

Globally recognised expertise and professionalism

MARINE DEPARTMENT MARITIME RESCUE CO-ORDINATION CENTRE VESSEL TRAFFIC CENTRE

Crewmember Jochen Bruemmer will never forget the 24 hours he spent battling perilous weather and rough seas aboard the yacht, “Precious Dragon”.

He will also carry to his grave the appreciation he feels for members of the Hong Kong Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre (MRCC), without whose help he would almost certainly have perished. He recalls his ordeal, which began on May 18, 2003:

“I had the most terrible hours of my life ... We never will forget what you (the MRCC) did.”

Mr Bruemmer, one of five crewmembers stranded on board the stricken yacht, had never experienced such a serious emergency in his 25 years of sailing. But thanks to the search and rescue mission co-ordinated by the MRCC, he and the other crewmembers were rescued by two tankers.

With a fierce wind of up to 40 knots, heavy showers, violent thunderstorms and waves as high as five metres, the yacht was badly swamped by huge seas off the coast of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean. The crewmembers tried hard to pump the water out but the yacht eventually sank in the 3.8-kilometre-deep ocean. The accident happened over 2,000 nautical miles from Hong Kong and well beyond its area of responsibility for search and rescue. But the MRCC responded instantly to the pleas for help.

“We offered assistance without hesitation,” Senior Marine Officer Summy Chu said. “Just imagine how desperate the crewmembers were with their lives at stake in the dangerous waters out there. The chance of saving all the crewmen was slim should there be any delay. Fortunately, a total of nine vessels responded to our appeal and three of them came to join in the search and rescue.”

With the same spirit of service and professionalism, the MRCC has co-ordinated hundreds of search and rescue operations, saving many hundreds of lives. A recent operation was the dramatic rescue of all 16 crewmembers aboard the container ship, “Fu Feng”. The ship was caught in appalling weather during the passage of a typhoon on July 24, 2003. The MRCC, the Government Flying Service and other search and rescue units co-ordinated their efforts to ensure that all crewmembers were evacuated to safety.

Search and rescue operations

The MRCC, established in 1989, is a world leader in maritime search and rescue operations (SROs), covering the major shipping routes of the South China Sea. The Centre has handled over 2,800 marine incidents since 1993, about a third of which were vessels in distress involving about 800 search and rescue operations, which saved more than 1,300 lives.



Marine Department staff member manning the MRCC.

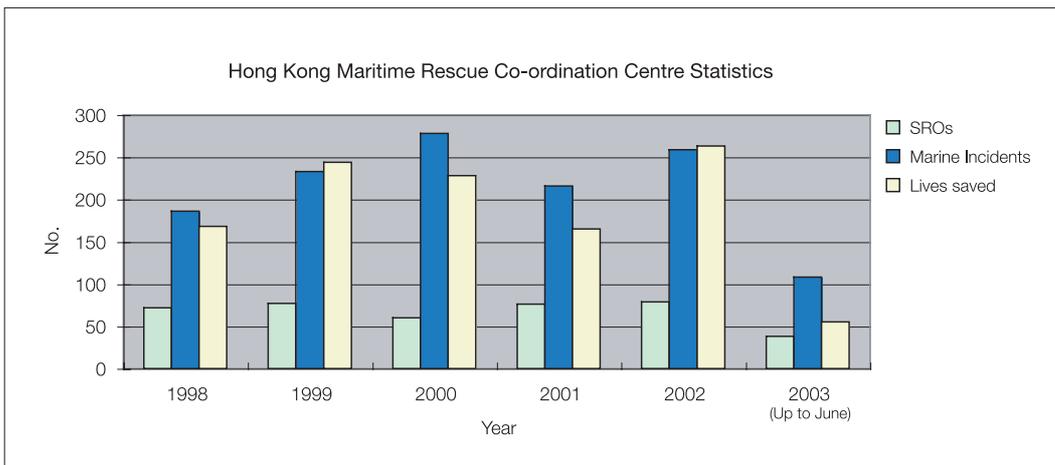


Table 1: Marine incidents, SROs and the number of lives saved by the MRCC.

MRCC's professionalism world-recognised

The expertise and efficiency of Hong Kong's maritime safety operations are recognised globally. Its maritime experts were among those of only eight nations invited to participate as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) members in the United Nations' IMO/International Civil Aviation Organisation joint working group in developing new techniques and procedures to harmonise aeronautical and maritime search and rescue operations. The others were Canada, France, Japan, Norway, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Mr Chu said it was a great honour for Hong Kong to be regularly invited to join in international maritime safety management projects. "Hong Kong, as a city, is on a par with maritime experts like the United States. This could not have been achieved without the hard work of our dedicated staff."



The Director of Marine, Mr S Y Tsui (second from left) and Senior Marine Officer Mr Summy Chu (first from left) receive commendation for its search and rescue operation.

Working with the Vessel Traffic Centre

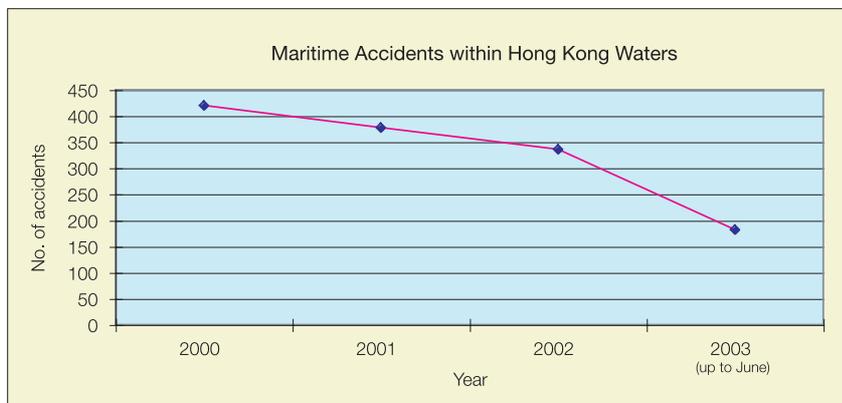
The MRCC is responsible for co-ordinating all rescue missions in the international waters of the South China Sea in the area bordered to the south by latitude 10 degrees north; to the east by longitude 120 degrees east and to the west and north by the coasts of Vietnam and Mainland China and coastal waters within Hong Kong.

Working with the MRCC, the Vessel Traffic Centre (VTC) provides advice on the safe navigation of vessels and the MRCC co-ordinates search and rescue missions. These two centres are located side by side to enhance co-operation and communication in dealing with any maritime emergencies.

Advanced nautical technologies

Hong Kong waters are among the busiest in the world. To advise on the safe navigation of vessels, the VTC was one of the first in Southeast Asia to install the state-of-the-art Vessel Traffic Services System that keeps track of up to 4,000 moving vessels and 1,000 stationary targets in real time simultaneously. It has 10 surveillance radars covering all Hong Kong navigable waters. Automatic Identification System transponders and closed-circuit television cameras have also been mounted at strategic locations for prompt identification of ships. Experts from the United States, Australia, Japan and Singapore have visited the VTC to exchange knowledge and experience in provision of vessel traffic services.

With the implementation of these new technologies, the VTC can contact the corresponding vessel(s) immediately and offer traffic advice in case of potential collisions between vessels or any other accidents. Through the persistent efforts and under the round-the-clock visual surveillance provided by the VTC, the number of marine accidents recorded over the past three years has decreased from 420 cases in 2000 to 378 cases in 2001; and 336 cases in 2002. At June 2003, there had been 182 recorded for the year.



*Table 2:
Number of marine accidents within Hong Kong waters from 1999 to June 2003.*

With no room for complacency, both the MRCC and VTC are constantly searching for further areas of improvement. The two bodies will continue striving for excellence through the close co-operation and exchange of ideas with other maritime safety management and rescue experts.

Senior Marine Officer of the VTC, Marine Department, Mr Butt Lee-yuen shares this vision. “Taking the lead in sharing our expertise with other maritime authorities, we are trying our best to turn the Vessel Traffic Service into a regionally orientated system in which neighbouring ports can exchange and share information through radio data communication gateways and networks.

“We are confident that the MRCC and VTC will do the right things better,” Mr Butt said.