

INCIDENT AT  
DONINGTON MONSTERS OF ROCK 1988

Presentation Paper

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**Abstract**

On the 28.8.1988. two young men died and a third was seriously injured in a fatal crowd related incident during an open air rock concert billed as the `Monsters of Rock` at the Donington Park motor race circuit North West Leicestershire. This paper is a personal account of my involvement in what is now commonly referred to as the Donington Disaster.

**Introduction**

My involvement at the Monsters of Rock was as Head of Security, as such I was employed by Aimcarve, the company responsible for promoting the event. I attended all pre meetings and I had a good working knowledge of the site having worked on all events since 1980. At the 1988 event I was responsible for all security issues which included crowd control and the implementation of crisis management strategies should the need arise.

At the time of the event (1988) there was no established practice to set up an Emergency Liaison Team (E.L.T.) therefore this event did not have one. The police attended all Safety Advisory Group (SAG) planning meetings for the event but no police officers were present within the concert arena during the event. The police were fully aware of what was taking place during the event via radio communication but they did not take an active part in containing any of what turned out to be three separate incidents that took place or the subsequent rescue operation of the injured. The rescue actions were entirely undertaken by a team from ShowSec International Limited supported by St John Ambulance.

The following account is not claimed to be a factual minute by minute account of what happened on that day, it is simply the recollections of one who was actually there. As with all accidents or incidents there will doubtless be other witness accounts from people who were present that day and will recall things differently. This is natural when people see things from different perspectives. My version of the disaster is however based on a broad view of the sequence of events and the benefit of radio reports to me from trained supervisors. From this wide perspective I believe my version to be an accurate account of the events that lead to the loss of two lives, the serious injury to one person and a traumatic experience for many other people that were involved either as victims or rescuers.

The incident at the 1988 Monsters of Rock concert has been the subject of much discussion by those that have an interest in crowd safety matters. At the time of the incident the media showed a natural interest, as would

be expected when two people die in such high profile circumstances. Unfortunately much of what was reported by the press as the cause and effect of the incident was inaccurate. For example, the name of the act quoted in some reports as being on stage at the time was the singer David Le Roth, it was in fact Guns `n Roses. Other reports indicated that a high crowd density build triggered the incident directly at the front of the stage subsequently causing crushing, this was also inaccurate. Several other papers claimed that the group on stage refused to stop playing, this was also inaccurate. Yet another report claimed that police were directly involved within the crowd at the time of the incident when in fact the police were not in the arena at all.

Confusion over what actually happened was perhaps due to the fact that there had in fact been *three* separate incidents that day and reporters were possibly unaware of this when they questioned people. Perhaps, confused by the different versions given by some witnesses, they (the press) simply cobbled together a version of a single incident. While this version may have satisfied newspaper editors it did little to help students of crowd safety to discover the true course of events. This account might therefore help those that have an interest in crowd safety to understand what happened on the 28<sup>th</sup> of August 1988 at the Monsters of Rock.

### **Previous history of the event**

Promoter Maurice Jones, Chairman of Aimcarve Ltd, the organisers, first staged the Monsters of Rock in 1980. Jones enjoyed a well-earned reputation for promoting good rock shows. The 1980 show was an immediate success with rock fans. Many of who traveled from different parts of Europe to be there. The demand for an annual rock show was clearly evident and the show has continued to be held annually.

Heavy rock groups came to regard the Monsters of Rock show as being a major international showcase. To play at Donington was seen to be performing at *the* rock event in the heavy metal calendar. It was covered by virtually all the trade press, and in addition to being broadcast live on radio bands often filmed their performances for future video promotion to enhance a sales campaign of their latest recording.

Many fans will travel great distances to be there regardless of was performing as the headline act. At the first concert in 1980 the demand for tickets was such that people arrived and set up camp on the Monday prior to Saturday's concert. Over the years the promoter had actively discouraged camping and tried to present the event as a one-day concert not a festival. Nevertheless some fans still arrived with tents on the

Friday evening. The promoter did provide facilities for these people. These facilities included; toilets, lighting, large marquees (for those without tents), food vendors and vast amounts of firewood.

The campsite itself was an amazing prelude to a rock concert. Nobody appeared to want to sleep. There was perhaps what could only be described kindly as a *carnival atmosphere*. Rock fans have a well deserved reputation for a love of alcohol and giving them the opportunity to spend all night in a field with a ready supply of beer while listening to ear splitting rock music appears to be their vision of heaven. In fact some of them are known to have enjoyed the night on the campsite so much that they slept through the entire day of the concert and went home on the Sunday having had a wonderful time!

### **The venue**

Donington Park is a motor race circuit situated approximately midway between Nottingham and Derby at the village of Castle Donington. The site itself is next to the East Midlands International airport. The circuit has a long history of motor sport and the track has been upgraded to handle F1. However it is perhaps best known as the home of the British Motor Cycle Grand Prix. Motor sport attracts large crowds and the venue had developed good working relationships with the emergency services. As one would expect, there is a major incident plan in place, which takes into account virtually any scenario that could occur at a motor sport venue situated next door to major airport.

Structural security in terms of crowd management is good. A brick wall surrounds the track area approximately twelve feet high topped with barbed wire. Entry and exit gates are designed to cope with ingress and egress crowds in the region of 200,000 people. The concert arena area is situated in the inner circle of the track with a standing room area that could accommodate 150/200,000 people. In practical terms however this number of people could pose problems with sight lines for a concert therefore attendance at the Monsters event would normally range from 50/100,000. Attendance for the 1988 event was given by the promoter as 85,000 people.

The stage was built at the north east corner of the arena, facing approximately south east so as to direct PA sound away from the village of Castle Donington and toward the open area of the airport. In 1988 the grass area immediately in front of the stage sloped down toward the stage at a gradient of approximately 1/20. At the time this was considered

advantageous to viewing, however after the incident this area was laid flat.

### **The Police**

As stated previously, I had been present at every Donington concert from 1980 and I have never seen a serious confrontation between the police and the fans. The police have always taken what I would describe as a realistic approach to the event. This is not to suggest that they ignored crime. Local officers have come to understand the rock culture and realised that a torn denim or leather look of the average rock fan did not signify that they were a rioting mob. All police control vehicles, temporary police station and facilities were therefore positioned near the main entrance to the site not in the arena.

Officers patrol the campsite during the evening and night of Friday but the event itself is left in the hands of a private security company employed by the promoter. The only officers in the arena in 1988 were two that were assigned as liaison officers and they were in the back stage area. In my opinion the working relationship between private security and all the emergency services prior to 1988 were good and since the incident they could be classed as excellent.

### **Pre Planning**

The event was licensed by the Northwest Leicestershire District Council who chaired regular meetings for some six months prior to the event. For me planning for the 1988 concert began in March of that year with informal meetings with the promoter. At this point I was advised that Iron Maiden would be the headline act. This particular act had a long history of successful record sales and the indications were that they would attract a large crowd but their stage act was unlikely to cause serious problems.

During the months leading up to the concert the local authority arranged a number of meetings that were attended by the emergency services, the promoter, St.John Ambulance, myself and Tony Ball, who at that time was my assistant and would act as the site controller on the show. At these meetings it became clear that an attendance of 85,000 people was likely. Accordingly, the promoter agreed to provide daylight vision screens each side of the stage to avoid crushing at the center of the crowd. A single front of stage primary barrier constructed of scaffold and ply board was installed for the event. This design was common at the time. The event used only one stage.

On completion of a site survey I proposed that a total of 520 steward staff be deployed on the day and all parties agreed this number. In July we were advised that the line up of major artistes for the concert was to be:

IRON MAIDEN  
KISS  
DAVID LE ROTH  
GUNS `N ROSES

I had worked previously with three of the four named acts and they were considered to be low risk in terms of crowd behaviour. However the fourth act, Guns `n Roses, were a new young American act that we knew little of. Our risk assessment indicated that their stage act was aggressive in style and that they had strong record sales that would possibly attract a large number of their own fans to the show. Our audience profile indicated that these fans would be younger and more volatile than we would normally expect. The term used to describe this new trend in heavy rock was *Thrash Metal*. This title was given to indicate the way that these fans thrashed about wildly to the music to a point where they appeared to be hitting each other. As a result of our risk analysis we increased the number of security staff in the front of stage pit to forty.

### **The Incident(s)**

The weather conditions prior to the concert were bad. It rained continuously from the Monday to the Thursday. Nevertheless the crew completed construction of the site on time. By Friday the weather had improved but conditions were still very wet and it was necessary to impose restrictions on vehicle movement around the site. Saturday, the day of the concert, the weather remained overcast with occasional showers.

The doors opened to the public at 0800hrs and ingress was completed without serious incident. Those fans that had arrived early made their way directly to the front of stage where security were not able to sit them down due to the wet ground conditions. However the crowd was cheerful and friendly and appeared to be happy to wait until the supporting acts would start to appear. During the period of their wait recorded music provided by a disc jockey from B.B.C radio,

### **Incident # 1**

At 1300hrs the control room received a message from the supervisor back stage advising that high winds were causing a serious problem to the daylight screen position at stage right. A rigging crew was alerted and I

arranged to meet with Tony Ball at that location to assess the situation. By the time that we reached the location however the complete screen assembly had collapsed and was only prevented from falling onto a section of the crowd by a steel fence that surrounded the backstage area.

The ShowSec supervisor had moved the crowd from the danger area and a rigging crew was attempting to retrieve the damaged screen rig. Efforts by the rigging crew were continuously frustrated at this time as a small section of the crowd insisted on attempting to stand underneath the suspended rig because the screen was still relaying live pictures of the act on stage. Their actions however put them in great danger. My actions at this point were to deploy more staff from the pit to secure the danger area, cut the power to the screen and secure the damaged screen so that it would not fall. It was not necessary to stop the show as the band on stage shortly finished their act. The team operation to retrieve the screen took approximately one hour but before it was finally completed Guns `n Roses went on stage. Almost immediately I received a report from the pit supervisor that there was an unusual high level of crowd activity taking place in front of the stage. At this point I detailed a security team to return to the pit. I remained at the screen location to ensure that it was safe and I detailed my assistant, Tony Ball, to go to the pit and send me a situation report.

## INCIDENT #2

At approximately 1415 hrs Tony called me on the radio and asked for me to come to the pit urgently. I immediately went to the area which was approximately one hundred yards from where I was. On arrival at the pit I saw that there was a great deal of activity within the crowd. Density was clearly at 0.3 immediately in front of the barrier, however this was not a serious problem. At approximately ten rows back however a density of approximately 0.5 allowed room for lateral surges, which were becoming a problem. I witnessed continued lateral crowd surges that ran across the complete length of the front of the stage. One particular surge started at stage right and stopped suddenly with a crowd collapse at the center of the audience approximately fifteen yards out from the front of stage. It was immediately obvious that this was a serious situation as approximately fifty people were involved in a crowd collapse. I sent a four-man team into the crowd to assist and assess the problem. At the same time I sent a message to the stage to ask the singer with Guns `n Roses to stop the show as we had a problem. The singer immediately stopped the show and he then used the stage PA to calm the crowd and advise them of the problem.

The advance team reached the spot and attempted to send back a radio message but unfortunately their communications failed due to the fact that victims of the incident grabbed at their radios and pulled the microphone lead out. At this point the team leader signaled to me to go to the spot. I instructed Tony Ball to remain in charge of the pit and I advised the control room, which was now managed by my business partner Gerry Slater, that I was going out into the crowd with another team. The show was still stopped at this point.

On reaching the spot I found that the advance team was dealing with approximately 10/15 people that had obviously been at the bottom of a crowd collapse. Ground conditions were bad and the people involved were covered in mud, I decided that they should all be extracted from the crowd for their own safety. We managed to lift most people up and were passing them toward the pit when unfortunately the band on stage assumed that the incident had been fully contained and they resumed playing. Suddenly, the whole crowd around us erupted. A large section of the crowd, and two of our own security team, collapsed in front of us. I witnessed approximately 30/35 bodies that suddenly piled up in front of me covered in mud. Our efforts to pull people off of the pile were hampered by the fact that people behind us climbed onto our backs in an attempt to what we now know to be crowd surfing. In some cases these people dived over our heads onto the pile of bodies.

At this point I lost communications, my radio and earpiece was ripped from me. I was not therefore able to advise Tony of the situation. He realised however that we were in serious trouble and he quickly dispatched another ten-man team to assist us. At the same time he stopped the show for the second time. Once assistance reached us I was able to establish a cordon around the scene and retrieve the bodies. Tony had managed to establish a line of security people that extended from the pit to us and this enabled us to pass people back to St. John Ambulance staff who were stationed at stage right. We managed to retrieve over thirty bodies, all were covered in mud, some were bleeding and others had obviously vomited. When we reached the bottom of the pile we discovered one person unconscious. This person was immediately passed to the pit where he was resuscitated by Steve Johnson, a ShowSec pit team member.

Unfortunately, as we removed what we took to be the last casualties we discovered another two bodies underneath them. These two were both laying face down in about four inches of mud and they were almost covered over. At first I did not realise that they were people. The pressure

load on these two victims was such that we had to dig under them with our bare hands to turn them over. We managed to extract both of them from the mud but they appeared to us to be lifeless. Suddenly the band started to play again and crowd conditions made it impossible for us to examine them in any detail. We immediately evacuated the victims to St. John where they were removed to hospital but were found to be dead on arrival at hospital.

Two senior police officers, having been advised by control of incident, arrived at the scene. The first indications were that the police wanted to stop the concert. After further discussions with the promoter however the show was allowed to continue as the police then decided that no purpose would be served by stopping the event. It was agreed in fact there might be a risk to public order by doing so as the majority of the audience were not aware of the seriousness of the incident.

### Incident # 3

At 1700hrs David Le Roth was on stage. Both Tony Ball and myself had remained in the pit area to monitor the crowd. There had been no further incidents since Guns `n Roses had finished their set but we had decided to remain in the area. At approximately 1715hrs I noticed a young woman stage right about ten yards out who appeared to faint. She disappeared from my view and she did not reappear. As I was the one that knew exactly where she was I advised the team that I was going in to find her. I went into the crowd and on arriving at the spot I found a young woman aged approximately fifteen, laying face down on the ground. The crowd parted and I was able to check her condition, she was still breathing, there was a pulse and there were no obvious signs of injury. As she would have been in danger where she was I lifted her up to take her back to the pit where medics could attend to her. At this point the pit team signaled to the crowd to part to allow me room to bring her in and I started to do so.

As I approached the pit I noticed one member of the pit team begin to climb the front of the stage. I can only assume that he was in a state of shock from the earlier incident because he climbed onto the stage and pleaded with David Le Roth to halt the show as there had been too many injuries and the show should be abandoned. The singer, not realising the fact that he was a member of the pit team, assumed he was about to be attacked and called his two personal bodyguards onto the stage. They promptly grabbed hold of our man and literally threw him off the stage into the pit. Some sections of the crowd that had realised what was happening took offence at this and a dynamic surge toward the stage occurred. It was possibly that this incident is the one that the press later

mistakenly reported as being the point where Le Roth refused to stop the show.

At this point I was still in the crowd with the young woman in my arms. A member of the crowd, presumably seeing my security shirt, then decided that all security staff should be attacked and he hit me in the face with a one-litre plastic beer bottle even though I was obviously carrying a casualty. Although the bottle was only half full he hit me with enough force to knock me sideways onto the ground. This happened near to the barrier and fortunately the pit team was able to grab the young woman and I suffered the indignity of being rescued by my own pit team. The team also managed to recover our shell-shocked security man, who had actually missed the pit and landed in the crowd. He was also taken to St. John medics where he later made a full recovery.

There were no further incidents, Iron Maiden completed their set and the show closed on time.

### **The inquest**

The inquest into the two deaths at Donington was held at Loughborough Town Hall during February 1989. After four days of listening to testimony from more than thirty people that were involved in the incident, the verdict reached was accidental death. The coroner praised the efforts by the pit team by saying "*their efforts undoubtedly saved lives*". It was recommended that the following measures should be taken to prevent a similar disaster:

- **Muddy conditions should be made less hazardous**
- **A person should be positioned on stage to have overall control of safety**
- **The giant stage should be moved so that it is not at the foot of a slope**

It was also recommended that a working party be set up to discuss safety at concerts.

### **The aftermath**

The sense of shock resulting from the Donington disaster was the catalyst for a review of the Greater London Council (G.L.C.) guidance for pop concerts, which was current at the time. A review body chaired by Richard Limb from the Northwest Leicestershire District Council invited members of the concert promoters association, private security companies and volunteer groups to work with local authority officers and the emergency services throughout 1989/90 to formulate a new guidance

document for concert events. The result was the *Guide to Health, Safety and Welfare at Pop Concerts and Similar Events*. Perhaps more commonly referred to by the colour of its cover as, 'The Purple Guide'. The front cover of which had a photograph taken of a crowd at a later Monster of Rock concert. I was pleased to have had input into the document in the form of the chapter on crowd management.

The Purple Guide was also significant in that it advocated that an Emergency Liaison Team (ELT) should be established for each major concert event. The ELT should be made up from members of the emergency services, the local authority and the security team. The role of the ELT is to immediately take command if a serious incident occurred, the police officer present would then take charge of co-ordinating command and control, and evacuation if necessary. The system is now standard practice in the UK.

### **Conclusions**

On a personal level I learnt a number of lessons from that day.

1. The importance of a good control room
2. Good communications are essential
3. Staff need firm leadership - casual staff might not cope with disaster
4. All senior staff must have a very clear understanding of their role
5. Someone must take action to stop the show quickly
6. Staff at the scene can be affected by what they witness, they to might need care and attention
7. Training is fundamental to safety management

**ABOVE ALL, CROWD MANAGEMENT IS A TEAM CONCEPT.**

**END**