



# A unique position

He represents two secretaries of state in the UK government when maritime incidents unfold and Hugh Shaw, the SOSREP, has a 'back me or sack me' arrangement. He tells **Andrew Lansdale** about the unique position and why he *hasn't* been sacked

**T**he position of Secretary of State's Representative for Maritime Salvage and Intervention is unique: no other country has such a person in position. Australia introduced a post named MERCOM, which closely resembled the SOSREP but has since reverted to retaining the intervention powers within its Maritime Safety Agency. France has two Admirals in the Prefecture Maritime who can make interventionist decisions but they have to advise their minister prior to action being taken, depending on the circumstances.

Hugh Shaw takes on huge responsibilities, but his background justifies the politicians' faith in him. He was a cadet and junior officer in the merchant navy, he joined Her Majesty's Coastguard and rose through the ranks, he was appointed as counter pollution and salvage officer in Aberdeen.

One year later he assumed the position of deputy to the SOSREP, based with the then-DTI in Aberdeen. This post looked after the oil and gas sector while the SOSREP, Robin Middleton, oversaw that and all other maritime inci-

dents. After a while it was thought more prudent to bring the two responsibilities under one roof. Shaw became Middleton's deputy for shipping and offshore-related incidents in 2005.

"It took a very brave government to establish the SOSREP system," Shaw tells *Fairplay*. "Since it was brought in more than 10 years ago and has undergone no alteration, this speaks volumes about its effectiveness and the forward thinking by the late Lord Donaldson who proposed the concept."

Shaw took over as SOSREP in January 2008 when Middleton retired. It was a baptism of fire. On 2 January the container ship *LT Cortesia*, outbound from Europe at 21kt, ran aground on the Varne sandbank. Soon after, the timber carrier *Ice Prince* foundered 26 nm south of Portland Bill.

"Some people were keen to point out rather unkindly that the *LT Cortesia* was twice the size of the *MSC Napoli*," Shaw remembers. "However, despite running aground at full speed, the ship was pulled off within 12 hours. I had it taken to an anchorage off Kent, thereby enabling an

internal inspection by the MCA and the class society and an external inspection by divers. Surprisingly enough, there was no external damage and the vessel was allowed to continue on passage".

Then there was the ro-ro *Riverdance* on 31 January. It was blown ashore by high winds onto a beach in northwest England. "Despite every effort, the salvage team were unable to get the ship off," Shaw recalls. The vessel ended up with a list of 110°. Shaw approved cutting it up *in situ* – less than 350m from Blackpool's promenade – a challenge in itself.

There was no pollution and the ship became a tourist attraction. "That summer, more people came to see the *Riverdance* than came to see the famous Blackpool illuminations."

2009 started in a similar vein with the Russian timber carrier *Sinegorsk* taking a heavy list off the Isle of Wight in January. The SOSREP intervened and ordered the vessel into Southampton, even though the master simply wanted to anchor. The vessel was in port for a month discharging and then restowing its cargo.

The mechanism of SOSREP interventions start at an early stage. The Maritime & Coastguard Agency (MCA) reports to the SOSREP when a vessel appears to be in trouble in UK waters. If the incident continues, the SOSREP will issue an initial caution to the master. "This sends a warning to the captain that we are watching him," Shaw says.



Photo: MCA

“That summer, more people came to see the *Riverdance* than came to see the famous Blackpool illuminations”



Photo: Andrew Lansdale

If no improvement is seen, the SOSREP will issue a formal caution. “This gives the master a deadline within which action must be taken.” At this time Shaw will alert the P&I club into which the ship is entered.

“We try to mobilise early assistance to reduce the risk of a situation deteriorating,” Shaw explains. “Recently I’ve noticed that the P&I clubs are becoming more proactive and we might hear from them before we are able to get them involved. That is one of the benefits of having just one contact point: me.”

If nothing is done to improve a situation within a deadline, the SOSREP takes over and under considered advice from parties such as environmental groups, orders whatever action is necessary to contain the incident.

This is illustrated in the case of the *MSC Napoli*, which started to break up in a heavy storm in 2007. Salvors were attempting to tow the ship to Portland harbour, but they reported that the ship was in danger of sinking in deep water. Following advice from the local environmental group and the salvors, SOSREP Robin Middleton ordered that the vessel be beached in Lyme Bay.

The SOSREP ploughs his own furrow, but keeps the politicians advised. Shaw now represents transport secretary Lord Andrew Adonis and energy secretary Ed Miliband. He keeps them informed as to what action he is taking, and keeps the shipping minister in the loop. However, there is no political interference, which Shaw describes as ‘brave’. The system has gained great

respect in Europe and around the world. The British government has chartered four large emergency towage vessels which are based in Fair Isle, Stornoway, Falmouth and Dover. These are at Shaw’s beck and call and have high specifications, including a bollard pull of up to 200 tonnes.

Operationally, providing succour attracts allies. “Ship masters often heave a sigh of relief when I take over,” Shaw explains. “It means that all the difficult decisions are no longer his to make.” Residents living around a selected “safe haven” take a different view, so harbour masters are also pleased when the SOSREP intervenes: decisions are taken out of their hands.

Shaw admits the system is still evolving and isn’t yet perfect. “I would like the master of every ship entering our waters to have a single point of contact provided by his owner or his P&I club,” he suggested. “Then if a difficulty arose – in particular a grounding – the captain would first make contact with the designated person for advice. This gets the earliest of interventions under way.” Such a system is in force in the US under OPA 90.

When asked who could best co-ordinate it, he replies that it’s in the financial interest of P&I clubs to put such a system in place. Shaw believes quick action is the key. “In the 171 incidents last year, there was no significant pollution,” he concludes. **F**

Photo: Andrew Lansdale



**NAME:** Hugh Shaw **BORN:** 1 January 1957

**PLACE:** Dumbarton, Scotland

**FATHER:** Worked at John Brown shipyard, Clydebank

**INITIAL EMPLOYMENT:** 1974 cadet and junior deck officer, Mobil Tankers

**CURRENT HOME:** Fife, Scotland

**FAMILY:** Married to Filomena from Lisbon, Portugal. Children: son 26, daughter 22

**EMPLOYER:** Maritime & Coastguard Agency

**POSITION:** Secretary of State’s Representative for Maritime Salvage and Intervention (SOSREP)

**OFFICE:** Southampton

**HOBBIES:** When time permits – photography, golf and fly fishing

**GREATEST BUZZ:** Being able to land the big one...

**BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT:** Losing both parents at an early age

**GREATEST THREAT TO THE SHIPPING INDUSTRY:** Apart from the obvious – piracy, terrorism and insecure commercial markets – the challenges of salvaging megaships and handling the vast amounts of diverse cargo that they can transport