

# SEARCH AND RESCUE



## West Coast SAR... Part Three: Black swans — marine mass rescue operations

By K. Joseph Spears

Search and rescue has been very much in the news recently with the announced closure of the Kitsilano Canadian Coast Guard Base but we will leave that issue for another time. In order to have this discussion on a black swan event (i.e., an unexpected, catastrophic event) we need to examine SAR from a broad ocean management perspective to see how all the components fit together. In this article, Part Three and final installment in our look at West Coast SAR, we examine Canada's ability to respond to a mass rescue operation from the mariner's perspective. It has been said that mass rescue operational planning is more critical than ever but often remains undervalued by SAR organizations who are "responders", not planners." This article argues for more inclusive planning.

The United States Coast Guard has developed a comprehensive approach to Mass Rescue Operations (MROs) to "generate consistency, raise awareness, identify stakeholders and provide continuity between existing emergency plans". The MRO Planning Guidance states: "The success of a MRO is contingent upon the seamless efforts of search and rescue agencies, the company, mutual assistance assets, and Good Samaritans. Success is also contingent upon effective plans and the

exercising of those plans". There has been a recent series of MRO exercises in the various Coast Guard Districts around the United States (<http://www.uscg.mil/pvs/Exercises.asp>) and a full scale exercise called "Black Swan" will be hosted in April of 2013 involving a cruise ship.

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As a coastal nation, Canada has an obligation to respond to SAR incidents in its waters under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Canada participates in a number of international organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and has agreed to adopt search and rescue (SAR) standards and practices in accordance with the Convention on International Civil Aviation, the International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS). In addition it has reciprocal agreements with the U.S. for assistance.

Until the worst happens, we will never know, as a nation, if we are ready to handle a major incident like the *Costa Concordia* — a low-probability, high-consequence event. Black swan events are often characterized by initial surprise followed by rationalization and explanation after the fact. On the other hand, a "white swan" event is a predictable occurrence based on past history. Given the historical records of past marine casualties, major maritime disasters can and do occur and might be amply called white swan events. Canada needs to be prepared, as part of its ocean management strategy, to deal with both black and white swan SAR incidents.

As stated in Canadian National SAR Manual Annex 7B Major Maritime Disaster SAR Contingency Plan: "There is no fundamental distinction between a major maritime disaster and other maritime distress incidents except in scale, and in the scope of the response required." That is why planning and training exercises by all parties involved in SAR on an ongoing funded and sustained basis is so critically important. Gaps identified in both real and tabletop exercises can be very helpful to SAR Commanders and planners to develop and enhance a robust SAR capability buttressing Canada's National Search Rescue Plan and the Major Maritime

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Disaster Plan for the Victoria Search and Rescue Region.

In 1986, the Government of Canada established a National Search and Rescue Program (NSP) — a co-operative effort by federal, provincial and municipal governments along with other search and rescue (SAR) organizations. The objective of the NSP is to save lives by enhancing SAR prevention and provide effective and affordable services in Canada's areas of SAR responsibility. As mentioned, the Department of National Defence is the lead department, assisted by dedicated SAR vessels of the Canadian Coast Guard and all government vessels with a secondary SAR response capability. The Victoria JRCC has the authority to charter vessels if required. A good example of this is the recent distress call from two crew members in a fishing vessel off Port Hardy who were allegedly physically threatened by the vessel's master. The response came from a RCMP patrol vessel. Most Canadians don't realize that, prior to the inception of the Canadian Coast Guard in 1963, the RCMP Marine Division provided much of the search and rescue capability on Canada's coasts. This is the subject of a very interesting book recently published by the late Constable Kenneth John Haycock — *The History of the RCMP Marine Services*.

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It is time for Canada to look at its preparedness to respond to its own black swan event. In Canada, the National SAR manual sets out all of the obligations of the parties with respect to marine SAR and is a worthwhile read for any mariner interested in the subject. A copy of the document can be found at <http://loki.cgc.gc.ca/cansarp/sarmanuals/nsm.pdf>. Canada's Major Maritime Disaster response is set out in the National SAR Manual in Chapter 7 and requires each SAR region to have a SAR Contingency Plan as noted in Annex 7B:

*For the purposes of this plan, the term "major maritime disaster" means a*

*maritime distress incident or other distress incident occurring on the waters of the search and rescue region for which the rescue co-ordination centre is responsible, and of such scale that the federal search and rescue (SAR) system alone can no longer co-ordinate, control and respond to all aspects of the search for and recovery of survivors, and/or the preservation of life. Normally in a major maritime disaster the number of persons in distress is unusually large and vital support from other agencies not normally party to, or used by, the SAR system is required.*

With respect to non-governmental resources, the Annex further states:

**Civilian Resources** — *There are in Canada extensive resources available through civilian authorities or private companies and individuals for possible use in responding to a major maritime disaster. SRR commanders shall ensure that these are identified to the extent possible, and that adequate liaison is maintained to facilitate their effective participation in an emergency. Lists of key (single point of contact) personnel shall be available in the plan.*

No one level of government or group has the funding or resources available to provide a complete comprehensive SAR response on a consistent basis to cover Canada's 28,000-kilometre West Coast. It is almost impossible to provide all the necessary SAR resources

in the Victoria SRR to respond to all possible scenarios. A robust marine SAR response requires a comprehensive approach involving all levels of government and the private sector using the latest technology and local knowledge. Co-ordination by the JRCC is key.

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Being a "world-class" maritime nation requires fostering a "truth to power" discussion on our ability to respond to SAR incidents. The term "truth to power" was often used by the former commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, Admiral Thad Allen, to allow people to challenge the status quo and raise issues and concerns in a free and open forum with decision makers. Anyone in the SAR community should not be afraid to ask the hard questions such as — "are we ready for a major maritime disaster?" This includes officials of local government and First Nations up and down our coast who would be involved in a major incident. It also requires a full and frank discussion and dialogue of the risks and responses by all interested parties. It also includes



*Is Canada ready to respond to an incident like the Costa Concordia if it happened here on the West Coast?*

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regular SAR exercises. Annex 7 of the National SAR Manual states at 4 (e): “Contingency plans, particularly those involving outside agencies, must be regularly subjected to formal exercises.”

In Part One of this series on SAR, we examined the Coast Guard auxiliary, now called the Royal Canadian Marine Search and Rescue (RCM-SAR) and the important role they play, especially in remote areas where they would typically be the closest SAR first responders. We also examined the importance of local mariners and their ability to respond when called to assist — this was well highlighted in *The Boatlift*, a video documenting the evacuation of 500,000 people by boat during the September 11 Twin Towers attack. That video is available for viewing at [www.bcshippingnews.com](http://www.bcshippingnews.com).

In Part Two of our series, we looked at the importance of the Victoria Joint Rescue Co-ordination Centre (JRCC) and their capabilities as the lead in communication and co-ordination of

all SAR resources. In a major marine incident (or black swan event), this co-ordination, coupled with the experience and training of the JRCC, will allow for the optimization and allocation of scarce SAR resources. Response will need to be a seamless team effort — as happens every day with SAR responses in the Victoria SRR. The difference here is in the potential magnitude of the crisis, higher casualties and longer duration of the rescue operation. This would be especially so on remote sections of our coast.

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As one mariner stated in *The Boatlift*, we should never say “we should have”. We need to continually build on and strengthen SAR response on the West Coast. It is in every mariner’s interest. The professionalism of paid and unpaid

SAR responders in the Victoria SRR needs to be recognized and a mechanism developed to integrate their (and other interested parties) input on an ongoing basis. This will lead to great resilience in the SAR system. The same applies to the depth of a potential private sector marine response. We can learn from the United States Coast Guard’s comprehensive approach to Mass Rescue Operations and adapt this approach to Canada. For Canada to continue to be ocean strong with a world-class SAR response, we need to plan and exercise to be ready for black and white swan events, “so others may live”. Mariners helping mariners on our coast has always been world-class.

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