

BULLETIN

NO.: 24-006  
DATE: January 18, 2024  
TO: All Personnel  
FROM: Robert Logan, Deputy Fire Chief, Employee Support Services  
SUBJECT: Green Sheet – SDFD's Blacks Beach Capsized Vessel Incident

Attached is the Informational Summary Report of Serious/Near Serious Injuries, Illnesses, Accidents, or Significant Incident (Green Sheet) for the Blacks Beach Capsized Vessel Incident

Thank you to all the Lifeguards and Fire Personnel who shared their experiences for this review.

- **Refer to the SDFD Operations Manual**
  - **SI 10 Section 04 Safety Communications**
- **Please review this as a crew to share all your knowledge and experiences**
  - Supervisors can add their crew members for Vector Solutions assignment completion on all Health & Safety material

Approved by:

- David Picone: SDFD Health & Safety Officer, SDCFCA's Section Chair

This review was conducted by the following San Diego County Health and Safety Section's Serious Incident Review Team (SIRT) members.

- Ron Quinlan: Team Lead – Division Chief, San Miguel Fire Department
- Rob Ford: Lead Investigator – Division Chief, Vista Fire Department
- Jim Laing: Document Specialist – Captain, San Diego Fire-Rescue Department
- Rob Brown: Agency Representative – Lifeguard Sergeant, San Diego Fire-Rescue Department

Any questions should be directed through the chain of command.

Don't hesitate to contact the Health and Safety Office at [SDFDHealth&Safety@sandiego.gov](mailto:SDFDHealth&Safety@sandiego.gov) with comments or areas of improvement. For all other questions, contact HSO/Battalion Chief David Picone at 619.533.4466 or [dpicone@sandiego.gov](mailto:dpicone@sandiego.gov)



The Health & Safety App's QR code

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**Informational Summary Report of  
Serious/Near Serious Injuries,  
Illnesses, Accidents or  
Significant Incident**



**GREEN SHEET**

**San Diego Fire-Rescue Department**

**"Blacks Beach Incident"**

March 11, 2023

Incident Number FS23043034

9600 La Jolla Farms Rd. San Diego, CA 92037

## SUMMARY

On the night of March 11, 2023, two panga vessels involved in transnational smuggling operations entered the surf line at Blacks Beach to execute a drop-off. One of these vessels delivered its passengers. The other overturned in the surf, ejecting the passengers into the water. A witness called 911 via cell phone and requested assistance for those people still in the water. Responders from San Diego Fire-Rescue (SDFD) Lifeguards, Fire Operations, San Diego Police Department, California State Parks, and United States Customs and Border Patrol responded to perform search, rescue, and recovery operations. Eight of the victims from the overturned vessel were ultimately recovered through the efforts of personnel at the scene.

## CONDITIONS

### Weather

- Overcast with dense fog
- Temperature: 57° Fahrenheit
- Relative Humidity: 93%
- Winds: Light variable from the north
- Visibility: 50-75 yards
- Ceiling: 300'

### Road Conditions:

- Paved road
- Unpaved road
- Sand

### Topography:

- Sandstone cliffs and bluffs to flat sandy beach

### Ocean conditions:

- Surf size: 3-5' surf
- Water Temp: 56°
- Tides: March 11 Low 4:37 PM @1.2' High 11:08PM @5.3
- March 12, 2023 Low 7:08AM @0.8'

## SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

**23:30** The SDFD Lifeguard Communications Center (LCC) received a 911 transfer from the San Diego Police Department (SDPD). A Spanish-speaking reporting party (RP) stated that one of two vessels carrying passengers overturned with as many as ten people in the water at the south end of Torrey Pines City/Blacks Beach. The other vessel made it safely to the beach and delivered its passengers. LCC collected the GPS coordinates to confirm the location.

**23:33** LCC notifies the Joint Harbor Operations Center (JHOC) of the landing.

**23:38** The Boating Duty Sergeant (24 Sam/SND 24S) is awakened by the SDPD radio traffic on the radio channel LG DISP 1 and acknowledges the incident. SND 24S requests JHOC notification, air support, State Parks notification, and a lifeguard all-page for a callback.

*Note: LCC and Lifeguard Operations utilize radio notifications from LCC for incident alerting.*

A rescue boat Rescue 5 (SND R5) response is initiated from Mission Bay for the 11-mile response to Blacks Beach (Blacks).

The Northern Duty Sergeant (32 Sam/SND 32S) responds to Blacks from Lifeguard Headquarters on Mission Bay. Lifeguard 3 King (SND 3K) initiated a response to Blacks from La Jolla. Lifeguard 4 Lincoln (SND 4L) acknowledged the call, requested a Capsized Vessel response, and responded with the other Lifeguard Resources. LCC remains staffed with one lifeguard dispatcher.

**23:44** LCC requested a first responder and medic unit to 9600 La Jolla Farms. The incident was initially dispatched and formatted as a medical aid, Drowning/Diving Incident. SND 24S requested one additional ALS unit. SND 4L performed a communications check and repeated the request for a Capsized Vessel response.

**23:48** LCC requested confirmation of rescue boat response and confirmed callback pages. LCC confirmed additional units responding, and SND 24S requested the balance of the Capsized Vessel dispatch be added to the incident. CAD response is changed from a Drowning/Diving Accident to a Capsized Vessel Response.

Capsized Vessel units: San Diego Engine 7 (SND E7), SND E35, San Diego Truck 35 (SNDT35), Medical Supervisor 72 (MS72), Medic 22 (M22), M37, M42, M44, M29, M18, SND LG SND 3K, SND LG SND 32S, SND LG SND 24S, SND LG SND 4L, SND Rescue 5, SND SND B5, Shift commander notification (SCNOT)

*Note: Timestamped events that are described on LG Dispatch 1 will be identified as LG DISP 1. Timestamped events labeled 9A/9B are fire operations communications.*

**23:49** LG DISP 1 – SND 3K arrived at the scene and requested location confirmation, which was verified as the south end of Blacks Beach.

**23:53** LG DISP 1 –LCC advised the GPS coordinates provided by SDPD show in the middle of Torrey Pines City beach.

SND 3K arrived at the scene at the bottom of the road and reported that beach access was limited due to the high tide. They reported that darkness and fog had reduced visibility to no more than 50 yards. SND 3K lifeguards exited their vehicle and proceeded north on foot. They were equipped with wetsuits, swim fins, rescue buoys, one TEA OSK Maritime Swimmer Radio kit, and handheld lighting. SND 3K encountered several college-aged people on the beach, but no one reported knowledge of any emergency.

**23:54** 9A – Air ops advised they were unable to respond due to weather minimums. Metro notified lifeguards that Air Ops was unavailable.

LG DISP 1 – SND 24S requested a status callback status for additional staff and directed any additional personnel to respond to La Jolla.

**23:56** LG DISP 1 – SND 4L advised LCC that he would contact SDPD to divert officers to check for any victims coming up the Citizens Trail. SND 4L advised that all lifeguard units should respond to the base of Black Gold Rd.

**23:56** 9A – SND E9 arrived at the scene and advised "nothing showing" with low visibility and limited beach access. SND E9 attempted to make face-to-face contact with lifeguard units. SND E9 established Blacks Command.

**23:58** LG DISP 1 – SND E9 provided a summary of actions to LCC and requested any additional information. LCC provided an update to IC (SND E9). SND E9 notified LCC of attempts to contact lifeguards and the establishment of command.

**00:00** LG DISP 1 – SND 4L requested a response from CA State Guards to check Torrey Pines State Beach for any further smuggling incidents.

**00:02** LG DISP 1 – SND B5 arrived at scene and made a face-to-face with SND 4L declaring a unified command with SND B5. The incident command post (ICP) is established at 9600 La Jolla Farms near the gate at the top of Black Gold Rd. SND 24S and SND 32S arrived at the scene at the bottom of the road. SND 24S is assigned Rescue Group Supervisor.

9B – IC (SND E9) Blacks IC hailed SND B5 and asked if he wanted to come down to the base of the road and make contact with lifeguards. SND E9 stated that he did not have much information and did not know the location of the vessel. SND B5 remained at the top of the hill with SND 4L.

SND 24S requested an update from SND 3K. SND 3K advised that some of the people on the beach had confirmed a boat on the beach to the north.

IC suggested using UTV/ATVs in the Blacks Beach Storage container.

SND 3K located the first vessel and stated there were no victims in the immediate area of the first vessel. Several lifejackets and gasoline cans were on the beach and in the water. SND 3K advised that the tide reached the foot of the cliff for approximately 250 yards.

**00:05** 9B – SND B5 notified by SND T35 that the SDPD units searching the top of Box Canyon did not find any additional victims or persons associated with the incident.

9A – SND B5 contacted MS72 to go to Torrey Pines State Beach to check the area for any additional rescues or victims.

**00:07** – LCC confirmed that Box Canyon was the location of the original 911 call.

**00:09** – LG DISP 1 – SND 3K located two victims in shallow water. SND 24S advised them to use an MCI triage protocol. The two lifeguards separated and operated independently to search the area. They immediately found the second vessel and searched the area. SND 3K confirmed to SND 24S that a stretcher carryout is the best method for victim transport. SND 3K cleared the vessel and located a third body.

9B – SND E9 and M37 staged at the bottom of the road to receive viable victims. SND 24S and SND 32S walked north up the beach with a stretcher to support recon and triage.

**00:12** – LG DISP 1 – SDPD came up on LG DISP1 to confirm the victim count and confirmed that officers were on the scene with lifeguards.

**00:13** – LG DISP 1 – An off-duty Sergeant announced on LG DISP 1 that he was responding from home in his personal vehicle as part of the emergency callback. IC requested he respond directly to the ICP.

SND 3K located two more victims and advised that the primary search of the shoreline from Black Gold Rd. to Broadway Slide was complete and confirmed five total victims.

SND E9 was directed to the base of the road to be the Medical Group Supervisor. SND 24S confirmed the communications plan to keep beach operations on LG DISP1.

**00:17** – Rescue 5 at scene offshore from Blacks Beach. Rescue 5 stated they had no visibility of any landmarks and could barely make out the lights on the beach. SND 3K requested tide information to determine a safe victim collection point so they did get washed away. Rescue 5 was directed to stay outside the surf line.

**00:19** – SND T35 crew was assigned to the medical group and transported to the bottom of the road by ambulance with their equipment.

**00:23** – LG DISP 1 – SND 24S and SND 32S entered the water to proceed north and support SND 3K in recovery operations. SND 24S stated that the water is knee- to waist-deep and

inaccessible to non-water rescue personnel. SND 24S requested additional water rescue personnel. Rescue 5 searched offshore for victims outside the surf line as far north as Bathtub Rock. Customs and Border Patrol Agents (CBP) are on the beach and work with lifeguards to check the area for victims.

**00:36** - LG DISP 1 – An off-duty sergeant arrived at the scene, checked in at the ICP, and went into service as 41 Sam (SND 41S). After gearing up, he proceeded to the rescue area with stretchers and lighting. SND 32S reported additional victims located on the beach for a total of six. The area is cleared north to the Citizens trail.

**00:41** - LG DISP 1 – Lifeguard Marine Safety Captain (2 Charles/SND 2C) responded to the scene. Two additional off-duty staff went into service at Northern Garage, retrieved a lifeguard vehicle, and responded to Blacks. Personnel remained in rescue mode and continued search and rescue operations.

**00:45** - USCG advised they are sending a helicopter and a small boat.

**00:52** - 9A – Medical Group advised they can hear radio communications, but they have no contact with lifeguards and requested that IC relay any equipment needs from personnel on the beach. Medical Group is advised of the multiple victims on the beach and that they should move as far north as possible to support triage efforts. Med Group advised IC that they would wait until the tide dropped to begin any recovery efforts.

**00:54** - LG DISP 1 - IC confirmed the coordinates of the RP as the search area, which places the location at the mouth of Box Canyon.

**01:01** - LG DISP 1 – SND 2C assumed unified command with SND B5. SND 4L responded to the bottom of the road to support recovery operations. SND 24S confirmed that the area between Broadway Slide and the Wet Spot had been cleared.

**01:07** - LG DISP 1/9A – IC confirmed the transition from rescue to recovery mode. All units except for E9 and M37 cleared. Rescue 5 cleared from the incident.

**01:20** - LG DISP 1 – LG Unit 31 arrived at the scene with callback staff and responded to the bottom of the road.

**01:40** - LG DISP 1 – Lifeguards collected victims at the staging area. 4 Lincoln requests water for the rescuers who are getting hot doing work in their wetsuits. DIVS requested that lifeguards attempt to put a utility vehicle in service.

**01:45** - LG DISP 1 – State Lifeguards arrived at the scene and checked in at the ICP. IC assigned them to support recovery operations.

**01:48** - LG DISP 1 – 4 Lincoln reported that the debris field will need to be secured as a crime scene. He described fuel tanks, overturned vessels, and other evidence. 4 Lincoln advised that additional personnel would be needed to continue the search and recovery

effort if there were any outstanding victims. IC confirmed that CBP Air and Marine Operations coordinated the salvage of the vessels for the following day.

**03:00** - LG DISP 1 - 4 Lincoln reported CBP located an additional victim. Rescue 5 reported it was back at headquarters.

**03:10** - 1 Charles is transported to the scene by 4 Lincoln.

**03:18** - The first two victims are evacuated from the beach to the staging area using a lifeguard truck.

**04:15** - The medical examiner collected the eight recovered victims.

**04:51** - E9 assisted with the demobilization of the scene and went clear. Lifeguard units clear from the scene.

## **INJURIES/DAMAGES**

**Injuries:** No first responders were physically injured in this incident.

**Damage:** No equipment was lost or damaged in this incident.

## **APPLICABLE SAFETY POLICIES**

### **BULLETIN No: 22-13**

- SUBJECT: "Capsized Vessel" Dispatch Response Pilot

### **SDFD Operations Manual- Special Emergencies SI02, Sec. 7, Pg. 1**

- This unique incident is described in the Capsized Vessel Response memo.

### **SDFD Operations Manual- Communications: Chief Officer Notifications, SI03, Sec. 8, Pgs. 1-2**

- Unusual Circumstances

### **SDFD Operations Manual- Injury and Illness Prevention Program: Critical Incident Stress Management, SI10, Sec. 20, Pg. 1**

- Types of incidents that may warrant assistance.

### **SDFD Operations Manual- Injury and Illness Prevention Program: Cold Exposure, Rehabilitation, SI 10, Sec 14B, Cold Exposure, Pg. 1**

- Incidents requiring cold environment rehabilitation

### **SDLG Dispatch Certifications**

- Call Taking
- Swimmer In Distress
- Night Crew Notification

### **SDLG Level 1 D Dispatch Academy Field Training Guide**

### **SDLG Twenty-Four Hour Shift Standard Operating Procedures (2014)**

*\*Note: Outside agencies should review their applicable operations policies shown above\**

## **SAFETY ISSUES FOR REVIEW**

- Operating at night with limited visibility and environmental challenges highlights the need for standardized PPE requirements, including thermal protection, lighting, helmets, reflectivity, and radios with environmental protection.
- Not all resources assigned to critical ICS positions were aware of and in contact with personnel in the hazardous environment, despite attempts to communicate with those resources.
- The Capsized Vessel pilot program states the following: "The 'Capsized Vessel' dispatch will include command and tactical channels for use by all fire and ambulance personnel and the tactical channel (lifeguard tac D1 or D2) to be used by lifeguards for the duration of the incident. Fire and ambulance personnel may monitor the lifeguard tac channels for situational awareness but are NOT to use the lifeguard tac channel for communications."
  - Changing or clarifying that the frequency can be used to prompt the rescue group supervisor to respond to the appropriate command frequency is acceptable. This is likely common sense amongst rescuers and may not be necessary to state.
- Operations in cold environments and challenging conditions can threaten responders' physical and emotional health.
- Early notifications to Logistics, Duty EMS, and Health and Safety are essential for timely rehabilitation and personnel support.

## INCIDENTAL ISSUES/LESSONS LEARNED

- Lifeguard crews' initial actions were safe and effective in locating victims despite the following:
  - The environment was foggy and dark, which created challenges in navigating the scene.
  - The tide was high against the bluff, limiting rescuers to only a few lifeguards with proper PPE.
  - There was floating debris, challenges securing the victims from the water, fuel-contaminated water,
  - Limited resources were available to conduct search, rescue, and recovery.
- There were compatibility issues between the GPS formats used in public safety dispatching (degrees/decimal) and nautical (degrees/minutes/decimal) that were used to determine the incident location.
  - The initial incident coordinates were given in an inconsistent format, making it difficult to verify the location.
    - The primary notification to LCC was traffic from SDPD on LG Disp1.
    - The on-duty supervisor was alerted when they heard the SDPD radio traffic, not the LCC Dispatcher.
    - Per SOP, this frequency is monitored by LCC and not normally monitored by operations staff during night hours.
- During the interviews, it was identified that the LCC dispatcher is highly task-saturated during the initial call-taking and dispatching of critical incidents.
- Available staffing at night supported an appropriate initial response from lifeguards. The unique environment, geographic area, challenging conditions, and incident complexity required additional units which were requested via callback.
- The LCC dispatcher requires supervisor approval to dispatch the proper response matrix.
  - Per the current protocol, the initial response to a nighttime call (between 2200 and 0600) is to wake up the nighttime supervisor.
  - The supervisor assesses and then directs the dispatcher as to the appropriate response type and/or resources needed.
- The Capsized Vessel Pilot response matrix was highly effective.
  - The program was initiated via a departmental bulletin.
    - Note: The department bulletin expired less than 48 hours before this event but does not appear to have affected this call.
- Crews operated highly professionally in physically demanding, environmentally challenging conditions.

- Due to the nature and magnitude of this incident, the IC and Management worked well with the Health and Safety Office to offer several options to support the behavioral wellness of the personnel.
  - **Note/Reminder**
    - Critical incidents can result in acute and long-term behavioral health issues for responders.
    - Notification, activation, and follow-up of behavioral health resources are essential.
- The Department's resources are well-developed and comprehensive.
  - The coordination of the clinicians, chaplaincy, and peer support availability was impressive by all involved.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide supervisory-level support to the dispatcher during the initial phases of call-taking, dispatching, and notification of critical incidents, regardless of time of day.
  - Dispatchers are trained to wake their supervisors to request assistance when needed, and this should be reinforced.
- Develop more dispatch response plans for specific incidents that provide uniformity across Emergency Communications Centers (ECC) throughout the San Diego Operations Area.
  - These response plans should allow dispatchers to dispatch the appropriate predetermined resources to the incident in a timely manner.
  - The response plans should be developed in coordination with fire operations, lifeguard/marine safety operations, and the ECCs.
  - Ensure in-service training and continuing education supports dispatcher proficiency in new technologies, including GPS verification tools.
- Night crews monitor a radio for potential responses during rest periods. Leverage technology, including CAD and station alerting, to notify crew members of a response.
- Update the "emergency callback" procedure.
- Develop a PPE policy for coastal emergencies, including ocean rescues and night operations, to include:
  - Standardized lighting, including headlamps and strobes
  - Waterproof communications for personnel at the scene
  - Adequate thermal protection for a marine environment
  - Footwear for a variety of terrains
- Develop a standardized process for accountability with the incident commander for people working in a hazard zone.

- Memorialize the Capsized Vessel Pilot response matrix into policy/SOP to include a standard communications plan.
  - During interviews, members identified the value of the response plan for this incident. Adopt the response plan in coordination with fire operations and the affected ECCs.
  - Provide agency-wide training and continuing education.
- Update Cold Exposure and Rehabilitation policies to include the unique nature of ocean rescue operations.
  - This should include work-rest cycles, warming options, hydration, and nutrition to support rescuers working in a cold, wet environment.
- Continue to ensure consistent training and awareness for supervisors on when to request Logistics and Health and Safety to support operations personnel on extended incidents.
  - Auto-notification for significant incidents
- The initial actions of lifeguards in this incident exhibited courage, extraordinary decisiveness, and the calm presence of mind to act swiftly, regardless of their Safety, in an attempt to save lives.
- We believe that AHJ has a well-developed behavioral wellness program and that its leadership supports the policies and programs that promote and maintain the Health and Safety of its members.

Approved by:

- David Picone: SDFD Health & Safety Officer, SDCFCA's Section Chair

This review was conducted by the following San Diego County Health and Safety Section's Serious Incident Review Team (SIRT) members.

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Photo 3: The Incident Command Post at La Jolla Farms and Black Gold Rd.



Photo 4: The units at the base of Black Gold Rd.



Photo 5: The morning after the incident at low tide. Blue lines indicate the extent of the high tide at the time of the incident. Note the vessels are still on the beach.

