

DATE: November 21, 2007 15:11:57 PST

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Public Affairs
USCG District 11
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Fact Sheet: Vessel Traffic Service, San Francisco

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United States Coast Guard
U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Fact Sheet

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Vessel Traffic Service, San Francisco

VTS MISSION

- The primary purpose of Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) San Francisco is to coordinate vessel movements to facilitate the safe and efficient transit of vessel traffic in the waterways of San Francisco Bay, its seaward approaches and tributaries. These efforts prevent vessel collisions, rammings, groundings and the associated loss of life and damage to property and the environment.
- The secondary purpose of VTS San Francisco is to provide assistance to other Coast Guard units in the accomplishment of their missions, such as search and rescue, maritime law enforcement, and maintaining

aids to navigation.

- VTS San Francisco is responsible for the safe movement of approximately 133 miles of waterway from offshore to the ports of Stockton and Sacramento. VTS San Francisco averages 250 vessel movements a day.

NOT AN AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL

- VTS differs from FAA air traffic control in that ATC controllers direct all aircraft movement. Nothing moves in the sky without air traffic control permission and direction. VTS advises and coordinates with mariners to prevent collisions in busy port areas. VTS has authority to direct movements in certain situations such as ordering a vessel to anchorage or to prevent two vessels from colliding. VTS may also direct movement if watch standers observe violations of regulations or dangerous conditions of which the pilot seems unaware.
- The ultimate responsibility for safe navigation of a vessel remains with the master or person in charge. VTS communications never relieve the master or person in charge of his or her responsibility to control vessel movement.
- VTS is not the only tool a skilled mariner uses to transit a harbor. The mariner makes safe navigation decisions based on navigation equipment, radar, local conditions, information from buoys and other aids to navigation, and international and federal waterways regulations.
- San Francisco is one of 12 vessel traffic service locations around the nation. Vessels are required to maintain a continuous radio watch on the designated VTS frequency while transiting the VTS area.

BACKGROUND AND HISTORY OF VTS SAN FRANCISCO

- January 1968 - HARP Formulated: The Harbor Advisory Radar Project was formulated to evaluate land-based radar in maritime traffic control. San Francisco was selected as the site of the first project in early 1969, due to a well-developed Coast Guard communications system in the Bay Area, a port traffic density not high enough to require complex data collection, and a high occurrence of fog which allowed a complete evaluation of system benefits during low visibility. It was believed at the time that the experience gained at San Francisco Bay would be applicable at other ports.
- January 1970 - HARP Operational: Located at Pier 45 Fishermans

Wharf in the Marine Exchange lookout station, HARP worked on Channel 18A VHF-FM. HARP was a voluntary system of vessel movement reports. No Captain of the Port authority was granted to direct vessel movements.

- January 1971 - Collision: At 1:41 a.m., Jan. 18, in low visibility, as the HARP watch standers looked on helplessly, the tankers ARIZONA STANDARD and OREGON STANDARD collided near the Golden Gate Bridge, spilling 800,000 gallons of oil into San Francisco Bay, causing extreme environmental damage and raising national publicity. This collision resulted in the complete shutdown of port operations. The cause of the accident, according to the NTSB was: (1) the failure of the vessels to establish and maintain communications; (2) navigating a narrow channel in dense fog; (3) failure of the OREGON STANDARD to make timely radar contact; (4) loss of radar contact by the ARIZONA STANDARD and (5) negligence on the part of both masters. The NTSB recommended that HARP be continued and that Congress pass legislation requiring the use of Bridge-to-Bridge radiotelephone.
- September 1971 - VTS Advisory Committee Established: The purpose of this committee was to establish traffic lanes in San Francisco Bay (the Traffic Separation Scheme was adopted for use in March 1973) and to develop draft regulations for the use of the traffic lanes. The committee consisted of 10 members (tug/ferry operators and pilots/masters).
- July 1972 - Ports and Waterways Safety Act: Passed by Congress, this act authorized the Coast Guard to establish, operate and maintain vessel traffic services for ports, harbors, and other waters subject to congested vessel traffic.
- August 1972 - VTS San Francisco Established: In May 1973 VTS San Francisco relocated from Pier 45 to the top of Yerba Buena Island in the middle of San Francisco Bay. The operating frequency of VTS was changed to VHF-FM Channel 13.
- 1978 - Port and Tanker Safety Act: This act gave the Coast Guard authority via the Secretary of Transportation to order any vessel to operate or anchor in a manner which the Coast Guard directs if by reason of weather, visibility, sea conditions, port congestion, or other hazardous circumstances such directive is justified in the interest of safety.
- Nov. 2, 1980: After VTS San Francisco took navigational control of a charter F/V (lost in the fog), the F/V DORA BELLA ran aground near Baker Beach vicinity Golden Gate Bridge, with no loss of life.

However, this incident established guidelines for navigational control of vessels by VTS that are still in effect today. Under no circumstances does VTS take navigational control of a vessel's movement.

- October 13, 1994 - VTS National Regulations: Federal regulations made participation in the VTS mandatory for power-driven vessels 40+ meters long while navigating, towing vessels 8+ meters long while towing, and vessels certificated to carry 50+ passengers for hire while engaged in trade.
- May 1995 - San Francisco Bay Regulated Navigation Areas: Federal regulations went into effect, establishing regulated navigation areas within the San Francisco Bay Region. These regulations, developed with input from the Harbor Safety Committee of the San Francisco Bay Region, would increase navigation safety by organizing traffic flow patterns, reducing meeting, crossing, and overtaking situations in constricted channels, and limiting vessels' speeds.
- May 23, 1997 - Commenced operations with new VTS Upgrade System: VTS Upgrade System included the installation of state-of-the-art computer digitized radar displays shown on electronic charts. The capabilities of the new system would automate many of the controller's duties, allowing more time for monitoring traffic.

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