

Fire Onboard!

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The Largest Evacuation Exercise at Sea

The whole nation was abuzz with excitement when Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Wong Kan Seng announced during the SCDF Workplan Seminar that Exercise Northstar VI was imminent. With the last memorable simulation two years ago of a bombing attack on an MRT train still fresh on our minds, the revelation that Exercise Northstar VI would be Singapore's first and largest maritime emergency exercise posed an intriguing panorama and instantly developed into a news headliner.

Exercise Northstar VI - A Recount

It was supposed to be an ordinary day on 23rd May 2008 at sea, before a massive fire that broke out on board the cruise ship Superstar Aquarius, which has 13 decks of accommodation and recreational facilities to cater for over 2800 passengers and crew members, set the tone for the rest of

the day. The 1000 passengers on board the ship were badly caught off guard, immediately setting in motion a series of emergency operations by officials from 12 agencies to conduct fire-fighting and safety evacuation exercises.

Heroes at Ground Level

As soon as the fire broke out, the ship's crew burst into action. Their firefighting skills kicked in instinctively, and they were able to speedily evacuate these 1000 passengers from the ship to two designated landing points, namely the Marina South Pier and the Tanah Merah Ferry Terminal. Maritime and Port Authority's (MPA) support came instantaneously to evacuate the passengers to the landing points. Using Api-Api, their state-of-the-art tugboats, they provided seaward boundary-cooling operations to help contain the fire. The arrival of the Chinook helicopters subsequently paralleled a typical rescue scene from an action movie, where the Republic of

Singapore Air Force (RSAF) servicemen airlifted the 'severely injured' to the nearest hospital. Concurrently, the Police Coast Guard (PCG) vessels from the Singapore Police Force (SPF) heaved into the action foray and assisted in enforcing a sea cordon which regulated the flow of seaward traffic around the Superstar Aquarius.

The Ministry of Health (MOH) medical teams, alongside those from SCDF, Singapore Armed Forces and Singapore Red Cross stationed at the landing points, sprung into action as soon as the casualties were ferried to the landing points. The situation would have seemed chaotic to the amateur eye. But the medical teams were resolute when called upon. Casualty after casualty arrived, but unfazed, the medical teams immediately triaged each of them to the landing points, administering first aid and pre-hospital care, making sure that no injured passenger was left unattended.

Off-site Exercise Points

Captivatingly, the drama was not just confined to the waters. From the two landing points, casualties who needed further treatment beyond the onsite facilities were immediately conveyed to the Accident & Emergency Department at Changi General Hospital. This ensured that no unnecessary lives were lost due to insufficient treatment during the first crucial hours of serious injuries.

To cater to the families and next-of-kins of the casualties, the Family Assistance Centre (FAC) at Changi Simei Community Club served as the focal point for them to obtain more information on their loved ones. The situation was expectedly dramatic and tense as anxious family members demanded to know the whereabouts of their loved ones'. Many openly voiced their worry and frustration; some even fainted due to the overwhelming strain. The FAC staff, drawn from the SPF, the Ministry of Community, Youth and Sports (MCYS) Care Teams, grassroots leaders and volunteers from the People's Association (PA), were able to calm down restless relatives who had been traumatized by the happenings of the day. In an effort to cater to all their needs, the staff went a step further to offer food, listen to their outpourings, and provide timely information on their loved ones.



Such was the realism and urgency portrayed in this exercise, that one would have really have thought that disaster had struck Singapore's waters! But fortunately, every action had been pre-empted. In truth, it was months of careful and meticulous planning that gave rise to the memorable action-packed six-hour exercise.

Why a maritime exercise this time round?

Organised by the SCDF, Exercise Northstar VI was a joint effort between 12 agencies - including MPA, SPF and Star Cruises - to test Singapore's on-going efforts to enhance maritime safety and security within Singapore waters. The exercise is timely for Singapore as it develops into a regional cruise hub. It aims to assess the national multi-agency response to a major fire incident involving mass casualties on board a ship. To add a dose of realism and complicity to this exercise, 1000 people role-played as passengers-turned-evacuees onboard the cruise ship. They were drawn from various organizations like SCDF, serving national servicemen, members of the National Civil Defence Cadet Corps (NCDCC), the Singapore Maritime Academy students, and grassroots volunteers.

Compared to Exercise Northstar V which was staged in MRT stations and a bus interchange, the planning, organization and execution of Exercise Northstar VI was equally, if

not, more challenging. "Unlike land fires where resources are almost instantly available, it will take more time to master the resources required where sea fires involving cruise ships at sea are concerned because there is the additional challenge of distance," said DPM Wong, echoing the challenge and the need to conduct such an exercise. Coordination between the agencies is also essential. DPM Wong added that "the purpose of the exercise is to find out what we need to do to beef up our capacity."

Echoing this, COL Eric Yap, Director of Operations Department in SCDF, stressed the significance of this exercise by saying that "it is through such simulated exercises of a national scale, that we would be able to sharpen our operational readiness and validate the capabilities and state of readiness of our homefront agencies."

Judging from the successful completion of Exercise Northstar VI, one would definitely have been proud to play a part in refining Singapore's security. It is through exercises like these that augment and further refine Singapore's safety measures. Yet, despite this, we can never be too comfortable and complacent about Singapore's security. Instead, we should stay vigilant and continually strive to further enhance our security.

Exercise Northstar VII anyone?