



5830

2 OCT 2009

MEMORANDUM

From: R. J. Papp, Jr., VADM
CG LANTAREA (LANT-00)

Reply
to
Attn of:

To: Distribution

Subj: FINAL ACTION ON INVESTIGATION INTO THE COORDINATION AND
CONDUCT OF STA WASHINGTON UNIT TRAINING ON THE POTOMAC
RIVER ON 11 SEPTEMBER 2009

Ref: (a) CG Administrative Investigation Manual, COMDINST M5830.1

1. Having considered reference (a) and other applicable references, appropriate actions are hereby ordered, and this administrative investigation is closed. A summary of the pertinent facts and my opinions based on those facts are herein provided. Progress with respect to the ordered actions shall be reported on a monthly basis to my Director of Staff until all ordered actions have been implemented.

2. Factual Summary. The events and actions detailed here occurred on the morning of September 11th, 2009, when Station Washington conducted a series of planned training evolutions on the Potomac River.

At approximately 9:30 a.m. local time, Station Washington began conducting routine, unit-level approved, response boat (RB) training with four small boats in an area between the 14th Street and Memorial Bridges on the Potomac River. One of the boats was to act as an aggressor during the training evolutions and one was to be the safety observer. The remaining two boats were to employ tactics, including high-speed maneuvering, necessary to counter actions of the aggressor boat. The training was in preparation for an upcoming internal Coast Guard inspection and evaluation of crew proficiency. Initial planning for the training had occurred the previous week in anticipation of the originally scheduled training date of September 4, 2009, and included a series of 7 separate scenarios to be conducted. Attempts to conduct training as scheduled had been postponed multiple times for various reasons including crew shortages and a potential short notice support request for security during movement of the President (POTUS). Due to its location within the National Capital Region and multi-mission status, Station Washington is designated a Level 1 unit. Level 1 is the highest tactical USCG designation for small boat stations and crews must train regularly to maintain competency.

Station Washington was not asked to provide security for any of the 9/11 events taking place, and as a result the station was not informed of POTUS movements within the region. The Station Washington Commanding Officer (CO) considered the significance of 9/11 before approving response readiness training on that date and determined it was an opportunity to pay respect to those tragically lost. Law enforcement agencies train frequently, both separately and

together, within the region and interagency notifications were not expected nor made for single agency training evolutions.

During training the RB crews maintain radio contact with the station and the Sector Baltimore office, which is located in Baltimore, to ensure tactical oversight and safety during high-speed maneuvering operations. Although upgrades are in progress and secure communications are expected to be operable by the end of January, 2010, current technical radio equipment range limitations required the use of radio frequencies that were subject to listening by non-Coast Guard persons. Station Washington commonly uses a standard FCC-designated internal USCG non-emergency, non-secure radio frequency to communicate during training with a range that meets safety and oversight purposes, as it did that morning. No communications were made by those conducting the training over any emergency or law enforcement operational radio frequencies.

Tactical training includes simulating warning shots, disabling fire, and other action against non-compliant vessels. During this training event, no actual rounds were fired. Station Washington RB operators broadcasted “bang, bang, bang” and the simulated number of rounds fired to communicate they were firing weapons during the training evolution and the level of force being applied. This helps the evaluators assess the use of force decisions during the training, and the effectiveness of the force employed. RB operators used current standard training disclaimers during the simulations that were geared to a Coast Guard audience. Persons unfamiliar with USCG terminology may not have understood the disclaimers.

At 9:40 a.m. USCG External Affairs received a call from CNN inquiring whether there was a security breach on the Potomac. At 9:43 a.m. External Affairs contacted the National Command Center (NCC) requesting confirmation of the CNN report. The NCC had no reports of non-compliant boats on the Potomac, but continued internal efforts to confirm. At 9:45 a.m. the NCC contacted the Atlantic Area (LANT) Command Center. The LANT Command Center conferred with the Fifth District (D5) Command Center, who relayed the question to Sector Baltimore. After determining there were no active cases, the LANT Command Center reported to the NCC that they had no reports of security breaches on the Potomac. At approximately 9:53 a.m. Coast Guard External Affairs contacted CNN and told them they had no information regarding any incidents on the Potomac.

At some time during the training, two DC metro police boats passed by the training area. A Secret Service officer was embarked aboard one of them. The RBs stopped the training and spoke with the Marine Police about their intentions. Station Washington was then informed of a POTUS motorcade in the area, but specific details were not discussed. Training was resumed and the Marine Police departed. POTUS left the Pentagon at 9:52 a.m. and arrived at the White House at 9:58 a.m., crossing a bridge near the location of the exercise. None of the training participants actually saw the motorcade.

From 9:57 until 10 a.m. CG External Affairs received e-mail inquiries from CNN saying their scanner listener was quite sure something was going on, their camera was showing a fair amount

of small boat activity, and to call ASAP. Coast Guard External Affairs called CNN and was told CNN heard that the CG had fired shots on the Potomac. CG External Affairs stated that they were gathering information and could not confirm anything at this time. CG External Affairs put CNN on hold, relayed CNN's phone report of "shots fired" to elements of the CG including the NCC, and requested further information. The NCC again contacted the LANT Command Center and this time relayed the new report that CNN thought shots had been fired. Simultaneously, CNN began broadcasting breaking news reports that the USCG had fired shots during a breach of security on the Potomac at approximately 10:04 a.m. District 5 immediately contacted Sector Baltimore again and confirmed that the USCG was not conducting vessel boardings or firing rounds at any vessels on the Potomac.

After the CNN broadcast, the DC Metro Marine Police boats, with the Secret Service agent still embarked, returned to the training area and asked if shots had been fired. They also inquired whether the RBs had been made aware of POTUS' movement. After receiving a negative response to both questions, the Marine Police departed the area.

At approximately 10:10 a.m. USCG External Affairs took CNN off hold and informed them that there were no reported incidents on the Potomac. At 10:11 a.m. CNN issued a wire report notification of the alleged incident. At 10:12 a.m. the National Capitol Region Air Defense (NCRAD) aircraft was ordered by Eastern Air Defense System to launch in response to the media reports. From approximately 10:13 to 10:30 a.m., several USCG Public Affairs offices fielded calls from multiple news agencies attempting to obtain information on the incident. Many major news agencies reached the Sector Baltimore Command Center and were informed the boats were merely conducting training. Those who contacted other CG units and Public Affairs personnel were either given similar information regarding the training evolution or told there was no confirmation and USCG would call them back (depending on their location and information they had available). No media were ever given false reports regarding this incident by CG personnel. At 10:17 a.m. the Transportation Security Operations Center prompted the FAA to invoke what was eventually a 14 minute ground hold that affected 17 flights departing from Ronald Reagan National Airport. At 10:18 a.m. Coast Guard External Affairs called CNN and informed them that there were no security breaches on the Potomac that morning. At 10:34 CNN asked Coast Guard Public Affairs for a phone interview regarding the incident. The NCRAD aircraft returned to base at 10:37 a.m. At 10:39 a.m. Sector Baltimore broadcasted a Special Maritime Information Broadcast on VHF channel 16, a widely used public radio frequency, that there was Law Enforcement training occurring on the Potomac. At 10:44 a.m. the RBs returned to Station Washington. At 10:47 a.m. CNN asked Coast Guard Public Affairs to confirm no shots were fired. At 11:06 a.m. the Coast Guard issued a statement explaining that reports in the media were based on overheard radio calls from a training event. At 12:00 p.m. the Chief of Staff of the U.S. Coast Guard held a press conference at CG Headquarters.

3. Opinions. It is my opinion that Station Washington followed standard policy and practices when conducting training on the Potomac on September 11, 2009. My specific opinions regarding the response efforts are:

- a. Both Sector Baltimore and STA Washington's command guiding philosophy and standard operating procedures are in concert with Commandant, Area and District expectations.
- b. STA Washington did not deviate from its standard training protocols while conducting training on 11 September 2009.
- c. Although the unit adhered to current policy and practices and had no specific knowledge of POTUS exact movements on 11 September 2009, STA Washington's decision to conduct training on that morning in the selected training area was ill-advised. STA Washington should have considered the potential for misinterpretation and sought guidance from Sector Baltimore. Discussion with Sector Baltimore might have led to additional scrutiny of STA Washington's decision to conduct the training on the morning of 11 September 2009.
- d. The training location and scheduled date and time would have been adjusted if STA Washington or Sector Baltimore had received advance notice of POTUS movement near the water.
- e. The training safety observer should have concluded training after receiving numerous inquiries about Coast Guard involvement with "shots fired" on the Potomac River. The on-scene decision to continue training was ill-advised in light of the date of the training evolution, POTUS movement near the training area, and repeated inquiries. STA Washington's collective decision to complete the final two of seven total drills added to the level of misinterpretation and confusion.
- f. STA Washington's training was pre-briefed, scripted, and approved to mimic potential scenarios within the NCR. STA Washington's intent was to ensure adequate training and preparedness of its personnel. Unfortunately, due to the similarity and timing of the realistic scenarios and actual events of the day, this led to misinterpretation and confusion.
- g. Throughout the evolution, all boat crews acted professionally. After initial inquiries were received, boat crews rafted together to discuss, clarify, and respond to inquiries. At no point during the training were the boat crews seeking media attention.
- h. Coast Guard training is more likely to be misconstrued as actual operations when located near large, metropolitan areas. STA Washington will always face this challenge within the NCR. However, direct and immediate communications with law enforcement partners will mitigate misperception of training evolutions such as the one conducted on 11 September 2009.
- i. CG policy does not require scrambled communications for training. Although boat-to-boat scrambled communications is possible, neither the Station nor the Sector would have been able to monitor the boats as required by the Boat Operations and Training Manual (COMDTINST M16114.42). The current limitation is projected to be corrected in January 2010, when Rescue 21 is expected to be fully implemented in the Sector Area of Responsibility. Scrambled communications would have prevented the interception of STA Washington's training communications.

4. Directed Actions. The following actions are ordered to optimize Atlantic Area Coast Guard training evolutions in the future, and to make recommendations for potential Coast Guard-wide improvements. No fault or liability should be assumed by virtue of the fact that these actions have been ordered.

a. LANTAREA Districts shall ensure Stations employ a standard broadcast of “This is a drill, this is a drill” on the VHF channel used for training when commencing and ending TTP training scenarios and at any time where the content of the training script calls for announcing “shots fired”, “rounds expended”, “explosions”, etc. to prevent misunderstandings.

b. Security broadcasts on channel 16 shall be considered to further inform the public about the training. Frequent broadcasts are critical to reducing the opportunity for audio misinterpretation.

c. LANTAREA Districts, Sectors, and subordinate units shall utilize encrypted communications during training whenever possible.

d. Fifth District (D5) shall direct Sector Baltimore to require Station Washington to re-engage maritime law enforcement partners in the region and at a minimum provide those partners a copy of the monthly on-water training schedule to improve situational awareness of training and exercise events.

e. LANTAREA Districts shall direct their Sectors to require stations in high-density population or traffic areas to be cognizant of high visibility or high interest events in their area of responsibility and engage their maritime law enforcement partners to improve situational awareness.

f. D5 Public Affairs shall coordinate with Sector Baltimore to develop an outreach plan to inform external audiences of Coast Guard maritime mission responsibilities in the NCR. An active and aggressive outreach posture is required to educate the media and public on how to contact local units and the distinction between policy questions at Headquarters compared to tactical operations at the field level.

g. LANTAREA Director of Operations shall engage Deputy Commandant for Operations to initiate a review of COMDTINST 3100.8A, Critical Incident Communications, to determine if changes can be made to improve the flow of real-time, detailed information from the on-scene unit to the NCC during critical incidents.

h. LANTAREA Districts shall encourage responsible and reasonable media engagement from the field in accordance with COMDTINST M5728.2D, Public Affairs Manual, unless questions turn to Coast Guard policy. Once Public Affairs Guidance is developed during an operational incident, all elements of the chain of command should be leveraged to present a consistent message to the media. The LANT command center has an integrated Public Affairs Watch that is manned 24/7 and provides a ready resource for media monitoring and outreach.

i. D5 shall direct Sector Baltimore and STA Washington to reach out to and coordinate with the Joint Forces Headquarters-NCR Command Center and other similarly-situated command centers in the region to provide situational awareness of training and exercise events.

j. D5 shall direct the Sector Baltimore Command Cadre to assist STA Washington with integrating potential high profile and/or politically sensitive events, which STA Washington has not been previously tasked with supporting, into STA Washington's training and operational schedule. Station Washington shall seek clarification and guidance as to whether an event is high profile and/or politically sensitive from Sector Baltimore regarding any ambiguity during such training and in real world events.

k. LANTAREA Districts shall ensure their subordinate units seek clarification and guidance from their respective Sectors, or in the case of Sectors their respective District, if ambiguity exists as to whether an event is high profile and/or politically sensitive during both training and real world situations.

l. LANTAREA Director of Operations shall examine technological capabilities to improve critical incident communications gaps and improve the flow of information from the field level commanders.

m. D5 shall provide appropriate administrative counseling to the Commanding Officers of Sector Baltimore and Station Washington.

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