The International Maritime Rescue Federation Mass Rescue Operations Project:

The On Scene Coordinator

Overview

The IMRF’s mass rescue operations (MRO) guidance is provided in 30 separate chapters at www.international-maritime-rescue.org. For downloadable documents referenced in this chapter please use the drop-down menus or return to the MRO project main page under ‘Resources’. For a general introduction please see chapter 1, ‘Complex incident planning – the challenge: acknowledging the problem, and mass rescue incident types’.

This chapter discusses:

- the general role of the On Scene Coordinator
- the OSC’s role in a mass rescue operation
  - communications with the casualty, the SMC, and SAR facilities on scene
  - coordination of SAR facilities on scene
  - receiving, modifying and implementing search, rescue and support action plans
  - monitoring safety
  - reporting and record-keeping
- appointing an OSC
- pre-selecting an OSC
- remote area operations

1 The general role of the On Scene Coordinator

1.1 The IAMSAR Manual defines the OSC as “a person designated to coordinate search and rescue operations within a specified area”. Volume II, the Mission Coordination volume, summarises the OSC’s tasks in general at Chapter 1.2.4:

“When two or more SAR units are working together on the same mission, there is sometimes an advantage if one person is assigned to coordinate the activities of all participating units. The SMC [SAR Mission Coordinator] designates this on-scene coordinator (OSC), who may be the person in charge of a search and rescue unit (SRU), ship or aircraft participating in a search, or someone at another nearby facility in a position to handle OSC duties. The person in charge of the first SAR facility to arrive at the scene will normally assume the function of OSC until the SMC directs that
the person be relieved. The OSC may have to assume SMC duties and actually plan the search and/or rescue if the OSC becomes aware of a distress situation directly and communications cannot be established with an RCC. The OSC should be the most capable person available, taking into consideration SAR training, communications capabilities, and the length of time that the unit the OSC is aboard can stay in the search area. Frequent changes in the OSC should be avoided. Duties which the SMC may assign to the OSC, depending on needs and qualification, include any of the following:

- assume operational coordination of all SAR facilities on scene;
- receive the search and/or rescue action plan from the SMC;
- modify the action plan based on prevailing environmental conditions and keep the SMC advised of any changes to the plan (discuss proposed modifications with the SMC when practicable);
- provide relevant information to the other SAR facilities;
- implement the action plan;
- monitor the performance of other units participating in the operation; and
- make consolidated reports (SITREPs)\(^1\) to the SMC.”

1.2 IAMSAR Volume II should be referred to by MRO planners, including its guidance on the use of an OSC. However, the principal source of international guidance on the OSC role – because it is carried by most ships and some aircraft on international routes and therefore will be available to most ships’ masters and aircraft commanders who are asked to take on the role – is Volume III, *Mobile Facilities*. The list of OSC duties contained in Volume III, Section 9, is as follows:

- Obtain a search and/or rescue action plan from the SMC via the RCC as soon as possible.
- Provide information to and coordinate operations of all SAR facilities on-scene. An ACO may be designated to coordinate aircraft operations.\(^2\)
- Modify the plan as the situation on-scene dictates, keeping the SMC advised (discuss proposed modifications with the SMC when practicable).
- Coordinate on-scene communications.
- Monitor the performance of other participating facilities and ensure operations are conducted safely.
- Make periodic situation reports (SITREPs) to the SMC. The standard SITREP format may be found in Appendix D [of IAMSAR Volume III]. SITREPs should include but not be limited to:
  - weather and sea conditions
  - the results of search and/or rescue action to date
  - any modifications made or suggested to the action plan
  - any future plans or recommendations.
- Maintain a detailed record of the operation:
  - on-scene arrival and departure times of SAR facilities, other vessels and aircraft engaged in the operation
  - areas searched
  - track spacing used

\(^1\) The SITREP format is included in IAMSAR Manual Volume III. See also chapter 25.

\(^2\) See chapter 21.
• sightings and leads reported
• actions taken
• results obtained.
  o Advise the SMC to release facilities no longer required.
  o Report the number and names of survivors to the SMC.
  o Provide the SMC with the names and designations of facilities with survivors on board.
  o Report which survivors are in each facility.
  o Request additional SMC assistance when necessary (for example, medical evacuation of seriously
    injured survivors).

1.3 IAMSAR makes reference to the possibility that an OSC may have to self-appoint, and run the SAR
operation without assistance if communications cannot be established with an RCC. We will return to this
point at the end of this chapter. In the meantime we will consider the situation in which an RCC and SMC
capable of handling an MRO are in place, and in communication with the OSC.

1.4 In chapter 19 we describe the OSC as the SMC’s eyes, ears and voice on-scene. There may be no need to
appoint an OSC in ‘ordinary’ SAR operations if communications between the RCC and those on scene are
good and there are only a few SAR facilities involved. But MROs are extraordinary. It is hard to imagine
an MRO scenario in which the careful use of an OSC would not be of significant benefit. It is therefore
recommended that an OSC should be appointed in a mass rescue operation – and at a very early stage,
to allow as much time as possible for preparation.

2 The On Scene Coordinator’s role in a mass rescue operation

2.1 The IAMSAR guidance on on-scene coordination is comprehensive, and may seem daunting to anyone
asked to become the OSC, in any circumstances. But what is an OSC’s role in a mass rescue operation?
We will consider some of the implications of the role as it is described in IAMSAR, in the MRO context:
  o assuming operational coordination of SAR facilities on scene
  o receiving, modifying and implementing search and rescue action plans
  o monitoring safety
  o reporting to the SMC, and
  o keeping records.

Then, having looked at what the role entails, we will discuss who is best placed to take it on.

2.2 As the OSC’s is intended to be mostly a communications role – and as good communications are essential
to its success – we will begin with a consideration of the OSC as a key link in the communications network.

3 Communications with the casualty, the SMC, and SAR facilities on scene

3.1 In the context of mass rescue operations IAMSAR Volume II says: 3

3 Chapter 6.15.19.
“In an MRO an OSC should normally be designated by the SMC. Where there is a pilot or master still in command of a craft in distress, the OSC acts in support of this person, bearing in mind that the OSC’s primary responsibility is to coordinate SAR facilities and rescue efforts under the SMC’s general direction.”

3.2 This text emphasises the importance of the concept of helping the commander of the ship, aircraft or other unit in distress, where there is such a person and they are able to communicate. The entire MRO is essentially mounted in that commander’s support. The maritime SAR is coordinated by the SMC, based at a Rescue Coordination Centre. But the RCC will almost always be remote from the scene, and the commander of the unit in distress may well find it easier to talk to a colleague on scene. This link, if it is established, is one of the On Scene Coordinator’s most important functions in a mass rescue operation, together with his/her appraisal of the situation, both initially and as it develops, which must be passed to the SMC without delay.

3.3 Chapter 25 discusses communications questions – including the need to ensure that the commander of the unit in distress is not over-burdened. In an ideal situation s/he would only have to talk to one external responder, and not be distracted from on-board actions in response to the emergency.

3.4 This single link to external assistance is achievable. It may be via the commander’s own company, or direct with the RCC; or it can be via the OSC. In practice, unless a very good relationship has been established between the company and the SAR services (probably beforehand), there may be some duplication, at least in the early stages. However, duplication of communications between the unit in distress and the RCC and OSC should be avoided whenever possible. The SMC and OSC should agree who will communicate with the casualty and stick to that agreement, each keeping the other informed.

3.5 Whoever is talking to the casualty, the communication link between the SMC and the OSC is vital. Whatever responsibilities the OSC is taking on (see below), they are delegated from the SMC, and it is essential that both understand what those responsibilities are and that they should be able to discuss them without restraint. This is a team effort.

3.6 Although the workload may be limited in various ways (see below), part of the OSC’s job is to handle communications with at least some of the other responders on scene, providing planning and other information to them, and receiving reports back. The OSC’s role as described in IAMSAR is not only about communications – but acting as a node in the communications network greatly assists with the subdivision of MRO communications that is fundamental to efficient information flow. See chapter 25.

4 Coordination of SAR facilities on scene

4.1 IAMSAR calls for the OSC to “assume operational coordination of all SAR facilities on scene”. This can be a very large task indeed in a mass rescue operation, involving many responding units of all types – SAR vessels large and small, merchant ships, fishing vessels and other small craft, naval and other Government craft, helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, civilian and military. Few units will have the communications capabilities – in terms of personnel as well as equipment – to handle traffic with all these units. Nor will most have the necessary expertise aboard to support an OSC in dealing with matters such as flight safety for the aircraft involved.⁴

⁴ The OSC in the Estonia disaster, for example – the master of a ferry – was unable to communicate with most of the helicopters which eventually carried out the majority of the rescues.
4.2 The key point here is that the IAMSAR Manual also says that the duties it lists are those “which the SMC may assign to the OSC, depending on needs and qualification” (our emphasis). An OSC is needed in a mass rescue operation, but to overload the OSC would be counter-productive. Clearly the SMC must ensure that no unnecessary tasks are delegated to the OSC – tasks which can be better done by the RCC, such as search, rescue and/or support action planning, or communicating with other shoreside authorities. And it is also the SMC’s responsibility to ensure that the OSC has the capacity to manage those tasks that must be carried out on-scene. This is a matter for the earliest possible discussion with the person selected as OSC. If there are areas of work which are outside his or her expertise and/or too much to manage, these should be delegated elsewhere.

4.3 The best way to do this is to appoint ‘sub-coordinators’, as discussed in chapters 17 & 19. The most obvious example is the Aircraft Coordinator mentioned in IAMSAR and discussed in chapter 21. If the person appointed OSC is master of a merchant ship, for example, s/he may have little or no knowledge of aircraft operations – but the ACO will have those skills and can act in support, dealing with flight safety and other aircraft issues and reporting to the SMC and OSC as appropriate.

4.4 Similarly, other on-scene tasks can be delegated to sub-coordinators not specified in IAMSAR. In chapter 17 we gave the examples of a search coordinator, an on-board coordinator (who boards the casualty to act as a link to the OSC and/or SMC when support resources are being deployed aboard, or when the casualty is not under command or its commander needs assistance), and a small-craft marshal (in cases in which many small craft such as leisure craft are in the area of the accident). The aim is to give sections of the on-scene coordination work to subordinate coordinators to manage, making the overall task a little easier by spreading the load. If, for example, the OSC is looking after extensive rescue operations and the SMC wants to run a search operation at the same time – as a precaution or because people are known to be missing – the commander of a suitable unit can be tasked to coordinate the search, leaving the OSC free to focus on the rescue. The sub-coordinator, like the ACO, may report to the OSC or the SMC as appropriate and as is most efficient. See chapter 25.

4.5 Implicit in this recommendation is the availability of such sub-coordinators. We discuss the specific task of aircraft coordination in chapter 21. Depending on the circumstances, the task of on-board coordinator may also require a specialist, although this may be a role taken on by a ship’s officer if it is sufficiently safe to transfer one. Separate search coordination and the organising of small craft are only required if there are several units on scene. These are more straightforward tasks in any event so can be more readily delegated.

4.6 It may be possible to deploy specialists from ashore – including the deployment of additional communicators and/or SAR specialists to the OSC’s own unit, to assist. (See also ‘pre-selecting an OSC’, below.) To do this, however, two things are required: preparation and time. Such personnel need to be trained and equipped for these roles beforehand, which should include training in transfer by helicopter or fast surface craft. And it will take time to transfer them. Such deployment may be of considerable benefit in protracted operations (remembering that fatigue will become an issue for the OSC and his/her own crew) but it should not be the only plan because of the time delay.\(^5\)

4.7 Some specialist tasks may also be carried out remotely in some circumstances; for example, aircraft coordination by an air traffic service unit with full coverage of the scene. Others, however, can only be carried out on-scene. The SMC must select the best of the options available.

\(^5\) In the Estonia case already referred to an Aircraft Coordinator and other specialists were transferred to the OSC’s ship – but they did not arrive until after the last rescue had been carried out.
4.8 The important point here is to avoid overloading the OSC. Appointing an OSC is intended to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the response. But overloading the individual appointed is likely to have the opposite effect.

4.9 It is the SMC’s responsibility to ensure that such overload does not occur, so far as possible. S/he and the OSC must communicate closely and honestly – and the OSC must accept responsibility for identifying when overload is becoming a real threat. The SMC can help prevent this by a careful analysis of both the situation and the appointed OSC’s capabilities, and by appointing sub-coordinators sooner rather than later.

5 Receiving, modifying and implementing search, rescue and support action plans

5.1 IAMSAR says, *inter alia*, that the OSC should:
   - receive search and/or rescue action plans from the SMC (almost certainly both in an MRO – and see below, too, as regards plans to support)
   - modify the action plans as the situation on-scene dictates and keep the SMC advised of any changes to the plan, discussing proposed modifications with the SMC when practicable
   - implement the action plans, providing relevant information to the other SAR facilities, receiving their reports in return and keeping the SMC informed of progress
   - advise the SMC to release facilities no longer required, and
   - request additional assistance from the SMC when necessary (medical evacuation of seriously injured survivors, for example).

5.2 As discussed in chapters 15 & 19, the response planning should also include the concept of on-scene support, either to mitigate the effects of the incident to such an extent that evacuation and therefore ‘traditional’ SAR are unnecessary, or to ‘extend survival times’ so that the SAR resources available can rescue more people. We have discussed the idea that, in effect, we might amend the IMO’s definition of ‘rescue’ to read:
   ‘an operation to retrieve or support persons in distress, provide for their initial medical or other needs and deliver them to a place of safety.’

5.3 It is clearly the SMC’s task to plan the various operations – search, rescue and/or support – that will achieve the aim of bringing people in distress to a place of safety. The OSC’s primary task is to ensure that these plans, or the parts of them that are delegated to the OSC, are implemented as effectively as possible – which involves discussing them with the SMC as necessary, based upon what the OSC finds on scene, and improving them with the SMC’s agreement.

5.4 The relationship between OSC and SMC should be very much a ‘two-way street’. The ideal situation is that the SMC (with his/her RCC team) produces search, rescue and support plans, covering the whole of the maritime SAR segment of the MRO, including providing for survivors’ initial needs and delivering them to a place of safety, and passes these plans to the OSC. The OSC comments on the plans as necessary, based on his/her experience and the situation on scene, and agrees any necessary modifications with the SMC before the plans are implemented and as the situation develops. 6 SMC and OSC remain in frequent

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6 “No battle plan ever survives first contact with the enemy,” said Helmuth von Moltke. In MROs our ‘enemies’ are different to the General’s; but his remark tends to be true of any plan that is too rigid and prescriptive. What may look very neat on paper can fail in practice – and if people think the plan is failing them, they will tend to abandon it. The key to ensuring that things do not go to pieces in action is for the plan to be flexible, and those who have to implement it able to adapt to events.
communication throughout, directly linked if possible, perhaps by a satellite phone call – partly to free up radio circuits for other traffic, partly to enable freer discussion (see chapter 25). Working together in this way will improve mutual understanding, the plan, and the results.

5.5 The SMC and OSC must try to avoid a number of things. The SMC must, as discussed, avoid overloading the OSC; and the OSC must warn the SMC if s/he is in danger of being overloaded. Both must avoid the impracticable: the OSC must advise the SMC if parts of the plans are unworkable or (to be more positive) can be improved; and the SMC must be ready to be flexible – it is worth repeating that this is a cooperative, coordinating relationship, not one of command. And both must actively avoid communications failures: each has to pass information and suggestions to the other in ways that can be received and clearly understood.

5.6 The same principles apply, of course, in the relationship between the OSC (and the ACO and other coordinators) and the units assigned to them.

5.7 Aspects of the planning the OSC may be asked to implement are discussed elsewhere in this guidance material. For further comments on retrieval of persons in distress, see chapter 8. On accounting for all at risk, including searching, see chapter 9. On supporting people during their transfer to a place of safety, see chapter 10, and on what constitutes a place of safety, chapter 11. The IAMSAR Manual, Volume III in particular, remains the main source of general guidance to the OSC.

5.8 In implementing the plans, the OSC will also be able to advise the SMC as to which of the units available is particularly suited or unsuited for particular parts of the plan. Some units may be unable to carry out retrieval operations, for example – perhaps because they are too unmanoeuvrable or because it would be too dangerous in the prevailing conditions – while others, more agile and with low-freeboard areas, are better for the task.

5.9 The OSC may be able to advise the SMC to release units if no use can be found for them; but this decision should be carefully considered. Units unsuitable for one task may be suitable for another: searching, for example, or – in the case of large ships – helping to form a lee or acting as temporary places of safety. In an MRO, the only units which should obviously be released are those for which it would be dangerous to remain (usually because of actual or forecast weather and sea conditions) or which are at the end of their on-scene endurance. See chapters 13, 22 & 23.

5.10 Difficulties being encountered on scene or during the transfer of survivors to places of safety may not be apparent to the SMC unless the OSC reports them. Many such difficulties the SMC may be able to do little about – but s/he may be able to provide specific assistance if it is requested. Medical advice and assistance are an obvious example: in some cases medical teams can be brought out to assist rescue unit crews, or medical evacuation of urgent cases can be arranged. Less obvious is welfare support to large vessels with small crews and many survivors aboard. The SMC may regard these survivors as temporarily safe, yet the ship’s staff may be struggling to cope. Once again this is first and foremost a matter of communication – from the unit with the problem to the RCC, via the OSC as appropriate. See chapter 25.

6 Monitoring safety

6.1 IAMSAR says that the OSC may be asked to “monitor the performance of other participating facilities and ensure operations are conducted safely.”.

6.2 As discussed, the task of maintaining aircraft safety should be given to an Aircraft Coordinator – a person or unit with the necessary skills and communications and (ideally) tracking equipment. In a case in which
the majority of responding units are aircraft, the ACO may also be the OSC, as discussed in chapter 21. In such circumstances the coordination of surface units may be outside the ACO’s experience, in which case the safety overview task may be delegated to a suitable surface craft.

6.3 However, it is also important to note again that the OSC (like the ACO) is a coordinator. S/he does not normally have command over any unit other than his or her own (see chapter 17). The safety of each responding unit is, and remains, the responsibility of that unit’s own commander. The OSC cannot take over that basic responsibility, and should not be assumed to be doing so.

6.4 That said, the OSC, as the lead coordinator on scene, does have a responsibility to assess the SMC’s planning for practicability, which includes the safety of actions proposed under the plan. The OSC can see what the SMC almost always cannot – the on-scene conditions – and may have experience the SMC does not have; ship or aircraft handling characteristics, for example. If the OSC considers part of the plan to be unsafe s/he must raise the issue with the SMC and the commanders of units assigned to carry out that part of the plan. The final decision is for the individual commander, but having the OSC keep an eye on safety overall is beneficial.

6.5 Part of that process is to be wary of over-enthusiasm among individual unit commanders, especially those we have referred to as ‘non-professionals’ – typically those in charge of leisure craft that happen to be in the area. As discussed in chapters 13, 17 & 22, such craft may be very useful in some circumstances if properly managed – or they may present a risk to themselves, to other responders, and to those who they are trying to save. The OSC, on scene, is better placed than the SMC to assess such crafts’ capabilities in the prevailing conditions, and must bear the safety considerations in mind before giving them work to do or, if needs be, asking them to keep clear. (As discussed above, the task of assessing and marshalling such craft may be delegated to a ‘sub-coordinator’.)

7 Reporting and record-keeping

7.1 Both reporting and record-keeping are of considerable importance, and both are sometimes neglected in the heat of the moment. The IAMSAR Manual asks the OSC to make periodic situation reports to the SMC. A standard ‘SITREP’ format may be found in Appendix D of IAMSAR Volume III. This form enables clear and consolidated reporting, saving time and helping to overcome language difficulties (see chapter 25). As discussed above, an open communications link between SMC and OSC is recommended, but SITREPs are a very useful tool whether or not this link can be established or maintained. They enable quick, clear communication – which is a major aim.

7.2 SITREPs should include but not be limited to:

- weather and sea conditions
- the results of search, rescue and/or support action to date
- any modifications made or suggested to the action plans
- any future plans or recommendations.

7.3 The OSC should also seek to ascertain, and to pass on to the SMC, the number and condition of survivors, the identities of SAR facilities with survivors on board, and the destination and estimated time of arrival of each facility when it leaves the scene to transfer people to a place of safety. The latter information – when and where survivors can be expected, and in what numbers – is of very great importance in the next stage of the operation. It may seem – and may be – less urgent than action continuing at the scene,
but the more information that can be provided to shoreside responders in good time, the better. See chapter 24.

7.4 Information on survivors’ identities, and which survivors are in which SAR facility, will also be very valuable, if available and reliable, but care should be taken not to overload communications facilities in relaying it. Numbers, condition, present location, destination and ETA are usually more important during the at-sea phases of the operation.

7.5 As discussed in chapter 9, counting people is a much more difficult task than may at first appear. The OSC should seek to ensure that counts are carried out carefully by units which have retrieved people, explaining to their commanders the necessity of making sure that everyone is accounted for. The identities of survivors will also need to be established. Although this is less immediate — and should not be a matter for the OSC to deal with in an MRO — it is likely that SAR facilities transferring people to places of safety will be asked for this information by or via the RCC if the transfer will take some time. The OSC should ask units with survivors aboard to collect information about the survivors they carry — names, nationalities, etc. Generally speaking, names should not be transmitted over open networks.

7.6 Of more immediate concern to the OSC, because it is more immediately important to lifesaving, is information about people needing urgent medical or other attention, and any information of value to the ongoing SAR effort; for example, information that survivors may have about people still unaccounted for. The OSC should ask rescue units to collect this information too, and should relay any such information to the RCC, so that appropriate assistance can be arranged in the first instance, and so that search and rescue action plans can be better informed in the second. See chapter 10.

7.7 In cases in which external support is being provided to a casualty, the OSC should also ensure that the RCC is informed when teams are deployed and recovered, and how many there are in each team. See chapter 15.

7.8 Finally, IAMSAR says that the OSC should maintain a detailed record of the operation, including when SAR facilities arrive at and depart from the scene; areas searched and the track spacing used; sightings, and other relevant information.

7.9 As discussed, search coordination in an MRO may be a part of the operation that is delegated to a sub-coordinator. There are also many other aspects that should be recorded, to do with rescue and/or support action as well as searching. While the records will have great value in helping to complete reports to the SMC and later – in investigating the accident and the response, for example – they will also be of immediate value to the OSC, who will need to refer to details of information received, questions, decisions, taskings, results and timings to help him or her coordinate a complex operation. A simple but successful procedure in this respect is for the OSC to appoint a ‘secretary’, whose sole task should be to keep a chronological record of all these elements. The secretary can be any staff member not otherwise engaged in the operation, or who can best be spared from it. In small crews this may not be practicable, but it should be attempted if possible. The OSC is very unlikely to be able to keep adequate records without help.

7.10 In MROs an indicative list of what should be recorded, with all entries timed, is as follows:

- time of appointment as OSC and time of relief or release from OSC duties, and by whom
- location when appointed, and own unit’s subsequent actions
- weather and sea conditions, with changes observed and forecasts received
- the search, rescue and/or support action plans received from the RCC
any discussion of the plans with the SMC, and modifications agreed
the identities of SAR facilities assigned to the OSC
their times of arrival at, and departure from, the scene
the tasks allocated to each, including any ‘sub-coordination’ tasks
communications with the SAR facilities assigned, including sub-coordinators
communications with the SMC / RCC, including SITREPs
any safety concerns, and actions taken to resolve or mitigate them
areas searched; the track spacing achieved; and the results
rescue action plan results
support action plan results
numbers and condition of people retrieved, with any other identity detail received
SAR facilities with survivors and/or the dead aboard
destinations and ETAs of SAR facilities departing the scene
requests for medical or other specialist assistance.

8 Appointing an OSC

8.1 As discussed, the role of OSC in a mass rescue operation is both vital and complex. The big question is, who should be appointed to carry it out?

8.2 The simple answer to this question is ‘the most suitable person available’, as determined by the SMC and the potential OSC – for it is very important that anyone asked to become OSC should tell the SMC if they do not have the capability to take the job on. It is better for the SMC to have to ask someone else (assuming someone else is available) than to take on the role and subsequently be overwhelmed by it.

8.3 Avoiding overloading the OSC is the responsibility of the SMC, and is discussed above and in chapter 19. The ability to appoint ‘sub-coordinators’ is especially important here, enabling the workload to be broken up into manageable pieces.

8.4 The IAMSAR Manual says that “the OSC should be the most capable person available, taking into consideration SAR training, communications capabilities, and the length of time that the unit the OSC is aboard can stay in the search area”, noting that “frequent changes in the OSC should be avoided”. The OSC, says IAMSAR, may be the person in charge of a designated SAR unit, or of a ship or aircraft participating, or someone at another nearby facility in a position to handle the necessary duties. The Manual also says that “the person in charge of the first SAR facility to arrive at the scene will normally assume the function of OSC until the SMC directs that the person be relieved”. It is for the SMC to select ‘the most capable person’, with that person’s agreement.

8.5 This is all very well, but the decision often has to be made rapidly, at the outset of what will, by definition, be a very challenging incident. If the OSC is not pre-selected (see below), how is the SMC to really assess training and capability? Yet the decision has to be made.

8.6 The points made in IAMSAR are important. To carry out the OSC function, the individual selected must understand what it entails – which implies at least some SAR knowledge and sufficient maritime experience – and must be able to communicate with the units assigned to him or her; which in turn means that s/he has to have enough people as well as the equipment to handle the communications. It should
be remembered, however, that the OSC does not have to have the capability to communicate with every unit on scene, only with those assigned to him or her. A ship’s master appointed OSC may not have direct communications with SAR aircraft, for example – but does not need to as long as s/he can communicate with an Aircraft Coordinator. See above, and chapter 25.

8.7 It is also very important to consider the length of time the OSC can continue in the role, and the focus s/he will be able to bring to it. Handing over the task before it is necessary to do so (which will usually be when the OSC begins to become fatigued) means an unnecessary hiatus in on-scene coordination: time must be spent passing information from the old OSC to the new one. For this reason the SMC should think twice before assigning the role to a designated SAR unit s/he knows well but which does not have much on-scene endurance because of fuel limitations. An additional SAR facility such as a merchant ship may be a better choice: the ship’s master will have less SAR experience, but the ship will usually have the necessary on-scene endurance. Continuity is more important than a high level of SAR expertise. SAR plan details can be explained as necessary to someone with basic professional knowledge; and the risks associated with hand-overs (loss of time, misunderstandings, loss of detail) can be avoided.

8.8 Similarly, the person selected as OSC must be able to focus on the job. A designated SAR unit commander may well have the necessary knowledge – but that unit will probably be better used in its primary SAR function, and its commander is very unlikely to be able to do that and act effectively as OSC in a mass rescue operation. Indeed, we may say that only vessels with large crews with relevant training and multiple communications systems can really be expected to provide effective on-scene coordination as well as being heavily involved in SAR and/or support operations. If such a unit is not available it will usually be much better to let SAR-capable units do what they are best at and appoint as OSC someone who can concentrate on that task alone – the master of a less manoeuvrable merchant ship in the vicinity, perhaps, or the person in charge of a nearby installation; or perhaps the commander of a maritime patrol aircraft, provided that the aircraft has sufficient on-scene endurance.

8.9 It is sometimes suggested that the commander of the unit in distress should act as OSC. While it can certainly be argued that this person is, in a sense, in overall control on scene, and that the SMC and other SAR responders are acting in his or her support, the OSC is one of these supporters and has distinct responsibilities. The two functions should not be confused.

8.10 IAMSAR’s suggestion that “the person in charge of the first SAR facility to arrive at the scene will normally assume the function of OSC until the SMC directs that the person be relieved” should also be treated with caution in an MRO. This can work if this unit is unable to do much apart from liaising with the casualty and reporting back to the SMC, pending the arrival of more capable SAR facilities – but a SAR-capable unit arriving on scene and finding SAR work to do is likely to become involved in it straightaway. In most cases, as discussed above, it is unlikely that this unit will be able to function as OSC as well. There are significant benefits to appointing a unit not yet on scene, for this allows the OSC a little time to prepare, receiving information, agreeing plans with the SMC and establishing communications with the units assigned to him or her while still in transit.

8.11 As noted, it is part of the SMC’s responsibilities to ensure that the OSC can perform the work requested. The SMC should endeavour to assess the OSC’s capability if selecting him or her at the beginning of an MRO, and to monitor his or her performance as the operation develops. If there are signs that the OSC is becoming overwhelmed, share the load!

8.12 In summary, the selection of an OSC is done with reference to a number of factors, and it is the most efficient combination of these factors which is being sought. They include:

- understanding of the OSC role
9 Pre-selecting an OSC

9.1 The problem of how to select an OSC in the confusing conditions at the beginning of an MRO can be avoided by pre-selection.

9.2 We referred above to SAR units capable of undertaking the OSC function as well as engaging in direct search, rescue and/or support work themselves. Where such units exist, they should have trained OSCs available among their crew. Similarly, we referred to ships which are unlikely to become directly involved in SAR operations because of their size or limited manoeuvrability; to offshore installations; and to aircraft with long endurance capability. These and suitable Government vessels and aircraft can also have OSC-trained crew members. In higher-risk areas, such as multi-ferry routes and offshore industrial areas, consideration should be given to training ferry masters, offshore installation managers etc in the OSC role. In the cases mentioned this training need not be particularly extensive. It should comprise a knowledge of the OSC function and of the local MRO plan(s).

9.3 A more complex solution is to develop a cadre of OSC-trained personnel who can be deployed to the scene of an incident when it occurs. The pre-selected OSCs mentioned in the paragraph above can only act in MROs occurring in their own vicinity. But deployable OSCs can be transferred rapidly to the scene of any incident within range, usually by helicopter; including to an on-shore location for incidents happening close to the land. The SAR Coordinator (see chapter 18) should consider this option.

9.4 The downsides of the ‘deployable OSC’ idea are that the necessary training will have to include transfer training; personal safety and communications equipment will be required; a call-out rota must be established; and time elapses while the OSC is being deployed. On the up-side, deployable OSCs can be used to support or relieve an OSC appointed ad hoc.

9.5 We have discussed the importance of on-scene endurance in selecting an OSC: this applies to the person as well as his or her craft. A large merchant ship, for example, may be able to stay on-scene practically indefinitely; but will probably have a small crew. The limiting factor then becomes fatigue, not fuel endurance. Deployable OSCs can relieve hard-pressed ships’ masters in the OSC role, ideally before fatigue sets in.

9.6 Deployable OSCs can be available to be deployed from a roster at short notice. Suitable candidates may include SAR service personnel, Government officers in maritime posts, marine pilots etc.

10 Remote area operations

10.1 Finally we must return to a major potential problem alluded to in IAMSAR. Someone on or near the scene of the accident “may have to assume SMC duties” if “communications cannot be established with an RCC”. IAMSAR mentions planning the search and/or rescue action in this respect, although, as discussed in chapters 19 & 22, the SMC’s duties extend much further. Thus far in this chapter we have assumed that there will be an ‘MRO-capable’ SMC available to organise the maritime SAR response, and that the
OSC will be acting with that SMC’s support. Now we must briefly consider what should be done if that support is missing.

10.2 In chapter 12 we noted that the IMO have identified ‘areas remote from SAR facilities’ as ones where sufficient designated SAR units cannot reach the scene of an accident within survival times, and that there are many parts of the world’s seas and oceans where this may be the case. There are also SAR Regions without functioning RCCs to coordinate SAR action within them, or the local RCC may have lost functionality; in a catastrophic incident, for example. It is also possible that, while there may be a functioning RCC in the Region, it is not capable of coordinating a mass rescue operation. MROs in such areas will be particularly challenging. But they must still be carried on, and will require an OSC to organise them on scene.

10.3 However, unless there has been an exceptional communications outage, ships and other units with modern long-range – particularly satellite – communications capabilities should not be in a position where “communications cannot be established with an RCC”. They should be able to contact an RCC somewhere, direct or via their own parent organisations, even if that RCC is itself very remote from the scene of the action. That RCC’s staff will have a particularly difficult task to undertake, establishing contacts in the State(s) nearest the incident so as to ensure that places of safety can be agreed and the necessary shoreside infrastructure established (see chapter 24), but they will be able to provide support and guidance to the OSC as described here and in chapter 19.

10.4 In the truly exceptional circumstance that no contact with an RCC can be made, the OSC will find guidance in IAMSAR Volume III covering all aspects of a maritime SAR operation and, by extension, an MRO. This guidance, combined with common sense and good seamanship, will help. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the OSC to contact an RCC or other shoreside authority – a port authority, for example – at some point, to ascertain the locations of places of safety and to make arrangements for landing those recovered in the MRO.

11 Summary

- An OSC should usually be appointed in any MRO.
- The OSC coordinates the search, rescue and/or support actions of the SAR facilities assigned to him or her, implementing plans drawn up by, and discussed with, the SMC. The use of an Aircraft Coordinator and other ‘sub-coordinators’ can facilitate on-scene coordination overall.
- Communications with the commander of the unit in distress may be one of the OSC’s most important functions in an MRO, together with appraisal of the situation, initially and as it develops.
- The OSC acts as a node in the communications network between the SMC and responders on scene. This greatly assists with the sub-division of MRO communications that is fundamental to efficient information flow.
- Good communication and information flow between OSC and SMC are particularly important. The OSC acts as the SMC’s ‘eyes, ears and voice on-scene’. Communication between the two should be a ‘two-way street’.
- Having the OSC keep an eye on overall safety on scene is beneficial, although responsibility for each unit’s safety remains with its commander throughout.
- The OSC needs to keep records of the operation: assigning an ‘OSC’s secretary’ to achieve this is recommended.
“The OSC should be the most capable person available.” Determining who that is is a matter for careful assessment by the SMC and by potential OSCs. The OSC must understand what the role is, and be able to concentrate on it; must have good communications capability; and should have good on-scene endurance.

Consideration should be given to identifying people who may be in a position to act as OSC by virtue of their normal work, and providing them with training for the role. SAR Coordinators should also consider developing a cadre of ‘deployable’ OSCs.

In some circumstances there may not be a functioning, or MRO-capable, RCC in the Region in which an MRO is needed. The unit whose commander is taking on the OSC role should be able to contact a remote RCC for advice and assistance. In the worst case scenario, in which even this communication is impossible, the OSC must do his or her best, guided by IAMSAR Volume III and seeking whatever help can be found from shoreside authorities, particularly as regards landing people rescued.

12  Further reading

12.1  Section 9 of IAMSAR Volume III is the principal source of guidance for the OSC, taken together with detailed guidance on various aspects of SAR operations elsewhere in the Volume. Volume II also provides guidance on the OSC role, with a summary at Chapter 1.2.4. Chapter 6.15 refers to the OSC in the context of mass rescue operations.

12.2  The IMO also publish a Model Course on the On Scene Coordinator role.

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