



Unlimited Impossibilities: Intelligence Support to the Deepwater Horizon Response

USCG, Capt. Erich M. Telfer

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In “Unlimited Impossibilities: Intelligence Support to the Deepwater Horizon Response,” CAPT Erich M. Telfer of the U. S. Coast Guard examines the Intelligence Community and Coast Guard response to the 2010 BP oil explosion on Deepwater Horizon, which spilled tons of oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Telfer points out problems that hampered the response and suggests approaches for better communication and coordination in future responses. In April 2010, when BP’s DEEPWATER HORIZON rig exploded and spilled millions of barrels of oil in the Gulf of Mexico, the United States had no national-level plan for intelligence support to guide the process of conducting intelligence collection, analysis, production, and dissemination. The intelligence effort lacked unity of command, and took over a month and a half to develop a functioning system that served strategic- and operational- level decisionmakers well. Even then, it was of less help to tactical responders. A considerable amount of data was collected during the response (primarily by remote sensing), but analyzing, producing, and disseminating the subsequent intelligence proved difficult. The lack of an air tasking order directing and deconflicting all flights above and around the spill resulted in near air-to-air collisions and hampered intelligence collection. In addition, no imagery-based common operating picture existed to display the spill, the impacted areas, and the response effort. To prevent these problems from happening again, the Coast Guard should develop a plan for future spills of national significance that describes the organization, command relationship, function, and goal of intelligence support. The Coast Guard also should establish a system to manipulate and share imagery of the spill among federal, state, local, tribal, private, and public organizations. An air tasking order should guide obtaining this imagery, to ensure flight safety and intelligence collection. Finally, a system for developing a common operating picture should be used to share information and manage intelligence across the spectrum of responders and response activities.

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