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WHITE PAPER:

# Why We Created the Water Rescue Supervisor Award

## Examining the gap between Operational Competence and Supervisory Development in Water Rescue

A discussion paper by Greg Cain, Technical Training Manager, Outreach Rescue

# Summary

In this White Paper, Greg Cain explains the professional reasoning behind Outreach Rescue's Water Rescue Supervisor Award. He considers the gap between baseline operational competence, classroom-based Asset Commander learning and the demands of supervising complex water rescue operations. He also explains how the five-day programme combines FRCO-aligned Asset Commander content, Mod 3 reassessment and contextual, scenario-based supervisory development.

Outreach Rescue has recently launched a new training product – the Water Rescue Supervisor. I have written this article to explain the reasoning behind it, the professional gap it seeks to address, and how it supports services in strengthening flood response capability in a context where many services are experiencing increasingly frequent and complex flooding demands.

Over the years I have had many conversations with services about supervision in water rescue. Many of those discussions begin with a comparison to our Rope Rescue pathway. In rope rescue, we have a clearly defined Supervisor level. People understand what that means. Many understand the value it adds. And it is a question we are asked regularly: why does a Water Rescue equivalent not exist?

## Rope Rescue and the Question of Adaptability

In the Rope Rescue context, the Supervisor develops beyond simply performing operator skills competently. A Rope Rescue Supervisor can demonstrate all operator skillsets. From there, development centres on adaptability. Individual skills are re-combined and re-oriented as ingredients in more complex problems. The aim is not to introduce elaborate techniques for their own sake, but to understand principles deeply enough to remix what is already known in order to overcome more demanding challenges.

We keep things as simple as they need to be. We do not add techniques because they look impressive. We focus on efficiency, clarity and memorability. Techniques must pass what we call the "cold November night test" — skills that can be recalled at 3am, in poor weather and darkness, when people are tired and under pressure.

To use the old adage, "you have to know the rules in order to break them." We teach the fundamentals that keep people safe and align with other services. Then we develop the judgement and situational awareness to recognise when those systems are limited, and how to adapt them in an informed and justified way.

Rope Rescue Supervisors therefore go deeper into systems analysis, projectional situational awareness, anticipation of failure points, command and control, safety checking, task allocation and dynamic risk management — often with stretched resources and time pressures. That will sound familiar to many people working in water rescue. It is therefore unsurprising that the question of a water equivalent continues to arise.

## Supervision in Water Rescue

Let's look at the operational side of water rescue. Within a deployed water rescue asset there is typically someone in a supervisory role — Crew Commander, Team Leader or similar — and those individuals will often have completed service specific incident command training.

What varies between organisations is the extent to which supervisors receive water-specific supervisory development beyond baseline operational competence. In some teams, the supervisor may be highly experienced in technical rescue capability. In other teams, the supervisor may be trained to the same operational level as the team, yet is expected to make decisions and direct operations under stress and time pressure without further sector-specific supervisory development.

It is frequently those supervisors — particularly those who recognise the limitations of “same level, no further development” — who ask what additional training is available. They recognise the potential vulnerability in their position. Every supervisor wants to be as safe and as competent as possible to protect their team and make sound decisions. The question becomes: where is that pathway in water rescue?

## The Asset Commander Model

That pathway exists to an extent within the Flood Rescue Concept of Operations (FRCO) produced by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA), through the Asset Commander course. This is stipulated as a two-day programme. In practice, the learning outcomes lend themselves largely to classroom-based delivery, and this is how it is typically delivered.

The syllabus itself is sound. It addresses command responsibilities, span of control, communication, situational awareness, decision-making and governance associated with asset command within the national framework. The issue is not the content. It is the context.

Flood and water incidents do not unfold in classrooms. They unfold in darkness, in poor weather, with media interest, public expectation, multi-agency complexity and genuine life risk to both casualties and rescuers. Whilst the content of the Asset Commander course is appropriate, classroom exposure alone may not be sufficient for many individuals without contextual application in demanding environments.

The Asset Commander role applies across Asset types — Type B (Flood Rescue Boat Asset), Type C (Water and Flood Rescue Technician Asset), and Type D (Water and Flood Rescue First Responder Asset). Many services deliver a dedicated two-day classroom course. We deliver a course aligned to FRCO learning outcomes — but it remains subject to the inherent limitations of classroom delivery.

Some services interpret the framework such that a Mod 3 qualification combined with an Incident Command course satisfies the Asset Commander requirements. I have been advised by a Flood Capability Officer within National Resilience that, without a documented gap analysis mapping Incident Command training to the FRCO Asset Commander learning outcomes, this approach may be challenged during assurance activity.

In principle, the requirement appears met. In practice, the more important question remains: does that pathway genuinely equip someone to supervise complex water operations in demanding environments?

## JESIP and Operational Reality

If we look at the JESIP Joint Decision Model, it emphasises:

- “Gather information and intelligence”
- “Assess threats and risks and develop a working strategy”
- “Identify options and contingencies”
- “Take action and review what happened”

These stages are underpinned by continuous situational awareness.

In a water incident, however, you can only gather information and intelligence if you know what information is relevant to look for. Projection — anticipating what may happen next — relies on

understanding hydrology, equipment and system limitations, environmental factors and human performance.

Viewed through a water-specific lens, classroom exposure alone is often unlikely to be sufficient preparation for operational reality without contextualised application.

## The Technical Progression – and Its Limits

In our experience, a response to this perceived gap has been to use the Water Rescue Advanced Award as a form of progression for supervisors.

We have delivered that programme for many years and it has real value. It focuses predominantly on rope-based operations over water: steep banks, complex edges, cableways and technical access systems. It expands capability and broadens operational scope.

However, it is important to understand its context. It is a technical progression. It introduces additional systems and addresses the niche of inaccessible water. What it does not primarily do is intensify command and control, situational awareness or supervisory judgement within the in-water environment itself.

## The Legal Requirement for Supervision

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974, Section 2(2)(c), states:

- *"the provision of such information, instruction, training and supervision as is necessary to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health and safety at work of his employees"*

Whilst the wording allows for interpretation, supervision is clearly identified as a requirement. The phrase *"such … supervision as is necessary"* is particularly important.

In my view, in a high-risk, technically complex and multi-agency water rescue environment, that means supervision should be highly sector-informed, technically grounded and operationally credible. It cannot rely solely on hierarchy or a classroom certificate. It should equip the individual to recognise risk, anticipate escalation and justify decisions under pressure.

Different services operate within slightly different legal and governance frameworks, but the Health and Safety at Work Act provides an overarching benchmark that most organisations will recognise. Senior officers understandably want their supervisory arrangements to be defensible against that benchmark. The Act provides a clear rationale for developing supervisory competence beyond the baseline learning outcomes set out in the FRCO.

## The WFIM Consideration – Operational Support at the Interface

Another important development within the FRCO 2025 concerns Water and Flood Incident Managers (WFIMs). To become a WFIM, the minimum prerequisite is Mod 2 – the Water and Flood First Responder course. The FRCO describes the WFIM role as commanding "at water and flood incidents at a tactical or operational level."

Mod 2 is limited to wading (Type D Asset). It does not include rope-based in-water systems, swim rescues, sled-based rescues or powered boat operations. Under the 2025 revision, there is no national requirement for WFIMs to maintain ongoing in-water competence, although services may choose to require this locally.

This does not change formal responsibilities. Asset Commanders remain responsible for managing their assets, and WFIMs retain their tactical role.

However, if a WFIM does not maintain current in-water experience, there may be occasions where the technical realities on the water need to be explained more clearly. In those situations, the Asset Commander must be able to articulate capability, limitation and risk confidently and professionally, ensuring decisions remain grounded in what is practically achievable.

That places real value on Asset Commanders who are technically assured, situationally aware and able to justify their decisions clearly.

## Addressing the Gap

With all of this considered, it became clear to us at Outreach Rescue that there was a gap between theoretical command input and applied, contextual water supervision.

This is not about criticising existing command structures. Fire and Rescue Service command systems are robust and essential. Rather, it recognises that water presents specific hazards and behaviours that require additional sector-focused understanding layered onto those systems.

There is also the matter of legitimacy. Do we want supervisory decisions followed purely because of rank? Or respected because they are grounded in knowledge and clear rationale? Ultimately, this comes down to trust.

The 2025 FRCO clarified that Asset Commander components may be delivered by “appropriately qualified and competent persons.” Within our instructor team are individuals with decades of water instruction and supervision experience, flood incident management experience, whitewater and rafting backgrounds, and involvement in early UK flood response development initiatives informed by international learning, including work in North Carolina associated with the CFOA Managing Major Flood Emergencies project.

Supervising people in hazardous water environments is not theoretical for us. It is daily professional practice.

## The Water Rescue Supervisor – The Integrated Solution

The Water Rescue Supervisor Award was built from that collective experience.

It is a five-day programme by design. Two days cover the full Asset Commander content aligned with the FRCO learning outcomes, including approximately two days of structured classroom input. The remaining three days are dedicated to contextual application in demanding water environments.

Delegates are placed in supervisory roles within realistic Type C asset scenarios. They apply JESIP principles, manage injects from police and HART, adapt plans as helicopters arrive or weather deteriorates and water levels change, and consider survivability windows as operations transition

from rescue towards recovery. We avoid artificial “shark-infested custard” exercises. Instead, we use high-fidelity mannequins and experienced staff role-players to create credible pressure. Managing these casualties in water is physically and cognitively demanding. That is deliberate. Supervision must account for fatigue, emotional load and degraded performance.

Search is covered in both theory and practice: immediate “search to rescue”, shoreline and in-water techniques, later-stage recovery considerations, vehicles in water, unstable surfaces, evacuation of large groups, influencing flow through liaison with water companies, and managing spontaneous volunteers. All of this is exercised in context, in challenging environments.

Non-technical skills are given equal emphasis. Situational awareness, decision-making, briefing, debriefing, communication discipline and span of control are assessed under pressure. There are scenarios where established systems may not neatly fit the situation. Delegates must assess options, justify decisions and recognise when not to proceed, and what alternatives exist. As we often say at Outreach Rescue, ‘rescue is always the best compromise between the ideal and the achievable’ — and that principle is tested repeatedly throughout the programme.

Two structured night exercises are included, a multi-casualty and multi-agency search, and a complex multi casualty rescue. The programme is delivered in winter to allow natural transition from day into darkness. That transition is operationally significant and too often under-practised, yet it can materially alter risk profiles if crews are unprepared.

Importantly, the course also incorporates Mod 3 reassessment. Asset Commanders are required to renew Mod 3 every three years, typically over two or three days, and complete two days of Asset Commander training. That equates to five days of training commitment in any case. We therefore suggest that once an individual has approximately three years’ operational experience at Mod 3, this integrated five-day programme becomes a cost-effective opportunity for renewal and upskilling. Rather than simply maintaining minimum standards, services can consolidate required renewal while significantly elevating supervisory capability. In practical terms, the overall programme represents the equivalent of seven days’ worth of structured input and assessment, delivered in five meaningful and integrated days.

## Why It Matters

*“Practice makes perfect”* is often quoted. I would suggest instead that ‘practice makes permanent’. If we want excellence, then it must be deliberate, well-structured practice. Overly simplistic scenarios are appropriate at Mod 3 level to hone technical skills. However, to create well-rounded, adaptive supervisors, training must incorporate complexity, decision-making and contextual challenge. If we practice these skills well, then we make permanent good supervisory competencies within the water rescue context – and beyond.

The Water Rescue Supervisor Award is not about adding complexity for its own sake. It is about strengthening judgement, clarity and confidence where it matters most. It is about ensuring that those holding supervisory responsibility genuinely understand what they are supervising and feel confident in the weight of that responsibility.

Appropriate supervision in water rescue means more than rank and certification. It means understanding systems, recognising environmental indicators, anticipating escalation, making defensible decisions under pressure and maintaining effective communication with both the team and the WFIM or senior officer.

The feedback from initial deliveries has reinforced that this development was necessary. Delegates leave with sharper situational awareness, stronger decision-making and greater confidence in leading teams in water. They also develop a clearer appreciation of their limits and the consequences of their judgement. Many have additionally reflected that the contextualised, scenario-driven approach has strengthened not only their water-specific supervision, but also their broader incident command capability and interoperability skills across other areas of their operational roles.

We designed the programme to meet the national framework. We designed it to align with existing renewal cycles. And we designed it in way to ensure it is practical as well as progressive. Above all, it has been developed to elevate supervisory capability in a way that is operationally meaningful, professionally credible and defensible against both real-world scrutiny and statutory expectation.

That is why the Water Rescue Supervisor Award exists.

# Discuss your organisation's requirements

To discuss the Water Rescue Supervisor Award and its relevance to your organisation's existing training and renewal arrangements, contact Outreach Rescue.

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