

**Abstract:** 2017-022

2017 INTERNATIONAL OIL SPILL CONFERENCE

**TITLE**

Creation of National Strike Force Center of Expertise:

U. S. Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces “Stem-to-Stern” Review

**AUTHORS**

LCDR Kathryn Campagnini  
U. S. Coast Guard Sector New York Incident Management Division  
212 Coast Guard Drive  
Staten Island, NY 10305  
Phone (718)-354-4070

CDR Tim Gunter, Ed.D., MES, MBA, M.Ed.  
U. S. Coast Guard District 5 Prevention Staff Chief  
One Washington Ave  
Philadelphia, PA 19147  
Phone (215)-271-4937

March 21, 2017

**Abstract**

The United States Coast Guard conducted a review of the National Strike Force's alignment with the Coast Guard organization following direction from Admiral Papp, Commandant of the Coast Guard, for a "Stem to Stern" review of all Deployable Specialized Forces. The Deployable Specialized Force program and its support structure has made significant progress building and sustaining a highly specialized community. Some of these successes include the Incident Management Assist Team. The full purpose and integration of all Deployable Specialized Force units has still not completely achieved full operational capability. One of the recommended courses of action for Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces is to maintain proficiency and provide value across the Coast Guard's mission spectrum included: Establish Centers of Expertise for disaster/ incident response with functionality to include standardization teams, external assessment, and Tactics, Techniques and Policy integration. The review concluded that a separate unit should be established to conduct third party assessment of the National Strike Forces' three Strike Teams. As a result, the National Strike Force Center of Expertise was created under the oversight of the Coast Guard Force Readiness Command. This paper will review the reasons for creation of the National Strike Force Center of Expertise and why it was placed under the Coast Guard Force Readiness Command as a detachment of Training Center Yorktown. Several functional statements of the National Strike Force Center of Expertise will be presented regarding managing environmental response and equipment standardization among the Strike Teams and how the National Strike Force Center of Expertise concept of operations will support future progress for the NSF mission.

**Abstract:** 2017-022

2017 INTERNATIONAL OIL SPILL CONFERENCE

Creation of National Strike Force Center of Expertise:

U. S. Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces “Stem-to-Stern” Review

Throughout Coast Guard history numerous reorganizations have taken place, usually triggered by a major event or casualty. In post-9/11 years subsequent to the Maritime Transportation Security Act of 2002, the Coast Guard experienced unprecedented resource growth that introduced advanced, high-risk competencies that were not previously resident in the Coast Guard. This growth in Coast Guard capacity and capability occurred very rapidly in order to meet our nation’s critical needs and did not always provide for deliberative analysis when implementing such organizational change. The standing intent had been to transition to organic Coast Guard subject matter expertise and training capability for maritime tactical operations as the Deployable Specialized Forces (DSF) operational and training communities matured. The strategic and operational visions for employment of the DSFs have evolved since their original standup based on the Coast Guard’s understanding of mission requirements, priorities, and operational experience (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). In 2011, an overall assessment of the DSF “Stem-to-Stern” Review was completed and it provided the Coast Guard with an opportunity to analyze adjustments necessary to more effectively, efficiently, and proficiently operate with available resources to best meet the nation’s needs. This “Stem-to-Stern” Review produced valid recommendations to ensure DSF members are properly trained, equipped, and supported to meet challenging threats the nation may face in the maritime domain (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). The Coast Guard Commandant’s “Stem-to-Stern” review led to the strategic decision to realign Coast Guard DSF oversight to provide better connectivity and integration which would work to best leverage DSF capabilities.

Strategically, the National Strike Force (NSF) goals are to strengthen its existing specialized response capability, capacity, and competency for environmental preparedness, response and incident management. The NSF established critical NSF programmatic and logistical linkages to operations, mission support, and force readiness. For the NSF, force management was reprogrammed under the Atlantic Area Commander (LANTAREA), as a result of the disestablishment of the Deployable Operations Group (DOG), to take over both operational and administrative control of NSF units. The National Strike Force Coordination Center (NSFCC) works under LANTAREA and continues to provide administrative support to the strike teams, coordinate NSF response resources, and provide subject matter expertise and equipment in support of Federal On-Scene Coordinators (FOSC). Additionally, the NSFCC continues to serve its missions for Marine Environmental Response (MER) Preparedness, as they support, assess, and assist all national response entities in their ability to appropriately respond to an incident/event under the National Contingency Plan (NCP). The focus for NSF modernization was in regards to the Stem-to-Stern review's DSF Proficiency lens – to ensure DSF members and organizational elements attain and sustain proficiency in the capabilities required to meet deployable operational requirements. Modernization established a separate unit to conduct a third party assessment of the NSF's three Strike Teams and refine linkages and strategic relationships with Coast Guard Force Readiness Command (FORCECOM) for training and readiness, known as the National Strike Force Center of Expertise (NSF COE).

## **HISTORY OF THE NSF**

The U. S. Coast Guard's NSF has a distinct history of serving this nation in responding to oil and hazardous substance incidents. The NSF was created in 1973 following federal legislation that authorized in the Federal Pollution Control Act of 1972 (U.S. Coast Guard,

2016). The NSFCC was established as part of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90). OPA 90 restructured two existing strike teams and other units under the NSFCC and established the National Response Unit (NRU) (Crickard, 1993). OPA 90 mandated the functions of the NSFCC, including maintaining a response resource inventory, managing the Strikes Teams, and overall technical spill preparedness support (Crickard, 1993). The overall mission of the NSFCC was described as (Crickard, 1993): “The National Strike Force is a highly trained cadre of Coast Guard response specialists available to rapidly deploy with specialized equipment to support an FOSC prepare for and respond to oil and hazardous chemical incidents, in order to reduce environmental damage and adverse impact on the public” (p.273). While the NSF mission continues to grow it has experienced numerous organizational changes over the last 30 years.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the NSF was integrated into the DOG (Military.com, 2016). The creation of the DOG after 9/11 was the largest organizational change since OPA 90. The DOG was intended to provide a single command to oversee all Coast Guard DSFs (Smith, 2016). Some of these specialized forces included: the NSF, along with Port Security Units, Tactical Law Enforcement Teams, and Marine Safety and Security Teams. The new model of the DOG was a major organizational shift for the NSF, which placed it with numerous other security units focused on tactical law enforcement fundamentals. The NSF mission has never included tactical weapons. This organizational change constituted a major shift in the program management of the NSF through spill response experts at U. S. Coast Guard Headquarters which was the model established after EXXON Valdez spill in 1989.

## **SPECIAL TEAM MISHAPS**

In the early 1970s, the NSF was tasked to develop an experimental dive program (Hanson, 2015). In 1974, DC1 Dennis Perry lost his life while responding to a tank vessel grounding during diving operations. This event was a moment of pause for the NSF (Hanson, 2015) as the NSF learned valuable lessons from previous mishaps. The NSF discontinued diving operations of one of its mission. Other dive mishaps have occurred in the U. S. Coast Guard as well. Most recently, in 2006 two U.S. Coast Guard divers from the Coast Guard Cutter HEALY perished during diving operations in the Arctic (Hanson, 2015). This accident led to multiple Congressional inquiries and changed many aspects of the current dive program within the Coast Guard today (Hanson, 2015).

The DOG experienced numerous challenges and several additional mishaps. One of the most significant of these accidents was the loss of Maritime Enforcement Specialist Third Class Shaun Lin, while participating in training for Hook and Climb delivery in the coastal waters of Virginia (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011a). According to U.S. Coast Guard (2011a), “The mishap was preventable. It resulted from the cumulative effects of a series of failures to consistently follow safety procedures and exercise sound judgment, both systemically, by failing to provide clear, comprehensive doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) to those responsible for training, and individually, by failing to follow or enforce established safety procedures and accurately assess foreseeable risks” (p.16). As a result, the Commandant of the U. S. Coast Guard initiated a DSF “Stem to Stern” Review (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b).

### **DSF STEM TO STERN REVIEW**

The DSF “Stem to Stern” Review was initiated in February 2011 and was led by a flag level work group as directed by the Coast Guard Commandant. The Commandant expressed concern regarding the operational framework of the DOG in the division between operational

**Abstract:** 2017-022

## 2017 INTERNATIONAL OIL SPILL CONFERENCE

and administrative control (U.S. Coast Guard, 2011b). Additionally, the Commandant identified unit cohesion issues since the DOG was in a separate command structure from operational commanders at Atlantic and Pacific Areas (U. S. Coast Guard, 2011b). As a result, changes to the NSF organization structure included the transition of the NSF Force Manager at the DOG to LANTAREA. Additionally, the Public Information Assistance Team was transferred to the Incident Management Assistance Team. Coast Guard leadership's assignment was focused on improving proficiency and seeking out third party training evaluation, thus initiating the establishment of the NSF COE, in 2014, under FORCECOM.

### **FORCECOM**

The FORCECOM mission and overarching responsibility is to prepare the workforce to execute the full range of their duties. This is done by adhering to the Human Performance Cycle focusing on: the management of all relevant operational and mission support training; alignment with clear, adaptive TTP; and continual improvement through feedback and lessons learned captured by quality assessments and exercise support. The FORCECOM enterprise provides adaptive program TTP, optimizes operational and mission support training, and conducts quality assessments for standardization oversight. DSF "Stem-to-Stern" decision memos had the DSF community focus on training capacity and proficiency. These efforts lead to the integration into the FORCECOM system which could provide initial training for all high-risk skill-sets, initial and sustainment training of all high-risk instructors, standardization (STAN) Teams, exercise assessment, and collaborative TTP development. This led to the creation of the NSF COE which was placed under the Coast Guard's FORCECOM enterprise, as a detachment of Training Center Yorktown. The NSF COE was stood up in September 2013; it consists of eight members and is physically located with the NSFCC in Elizabeth City, NC to optimize communication and

coordination. The NSF COE will provide consistency of NSF readiness while aligning human performance technology principles, coordinate efforts with respective entities of the Coast Guard enterprise, and integrate performance support into NSF units. The FORCECOM training manager fulfills the role as liaison between the NSF program manager and NSF COE to provide guidance and assistance in all training management duties in alignment with FORCECOM's standard operation procedures. The NSF COE will ensure alignment and consistency of NSF readiness with larger organizational MER and incident management programs.

### **CENTER OF EXPERTISE CONCEPT**

The framework for developing the NSF COE was based on the Commandant's decisions pursuant to the DSF "Stem-to Stern" Review. The Coast Guard Commandant approved the recommendation to establish a disaster/incident response COE with functionality to include STAN teams, external assessment, and TTP integration, as well as, provide initial training for the response personnel. The objectives were to properly train, qualify, and build a proficient NSF community; leverage the COE for external assessments and incorporating lessons learned; and improve readiness through standardized training that supports mission execution for operational commanders and interagency partners. With these objectives in mind, the Office of Marine Environmental Response (CG-MER) as chair of the DSF "Stem-to-Stern" Review Implementation sub-workgroup for NSF modernization, conducted an analysis of all functional statements for the NSF and separated out the functions specific to the COE. The creation of the NSF COE was an extremely complex evolution, which was further complicated by a deteriorating federal budget environment, in which the NSF COE was established in a cost neutral environment with resources internal to the NSF operational units. Therefore, the NSF COE was established without additional resources or funding to provide the proper staffing and



maintain operational billets within the Strike Teams. NSF COE support is envisioned for operations conducted by the three Strike Teams, with no intention to provide COE functions to additional field units conducting MER or incident management. The overall mission of the NSF COE is to manage environmental response training and equipment standardization among NSF units.

## **FUNCTIONALITY**

It was determined that the COE would manage hi-risk training, evaluation, standardization, doctrine development, and would be the integrator for administrative and logistics support for the three Strike Teams. The NSF COE was developed to execute the following five functional areas:

1. Training management - manage all basic, advanced and train-the-trainer training
2. Doctrine/TTP oversight - create training and performance support materials to standardize, align, update and integrate doctrine and TTP
3. STAN assessments - manage organic and coordinate external standardization teams for responders and boat crewmembers
4. Ready for operations (RFO) assessments - deploy third-party assessment and evaluation teams that will evaluate individual levels of human performance proficiency and unit readiness
5. Operational test and evaluation (OT&E) support - coordinate operational testing and evaluation of prototype initiatives for personnel and platforms by testing new equipment prior to CG-wide deployment.

The NSF has a robust Responder development program that defines training and qualifications for all members within the Strike Teams. NSF members have an array of over 60 specialized

trainings that they participate in, most of which are contracted or conducted through ad hoc training strategies. The goal of the recommendations from the DSF “Stem-to-Stern” Review was to embed a training detachment at NSFCC to leverage proficient capabilities for disaster/incident response. The Coast Guard Training System standard operation procedures should provide guidance on the management and execution of NSF training. The NSF COE is an active participant in the NSF training workgroup and collects feedback to develop recommendations for training improvements in conjunction with FORCECOM Training Division.

Additionally, NSF COE will be responsible for integrating the management and maintenance of doctrine and TTP relating solely to the unique functions and duties of NSF operations. NSF doctrine and TTP includes operation/management of equipment, safety procedures, and integration with local, regional, and national commands. NSF COE will not own the doctrine or TTP, but rather serve as the process facilitator and steward of FORCECOM policies and procedures, so the NSF will still provide the subject matter expertise in development of operational TTP. The NSF COE will provide support and feedback to ensure alignment with Coast Guard wide environmental response and emergency management doctrine and TTP. These two programs are currently owned by the Assistant Commandant of Response (CG-5) and Assistant Commandant of Capabilities (CG-7).

The NSF COE will conduct periodic STAN assessments and observe/support RFO evaluations at each Strike Team to ensure alignment and interoperability of NSF units through inspection and assessment of the unit's training program, and readiness of personnel and equipment in the areas of oil, hazardous materials, and weapons of mass destruction response. The assessment verifies that the Strike Teams are adhering to Commandant policy, which includes assessing the Required Operational Capabilities (ROC) and Projected Operating

Environment (POE) for Coast Guard National Strike Force Strike Teams, COMDTINST

3501.57. Through the results from these assessments, the NSF COE will disseminate lessons learned and best practice to the Strike Teams and provide program managers with recommended standardized performance requirements. This will assist the NSF program in incorporating new standard procedures and techniques used and/or improve problem areas regarding procedures and techniques employed by response forces, response equipment, and small boats.

Lastly, the NSF COE will be taking lessons learned from exercises, actual operations and STAN/RFO assessments and employ that information to identify trends and emerging technologies to close gaps. Whether a capabilities gap is identified through exercise, assessment, operations, or the ROC & POE, the Office of Specialized Capabilities (CG-721) is responsible for identifying what technologies exist that could close the gap. A needed capability will then go through OT&E; which is envisioned as a means to evaluate the operational effectiveness and suitability of new equipment and technologies to support NSF operations. CG-721 will coordinate with the NSF COE to develop a comprehensive OT&E plan and conduct field trials to test and evaluate the technology. When new equipment is chosen to be standardized amongst the strike teams, then the NSF COE will assess and align the equipment systems with TTP and training programs in accordance with the NSF ROC & POE.

## **CURRENT STATUS**

Three years following the establishment of the NSF COE, while progress has been slow and challenging at best, the eight members who make up the NSF COE are officially in place and have been diligently working to determine what their functional lanes actually are and pushing forward the most important functions that will support the NSF program at this time. Most of the focus has been on training management and aligning all the NSF courses, except unit-level

training, under NSF COE management in coordination with the FORCECOM training manager and CG-721 NSF course manager. The challenge with expanding to other functional areas is due to lack of fully being resourced properly and not incorporating similar processes from the Special Missions Training Center's COE for the other DSF units into the establishment of this unit. The NSF COE has been able to meet with SMTC and review their programs and processes to evaluate where they may align similar business practices and leverage support, though significantly lack the resources to build up to the same capacity. The NSF COE also has plans to develop new equipment OT&E and determine the training process necessary for evaluating equipment. Further down the road they will begin to shepherd the TTP process within FORCECOM to ensure all NSF TTP is properly documented and reviewed.

However, the most significant step forward takes place at the end of April 2017. The NSF COE hosts their first NSF Joint Exercise to conduct a standardized training evaluation amongst the three Strike Teams. Building out a joint exercise takes a lot of time and commitment in which the Strike Teams which don't consistently have the capacity to manage. As a result, the NSF COE will truly evaluate the standardization and proficiency of the NSF during the April 2017 exercise. The purpose of the exercise is to validate procedures and policies, challenge SOPs and response plans, and develop lessons learned to support future operations. Members from each Strike Team will participate over multiple days on several proficiency drills. Being able to provide this level of external assessment and exercise development, allows the Strike Teams to focus more on developing proficiency through training and operations.

## **CONCLUSION**

**Abstract:** 2017-022

## 2017 INTERNATIONAL OIL SPILL CONFERENCE

As a detachment to Training Center Yorktown under the FORCECOM enterprise, the NSF COE is strategically positioned to provide consistency of NSF readiness while aligning with human performance technology principles. The scope of the NSF COE carries out the directives of the Coast Guard Commandant to help attain and sustain proficiency of NSF capabilities to meet deployable operational requirements now and into the future. The NSF COE will coordinate efforts with respective entities of the Coast Guard Enterprise and in some cases, with other governmental agencies and industry, to obtain information, collaborate on decision-making, and integrate performance support into NSF units. This modernization effort will continue to provide operational commanders with a highly proficient workforce integrated into FORCECOM's human performance systems, as the NSF COE develops adequate training and assessment to sustain highly proficient tactical operators. As the pieces connect more efficiently within the Coast Guard enterprise organization, the NSF will continue to develop and provide highly trained, experienced personnel and specialized equipment to meet exigent mission requirements, for both response and preparedness against all hazards and threats, including terrorism, in order to protect public health and the environment.

## REFERENCES

Crickard, M. 1993. Post-OPA 90 National Strike Force. International Oil Spill Conference. doi: <http://ioscproceedings.org/doi/abs/10.7901/2169-3358-1993-1-273>

Hanson, J. 2015. The Coast Guard NSF Dive Program, doi: [https://www.uscg.mil/proceedings/archive/2015/Vol72\\_No1\\_Spr2015.pdf](https://www.uscg.mil/proceedings/archive/2015/Vol72_No1_Spr2015.pdf)

**Abstract:** 2017-022

2017 INTERNATIONAL OIL SPILL CONFERENCE

Military.com. 2016. Deployable Operations Group. doi: <http://www.military.com/special-operations/deployable-operations-group.html>

National Response Team. 2011. On Scene Coordinator Report Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill. doi: [http://www.uscg.mil/foia/docs/dwh/fosc\\_dwh\\_report.pdf](http://www.uscg.mil/foia/docs/dwh/fosc_dwh_report.pdf)

National Response Team. 2016. National Strike Force Coordination Center. doi: <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:XgWbqJWy2mAJ:https://www.nrt.org/site/download.ashx%3Fcounter%3D2957+&cd=3&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>

Romero, A. 2014. National Strike Force Center of Expertise Joins FORCECOM. doi: [https://www.uscg.mil/forcecom/docs/FORCECOM\\_Newsletter\\_Vol\\_II\\_Issue\\_1.pdf](https://www.uscg.mil/forcecom/docs/FORCECOM_Newsletter_Vol_II_Issue_1.pdf)

Smith, G. 2011. Deployable Specialized Forces Stem to Stern Review update. doi: <http://coastguard.dodlive.mil/2011/08/deployable-specialized-forces-stem-to-stern-review-update/>

Smith, S. 2016. Coast Guard Specialized Forces Overview. doi: <http://www.military.com/military-fitness/coast-guard-special-training/u-s-coast-guard-deployable-specialized-forces>

U. S. Coast Guard. 2011a. Final action of the administrative investigation into the MSST New York personnel casualty that occurred on the James River near Portsmouth, Virginia on 13 October 2010. doi: [https://www.uscg.mil/foia/docs/MSST\\_NY\\_FAM.pdf](https://www.uscg.mil/foia/docs/MSST_NY_FAM.pdf)

U.S. Coast Guard. 2011b. Shipmates 13: Deployable Specialized Forces (DSF) Stem to Stern Review Update. doi: [https://www.uscg.mil/announcements/alcoast/383-11\\_alcoast.txt](https://www.uscg.mil/announcements/alcoast/383-11_alcoast.txt)

U.S. Coast Guard. 2016. USCG National Strike Force, Elizabeth City, NC. doi: <https://www.uscg.mil/hq/nsfweb/NSF/nsfhistory.asp>