

The Chemical Corps and the Coast Guard—Interoperability in Action

By Lieutenant Commander Dennis E. Branson and Petty Officer Jaime Bigelow

As the first U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) officer assigned to the U.S. Army Chemical School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, this past year has been an exceptional journey down paths less traveled for a U.S. Coast Guardsman. I am also becoming accustomed to being asked why the USCG would station a guardsman almost 500 miles from the nearest coast. The answer is simple. I represent the USCG's National Strike Force (NSF)—a specialized organization designed to facilitate preparedness and response to oil and hazardous-substance incidents to protect public health, welfare, and the environment.

Established in 1973 under the Federal Water Pollution Control Act of 1972 (primarily as a pollution response team), the NSF has evolved into a rapidly deployable resource for hazardous material (HAZMAT), petroleum, and biochemical response. Its extensive training and experience with a wide spectrum of cases has propelled the NSF into new areas of responsibilities (such as weapons of mass destruction/chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear [WMD/CBRN] responses). By building a bond between the NSF and the Chemical Corps, we hope to become better equipped to meet the new responsibilities.

National Strike Force

The NSF consists of three regionally based “strike teams”: the Atlantic Strike Team (AST) in Fort Dix, New Jersey; the Gulf Strike Team (GST) in Mobile, Alabama; and the Pacific Strike Team (PST) on Fort Hamilton in Novato, California. The NSF Coordination Center (NSFCC) in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, supports each of these teams and is also home to the Preparedness for Response Exercise Program (PREP) staff, the Public Information Assist Team (PIAT), and the National Inventory of Oil Spill Removal organizations. The NSF employs nearly 200 active-duty, civilian, and reserve USCG personnel.

The NSF is on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and can deploy by land, sea, or air. During a recent House subcommittee hearing, the NSF Commander, Captain Scott Hartley, said:

“As the name implies, we are a national asset equipped and trained to conduct hazard assessment, source control, contamination reduction, release countermeasures, mitigation, decontamination, and response management activities, in

support of a federal on-scene coordinator (FOSC), during oil and HAZMAT releases occurring here in the United States.”

National Response System (NRS)

The NSF is an integral part of the existing NRS—a network of numerous federal, state, and local agencies that prepare for and respond to oil and hazardous substance releases, including chemical and biological terrorism incidents. The NRS activates immediately upon notification from the National Response Center or any agency involved in an incident.

Federal On-Scene Coordinator

The FOSC is the central figure in the NRS. Under the National Contingency Plan (NCP), the FOSC leads local preparedness efforts (in coordination with state and local agencies and private industry) and provides the federal lead during an actual response. Through the area committee process, response protocols are developed, joint priorities are established, and response resources are identified through an interagency collaborative process. In the event of an actual incident, the FOSC would establish a response organization using the Incident Command System (ICS) while incorporating federal, state, local, and private resources into a single response structure. As part of a Unified Command System (UCS), the USCG's FOSC works closely with local officials (for example, the cognizant fire chief) and representatives from the state to aggressively respond to an incident. If necessary, the FOSC has access to the Oil Spill Liability Trust Fund (for oil spills) or the Superfund (for HAZMAT releases).

Special Teams

Beyond the local response community, the FOSC also has access to special federal teams, which include the

NSF; the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA's) emergency response team; the Department of Energy's radiological emergency response team; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's scientific support coordinators; and Department of Defense (DOD) resources, including the Navy's supervisor of salvage, to support a local response. For planning, coordination, and interoperability, the FOSC is supported by representatives from more than 15 federal agencies at the regional level through the regional response teams, which in turn have a mirror organization for national coordination, planning, policies, and interagency coordination known as the National Response Team (NRT). The EPA is the chair and the USCG is the vice chair of the NRT. All of these relationships, roles, capabilities, and responsibilities are extensively outlined in the NCP.

If the Federal Response Plan (FRP) is activated for an incident, the NRS folds into Emergency Support Function #10 (for HAZMATs) for further coordination of federal resources to assist the local municipalities and states. Upon activation of the FRP, the USCG also supports Emergency Support Function #1 (concerning transportation). The NSF activated to support Emergency Support Function #1 during the World Trade Center attacks when USCG assets coordinated and participated in the evacuation of more than one million people from lower Manhattan following the collapse of the Twin Towers.

All the NRS authorities are predesignated and preauthorized and are consistent with Presidential Decision Directives 39 and 62. These executive directives mandated that the federal government use existing systems for WMD rather than create new ones. Accordingly, the NRS should be a key component of the new Department of Homeland Security's Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate.

NSF Capabilities and Emergent Skill Sets

Incident Management Organization Sustainability

As subject-matter experts in the ICS, NSF personnel provide highly trained, multicontingency incident management teams (12 to 16 people) to support OSCs for nationally significant incidents (for example, the World Trade Center) and/or locally significant incidents. Incident management support includes qualified personnel to support staffing of the emergency operations center, disaster field office (DFO), and regional

operations center (ROC) during FRP responses and ICS technical expertise to support national and regional incident command teams. The inherent expertise and experience in working and training the ICS/UCS model is something that the Chemical School could gain immediate benefit from in the new cooperative interservice relationship.

Response and Consequence Management

During the World Trade Center cleanup and the Washington, D.C./Boca Raton, Florida, biological remediation, members of the NSF proved they have the technical expertise and specialized response skills necessary to support OSCs from the earliest "assessment phase" through disposal and case closure. NSF teams possess equipment not readily available in the private or public sector (for example, stainless steel HAZMAT transfer pumps and high-capacity oil pumps, new oil-skimming systems or containment boom which industry now has an adequate inventory). Other response and on-scene support capabilities include—

- HAZMAT teams that provide oil/HAZMAT source control, bulk liquid lightering, environmental assessment, and removal/oversight in a hazardous-atmosphere environment. Currently, the NSF has three Level A teams with the ability to conduct Occupational Safety and Health Administration-compliant Level A and B entries. Also, efforts are now underway to expand the current fielding strength for additional entry teams.
- Oil response teams with the capability to support bulk oil removal operations. The NSF currently has three Level B/C teams (environmental assessment team, communications group, and logistics group).



CWO Leon, Atlantic Strike Team member, near Ground Zero of the World Trade Center, September 2001

- Incident management teams whose knowledge and experience include ICS positions throughout the continuum of ICS staffing for FRP responses. They have a limited ability to support OSCs during consequence management operations under the FRP and NCP responses and to support USCG incident commanders during non-NCP/FRP response operations.
- Public information assist teams made up of specially trained personnel who provide mobile crisis media relations and crisis communications assistance.
- Environmental assessment teams that provide technical expertise in air monitoring; special-monitoring, applied-response technology sampling; and shoreline assessment evaluation.
- Removal oversight teams that monitor material removal operations according to the FRP mission assignment or direction from the OSC.

Interoperability

A key strength that has clearly contributed to the success of the NSF is that the teams are trained, manned, and equipped so the personnel on each team are essentially interchangeable. On virtually every major event in which a strike team deploys, personnel from the other teams come in to assist and augment operations. Everybody assigned to a team is sent to the annual NSF training drawdown (affectionately referred to as NSF “boot camp”) that is held in the late summer/early fall. Other training opportunities are offered jointly so training is consistent and the teams remain interoperable. Looking to the future, the NSF and the Office of Marine Safety Response are leading a multiagency review of the NRS’s special teams to enhance their interoperability. The Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI’s) HAZMAT Response Unit, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Office of Homeland Security, and the Centers for Disease Control have accepted invitations to participate. This review will—

- Assess the special teams’ individual and collective response assets and capabilities.
- Project the role the teams will play in future operations.
- Identify gaps that may currently exist and a strategy for filling in those gaps.

Internal Training and Professional Development

Through the formal relationship bridge provided by the USCG liaison position, the NSF now has an on-the-ground “conduit” into DOD training and professional development. This information bridge has already yielded results as evidenced in the just-in-time training conducted in January 2002. (See inset article, “The Way Ahead Is A Two-Way Street.”) The NSF is capable of providing limited technical training to USCG and other NRT-member agencies in support of preparedness and consequence management activities, specifically in relation to the ICS.

Exercise Coordination

The NSF facilitates the planning, coordination, execution, and participation of players in response-preparedness exercises to strengthen local, state, federal, and industrial coordination (about six to eight exercises per year). For years, the focus of these drills, conducted by the NSF coordination center’s PREP staff, has been on oil and accidental HAZMAT spills/releases. With the new threat environment, the need for multiagency WMD exercises (see inset article, “Port Rio Grande,” page 8) is another excellent example of how the NSF can partner with the organic exercise capabilities and contacts.

Conclusion

Many paradigms have clearly shifted within the NSF and federal response community as a whole. Overall, the NSF strike teams have made dramatic leaps forward in adding to their response capabilities as proven at the World Trade Center cleanup and during the biological remediation

The Way Ahead Is A Two-Way Street

In the wake of the 11 September attacks (and the resultant high-threat environment), the USCG has an even greater need to partner with its sister services within DOD, especially in the WMD/CBRN arena. The corporate resources and joint environment of the Chemical School and the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center (MANSCEN) at Fort Leonard Wood affords the USCG the opportunity to interface and exchange information regarding WMD/CBRN and consequence management with each of the services. Not only can the USCG benefit from the equipment, training, and doctrinal resources, but it can do so in a highly cost-effective manner (for example, low, local per diem; lodging; and airfares). From the USCG’s perspective, our forces could be involved in a WMD or NBC event in a variety of scenarios, primarily under our mission as part of the FRP, but also in executing defense operations and port security. The USCG has traditionally had outstanding response capabilities to address toxic industrial chemicals through the NSTs, but it must be understood that military chemical and biological agents are different in a variety of ways and must be addressed as such. Under the continually emerging National Security Strategy, it will become even more critical for the USCG to interface with the joint services and participate in a like manner to exchange information and coordinate responses to accomplish its goals.

incidents in Boca Raton and Washington. Despite these advances, there are clearly many hurdles ahead. The critical (and most likely immediate) WMD/CBRN shortfall would appear to be in the training arena. As the primary training resource for all DOD NBC personnel, the Chemical School, in conjunction with MANSCEN, has the capability of developing programs of instruction for training the NSF and other team USCG personnel. In January 2002, MANSCEN's Directorate of Training Development worked directly with the 84th Chemical Battalion/Chemical School to conduct a just-in-time training course for more than 30 NSF personnel. The three-day training gave NSF response personnel hands-on experience with chemical, biological, and radiological

equipment and classroom instruction on military agents and included informational briefings from the National Guard's 7th CST and the FBI. "They have an expertise in hazardous material that we don't have," said BG Nilo, "and we have expertise in warfare agents that they don't have."

BG Nilo further expressed that the USCG already knew how to handle spills involving industrial chemicals. "They work with these materials all the time in ports," Nilo said. "They're already well-grounded, more so than many of our young Army students just starting out."

For more information on the NSF, please visit our Web site at www.uscg.mil/hq/nsfcc/nsfweb/

Port Rio Grande

It looked like a scene from a Hollywood movie as emergency responders worked to curb the effects of a simulated chemical terrorist attack during a drill on USCG Island, Alameda, California. The joint service exercise, dubbed "Port Rio Grande," was sponsored by the USCG Integrated Support Command (ISC) Alameda and was one of the largest WMD drills ever held on a USCG installation. Participating units included the ISC Alameda, USCG Cutter *Munro*, the PST, Training Centers Yorktown and Petaluma, Western Region Auxiliary, USCG Investigative Service, and staff from the Pacific Area and Eleventh District. One thing that made the exercise unique was the involvement of DOD assets from the U.S. Army's 464th Chemical Brigade and the California National Guard's 9th Civil Support Team (CST). Delegates from the FBI, EPA, Red Cross, Alameda City Fire Department, and Alameda County HAZMAT represented federal and local agencies.

About 300 personnel participated in Port Rio Grande, which had been in the works for more than three months. Lieutenant Commander Dennis Branson, the exercise director and WMD liaison to the Chemical School, explained, "Our main exercise objective was to provide a shipboard environment to test agency interoperability in responding to a WMD attack." Petty Officer First Class Martha Sturm, an ISC participant, said that the exercise provided a great learning opportunity. She added, "This is all new to us, but we need to be aware of situations like this and learn how to handle them." In addition to their roles as first responders, ISC personnel operated the command and control of the incident and provided security as the CG Cutter *Munro* was "hit" with a simulated nerve gas explosion. Immediately after the incident onboard the *Munro*, a second scenario erupted involving a toxic industrial chemical device in a building on the island. Throughout both events, ISC personnel also stood by with their own organic mass decontamination and medical-treatment equipment as back up to the responding DOD/USCG decontamination and medical teams caring for the simulated casualties. As the island was sealed off and the terrorists (played by team USCG personnel) were taken out by ISC force protection personnel, responders from the 464th, 9th CST, and PST moved in to identify the agents, bring out the "victims," and perform decontamination/medical care. All this was accomplished under the direction of the incident commander, Captain Jim Hass, commanding officer of ISC Alameda. "This was new ground for many Coast Guard men and women, as the Coast Guard works on how to best address and respond to the nation's WMD threat," concluded Hass. The exercise, which used the ICS, provided valuable insight into each agency's role and the capabilities that could be brought to the table. Brigadier General Patricia Nilo (commandant, U.S. Army Chemical School, Fort Leonard Wood) summed up her observations of the day's events. "We're in kind of the crawling phase with all this. The only way you get better is to practice at it." Even though Port Rio Grande yielded important insights, honed skills, and improved doctrine, the nation's road to adequate WMD response is still a long one.