

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service - MIRG Team

East Sussex Fire and Rescue Service (ESFRS) have been responding to Incidents 'At Sea' since the launch of their Maritime Team in 1996.

ESFRS is situated on the south coast of England and has a 50 mile coastline bordering the English Channel. The principle towns within the county are the City of Brighton and Hove, Eastbourne, Hastings and the county town of Lewes. There are two ports within the county the largest of which is Newhaven in the west with the smaller port of Rye in the east.

The Newhaven port operates cross channel ferries to Dieppe and Le Harve and there are yacht marinas at both Brighton and Eastbourne. Also small fishing fleets operate out of Hastings and Newhaven.

The English Channel is known to be one of the busiest waterways in the world with ships continuously traversing the channel to all parts of Europe and the rest of the world. In addition there are the frequent ferry crossings from England to both France and Belgium.

So the potential for a Maritime Incident off of the coast of ESFRS is considerable as has been demonstrated on a number of occasions in recent years.

Our team which comprises over 40 firefighters and officers is based at Newhaven Fire Station which is in close proximity to the port as well as the main Helicopter Rendevous Point (RVP) for the county. Storage facilities have been provided for all the Maritime equipment issued to the team by the MCA who fully fund the Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG).

In the event of an Incident the team are alerted to respond to Newhaven Fire Station where team members are selected and equipment is issued to facilitate the response. At the same time an HMCG Helicopter is tasked to the RV point to pick up the team and transport them to the casualty vessel. The helicopter normally used is India Juliet (IJ) based at Lee-on-Solent in Hampshire.

Since its launch the team have responded to a number of significant incidents, three of which have required a firefighting response by the team once on board the vessel.

The first such incident was in September 2002 when a call for assistance was received from the container vessel 'Wester Till' reporting a fire in the hold. The ship which was travelling west along the English Channel when the fire was discovered was carrying 512 tonnes of cargo including 20 tonnes of dangerous Cargo in the hold as well as 286 containers on the deck. ESFRS Firefighters responded to the call and were winched on board the vessel where they worked in difficult circumstances to bring the fire under control. However in order to establish that the fire was fully extinguished it was

necessary to bring the vessel alongside and off load the containers to lift the hatch covers to the hold. It was obvious that this could only be achieved in a harbour equipped for handling containers and so the team remained on board whilst the vessel sailed into Portsmouth Harbour for that purpose. On arrival the incident was handed to Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service who stood by whilst the hatch covers were removed allowing them to complete the final inspection and confirm the fire was indeed fully extinguished. ESFRS Firefighters finally returned home nearly twenty hours after responding to the initial call.

The second incident of note which occurred in April 2003 was a fire on the car transporter the Oriental Highway. The vessel loaded with 500 tightly packed brand new cars was travelling through the English Channel from Germany to Portugal when a fire occurred in one of the vehicles on deck 7. Due to the close proximity of other vehicles the fire quickly spread to over thirty cars causing a severe fire which the ships crew were unable to deal with. Despite the punishing conditions and the difficulty moving around the car deck, Breathing Apparatus crews entered deck 7 and managed to bring the fire under control using hand held branches. After some considerable time spent damping down and ensuring the fire was completely extinguished the vessel continued on its journey and the team were repatriated by RNLI lifeboat.

The most recent and potentially most serious incident occurred just a month after the launch of the national MIRC Strategy in April 2006 and was the first incident to be attended under those new arrangements. This incident occurred on the Cruise ship 'Calypso' with 706 passengers and crew on board whilst transiting the English Channel en route to the Channel Isles. The fire which started in the engine room caused a complete loss of power to the vessel and was reported as being a severe fire threatening the safety of the ship. The passengers donned their Life Jackets and assembled at the muster stations where the lifeboats were made ready in case the order was given to abandon ship. Two MIRC teams from ESFRS were transported by helicopter onto the vessel and an assessment of the incident carried out. Following an inspection of the engine room by firefighters wearing Breathing Apparatus it was discovered that the fire was in fact extinguished. It was clear that a severe fire had raged in the engine room at the height of the blaze and that much structural damage had been sustained, although the stability of the vessel was intact. With Firefighters monitoring the compartments adjacent to the engine room the Calypso was taken under tow by the Coastguard ETV Anglian Monarch and brought into Portsmouth Harbour where the passengers were disembarked. Firefighters from Hampshire Fire and Rescue Service then took over and entered the engine compartment to finally confirm that the fire was indeed fully extinguished. This incident coming so soon after the launch of the MIRC national strategy tested the procedures fully and demonstrated that the multi agency approach that is funded by the MCA is robust and will make a significant contribution to the safety of Maritime industry around the coast of the UK.



Calypso

This article was written by Group Manager John Ticehurst the Lead Officer of ESFRS Fire and Rescue Service Maritime Response Team. John has served for over 35 years and was the Operations Commander at the Calypso Fire in 2006 . In addition to being the MIRG Lead Officer John now manages one of the Six Boroughs that comprise ESFRS Fire and Rescue Service.