



“Saving lives at sea”

**Report on the Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue
operations in the Mediterranean 2015-2017**



SUMMARY

In the beginning of 2015, the refugee and migrant influx towards Europe increased dramatically. An unexpected number of people risked their lives in search of safety and protection in Europe. Thousands of people died in an attempt to cross the Mediterranean, but this number would have been far higher without the efforts of the Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue (RS) and other sea rescue organizations.

RS decided in April 2015 that the organization would engage itself in the crisis, and shortly after, RS was able to demonstrate substantial capacity to the relief efforts to both the Norwegian government and other international actors.

Firstly, RS sent its modern rescue vessel “Peter Henry von Koss” to the Greek island Lesbos. From the start of its mission in July 2015 until operations ended in June 2017, “Peter Henry von Koss” and its crew had saved more than 6000 people in distress at sea.

Secondly, RS entered into a cooperation with the Greek sea rescue organization Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT). Financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, RS gave HRT several types of support to strengthen its operational capabilities by providing new rescue boats, administrative support and trainings to HRT-members.

Thirdly, RS engaged in advocacy work

both internationally and in Norway to raise awareness of the crises.

The two years RS worked on the refugee crises gave the organization experiences and competencies that will be applied in future operations. This report provides an overview of the efforts of RS, and presents learnings and recommendations for future international assignments. Five recommendations are highlighted in the report;

- 1 the need for continued professionalization of crew through exercise and knowledge,
- 2 the necessity for close cooperation with authorities in international operations,
- 3 the demand for solid financing
- 4 the need for a broad understanding of security challenges in international operations,
- 5 the requirement of a varied response in the support to international partners.

The efforts made by RS in the Mediterranean Sea are widely recognized, and RS and its crew have received commendation from many institutions. This report explains why.

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Captain Jarl Pedersen
with rescued boy



1. The Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue

The Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue (RS) is Norway's largest humanitarian organization for saving lives at sea. Through its nationwide activities, RS also salvages assets and protects the coastal environment of Norwegian waters. Further, RS undertakes public outreach activities and accident prevention initiatives to improve the safety of those at sea in the Norwegian coastal waters.

RS was established in July 1891. By 1893, RS was already equipped to launch its first lifeboat. Initially, the organization's primary goal was to rescue fishermen. However, RS also took on other tasks like transport of people and goods when the regular freight carriers could not perform their missions. From the outset, it was imperative for RS that the organization was present throughout the country, especially in northern Norway, where many fishermen worked under more hazardous weather conditions as compared to those further in the south.

"No one shall drown" – is the vision of RS. RS works around the clock, 365 days a year to realize this vision throughout Norway. Currently, RS has 50 modern and

well-equipped rescue vessels of which 25 are manned by a professional crew staffed by RS. The remaining 25 vessels are operated by volunteers. RS also has a youth branch that provides training for 7000 youth every year. Furthermore, RS reaches 45 000 children annually with activities teaching them how they safely can explore the sea.

In addition to its work in Norway, RS also engages in international activities and cooperates with both national sea rescue services and is an active member of the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF). RS has bilateral cooperation agreements with several organizations and offers trainings to them at its modern educational center.

2. The refugee situation in the Mediterranean in 2015

In the beginning of 2015, the refugee and migrant influx towards Europe increased dramatically. This was a direct consequence of the global refugee situation that had grown severely in the years leading up to 2015. Forced displacement increased in 2015 with record-high numbers. At the end of the year, 65.3 million individuals were forcibly displaced worldwide as a

result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations. That was an increase of 5.8 million over the previous year.

In 2015, an increased number of people risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea in search of safety and protection. While the people taking the dangerous route before 2015 were primarily young men, the composition changed in 2015. Entire families, including women and children, started to come across the sea. People came in the thousands each day. More than 1 million people arrived in Europe by boat during this year. The majority of the new arrivals crossed the Aegean Sea from Turkey and arrived in Greece. During the year, some 3,770 people drowned or were reported missing in the Mediterranean Sea. However, this number would have been far higher without the efforts by RS and other sea rescuers.

3. RS engagement and operations

RS engagement in the crisis in the Mediterranean can be split into three different, but linked interventions. Firstly, RS sent one of its own vessels to the Aegean Sea as part of the international rescue operation. Secondly, RS engaged in a close cooperation with the Greek sea rescue organization Hellenic Rescue Team to strengthen their operational capacity. And finally, RS did a considerable advocacy effort to engage decision-makers and the public. In this chapter, the efforts of RS are further elaborated.

3.1 Deployment of the rescue vessel «Peter Henry von Koss»

As the crisis in the Mediterranean began to unfold, in early 2015, RS started an internal discussion on how its resources could be used to assist both the people at risk in the Mediterranean and the coastal states bearing the heaviest burden in the rescue work. Many individuals and crew-members on RS's vessels contacted the management with proposals on how the organization could engage and assist. The management of RS approached these proposals with great interest and in early April 2015 the organization decided to prepare the vessel RS "Peter Henry von Koss" for operations in the region. Soon after the Norwegian Government approached RS with a request to send a ship to the Aegean Sea. Furthermore, it was decided that RS's operation should be a part of the Frontex operation (European Border and Coast Guard Agency), and that there should be representatives of the Norwegian police on board. RS was the only rescue organization that chose to put its boat under the direct authority of Frontex and the Norwegian police. The organization was also asked to be part of the Frontex operations center in Piraeus, Greece.

3.1.1 Results

After consultation with the Norwegian and Greek authorities, as well as with the management of FRONTEX, RS decided that its vessel would be located on the Greek island of Lesbos, as this was one of the islands with the largest number of refugees arriving from



Prime Minister Erna Solberg together with RS Secretary General Rikke Lind, RS Operational Director Ronny Pedersen, captain Lars Solvik and captain Jarl Pedersen before departure of Peter Henry von Koss to Greece.

Turkey. The vessel, Peter Henry von Koss, was in place in Greece in July 2015 and from July 15th the vessel was operational from its base in Mytilene.

The vessel consisted of crewmembers from RS. In addition, representatives from the Norwegian police were on board, together with Greek authorities. The main tasks for the vessel were to participate in the search and rescue work of shipwrecked refugees and border control. The vessel had a mandate to perform border control under the auspices of Frontex. The latter task was the reason for having representatives of authorities onboard the vessel.

The operation lasted until June 14, 2017. During those two years, the vessel sailed almost every day. A total of 16 crewmembers from RS staffed the vessel. The achievements of the boat and its crew were sensational – 6 343 people were rescued.

Many of the operations of RS «Peter Henry von Koss» were dramatic, and sometimes it was impossible to save all people in distress, as this eyewitness testimony bears proof of:

”On October 28, 2015, the stiff breeze blows on the Aegean Sea. The crew has

already had three demanding rescue missions when the message of a boat in distress arrives. The time is around 14.30 when RS ”Peter Henry von Koss” heads for a somewhat uncertain position in the Myteline district. It’s rough sea and the waves hit the side of the 75-foot long boat. After a while, they meet the nightmare - 300 people onboard a half-sunk boat fighting to stay over water. Many have already lost the battle as their lifeless bodies float with their faces down in the water. There are no other boats within reach. Dead bodies are lying at the side of the boat. In 2.5 hours, the crew draws more than 120 people alive from the sea. Many of them children.”

This story illustrates the pressure and strains on the crew. However, it also tells a story about professional rescuers that knew that their job was to save as many lives as possible and who never gave up their rescue efforts despite challenging conditions.

3.1.2 Challenges and learnings

The results achieved by RS «Peter Henry von Koss» were impressive. But, that does not mean that the mission was without its challenges.

One of the main challenges with the operation was financing. Keeping a state-of-the-art boat operating in waters far from Norway is expensive, and for RS it was a challenge to obtain funding for the vessel. Frontex provided funding for some of the operational costs, while RS covered the rest from its own resources. Another challenge was a lack of coordination among the many players in the international efforts for refugees. Lesbos had an influx of many NGOs, however many of them were both poorly coordinated and ill prepared for the type of rescue and relief work needed in the region.

Another challenge was the psychological stress on the crew. During their service onboard, the crew experienced many human tragedies, which are important to process. RS has developed a good system for taking care of its own employees, however it was a challenge to ensure that crews got the time and environment needed to de-brief and handle the psychological strain.

Security was also a challenge - both for the crews on board and the refugees picked up from the sea. To meet the security challenges, considerable resources were spent to prepare the crews and to provide for other security measures such as communication and cooperation with key players in the area.

3.1.3 Acknowledgements

The efforts made by RS «Peter Henry Koss» in the Mediterranean Sea are widely recognized, and RS and its crew has

received commendations from many institutions.

In 2016, RS and the crew of RS “Peter Henry von Koss” were awarded the renowned Humanist Award for the following reason; *“The rescue operation in the Mediterranean is humanism in practice. Humanistic values such as community, solidarity, and human dignity are little worth if they are not also practiced through actions. The crews show that we are part of a community and are responsible for our fellow human beings - whether they are in Norway or if they are in the process of embarking on a dangerous journey to Europe.”*

The crews onboard RS «Peter Henry von Koss» were also awarded the Norwegian Police Medal for International Service in 2016. In the award acknowledgement it was stated that *“We will honor and thank you for having made a difference for many migrants.”*

In addition, on Christmas Eve 2016 the readers of the largest Norwegian newspaper, VG, voted the crew of RS «Peter Henry von Koss» as the “Name of the Year”. The paper wrote: *“The effort is formidable. Rescue figures alone say something about the extent and value of the humanitarian operation that crew and vessel stand for.”*

However, more important than the many prizes and awards that the crews have received, are the appreciation and gratitude of the many individuals whose lives were saved. One such woman is

“

The influx of migrants to Europe via the Aegean Sea in 2015 and 2016 called for a common response. The Norwegian Government decided at an early stage to contribute the vessel Peter Henry von Koss from the Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue. The vessel and its crews have made an outstanding effort and have saved many lives. The Norwegian Society for Sea Rescue has also made an invaluable contribution to long-term capacity building in Greece.” Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende.

Fatima Al-Zubadi, who the crew of RS «Peter Henry von Koss» picked up from the Mediterranean in August 2015. She said: *“I will never forget the people who helped me. My lifeguards, I thank you for my life.”*

3.2 Cooperation and engagement with Hellenic Rescue Team

When more than 850,000 refugees and migrants started to arrive to the Greek islands in 2015, the Greek Sea Rescue organization, Hellenic Rescue Team (HRT), had 15 rescue stations, but only five boats. Most of these boats were not of a reasonable standard to cope with mass rescue operations. The pressure on the Greek communities was extremely high, and many volunteers from HRT used their private boats to prevent children and adults from drowning on the way from Turkey to the Greek islands. Both Greek authorities and NGOs were completely overwhelmed by the large number of arrivals and had no opportunity to cope with the situation without assistance from the international community.

3.2.1 Overview of cooperation between RS and HRT

As the RS began to engage in the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, the organization explored many options on how they could best provide assistance. In June 2015, RS, as the first foreign organization, took the initiative to assist the Hellenic Rescue Team. RS quickly realized that HRT needed different types of assistance, and based on a thorough evaluation an aid package with various elements was formulated. An application for support for the cooperation was sent to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (NMFA), which responded with a grant of 13 million NOK.

HRT’s most important and urgent needs included professional boats and training. Therefore, RS prioritized the delivery of professional rescue boats to HRT. As soon as the decision was taken, things moved rapidly. The first boat, named “Norway I” was launched in August 2015 at the Greek island of Kos and was a direct gift from RS to HRT. The second boat, named Norway II, became operational from April 2016. An additional four boats, named “Nansen”, “Europe”, “Odin” and “Aigaion” were obtained and given as gifts from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to HRT.

In addition to the acquisition of boats,

there was also a need for professional training of HRT crews. RS organized trainings that took place at the RS Sea Rescue School in Horten (Norway) and on the Greek islands. Both professional staff and volunteers from RS trained their Greek colleagues. More than 150 Greek sea rescuers received training from RS – and as a result, the HRT built its internal capacity to become a modern, professional and efficient sea rescue organization.

RS also quickly discovered that HRT needed administrative support. To operate a professional and effective sea rescue service not only depends on well-equipped boats and dedicated employees, it also requires an effective administration, good governance, strategies, plans and administrative procedures. As HRT was a small organization with almost exclusively volunteer members, the organization had weak administrative capabilities. RS therefore decided that it would be imperative to strengthen the administrative aspects of HRT and use

considerable resources on building up HRT's administration.

Other sea rescue organizations throughout Europe soon learned about RS' engagement with HRT. Based upon the success of the cooperation between RS and HRT, organizations from the UK, Netherlands, Sweden and Germany also developed similar support programs to build the capacities of HRT.

RS is proud of the cooperation with HRT and grateful for the support received by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The success of the cooperation after two years are impressive and include the following concrete results:

- RS has been instrumental in providing 6 boats to HRT - one boat was a gift from RS and 5 were financed by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. HRT now has 18 operational rescue boats.
- More than 150 Greek sea rescuers have received training from RS.

HRT training in Greece



- RS has assisted HRT in its development of a new strategy.
- RS has participated in the work to strengthen the administrative capacity at the HRT-headquarters in Thessaloniki.
- HRT has received VHF and communication equipment.
- HRT has received first aid equipment and thermal suits.
- RS has provided HRT with translation of manuals and international literature.

In 2016, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) awarded HRT the Nansen Refugee Award. The award honors extraordinary humanitarian work for refugees, internally displaced and stateless people and is the highest ranking international award for refugee-work. RS is proud that their sister organization received the award and of its own contribution to HRT's work for refugees.

3.3 Advocacy work for refugees in the Mediterranean

RS primarily conducted its advocacy work within its international umbrella organization, the International Maritime Rescue Federation (IMRF). IMRF became an important player in the rescue effort in the Mediterranean, not least because of RS's strong commitment. Further, RS support to HRT inspired sea rescue organizations from other countries to also engage in a collaboration with HRT. After the cooperation with RS and HRT become widely known, Swedish, Dutch, British and German

sister organizations entered into partnerships with HRT.

RS also used its presence in the Mediterranean to raise the awareness of Norwegian politicians of the refugee crisis. RS invited several politicians to visit RS "Peter Henry von Koss" to witness and experience the rescue work for themselves. Several Norwegian ministers, state secretaries, and parliamentarians visited both RS's rescue boat and RS Greek sister organization HRT. RS also kept close contact and developed a fruitful cooperation with the Norwegian Embassy in Athens throughout the operations.

Finally, RS had an effective communication strategy that enabled it to maintain a high media profile. RS used its own media channels such as the magazine "RS Magazine" and social media platforms to highlight its operations. In addition, RS employees, both in Oslo and the crew of RS "Peter Henry von Koss", provided several hundred interviews with various media organizations. Many newspapers, TV and radio journalists also visited RS «Peter Henry von Koss».

4. Conclusion and recommendations for future international operations

RS has harvested many valuable experiences based on its efforts in the Mediterranean. These experiences and lessons learned will be used in the international work that RS plans for the coming years.



Exercise and knowledge

Firstly, it is important that the crew on-board rescue vessels on international assignments are well trained. The Norwegian sailors who staff RS's vessels undergo thorough exercises and have extensive experience. The mission in the Mediterranean showed the importance of professional training of the crews. Sea rescue work requires very specialized skills. Through its work in the Mediterranean RS obtained important experiences in mass rescue situations. To prepare its crews even better for future assignments, these experiences will be used in the trainings that RS conducts at its new maritime training center in the Norwegian city of Horten. There, RS will offer training and exercises both for its own employees and volunteers, as well as training of international partners.

Close cooperation with authorities

Secondly, an important lesson learned is the need for close cooperation with the authorities - both Norwegian and the authorities in the area of operation. RS cooperated very well with the Norwegian police, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and

other branches within the Norwegian government. In addition, the rescue boat RS "Peter Henry von Koss" was part of the European border cooperation Frontex, and part of their joint operation Poseidon. Collaboration with these key governmental players secured that the rescue efforts were well-coordinated and most effective. In future operations abroad, RS will seek to establish the same level of cooperation with authorities and state players.

Solid financing

International operations are expensive as there are always a number of additional costs. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported RS's cooperation with the HRT with NOK 13 million. In addition, RS received funding from FRONTEX covering some of the operational cost of the rescue vessel "Peter Henry von Koss". However, the total cost of RS's work on the refugee crisis exceeded the amount received from donors, and the organization incurred significant costs. In future international operations, it is imperative that governments and other financial players contribute to RS's efforts.

Safety

Security challenges were significant during the operations in the Mediterranean. Rescue work is in itself potentially dangerous work. Under international operations, such as the one in the Mediterranean, additional security challenges are present. Additionally, in international operations, linguistic and cultural differences among rescuers can lead to potentially challenging situations. The operations in the Mediterranean gave RS valuable experience, which enables the organization to prepare better for future operations.

Variety in support to partners

Based on the cooperation with HRT, RS must be prepared not only to provide operational support to future partners, but also administrative support. With over a hundred years of history in this field, RS has built up considerable experience in managing and operating a sea rescue service, and in the future, partners can greatly benefit from this wealth of knowledge.



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