

The Coast Guard's Role in the EXXON VALDEZ Incident

INTRODUCTION

On 24 March 1989, at 12:04 AM, the EXXON VALDEZ, an oil tanker captained by Joseph Hazelwood, hit Bligh Reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound. She had been traveling outside normal shipping lanes to avoid ice. What ensued was the largest oil spill in history and one of the world's largest ecological disasters – the loss of 10.8 million gallons of crude oil. The EXXON VALDEZ was carrying 53 million gallons of oil from Alyeska Consortium's pipeline at the time of the spill. Although Aleyska's spill response barge was out of commission, they immediately sent another tug to the site to stabilize the EXXON VALDEZ. However, due to the size of the spill, Aleyska quickly realized they did not have the resources to handle the situation. The Coast Guard stepped in, and Exxon assumed full responsibility for the spill and its cleanup the next day. Because the incident took place in navigational waters, the Coast Guard had authority for all activities related to the cleanup effort. The Coast Guard largely served as the Federal On-Scene Coordinator between Exxon Mobil and all of these organizations, acting within authority under the Clean Water Act.

FEDERAL ON SCENE COORDINATORS (FOSC)

The Coast Guard was largely responsible for overseeing response efforts and coordinating other federal resources. Its first action was to immediately close the port of Valdez to all traffic. A Coast Guard investigator, with a representative from the Alaska Department of Environmental Conservation, visited the scene to assess damage. The Coast Guard quickly expanded its presence at the scene and personnel from other federal agencies came in to assist. They, jointly with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the state of Alaska, and Exxon, conducted shoreline surveys as part of the cleanup effort. The Coast Guard monitored 10 federal agencies involved in the cleanup and also served as the administrator for the 311(k) fund, which reviewed and approved costs billed to Exxon.

Seven on scene coordinators – all from the Coast Guard – served during 1989:

- CDR Steven McCall (24 March 1989 – 7 April 1989) assumed the role of FOSC within hours of the EXXON VALDEZ grounding and immediately coordinated his staff to begin a timely response effort.
- RADM Edward Nelson (7 April 1989 – 15 April 1989) was the commander of District 17, arriving on scene on 25 March primarily to provide senior level support for CDR McCall. RADM Nelson assumed a high-profile role in dealings with Exxon and the media.
- The arrival of VADM Clyde Robbins (15 April 1989 – 30 September 1989) proved to be a significant change for the Coast Guard and its "traditional" spill response community. VADM Robbins instituted a new organizational structure and a set of relationships not influenced by past experience. He established an assistant on scene coordinator (AOSC) in each of the contiguous areas and focused primarily on shoreline cleanup. He also created several Interagency

Shoreline Cleanup Committees (ISCCs), which allowed for formal input from both government and non-government outside interests.

- RADM William Kime (15 June 1989 – 2 July 1989) served as acting FOSC for a brief period of time.
- RADM David Ciancaglini (30 September 1989 – 26 June 1992) had an organizational structure based on the Alaskan seasons. Shoreline surveys were conducted in the winter; forces were mobilized in the spring; cleanup and treatment of shorelines was done during the summer; and the following spring saw the demobilization of people and equipment. RADM Ciancaglini also oversaw the downsizing and consolidation of FOSC operations, including the move of headquarters from Valdez to Anchorage in late 1989.
- CDR Dennis Maguire (26 June 1992 – close) took care of tying up the loose ends to close a chapter in the largest oil spill in history.

PERSONNEL

When the EXXON VALDEZ ran aground, the Federal On Scene Commander was the Coast Guard's CDR Steve McCall, who supervised a staff of forty-three. He quickly realized that forty three was not enough.

Within hours, two National Strike Force (NSF) teams were established – one in the Pacific Area at Hamilton Air Force Base in California, and one in the Atlantic Area at Mobile, Alabama. The teams' primary mission was to provide expert support to FOSC through technical on-scene assistance, communication support, safety monitoring, operational monitoring of the responsible party's cleanup, and cost documentation. In fact, NSF teams were vital in the difficult task of lightering and stabilizing the EXXON VALDEZ in the hours following her grounding. The Pacific Strike Team and Exxon worked nonstop to offload the remaining forty two million gallons of oil from the EXXON VALDEZ to the EXXON BATON ROUGE. They also utilized its entire supply of high sea barrier boomss – 8,000 feet – to combat the spread of oil in the water.

Over the next six months, approximately 1,100 Coast Guard personnel served in 349 billets in support of the Coast Guard's monitoring role over Exxon. Valdez, Alaska grew almost overnight from a town of 3,500 people to a city more than three times its normal size.

However, there was a severe shortage of trained spill response personnel in the Coast Guard in 1989. The focus was then turned to the approximately 1,200 Coast Guard Reservists, many of whom brought relatively weak oil spill experience, but were assigned to logistic assignments. This allowed senior response personnel to focus primarily on the spill itself.

The spill also proved to be an unexpected, but extremely successful, training opportunity for cadets from the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut. Initially, the Academy was reluctant to revise its summer training plans to accommodate the spill. Nevertheless, cadets were brought to Alaska and assigned to various jobs in the field and ashore.

It was not uncommon for Coast Guard personnel to put in up to 16 hour days for 30 days, which was followed by a period of rest. This helped boost morale and productivity during cleanup periods.

AIR SUPPORT

The Coast Guard performed overflights to assess oil damage to the waters of Alaska and its surrounding habitats. By 4 April, 1,000 square miles extending 100 miles south of Valdez into the Gulf of Alaska were soaked with oil. Beaches of all of the islands from the northeastern side of Story, Naked, Eleanor, Ingot, and Knight Islands – all the way down to the Bay of Isles area on Knight Island were stained with oil. Several C-130s from Air Station Kodiak airlifted more than 11 ¼ tons of clean up equipment by 10 April 1989.

CGAS Cape Cod was the only unit that utilized a fully operational Aireye surveillance system. Flight crews from Cape Cod began surveillance flights over Prince William Sound on 26 March, and Aireye sensors collected data pertinent to the size and scope of the oil spill, including tracking of its movement within the currents – all of which proved valuable to cleanup crews. H-25 Falcon jets, also from CGAS Cape Cod, flew twice a day tracking oil with side-looking radar equipment.

Five Coast Guard helicopters also assisted thirty-nine skimmers working in Prince William Sound.

COMMUNICATIONS

One of the first things the FOSC did immediately after the grounding was to assign a Coast Guard air operations officer from CGAS Kodiak to monitor and regulate air traffic at the scene. This officer was also responsible for coordinating all Coast Guard aircraft responding to the initial call for help. CGAS Kodiak personnel who responded to the scene observed as many as twenty aircraft simultaneously circling within a three-mile radius of the EXXON VALDEZ. By 11:15 AM, the Federal Aviation Authority had established temporary flight restrictions in the EXXON VALDEZ area, and the Coast Guard was responsible for enforcing them.

On 26 March, the FOSC issued a notice to pilots stating that air traffic was restricted within an eight-mile radius of the EXXON VALDEZ, at altitudes ranging from the surface to 3,000 feet. Permission to fly within this radius was granted in special cases by either the FAA or the Coast Guard. The purpose of these restrictions was to allow for FAA control over the spill area, while letting the Coast Guard secure the waters surrounding the EXXON VALDEZ. A secondary purpose was to protect local wildlife by reducing noise disturbance. As a consequence, the FAA and the FOSC limited media flights to four per day.

Flight operations centers were established for Coast Guard air activities, usually on board cutters such as the RUSH. Missions were combined wherever possible to save time and money. Dignitaries boarded aircraft engaged in normal operations, and agency representatives often shared the same aircraft during “sheening” searches. This allowed observers from various agencies to compare notes – and air congestion/traffic

was significantly reduced. The fleet of aircraft deployed directly to the response area grew quickly. By mid-April, thirty six helicopters – twenty nine civilian and seven military – and several fixed-wing aircraft with floats were on the scene. They ferried people and equipment into mostly inaccessible areas. By 1991, aircraft support was no longer deemed necessary.

The Coast Guard's Communications Center at MSO Valdez served as the base for all radio messages relating to the EXXON VALDEZ. The Coast Guard's Flight Planing Center, located within Alaska's Flight Planning Center at Valdez Airport, coordinated all Coast Guard aircraft and their zone mission numbers.

CUTTERS

Coast Guard cutters were one of the first to respond to the spill, quickly establishing a safety zone around the stricken EXXON VALDEZ.

Over 1,400 vessels provided service during the 1989 cleanup season. Many were retired fishing vessels put back into service exclusively for oil clean up. The remoteness of Valdez and the lack of roads and infrastructure during the response created a heavy reliance on vessels to support cleanup activities. They were the dominant mode of transportation, even as aircraft carriers. Almost all of the service, housing, and food supply needs for day-to-day operations were done by vessels reporting to the scene. They became cleanup platforms, command centers, transports, storage facilities, and berthing for personnel. Even floating oil operations were almost entirely vessel-based.

As Exxon searched for skimmers, barges, and other support vessels, the Coast Guard sent a fleet of its own vessels to the scene. These vessels were released as Exxon contracted its own support vessels. Cutters from the 11th, 13th, and 17th Districts served as on-scene command platforms during the 1989 response. At least eleven cutters were present in April 1989, the majority of them overseeing booming and skimming operations. Early that month, Coast Guard vessel activity went through a rapid buildup phase. The Coast Guard maintained a heavy cutter presence for two weeks in mid-April, and then reduced it towards the end of the month. Four or five cutters were on hand in early May, and that number was reduced to two or three by the end of the month. Three cutters were assigned to cleanup operations by the beginning of June, but only one remained two weeks later – and it stayed that way for the remainder of the 1989 response.

In order to allow Coast Guard cutters to return to normal duty stations, a rotating system was created so that at least one or two cutters were at the scene for the duration of the cleanup period.

Coast Guard Cutters During 1989 Spill Response

<u>NAME</u>	<u>HOME PORT</u>	<u>RESPONSIBILITY</u>
RUSH	Alameda, CA	In place 5 April. Established air Traffic control (ATC) platform in Prince William Sound (PWS). Was

		project's "Plank Holder" with two months on scene.
MORGANTHAU	Alameda, CA	Mid to late April. Western Alaska (WAK) area. Coordinated overflights; supported oil recovery operations; worked with M/V VAYDA GHUBSKY; washed down Vessels as they moved through Cook Inlet.
MIDGETT	San Francisco, CA	Limited appearance, late April
JARVIS	Honolulu, HI	Limited appearance, late April
STORIS	Seattle, WA	Gulf of Alaska (GOA) operations during April; helped with boom transport.
RESOLUTE	Astoria, OR	Arrived late July. Only assigned CG vessel for most of later stages.
YACONA	Kodiak, AK	Arrived mid April. Oil recovery and fishing vessel monitoring. Departed for patrol duties early May.
VENTUROUS	Terminal Is., CA	Relieved RESOLUTE in September. Remained until demobilization.
ACTIVE	Port Angeles, CA	Present late May to late July.
PLANETREE	Ketchikan, AK	WAK boom movement and Placement, mid to late April.
IRIS	Astoria, AK	April work in WAK and PWS. Skimming operations and support of shoreline teams.
SWEETBRIER	Cordova, AK	Performed ATC duty in PWS. Involved in hatchery protection projects. Safety zone enforcements at EXXON VALDEZ.
IRONWOOD	Kodiak, AK	Arrived early April. Prominent in Sawmill Bay booming project.
SEDGE	Homer, AK	Early skimming duties. Deployed 9,300 ft of boom to protect fisheries In Eshamy Bay and Main Bay. Returned to Aids-to-Navigation (ATON) duties in mid April.

MUSTANG

Seward, AK

Assigned to spill operations in late May. On Joint Task Force (JTF) assets lists for about one week.

CONSEQUENCES

Congress passed the Oil Pollution Act (1990) following the EXXON VALDEZ incident. The OPA requires the Coast Guard to strengthen its regulations on oil tankers and their owners and operators. Today, tank hulls are specially designed to provide maximum protection against oil spills. Communications between vessel captains and vessel traffic centers have improved for safer sailing.

In addition, the Coast Guard implemented stronger regulations on vessel traffic:

- The addition of 3 people at the Coast Guard's Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) to provide additional watchstanders round the clock
- The close monitoring of fully laden tankers by satellite as they pass through Valdez Narrows, cruise by Bligh Island, and exit Prince William Sound at Hinchinbrook Entrance. In 1989, only Valdez Narrows and Valdez Arms were watched.
- The continuous plotting of progress of all tankers in the Valdez channel
- The improvement of foul weather surveillance capability with the installation of an all-weather radar system at the Potato Point site.
- The erection of a major lighted aid to navigation at Bligh Reef

The FOSC EXXON Archives

During VADM Clyde Robbins' tenure as FOSC, he assigned LtCDR Joel Whitehead to act as a record-keeper. In time, this was the inception of the EXXON VALDEZ Historian's role – though it did not set out to be one.

Starting in July 1989, two document control policy directives were issued, and LtCDR Whitehead formally became the Historian of the EXXON VALDEZ. These policies stated that all original documents and copies of all other documents be forwarded to the Historian. As the spill incident went on and cleanup efforts intensified, a greater reliance was placed on the Historian's staff as a central records repository and resource. The size of the Historian's staff, and its function, grew as the FOSC's responsibilities deepened.

In 1993, probably after the close of the final phase of the EXXON VALDEZ cleanup, it was decided to deliver all FOSC records to the National Archives-Alaska Region (NARA-AK) in Anchorage. There, they were held in a Federal Records Center for ten years, until 2003, when they were to be formally accessioned by NARA-AK. However, it is probably unlikely that *all* records were accessioned to date. Yet, they are, in fact, at NARA-AK.

Components of the EXXON VALDEZ Archives

- ***Daily File Archive*** - Contains a file for each day through September 1990, and “as needed” thereafter. Includes Polreps, agency operational reports, weather reports, and public affairs documents. Has served as a basic reference file for chronology writers and repository for daily operational materials. Includes some technical minutia.
- ***Message Archive*** - Contains all FOSC messages traffic, including discrete sections for MSO and vessel message traffic. Filed accordingly to date-time-group (DTG)
- ***Segment Files*** – Largest single archive. Contains operational reports and correspondence for each individual segment, including subdivisions, of shoreline evaluated by FOSC during the spill. Filed by individual segment number. Files also contain photographs taken during surveys of each segment.
- ***Correspondence Archive*** – Primarily incoming and outgoing FOSC correspondence. Includes other documents and materials. Has a supporting computer database. Organized chronologically.
- ***Audio-Visual Archive*** – Contains VCR tapes, audio tapes, slides, slide shows (some with text), photographs, computer disks, and computer back-up tapes. Minimal computer index. (Segment file photographs are not part of the A/V archive.)
- ***Project Accounting Archive (CWR)*** – Contains material related to 1991 cleanup costs. Federal settlement provisions required FOSC approval of all cleanup expenditures during that time. Fund requests were called Cleanup Work

Requests (CWR). The Project Accounting Archive contains each CWR with activity description and cost data. Filed according to CWR numbers.

- ***311K Archive*** - Contains documentation of FOSC costs for individual days during the response. Organized chronologically.
- ***Property Archives*** - Contains purchase order invoices and billing documentation for FOSC purchases. Filed according to sequential purchase order numbers during each fiscal year.
- ***MLCPAC Payables Archives*** - A discrete archive containing materials sent to the FOSC historian by the finance office at the PACIFIC Area Maintenance and Logistics Command (MLCPAC). Contains payment records and documentation for various fiscal aspects of the response. Materials were forwarded for archives as part of Coast Guard wide centralization of EXXON VALDEZ records.
- ***Personnel Archive*** - Contains copies of all orders (with amendments) for each USCG individual who served as a member of the FOSC staff. Also contains personal award letters and documentation.
- ***USCG Branch Legal Archive*** - Discrete file containing materials forwarded to the FOSC historian by the Coast Guard Branch Legal Officer in Anchorage. Generally relate to investigations of the incident itself. Were forwarded for archiving as part of the Coast Guard wide centralization of EXXON VALDEZ records. Archived IAW an index developed and maintained by the original custodian.
- ***USCG R & D Center Archive*** - Discrete archive containing materials forwarded to the FOSC historian from the USCG Research & Development (R & D) Center in Groton, Connecticut. Includes records of R & D Center work on methods and technologies used in the cleanup. Forwarded for archiving as part of the Coast Guard wide centralization of EXXON VALDEZ records.
- ***Fax Archive*** - Contains copies of each fax into and out of the FOSC headquarters. Main backup to individual archives and primary redundant system for retention of information. Materials are filed by date and as “incoming” or “outgoing”.

Coming Soon!!

Finding Aid of EXXON VALDEZ records
as maintained by the Coast Guard’s Historian’s Office at
Headquarters, Washington, D.C.

**not to be confused with FOSC Historian’s Office*