness and stress unlike any simulation, realistic practice can save lives. He says before he flew helicopters in the Vietnam War, he visualized being shot down. When his bird was shot from the sky, he was prepared, and survived.

"(In crisis situations) who focuses, who folds and who freezes?" Buffington asked rhetorically.

"It's all emotion based. The expert is the one who can manage their emotions and communicate under extreme pressure."