The International Maritime Rescue Federation Mass Rescue Operations Project:

Accounting for people involved in a mass rescue operation

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 problems of counting in MROs
- searches aboard the unit in distress
- searches in the distress area
- accounting for response personnel deployed to the casualty
- what counting is required, when, and by what means
- the problem of empty survival craft etc

1 The problems of counting

1.1 Mass rescue incident and exercise experience has shown that counting people in such circumstances is a significant problem. Even counting people in relatively controlled situations – aboard a rescue unit, for example – can be difficult. Counting accurately in uncontrolled circumstances is practically impossible, including ashore if rescuers, relatives, reporters etc are allowed to become mixed up indiscriminately with survivors.

1.2 Yet it is clearly essential that people should be accurately counted. This is partly to ensure that the next stage in the rescue chain can be alerted and prepared – so that there are sufficient reception and land transport facilities available, for example. But the main reason for counting accurately, in SAR terms, is that we need to ensure that everyone involved in the incident has been accounted for.

1.3 To ensure that we have accounted for everyone, we need to know how many people were at risk in the first place. In some cases this will not be known: in the rescue by sea of disparate people caught up in a land-based emergency, for example. In other cases it will be uncertain, or it may only become clear after
a good deal of research has been done; when many small craft are overwhelmed by the weather, for example. Exact numbers can be uncertain even on a modern cruise ship or ferry.

1.4 In such circumstances even accurate counts aboard rescue units, as people are landed, or in reception centres will not assure us that everyone at risk has been accounted for, for the simple reason that we do not know, for sure, how many people were originally at risk. That is the first ‘problem of counting’.

1.5 The second problem is that all the stakeholders in an MRO want to know numbers, and as soon as possible. How many are at risk? How many have been recovered? How many are going to which landing sites? How many buses and ambulances and hospital beds are needed? How many remain aboard? How many are missing...? These are all very important questions and most can, and must, be answered – in due course. But the second problem of counting is that it can assume too great an importance too early; that is, before everyone has been retrieved from grave and imminent danger. Carefully counting all those picked up will not help those left behind in the water.

1.6 There is also a risk of complacency. If we are told that 500 people were aboard the sinking ferry, for example, and quick head-counts aboard an assortment of rescue units give us a total of 500, can we say that everyone at risk has been accounted for? Of course not. There is reason to think that the initial figure might be inaccurate – and every reason to believe that totals arrived at by hasty head-counts will be. In other words, at least in the early stages of an MRO, we cannot account for everyone at risk by counting alone. It follows that we should not focus on counting to the exclusion of other activity.

2 Accounting for people

2.1 The uncertainties discussed above lead to the conclusion that, to be sure that we have accounted for everyone, we should focus on ensuring that no-one is left behind. Searching therefore becomes a vital part of the MRO, even when the location of the accident is well known.

2.2 In some cases – a passenger ship or a ditched aircraft or an offshore installation that has to be abandoned, for example – SAR service personnel are reliant on the crew of the unit in distress to ensure that no-one remains aboard. It must not be assumed that everyone has gone to assembly stations in an orderly fashion. People go looking for friends and family. They go back to cabins for passports or medicines or treasured possessions. Some panic and may not behave logically. Terrified people can become immobile. They have even been known to hide.

2.3 It follows that on-board procedures should include ‘sweeping’ for people and sealing off areas that have been checked and confirmed empty. The On Scene Coordinator (OSC) and the SAR Mission Coordinator (SMC) will need to be assured by the commander of the unit in distress that this has been done.

2.4 SAR service responders’ roles in accounting for people are then two-fold. They do need to count those who come into their care, and to begin to acquire information from them; but they also need to conduct searches of the area, to ensure that no-one has been overlooked.

3 Searches

3.1 Searches aboard the unit in distress are required as discussed above. These will almost always be conducted by that unit’s own staff, at least in the vital early stages. Although trained external assistance may be appropriate in some circumstances, it is unlikely to be available for some time.
3.2 SAR units and other responders should also conduct searches of the surrounding area. The search objects will include people who may have fallen into the water or entered it to make their escape, and small craft and survival craft which may have drifted away in the confusion – particularly in bad weather or at night. These searches should be conducted even if the evacuation is orderly – and even if no evacuation has officially begun: staying aboard a unit in distress may not seem the best survival response to some people, and they might decide to ‘save themselves’.

3.3 Searches will be in addition to the other on-scene MRO activities. They should be coordinated, and have units specifically assigned to them. It is suggested that this work should be a sub-set of the overall on-scene response, with one SAR unit specifically tasked to organise it, reporting to the OSC. See chapters 13, 17, 19 & 20.

3.4 Except in cases of multi-vessel emergencies – a fleet of small craft overwhelmed by the weather, for example, when a large area will need to be searched – the searches themselves need not be complex. Units can patrol down-drift (downwind and down-current) of the scene, and between the scene and obvious refuges, watching for people or craft and either recovering them themselves or reporting them to more capable SAR units. See chapters 22 & 23.

3.5 The organisation and conduct of searches at sea are specialised subjects not covered in the IMRF’s MRO guidance. The reader should refer to the IAMSAR Manual, in particular Volume II Chapters 4 & 5 and Volume III.

4 Adding people

4.1 Accounting for everyone involved in the incident includes those who respond to it, and especially those who deploy into hazardous situations. Personnel placed aboard the unit in distress (see chapter 15) should be counted on and counted off, with a running total carefully maintained by the OSC and the SMC – see chapters 19 & 20.

5 Counting during and after rescue

5.1 As the MRO develops, counting will become increasingly important. When people are recovered at sea, counting should begin aboard individual rescue units. When people remain aboard the unit in distress, accounting for them remains the responsibility of that unit’s commander. If the unit is evacuated but it is decided to keep people in their survival craft, the counts will be done by those in charge of each craft.

5.2 Counting should be a part of the initial triage process; sorting people according to their medical needs. In all cases the results must be passed to the SMC, usually via the OSC.

5.3 Names and other such details are not essential at this stage, and should not be collected or transmitted unless this can be done without interfering with higher priority work or communications traffic. What the coordinators need to know, so that they can organise any necessary additional support and pass the information to the next responders in the chain, are:

- the total number of people in the rescue or other unit
- how many of them need medical or other specialist attention
- how many of these are ‘walking wounded’ and how many are stretcher cases; and
- whether the unit is carrying any confirmed dead and, if so, how many.
5.4 The coordinators also need to be given any information of importance to the continuing MRO on-scene – whether survivors’ friends or family members are missing, for example, or whether they saw people trapped or drifting away.

5.5 After people have been landed, or are aboard rescue units with the resources and time to do the work, counting and triage should be repeated and the extra data required collected. Survivors being landed should be kept away from the general public, the news media, and even family and friends, at least until these processes have been completed. See chapters 10 & 11.

6 Means of counting

6.1 Accounting for people involved in complex incidents such as MROs is a subject that would benefit from further study. Here, we offer a few general points for consideration.

6.2 Counting people is easiest if they can be kept still. That is best arranged by sitting them down and asking them to stay seated until they have been counted and assessed. This can be done in rescue units while heading for landing points; in land transport (buses, etc); and/or in reception centres ashore.

6.3 It is recommended that each person counted and assessed should be marked in some clear way, to ensure that everyone is seen and that people are not counted twice by mistake. If no specialised equipment is available for this purpose, simple marking systems can be improvised. Survivors might object to being marked on their skin or clothing with indelible pens – although this can be effective – but there are simple alternative markers; coloured cable ties, for example. (See also the discussion of triage in chapter 10.)

6.4 While special equipment is not required for counting people, there are systems available which will assist with this process and with the wider collection of data too, including triage data. See chapter 10 for further discussion of this aspect of the operation.

7 Empty survival craft etc

7.1 In cases where there are many small craft in distress and/or many survival craft have been deployed, especially in bad weather, the challenge of accounting for everybody involved is exacerbated by the increasing number of empty craft in the area. A SAR unit may recover everybody from a liferaft, for example, and then move on. But other units finding the raft subsequently will not know it is empty. They will have to try to check it, which entails risk to themselves as well as a waste of time.¹

7.2 Recovering the craft after it has been emptied, to avoid this problem, will be impossible in some circumstances and time-consuming and/or hazardous in others. Towing it away may also be impracticable, and will hamper the towing unit in further SAR efforts. Sinking the craft is sometimes suggested as an alternative – but this is easier said than done, and if the craft remains afloat after sinking has been attempted it may still be re-checked. Marking it to show that it has been emptied or confirmed empty is also easier to say than do – and, like the other solutions suggested here, has the disadvantage that people in the water, unnoticed by the rescuers, may still be able to board the craft if it is left intact and afloat. If it has been previously marked as empty, they will be overlooked.

¹ In the Estonia disaster, in which large numbers of survival craft were deployed or floated from the ferry, some empty craft were checked many times over.
7.3 There is no easy solution to this problem. If the area of operations is relatively large and the sea state difficult, the risk of removing potential lifesaving equipment from the scene may be too great. On balance, however, the best answer seems to be to remove craft confirmed as empty from the scene, once it has been agreed unlikely that there are still people in the water who might need them.

7.4 Removal of empty craft can be a task given to units considered of limited use in other respects. The time and effort saved by not having to re-check empty craft can be sufficient compensation for the time and effort removal requires.

8 Summary

- Experience has shown that counting people in an MRO is a significant challenge.
- There is a need for accurate counting as part of the extended response.
- Simple methods of counting accurately are suggested here: there are accounting and information collection systems available, discussed in more detail in chapter 10.
- Counting heads and comparing the totals so derived against manifests etc is not a sufficient means of accounting for everyone at risk.
- Accounting for everyone originally involved in the incident should include searches of the unit in distress and the surrounding area.
- Response personnel placed on board the unit in distress or survival craft etc must also be accounted for.
- A procedure for dealing with craft confirmed empty should be agreed, taking the prevailing conditions into account.

9 Further reading

9.1 The IAMSAR Manual should be consulted for advice on search planning and conduct: see Volume II Chapters 4 & 5 and Volume III.

9.2 IAMSAR also contains general guidance on accounting for people in MROs. See Volume II Chapter 6.15.21-22 and 6.15.50-51.

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