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Slick Response

by Kathy Bergren Smith

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The explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig in the Gulf of Mexico triggered the largest marine oil spill in history.

The response to the rig blowout and subsequent spill resulted in perhaps the largest gathering of workboats in history. Vessels from small barges to tugs to ship-sized oil skimmers came from all over the U.S. to the Gulf of Mexico, providing an assortment of equipment to battle the disaster. Professional mariners, oil spill responders and industry experts provided essential support to the response.

One of those vessels was the Damon B. Bankston, a 260' x 60' SSSq offshore supply boat owned by New Orleans-based Tidewater Inc. The boat, built at Tidewater's Quality Shipyards in Houma, La, in 2003, is powered by four Caterpillar 3515B engines and is an early example of Z-drive use in an OSV. On April 20, the Bankston was standing by to pump liquefied mud to the rig, a normally routine operation that changed to emergency response when the Deepwater Horizon suddenly exploded, consuming itself in a fireball. Capt. Alwin Landry and his crew were credited with a quick and coordinated response that helped rescue 115 workers who had abandoned the drilling rig.

Five offshore supply vessels in the area immediately made their way to the scene and began fighting the fire. Within 36 hours, the rig capsized and sank in 5,000' SSSq of water.

During the following weeks, responders fought an ongoing oil spill of epic proportions. BP's educational facility in Houma became the Incident Command Center where spill response was coordinated. At its peak, some 7,000 vessels and over 40,000 people were involved in response efforts. Workboat operators were enlisted under contracts with BP to provide much of the equipment required for the maritime response.

TUG-AND-BARGE OPS

At the wellhead, Moran Towing Corp. mobilized the 3,000-hp Mary Moran with the 430' x 84' x 42' SSSq, 137,000-bbl. articulated barge Massachusetts to transfer oil from the drillship Discoverer Enterprise as it captured oil by the lower riser containment cap.

As oil spread away from the wellhead, a flotilla of skimmers was deployed. To collect oil from the skimming boats, BP contracted companies such as Baltimore-based Vane Brothers to supply tug-and-barge services.

"We mobilized six of our 50,000-barrel barges to the Gulf matched with six of our 4,200-horsepower Patapsco-class tugs," said Rick Luliucci, Vane's Philadelphia general manager who has supervised the company's Gulf operations out of Mobile, Ala.

The Gulf was divided into sectors, each with its own vessel task force assigned to it. When oil was collected in its sector, the Vane tug and barge proceeded there to gather product from the skimmers.

"Our challenge has been to adapt to all the different types of vessels that are delivering product to us," said Luliucci. "We have skimmers from 30 feet to 175 feet bringing us oil. Military vessels, private-sector vessels, you name it, we had to create packages before the barges mobilized in order to be 'tooled up' on site since we are working offshore."

Across the Gulf, tugs stood by barges deploying boom, picking up oil, and decontaminating oiled vessels.

St. Augustine, Fla.-based Tradewinds Towing spent several weeks in the Florida panhandle near Pensacola and Panama City helping to protect the shore.

"We tended a spud barge from Resolve Marine Group that was capable of lifting the smaller skimmers and laying out and retrieving boom," said Dominique Smith, the company's owner and captain of the 2,800-hp tug Miss Lis that tended the barge.

Standing by while a crane barge performed a lift was typical for Smith and many tug operators, but the circumstances

around these projects created challenges for many tug captains.

"Safety is something we as industry professionals are very focused on," said Smith. "In our day-to-day operations, there is enough danger to go around so we do everything we can to keep our crews safe."

However, many of the people involved with the cleanup operations had some hazardous materials training but little "on the water" experience.

"This makes for some difficult situations when doing personnel transfers and handling equipment on the water," said Smith.

BP's Vessels of Opportunity Program chartered commercial fishing boats and crews. This added another challenge. VOO crews needed to be trained in basic oil industry safety standards. Merging the different backgrounds was initially a challenge, but everyone pulled together to work successfully as a team after becoming familiar with the demands of the worksite and safety protocols.

Another Florida tug operator, Dann Ocean Towing Inc. of Tampa, committed a considerable portion of its fleet to BP response operations in the Gulf. In addition to the business value of the project, Stephen Dann said that it was important for his crews to participate.

"We live and work and play in the waters of the Gulf," said Dann, the company's vice president. "This has really hit home for us as a company and our personnel appreciate the opportunity to do whatever it takes to provide BP with the assets it needs to mitigate this spill."

In August, the company SSRq s 2,700-hp tug Stephen Dann was working as a vessel decontamination station near Pensacola, Perdido Pass, and Mobile Bay. Other tugs are working within their normal scopes of operations, such as towing mud scows for dredging contractors.

Dedicated emergency-response companies such as Resolve Marine Group were also called in.

The Fort Lauderdale, Fla.-based company that also offers marine salvage and other services, has been on the scene since the rig fire.

"We mobilized our 210 SSSq Resolve Pioneer while the fire was still burning in the event the rig needed to be moved," said Joe Farrell Jr., the company's president and CEO.

Subsequently, the Pioneer , a 10,000-hp anchor-handling tug/supply vessel, was refitted with oil skimming equipment and returned to the site. In all, Resolve Marine committed 100 vessels to the effort and the company's nine-acre yard in Theodore, Ala., has served as a central load-out area for projects throughout the Gulf.

Resolve has a sizable infrastructure in place to respond to oil tanker casualties and had assets ready immediately after the Deepwater Horizon accident. The company maintained 16 decontamination stations on the Gulf, cleaning oiled VOO boats and others exposed to the oil.

Resolve also handled skimming and boom deployment throughout Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Florida.

"In a way, the Exxon Valdez was a strange blessing," said Farrell. "If we had not suffered that disaster, we would not be prepared to the extent we are today."

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