

Protecting the Pope, Protecting the People

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When the Vatican announced Pope Francis would visit Philadelphia as part of a three-city tour of the United States, the men and women of Coast Guard Sector Delaware Bay began making preparations for the historic event. With hundreds of thousands of visitors anticipated for the World Meeting of Families visit, safety and security of the Pope, distinguished visitors and the public became a critical objective of the Coast Guard and other federal, state and local law enforcement agencies.

Between the Delaware River and Schuylkill River, the 3-century-old city of Philadelphia is surrounded on three sides by water. Because many scheduled activities for the Papal visit took place near the waterfront, maritime security was a key element for public safety and the protection of the maritime transportation system. A large volume of vessel traffic passes through the region every day. Keeping the public safe during the event required interagency cooperation and planning on a large scale.

"We worked with our federal, state and local partner agencies to ensure the safety of everyone on or near the water," said Capt. Benjamin Cooper, the commander of Sector Delaware Bay. "We brought in Coast Guard assets and teams from Texas, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and New Jersey. We provided enhanced maritime protection while maintaining the same level of readiness we always provide for search and rescue cases, marine safety inspections, pollution response, and other missions."

To manage the multiagency maritime security effort, the Coast Guard established a Maritime Operations Center and an Incident Command System structure. The MOC staff assigned and coordinated maritime assets, tracked weather patterns and provided communications to vessel traffic on the waterways. The boat crews who patrolled the various security zones on the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers were also managed by the MOC.

"I'm proud of the collaboration and work that was done by our people," said Cooper. "All of the agencies together worked long hours, but we stayed focused on keeping the public safe and on service to the maritime community."

Managing an event as large as the World Meeting of Families required significant teamwork. Working under the direction of the U.S. Secret Service, nearly 20 agencies joined together to provide seamless communication and information sharing. Much of the information was shared through a Multiagency Coordination Center, which served as a virtual command center.

Another aspect of the effort was a Joint Information Center, a one-stop shop to ensure the accurate and timely flow of event-related information to the public.

"In the Joint Information Center, all the partner agencies dedicated to the effort collaborated and responded to public questions," said Lt. Nick Woessner, a public affairs officer at Sector Delaware Bay. "Fortunately, the Papal visit was incident free, but if needed, the JIC staff would have promptly updated the public with the most accurate and current information to ensure their safety and security."

In addition to working the event, some Coast Guardsmen in Philadelphia were able to attend the mass on Benjamin Franklin Parkway, and others were afforded the opportunity to see the Pope deliver remarks in person at Independence Hall.

"It was very inspiring to watch the Pope deliver his speech using the same lectern used by President Lincoln during the Gettysburg Address — and from only 40 feet away," said Petty Officer 3rd Class David Micallef. "I took some great photos, but at one point I set my camera down and just took it all in. To be that fortunate to sit in the front row during this historic event — I was ecstatic.

"Witnessing firsthand the overwhelming amount of emotion and inspiration among the crowds made me realize the importance of our planning efforts," said Micallef. "People were in tears — they'd waited their whole lives just to catch a glimpse of the Pope."

As Pope Francis headed back to the Vatican, the roads reopened and the people of Philadelphia got back to their everyday lives, left with memories of a landmark occasion in the City of Brotherly Love.

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