

Ten Coast Guard Mass Rescue Operational Realities

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Why should you read this? Before answering this question, let's take a moment to think about the past and present in regards to mass rescue events.

October 4, 2010 marked the 30th anniversary of the dramatic rescue of 520 passengers and crew from the burning MV PRINSENDAM in the hostile Gulf of Alaska. This “mass rescue operation” (MRO) was so impressive it is second on the list of top ten rescues in Coast Guard history as rated by the organization's historians. Only Hurricane Katrina operations in 2005 rated higher.



USCG PRINSENDAM response file photo

In 2007, the MV EXPLORER struck an iceberg and sank in Antarctica. In 2009, US Airways' Flight 159 “Miracle on the Hudson” incident resulted in the successful water landing and rescue of all on board. In 2010, the MV CLIPPER ADVENTURER grounded in the high Arctic. It took two days for the nearest Canadian Coast Guard rescue vessel to arrive on scene. What was unthinkable or unimaginable in 1980 is today's reality. The 520 people rescued from the PRINSENDAM would all easily fit in just two lifeboats from today's super cruise ships. Cruise ship routes now span the globe, and continue to expand into new markets. Adventure cruises now sail to the Arctic, Antarctic, and other remote corners of the seas. State and local ferry vessels, day tour operations, dinner cruises, offshore gaming vessels, commercial freighters, and fishing industry vessels have also grown in number, size, and geographic area of operation. *As a result, the next great event may be 15 times larger than the PRINSENDAM and occur in an even more isolated region.*

Thirty year old cruise ships are rare. Not so for Coast Guard cutters. Our capacity for mass rescue events has not kept pace with the potential. Mass rescue operational planning is more critical than ever, but often remains undervalued by SAR organizations that are “responders”, not planners. So you should continue to read if you are concerned about your organization's ability to meet the geometrically increased challenges for current and future MRO events.

This article will present a list of *10 US Coast Guard Mass Rescue Operational Realities* condensed from actual response and exercises that highlight the need for MRO specific planning, and introduce recommendations and job aids to improve local MRO preparedness.

Definition: A mass rescue operation is defined by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as “a civil search and rescue activity characterized by the need for immediate assistance to a large number of persons in distress, such that the capabilities normally available to search and rescue authorities are inadequate”. IMO’s “*Guidance for Mass Rescue Operations*” (COMSAR/Cir 31) dated 6 February 2003 provides additional valuable MRO background and response information.

MRO’s are low-probability, high-consequence events. Each MRO response will be unique depending on the type of craft or structure involved, number and condition of victims, location, weather, response assets available, capabilities of the crew and ownership, and several other contributing factors. But MROs also share common “operational realities” that must be considered in preparing for and responding to such incidents. Although only briefly described here, each item is worthy of a lengthy discussion, and certainly requires careful consideration in any MRO planning document and incident response.

Reality #1. *MRO incidents are not confined to a single organization, or to strictly search and rescue (SAR) functions.*

No single company or agency will possess all the tools or assets required for success. Coordination with multiple local, state, regional, or international response partners will be required, not only for the challenging on water SAR operation, but also for security, pollution/salvage, investigative, medical, shore side shelter and support, transportation, and other functional actions that will be concurrently undertaken. If you make a list of actual agencies involved it will include, at a minimum, the lead SAR agency, ship personnel, ship owners, “Good Samaritan” vessels, port community officials, agents, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), Customs Border Patrol (CBP), local fire/police, local and state public health officials, hospitals, media, transportation companies, various NGOs, and others. The list is extensive and each organization is dependent on the actions or information received from a partner to be successful. To make it all work, an MRO plan is required.

The Incident Command System (ICS) is the management process best suited to effectively organize all involved agencies to manage the various MRO operational functions. In fact, Homeland Security Presidential Directive #5 requires the use of ICS. Fitting the traditional SAR organization and procedures into the ICS umbrella takes a willingness to recognize and accept the need for change, and a commitment to invest in the planning, training and practice to make it work. With MROs being low occurrence events, it is often difficult to make this commitment, especially since we have been successful in the past. However, with the increasing capacity and remoteness of

operations for commercial vessels and jumbo airliners, this change will be needed if the “unthinkable” occurs.

To avoid duplication of effort or conflicts, Coast Guard MRO plans must dovetail with the emergency plans of each significant response partner. One tool to help with plan compatibility is a simple joint quick start guide listing the response expectations and key actions of major response partners. As an example, a Coast Guard “Multi-Agency Quick Start Guide for Passenger Vessel Emergencies” is found in Figure 1, or can be viewed more clearly on the Passenger Vessel Safety Homepage at <http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Handouts.asp>. Note this tri-fold brochure also lists the unified command’s response objects that are a vital component of the ICS system. Additional information concerning “Unified Command Recommended MRO Response Priorities, Objectives, and Tasks” can also be found on the web site.

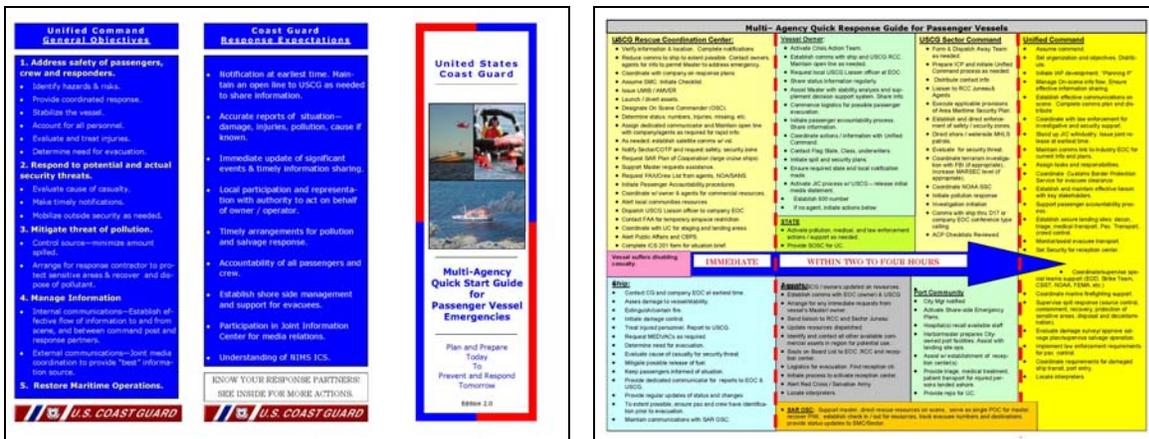


Figure 1: USCG Multi-agency Quick Start Guide

Another practical option to help achieve plan coordination is to work with your partners to develop a draft ICS 201 incident briefing document which provides much of the guidance of the quick start guide, but would also include your draft organization chart and identify key facility locations including command post, landing site(s), and reception center(s). No matter how you do it, get to know your partners, understand the the role they play, and the tools and information required for their success.

The next two operational realities are closely related and will be discussed jointly.

Reality #2. *Accountability of passengers and crew will be elusive and difficult. An accountability process must be developed, implemented and stressed from the start, and then checked and double-checked at each opportunity.*

Reality #3. *There will be delays, often lengthy, between rescuing and officially accounting for people. Pressure to “hurry” the process will often lower the accuracy.*

There is no standard procedure for managing the accountability process. The best available technology is often pencil and paper. If you’re lucky, there will be an official manifest that provides a starting point to check off the names of rescued survivors, but

even the accuracy of the manifest must be double checked. Manifests may not include non-revenue, short term technicians, marine pilots, or other individuals. To make matters worse, on many commuter ferry operations there is no manifest – only a head count taken as passengers walk on board. If this is the situation, it is important to include crew in the final head count number. Airline manifests are tightly controlled after an incident, and rescuers will often be provided with just the number of individuals on board.

Accountability will take time. Time to recover the evacuees to a stable platform, time to count the numbers onboard, time to double check the numbers, time to transport to shore, time to work the manifest (if available) and transition from head count to names, and time to run down the errors that should be expected. Accountability should precede at best speed. Rushing the process will only compound the errors, increase frustration, and in the end slow the process down.

How to execute the accountability process during a MRO incident is a universal problem. The Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) is refining an initiative titled "Casualty Tracking System for Multiple Casualty Incidents" (CASTRACK). This system is designed to track and account for all casualties involved in a major marine incident. While this project is focused on a CCG application pertaining to large passenger vessels, the intent is for the system to be adaptable and useful to other response agencies.

Accountability must be addressed in your MRO planning. As a minimum, your plan should determine which organization will ultimately manage the process, and how and where accountability information will be collected, shared, collated and checked. To help get you started, a "6-Step Process for Evacuee Accountability, Care, and Processing Guide" is available at <http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Handouts.asp> and can be amended for local conditions. Importantly, make sure to include responder accountability in your process. This is especially true for rescue swimmers that may be deployed on scene for extended periods of time.

As a practical matter, buses, (tour, city, school, etc) are excellent tools for accountability. Survivors can be loaded on to buses, provide basic food and drink, be warmed and provided with basic first aid. Buses also contain survivors until they can be "accounted for" – no one gets off the bus until they have signed in and required information is recorded and verified. Provide guides for each bus. Guides can be ship hotel staff, or local volunteers who are familiar handling and directing large groups of people and understand the accountability process. Due to the value of buses, it is strongly recommended that bus companies be involved in the development of local MRO plans, and be included in training and exercises.

Reality #4. *The demand for information from internal and exterior requestors will be overwhelming unless a process is implemented early to manage the content and flow of communications.*

How you communicate, what you communicate, when you communicate, and who you communicate and share information with will be critical, perhaps the single most

important factor. This is a huge topic, one that requires deliberate planning with your response partners. Planning involves hardware compatibility, frequency use, content and format agreement, release authority, information security, social media concerns, public information policy and other factors that impact communications. Maintaining a common operations picture between response partners requires a well planned and practiced system. Any level of success will depend on your communications capabilities.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS refers to communications internal to the response organization. Keep in mind, this organization includes not just Coast Guard units, but also all the other response agencies involved. Early in a response, the Coast Guard is often the “gatekeeper” of information. OSCs must immediately report “critical information” to the SMC. The SMC must not “hoard” this information, but actively push it out to response partners that may be remotely located from the command center. Information that must be pushed includes numbers of victims, condition of victims, arrival times to ports, rescue vessel names and docking requirements, safety concerns, and anything else that is required for mission completion by the various agencies. As the incident matures, other response partners will also begin to push the information they collect. Recommended landing sites, survivor tracking and accountability, status reports, and security concerns are examples of information the Coast Guard needs but will not necessarily collect. Dispatching liaison officers to help collect and share critical information should also be considered a best practice.

Additionally, for maritime incidents the USCG will become the initial “de facto center” for victim and survivor accountability information. A coordinated plan for how to manage this one aspect of information, as well as the process for release of survivor and victim information, must be implemented early in the event. Pre-planning will make this an easier challenge.

EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS refers to communications with contacts outside the response organization. For MRO events, this will largely be family and friends of victims and news media. Both will be demanding. Neither can be ignored.

Once again, pre-planning is critical if the response organization will be able to provide the first and remain the best source of information. Your response plans must outline a process for establishment of a call center for relatives and friends, as well as a media strategy that includes a joint media center and a methodology for unified command press releases and media briefs. Each response partner may already have a media specialist. Joint planning and training opportunities for these specialists is highly recommended.

To stress the importance of external communications and their value to the response, following are two communications related after action comments from real events.

Alaska Air Flight 261 Crash Off California in 2000. *The More PIOs The Better.* “When the Joint Information Center (JIC) was established in Port Hueneme about three hours post incident, there were 2 USCG Public Information Officers (PIOs) on scene. An hour later, there were 4 USCG PIOs, local LE PIOs, USN staff and others on scene. Even then, the JIC staff was barely able to handle the crush of

incoming phone calls and to deal with the media staged at the base theater. Get a fair number of PIOs on scene ASAP and have others ready to deploy.”

EGYPT Air Flight 990 Crash Off MA 1999. *Requests for Information Overwhelms Operations.* “...the demand for public affairs and our commitment to informing both internal and external “customers” required a significant investment of Unified Command’s time and patience. In both tragedies (including JFK Jr. aircraft crash), the JIC performed its core mission well, however, ...it was slow to form, hesitant to initiate and distribute media fact sheets to regional units, and ceased operations at the end of the workday. The JIC’s “shutdown” resulted in other ICS cells, particularly the operations cell and surrounding units, fielding a significant number of media/public calls. It makes sense the JIC stands up with the rest of the Unified Command and remains intact throughout the operations until demobilization. Additionally, a JIC exit strategy needs to be planned for to lead the press to a public affairs office for follow up questions instead of the local CG commands. The importance of the JIC cannot be overemphasized. The volume of briefings, inquiries, calls, and faxes can overwhelm the main response cells of a Unified Command. Regular PIO/JIC training for units is important.”

Invest the time and effort in your communications planning. It will pay huge dividends.

Reality #5. *Dedicated SAR resources will be limited and “Good Samaritan” vessels will be critical for success in the majority of incidents.*

In most regions, Government SAR assets are spread too thin to ensure they are always the first to arrive on scene. For the majority of locations, private “Good Samaritan” vessels will be the first rescue resource to arrive. To be of maximum value, the crews must understand the search and rescue organization, critical communication requirements, the duties and responsibilities of the first vessel on scene, and be trained to evaluate and mitigate associated risks in order to conduct a safe rescue operation. Unfortunately, most “Good Sams” will have no formal training in SAR operations and will need a higher level of support and direction from the On Scene Coordinator (OSC) or SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC).

SAR organizations are encouraged to provide basic SAR training to educate potential Good Samaritan vessels in their region. Training should review the functions of an OSC, communications requirements, safety and other concerns. Encourage the development of a company basic “rescue assistance” plan or policies, and investigate opportunities to include local Good Samaritans in training events. The “*Guidance for Good Samaritan Vessels Assisting in Maritime Search and Rescue*” handout provides basic information and is available at <http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Handouts.asp>.

Expect Good Samaritan vessels to have difficulties recovering survivors onto the deck. They are not designed for victim recovery. For many deep draft commercial freight ships or tank ships this is especially troublesome. Throw in age, fatigue or injury factors of the survivors and the problem increases. Research and development is being done to help solve this problem, but until more options are available, this is a case by case situation. Begin to investigate solutions for this issue as soon as the characteristics and recovery limitations of the rescue vessels are known. During the PRINSENDAM response, helicopters were used to lift survivors from lifeboats to the deck of a Good Samaritan tank ship.

Reality #6. *Coast Guard SAR Mission Coordinators (SMC) and On Scene Coordinators (OSC) receive minimal training in the extreme demands of managing MRO activities.*

Professional SMCs and OSCs are very good at their jobs. For the majority of responses they are comfortable taking control of the situation, issuing orders, directing people and assets. But are they prepared for the immense confusion, dozens of rescue boats, extreme communication demands, and thousands of survivors, many injured, that may result from a mass evacuation operation? Are they prepared to initiate passenger accountability and track all on scene rescue assets? In responding to the “unimaginable”, it would be easy to become “lost”, especially if no prior experience or training has provided a foundation for action.

Take the opportunity to provide MRO specific guidance, training and exercises to both SMCs and OSCs. Provide guidance for accountability, asset tracking, critical information reporting, and communications best practices. Ensure they understand how the SAR organization will fit into the Unified Command that will be employed. Discuss coordination with shore side agencies and the importance of sharing information quickly. Review MRO safety concerns. One safety item of particular concern is the awareness of the maximum number of recovered survivors that can be loaded onto rescue boats and still maintain stability in the on scene conditions.

Both the SMC and OSC will need extra help. The demands of the response will quickly overwhelm their normal capacities. A trained and practiced management team using ICS principals will be required to maintain a common operational picture with all response partners, track response resources, coordinate accountability, manage external affairs, ensure proper documentation, and execute actions beyond the normal scope of SMC and OSC duties. For this support to work and not add to the frustration and confusion of the event, the staff must regularly train and practice as a team. This training investment cannot be ignored.

Reality #7. *The physical or emotional condition of survivors may prevent them from helping themselves.*

Rescue swimmers will be needed on scene, often for extended periods of time. Cold water, poor health, injuries, or emotional stress may prevent many victims from swimming to and climbing into an air deployed life raft, or climbing out of a life raft to a rescue vessel. Even the smallest actions may be too large an effort for survivors to overcome without assistance. An extended time on scene in a life boat with minimal food, water and rest will exacerbate the need for assistance.

Support needs for survivors will not end once they are on board a rescue vessel or reach shore. At landing sites, many of the survivors will be too tired to walk up a ramp or even climb aboard a bus. Some may be covered in vomit or have soiled pants. Survivors may be cold, wet and contaminated with spilled fuel necessitating decontamination and emergency clothing. The response organization must anticipate the demands and plan for survivor support along the entire continuum of care.

Realities 8 and 9 are also closely tied together and will be jointly discussed.

Reality #8. *Local communities are vital partners in providing shore side MRO response actions, but most have minimal guidance or training on the functions expected of them.*

Reality #9. *Continuum of care for rescued victims will be required. Once delivered to shore, the functions of accountability, emergency medical care, human health, shelter, food, and other survivor support needs must be continued and coordinated.*

Some of the most complicated MRO work starts once the survivors hit the beach, especially if the beach is a remote or small village with limited infrastructure. Establishing shore landing site and sheltering facilities, arranging transportation, providing medical care, food, clothing and other support all involve the local community. In fact, this portion of the response may last much longer than the on-scene rescue. Unfortunately, many Coast Guard MRO plans stop at the beach. Apparently, once survivors are handed off, it's no longer a CG problem. That may work for a few dozen survivors, but with several hundred or thousands of survivors, it's unacceptable. Imagine the confusion and chaos that will result if we fail to coordinate our actions and support the port communities. It is critical to know your partners and their responsibilities and capabilities, as well as, understand their expectations. Imagine going to a BBQ or picnic with neighbors and no one bringing the hot dogs because everyone expected someone else to provide them. No big deal for a picnic, but potentially fatal in an MRO response.

With real life MRO experience limited, response planning and coordination is required for success. The efficient operation of landing sites, emergency medical services, transportation and evacuee care will depend on our joint pre-incident planning. Several agencies may find themselves working together for the first time and the potential for confusion and competing priorities can result. Community MRO plans, training and job aids are required, and the CG should encourage and assist port partners in this undertaking. These plans should not re-invent, but rather incorporate existing local emergency response procedures and facilities, and address MRO specific differences. This port level planning is especially important for large ports where MRO coordination involves multiple community jurisdictions, several potential landing sites, mass media outlets, and the potential for survivors to easily find their own way home before final accountability. For your review, a sample small community MRO plan for Kodiak, Alaska is at <http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Handouts.asp>.

Once the plan is finalized, basic familiarity training and local exercising of the plan will be required. Any plan is only as good as the training that accompanies the document. If no one knows the plan exists, then it will not be used. If players are not given the chance to practice the MRO policies, procedures or best practices developed, they will not use them and default to what they know or think is best.

Two job aids are available to assist local communities and MRO responders with managing landing sites and reception centers. Both the "*Job Aid for Landing Site*

Operations” and the “Job Aid for Reception Center Operations” can also be found at the link above.

Reality #10. *Past success does not guarantee future results, especially given the high turnover of Coast Guard personnel. Continuous training and plan improvement is required.*

Transfers, promotions, and retirements result in a high turnover of Coast Guard personnel, often replacing an experienced individual with someone of less knowledge of the area or contents of response plans. For continued success, a continual training and exercising program is paramount.

This training and practicing cannot be conducted in a vacuum. Any plans, procedures, or policies created in a vacuum will implode. To be a successful multi-agency response organization, partners need to develop, train and practice jointly and regularly, especially if one partner has a high turnover rate like the USCG.

What’s next? Hopefully, the main “take away” from this discussion is the need to refocus your energy and efforts to improve your mass rescue plans. Go back and critically evaluate your plans – are they useful, do they include all your response partners, is a command organization identified, does everyone have clear expectations and directions, can you efficiently exchange information, do you know what information to exchange, is the command post identified, do you have an accountability process and does everyone know it, how will survivors be managed ashore and who is responsible? Look at the entire process. Start with the ship and carry forward to the care and feeding of survivors shore side. Make sure to engage your response partners. Do not plan in a vacuum. If you do, plan to be surprised. To help, additional information is located in the “Mass Rescue Operations Planning Guidance” document available at <http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Handouts.asp>.

Once the plan is complete, conduct joint training to educate everyone on the plan and then exercise regularly. After each exercise or actual event, improve the plan. Carry through on the necessary improvements. Each successive exercise should test new solutions and not simply ID the same old problems.

Final Word. There is no guarantee of success for any MRO event. However, all SAR professionals have an obligation to invest in “planning” for success. Any plan should consider the 10 realities discussed here, and address any others identified for your region.