

## **SUFFOLK FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE MIRG**

Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service provides one of the 15 UK teams constituting the Maritime Coastguard Agency (MCA) funded Maritime Incident Response Group (MIRG).

Maritime operations are not new to SF&RS, the service having gained considerable knowledge and experience from its Firefighting at Sea Team which operated from the late eighties until it was disbanded in 2002 due to financial and other pressures.

**The MIRG team.** The Sea of Change project and the resultant formation of MIRG teams breathed new life into the SF&RS off shore service provision by funding both the equipment and training necessary to acquire and maintain competence to a nationally established standard in what is a specialist field.

Suffolk recruited new members to the team who, along with members of the original team, undertook sea survival, helicopter underwater escape, helicopter familiarisation; command & control and other theoretical & practical modules and training, to MCA standards.

Following a series of 'flying' exercises in mid to late 2005 designed to test all aspects of logistical and operational practice, and after gaining Suffolk County Council Fire Authority permission, the team declared as an MCA asset in January 2006.

Due to Suffolk's geography and available resources, the team of 50 personnel is sub-divided North and South, the North team of 25 based in Lowestoft and the South team of 25 in Ipswich.

The primary carriers for the team are 22 Squadron RAF Search & Rescue based at RAF Wattisham in Suffolk, flying Sea King helicopters that can accommodate a team of 9 with associated equipment.

**Exercises.** Three major exercises took place in 2007 including two 24 hour exercises on the Stena Britannica, a cross channel ferry sailing from Harwich to the Hook of Holland. The team have developed a mutually beneficial partnership with Stena whereby both the MIRG team and the vessel's emergency procedures are tested.

The Stena Britannica provides the team with first class training opportunities due to the ability to allow MIRG crews to deploy the vessels fixed installations including fixed monitors, fire mains and deck drencher systems. This along with the opportunity for extended travel BA wear exercises serves perfectly the need to familiarise the team with the maritime working environment. In between practical exercises the team receives theoretical input as well as familiarisation with the vessels cargo and passenger area layout

On the second cross channel exercise held on 26/11/07 the Suffolk MIRG team was audited by National MIRG officers.

The Suffolk team have a full programme of activity for 2008 and are in the enviable position of having more applicants to join the team than can be accommodated.

**Incidents.** Since going live in 2006 Suffolk MIRG has been tested twice operationally. On 23/6/06 at 12:41hrs the team was called to a fire on 'Sealand', a converted platform in the North Sea. Following a full helicopter reconnaissance and risk assessment carried out by the Operations Commander the team did not deploy.

This incident nonetheless demonstrated the efficiency of the established tasking and mobilisation procedures and also provided an opportunity to refine on-shore liaison and support arrangements.

On Sunday 24/6/07 the team were called to an engine room fire aboard the HT Blade, a 371 ton 30m tug laying in the North Sea off the Norfolk Coast. The vessel had lost power and had a crew of 3 on board. The fixed installations had been deployed and the engine room sealed as far as was possible.

The Lowestoft team deployed to the vessel and following full assessment of the incident the Operations Commander requested the support of a second team of 6 with additional BA resources. The RAF returned to Ipswich to pick up a team of 6 and returned to the incident for deployment.

Thermal monitoring and boundary cooling was deployed and the vessel surveyed for any unseen spread of fire. Following further risk assessment BA crews were committed to fully seal off the compartment in which the fire had occurred and to then make the engines safe under instruction of the vessel's engineer. Firefighting equipment and crews were held in reserve whilst the vessel was taken under tow by two further tugs to Lowestoft. Shore based crews then opened up and fully inspected the vessel and the incident was closed. The team commitment lasted approximately 22hrs in total.

Upon investigation the cause of the fire was believed to be a hydraulic valve failure resulting in production of a flammable mist subsequently ignited by hot engine components.

Suffolk Fire & Rescue Service's experience of working in partnership with the MCA has been very rewarding and has resulted in the provision of an efficient, professional response team for offshore incidents.

Further MIRG detail is available on [www.mirg.org.uk](http://www.mirg.org.uk)

## The Author

ADO Karl Rolfe is the SF&RS MIRG Lead Officer. Karl joined Suffolk Fire Service in 1982 and has served in a variety of operational and technical references. He is currently District Commander for the Babergh District area.



Suffolk Fire & Rescue Ipswich MIRG team loading equipment in preparation to respond to incident at sea 24/6/07

Suffolk MIRG BA crews enter the engine compartment of HT Blade



## Exercise Britannica.

Suffolk MIRG crew winching onto Stenna Britannica



Crews preparing for BA exercise aboard Stenna Britannica

