

MIRT Team Responds to Harbor Emergencies



VPA-funded marine firefighters record a busy fall

The Virginia Port Authority's Maritime Incident Response Team (MIRT), which is dedicated to responding to marine fires in the Hampton Roads area, had a busy fall. In response to four separate situations, the team provided equipment and expertise to help fight fires and assist in a search and rescue operation.

The first incident took place on October 2, when an engine room fire occurred on the Maersk Doha as she was sailing out of Hampton Roads. The ship dropped anchor at the Lynnhaven anchorage and called for help. Captain Bill Burket, director of MIRT, received a call at 4:30 a.m. and reached the scene at 6:00 a.m. He and MIRT member Kerry Nunn, a marine chemist, provided on-scene advice and equipment such as a thermal imager and heat-sensing monitors.

Fireboats with crews that included MIRT members from Norfolk, Portsmouth and Virginia Beach arrived on the scene, and the fire was declared out by 12:30 p.m. The ship suffered internal damage to its auxiliary boiler system, which produced steam for the domestic system aboard the diesel-powered vessel. The ship remained at anchor for two weeks to undergo repairs. It was not a hazard to navigation, and nobody was hurt.

Another emergency occurred on October 27 at Bay Bridge Enterprises in Chesapeake, where the former USS *Gilmore* was being dismantled. Dropdown debris from cutting torches ignited bagged insulation several levels below the ship's main deck. The Chesapeake fire department declared a two-alarm fire and requested a regional MIRT response.

Approximately 25 MIRT members responded with MIRT equipment, which is owned by the VPA and kept in firehouses in Norfolk, Portsmouth and Newport News. Burket was designated the operations chief and led the firefighting effort. In addition to trained shipboard firefighters, MIRT provided four trucks and two 3,000 gallons-per-minute water pumps. The assistance allowed Chesapeake to downgrade to a one-alarm fire and return half of its equipment to local firehouses. The two pumps established an on-scene water supply straight from the Elizabeth River because the nearest hydrant was 3,000 feet away.

"This was the first incident where a full regional MIRT team response was requested," Burket said. "It went extremely well; we couldn't have asked for anything better. We had manpower and equipment on scene in under an hour. We did what we've been training to do."

Two Bay Bridge employees were treated for



These photographs were taken during a fire aboard the former USS Gillmore, which was being dismantled at Bay Bridge Enterprises in Chesapeake. This was one of four incidents MIRT responded to this fall.

smoke inhalation and recovered. MIRT assistance was requested at about 10:30 a.m. The team arrived about a half-hour later. The fire was over by 4:30 p.m.

On November 17, MIRT participated in the Coast Guard's search and rescue effort for Jeff Ball, who spent 20 hours in 60-degree ocean waters after losing the sail from his windsurfer. MIRT received a call at 3:30 that morning asking if MIRT could provide four to five fireboats to help search the area from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel east to Cape Henry. He arranged for eight boats – fireboats from Virginia Beach, Norfolk and Portsmouth as well as a Virginia Beach



Emergency Medical Services boat and three Virginia Beach police boats – to begin canvassing the waters at dawn.

The boats searched the length of the

bridge, the shoreline to the mouth of the bay, and all aids to navigation in the area. About 20 minutes after they were given grids to expand their search into the ocean, a Coast Guard helicopter found Ball. He was located just after noon, some 20 miles from where he went windsurfing the previous afternoon at the north end of Virginia Beach. A wetsuit helped him survive the night atop his sailboard.

MIRT also responded to a fire at the Giant Industries oil refinery on the York River. Unlike the other incidents, however, that case proved uneventful. The fire was already extinguished when the team arrived.

