Customs and security

Port police hurricane response

In the wake of the recent disasters brought on by the hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we would be remiss if we did not pay our thanks to those who did what they could in response with their aid, donations, and kindness. The State of Texas was not only hit by one of the major storms, but it also acted as refuge to those who were impacted by the events. The help and support from the State of Texas is ongoing and greatly appreciated.

The Port of Houston and its Command Centre staff have worked continuously in hurricane response and have put forth a tremendous effort, and been rewarded with success. In Chief Whitmarsh’s own words: “This building is self-sustaining with power and water to deal with any level of emergency... We are prepared to respond to any crisis.”

And respond they did! The Port of Houston participated in one of the most demanding disaster management exercises for US ports to date. We are confident that we are learning from these experiences and that we will be better prepared in the future – our work continues.

As a refresher and reminder to everyone about what exactly the Command Centre is and what its capabilities are, below is an overview, reprinted with kind permission from the latest IAASP yearbook.

Port of Houston Command Centre

If a hurricane were to strike the Houston-Galveston region or if a terrorist were to attack the port, communication would be a key response component. However, modern business communications tools such as e-mail and cell phones are not as reliable as old-fashioned face-to-face contact.

To facilitate immediate and accurate communication exchange, the Port of Houston Authority designed and constructed the Port Coordination Center (PCC). This facility serves as a ‘command centre’ for the Port Coordination Team, which consists of security personnel from the PHA, the U.S. Coast Guard, the FBI, Customs and Border Protection, and various local and national police agencies.

“The Port of Houston is a complex and sprawling port, like no other in the country,” said Russell Whitmarsh, Chief of the port authority’s police department. “Responding to any type of emergency – be it a natural occurrence, a chemical plant situation or any type of security threat – would be daunting without a means of immediate and reliable communication.”

Located on port authority property, the PCC is staffed around the clock by port police. The central communications room is permanently set up with computers and other communications devices; personnel from the various Port Coordination Team members have assigned seating to ease the flow of communication.
“If the PCC were activated, information would flow from the various agencies and funnel to Coast Guard Capt. Rick Kaser and the Coast Guard’s Marine Safety Office,” said Whitmarsh. “This center would be the portal of information to and from the Coast Guard and various waterfront facilities along the Houston Ship Channel.”

Testing the system
To test the communication system, the Port Coordination Team conducted a drill. The focus was to push the center’s ability to handle an influx of calls, emails, faxes, etc. “We learned the volume of communication traffic that we are capable of handling,” stated Whitmarsh. “We found some areas that we are beefing up, and we expect our process to continue to improve with more training. Just as avenues of communication are always evolving, our coordination center will grow and improve with technology.”

The ability to respond rapidly and accurately will ensure that the ship channel returns to business as usual, said Kaser, who is both commanding officer and Captain of the Port for the Houston–Galveston–Texas City–Freeport port region. “With the PCC, the port community is able to look, see and track the status of an emergency at a physical plant or on a ship as well as track vessel movement in various policing agencies along the Houston Ship Channel or equally the ship channel,” Kaser said. “We will handle the response based on information and intelligence gathered from both the local and national levels.”

With this supply of information, the Coast Guard as well as the maritime industry can activate their security plans and communicate back to the captain of the port. Based on the free flow of information, the Coast Guard can start moving vessel traffic safely again. “The criticality of re-opening the port is really important,” he said. “All of our petroleum operations make us a vitally important component of the economy. We supply the oil and gasoline needs for a large region of the nation, therefore we are steadfast in our protection of the port’s facilities.”

To assure that the PCC is ever-ready to ramp up staffing, the building was designed with numerous system backups, Whitmarsh said. “We have many hardware redundancies, and our backups have backups,” he said. “This building is self-sustaining with power...
and water to deal with any level of emergency. The ports of New
York and Los Angeles have communications centres, but those
facilities are not as sophisticated and self-sustaining as ours is. We
are prepared to respond to any crisis.”

Chief Russell Whitmarsh talks about the
PCC in his own words

Filling a need
One of the first questions I was asked, after learning we had
received some of the grant funding needed to build the Port of
Houston Authority Command Centre, or what we call the PCC
was “command of what?” It is still a very good question and one
that deserves answering.

Its genesis began in knowing that while we knew we would
need a place for centralisation of our port surveillance and
alarm systems, we also had ‘other’ needs. For example, we also
needed to upgrade our radio system to improve the security
of the area we work out of. To meet these and other current
changing demands and also to have a self-supportive centre that
our Police, Marine Fire, and Security could continue to operate
during times of severe weather conditions, loss of power/water,
or extreme security incidents/events, we recognised we needed
to change also. So to meet the Port of Houston Authority
security requirements, we adjusted to become better capable and
defined – and today, we are really just in the very early stages of
all this change.

Main functions
The PCC has many functions; on most days it is the
administration office of the Ports Police, Facility Security Officer
(FSO) programme and dispatch for those areas to include our
Marine Fire Department. But when called upon, we can now
also function as a ‘portal’ of sorts, to allow information, data and
CCTV sharing between ourselves, the US Coast Guard and other
emergency centres. Further, when activated during heightened
security levels or weather or industrial accidents, we serve
as the communications link between the Caption of the Port
(COTP) and the approximately ninety (90) FSO’s of those private
industries that make up the Port of Houston.

The PCC facility itself has large paved areas that allow for
Emergency First Responder staging. To make this possible, on
one side of our facility, we have installed R/V type plug-ins to allow
emergency mobile units to have access to data, phone and power
lines. We have ordered portable decontamination units that we
will store on site for this staging area and for the region.

We also have a very large warehouse attached to the PCC.
One that is in need of repair, but doing what ports do (meaning,
moving cargo) it seems a perfect spot for a logistics centre and the
movement of emergency equipment and supplies in support of
this region, during times of need.

The people
There are many people that have put time and effort into
making this centre a reality. There is a core security team that
works together on every security project that I must tip my hat
to: Scott Forbes (government relations), Tom Schroeter (legal),
Eddie Fuller (Information Technology), Alex Skinner-Klee (grants
administration), Jim Eldridge and Ray Attar (engineer). We still
have much work to do though, for the PCC is far from complete
and more funding is required to develop it further; like the staging
area and logistics centre.

So back to the simple sounding, but very tough question...
Command of what? The answer is not so much ‘Command of’
but ‘of Purpose’. It is here to protect the people and assist the Port
of Houston, maximising any response required and to capitalise
on our efforts in making a more safe and secure port and region – Port
Command Centre just sounds so much better!

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND THE ORGANISATION

Russell Whitmarsh is the Chief
of Police for the Port of Houston
Authority. He began his professional
career in security/law enforcement in
1973 when he worked as a security
specialist for the U.S. Air Force in ground defense,
cross-training in military law enforcement. Civilian
accomplishments include security management
working with 85 branch banks reviewing and
implementing security methods and procedures in
electronic surveillance and alarm systems. He is a
graduate from the Criminal Justice Center of the
University of Houston in law enforcement and has
a Masters Certification with the Texas Commission
of Law Enforcement Officers Standards & Education.
He has expertise in Seaport Security Antiterrorism
Training and Cargo Loss & Theft Prevention. Chief
Whitmarsh is the current President of the International
Association of Airport and Seaport Police.
The IAASP, a non-governmental and non-profit
association, was formed in 1969 bringing together
representatives of police, other enforcement agencies
and the transportation industry in the movement
of passengers and cargo at airports and seaports
around the world. The Association has served in a
consultative capacity with the United Nations, the
US Department of Transportation, US Senate, the
National Cargo Security Council, the Canadian
Ministry of Transport and other organisations
dedicated to port law enforcement, port security and
economic development.

ENQUIRIES

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