

NAVY TIMES INTERVIEW WITH ADMIRAL PAPP HIGHLIGHTS UNIFORM AND FITNESS ISSUES, TOUR LENGTHS, BUDGET IMPACTS, AND ACQUISITIONS

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CG chief talks uniforms, manning, the Arctic-

Staff report

During an unprecedented era of federal belt-tightening, the Coast Guard faces a number of challenging missions.

On top of that, the Coast Guard needs to keep its end strCGF: NAVY TIMES INTERVIEW WITH ADMIRAL PAPP HIGHLIGHTS UNIFORM AND FITNESS ISSUES, TOUR LENGTHS, BUDGET IMPACTS, AND ACQUISITIONS

Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Bob Papp sat down with Navy Times reporters and editors Sept. 14 to discuss tour lengths, physical fitness, commanding officer problems and more.

Questions and responses are edited for space.

Q. Do you see end strength staying relatively flat over the next five years, going down or even moving up?

A. My projection is that end strength will stay flat.
And I will do my best to make sure ... that we at least remain flat.

We had about 42,000 people in the early '90s; we lost about 6,000 people throughout the '90s.

And since 9/11, we've built ourselves back up.

The country has given us the resources to gain 6,000 people since 2001. But it just puts us back where we were in 1990. And we've picked up a whole lot more responsibilities than we had in 1990.

I'm hopeful that we can make the case to the [Obama] administration and to the Congress that we need each and every person that we have. And unfortunately, we'll be looking at very constrained budgets.

Q. Are you considering adopting high-year tenure or separation boards for nonretirement-eligible members?

A. We have the highest retention that I've ever seen in the four decades that I've been associated with the Coast Guard.

The way our enlisted personnel system is set up, as long as they do OK, they're there for 30 years. And unfortunately, a lot of people were staying. Three years ago, when we instituted an early-out program, we thought people who were retirement-eligible would leave. They stayed, and we had a lot of third class petty officers leaving because they just didn't see the opportunity for advancement.

So, we came up with a performance-based review of people who were retirement eligible, basically looking for those people who, perhaps, were "retired on active duty." And over a thousand advancements were created for our young people as those people left.

What we don't want to do is come up with something really drastic. If things change and all of a sudden people are leaving, we're locked with personnel tools that perhaps don't serve us as well. So we're trying to be very deliberate.

Q. So right now, higher tenure is not under consideration?

A. Not the higher tenure that we once had. We used to have a higher tenure for every pay grade, and what we've found was that - particularly in ratings like our aviation ratings, which traditionally move very slow - if you institute a higher tenure for a second or first class petty officer, you may lose some people who are very talented. So that's a tool that you want to use very judiciously.

We're trying to stay away from that and try to come up with something not necessarily that duplicates the officer system, because we have a very strict pyramid for officers [that's] very good but sometimes harsh.

But on the enlisted side, we want to try and keep that flow steady, make sure that we don't have any big gaps in the pipeline as it goes forward.

Q. Do you see more military billets being converted to civilian jobs?

A. One of the things that I've observed is, we rotate our military people way too often. As a part of my "Steady the Service" campaign, I'm looking at longer tour lengths. We're going to start with our deployable specialized forces, lengthening tours for people, because it gives you a chance to build up greater proficiency and competency.

In a search-and-rescue case that we had a couple of years ago, the Coast Guard didn't respond as well as I thought it should have. And when we started looking at the command center that was responsible for the case, we found that we had three operations specialists on duty with a combined experience of 13 months in that particular command center.

It's good to take selected billets and make them civilian billets so there is some continuity there.

They also help with the training of the military people who rotate through.

Q. What about tour lengths for other members?

A. We're looking at the entire service. I started with our admirals. I thought our admirals rotate way too quickly, particularly district commanders. There were some places where we're leaving people in place for only one year. You could hardly learn your area of operations in that one year - plus, the relationships you need to establish and maintain with industry and with the public. And so when I came in a little over a year ago, I said we're going to keep them there at least two, and in some cases, three years.

We moved that down to our captains last year. We looked for places where we could extend people.

We looked for where we could fleet people up.

And we ended up saving a couple of million dollars just on captain transfers alone.

We've started pushing that down into our enlisted side, as well this year. And I just got a report back that we saved \$20 million in transfer costs this year, just by having people stay for their full tours. If you're going to spend a lot of money on people, first to transfer them to a location, then training en route and everything else, you want to get a return on that investment. And you don't get it if you transfer a person after one year or two years. And maybe you don't even get it after three years.

Q. In the last three months, the Coast Guard has fired one commanding officer a month, which is a rate far higher than the previous relief rate over the last three years. What are the contributing factors to these firings? How concerned are you?

A. Well, I'm concerned that our commanding officers conduct themselves and hold themselves to the highest possible standards, set a good example for their people. We give them great responsibilities. We also have to keep in mind that we've got human beings out there that are subject sometimes to failure.

I've looked at every case that comes across, and I'm not sure that I can identify a consistent theme across any of them. Without getting into the details of any one of those, I think that's sort of a general statement on the matter.

Q. Are you contemplating any changes to the command screening process?

A. What we've instituted over the last year is that every command position in the Coast Guard will be screened to find our best performers. And also we're going to make sure that every commanding officer has pipeline training.

What I envision is that there will be a core and strand approach to this. There are certain core courses that every commanding officer will get.

But then if they're going to an air station or sector or a cutter, there will be strand courses that they'll break off into.

I want to make sure that we're giving every commanding officer all the tools he or she needs to ensure success. Screening is the first step, and then providing this pipeline training is the second step, and then monitoring from the flag officer level, making sure that we're getting out there and doing a little intrusive leadership, making sure that people are getting their jobs done.

We will have everybody screened this year. I would anticipate by the beginning of fiscal 2013, we'd have the core curriculum nailed down, and then a little bit more rigor put into those courses for the specialties.

Q. Are you getting rid of "scrambled eggs" for the ball cap?

A. When we're out in the field working our enlisted people, why should an officer have scrambled eggs on their ball cap? Why can't they look like the people that they're leading? And quite frankly, when you get a bunch of senior Coast Guard officers out in the field with baseball caps with scrambled eggs on them, they look like they're yacht club commodores.

I take pride in wearing the same uniform as my people. And one of the first things I did when I became commandant was to get a hat that looks like what the people that I lead wear.

We do have metal devices on them. If they can't tell I'm the commandant with the four stars that are on the hat, then I don't think the scrambled eggs is going to help them.

Q. What other changes are planned for uniforms?

A. Uniforms are part of an overall cultural thing I'm working on. What I was concerned about coming in as commandant was the fact that we've lost 14 aviators in accidents over the last few years. I was concerned that we'd had a couple of boating accidents where we've run into civilian boaters.

I was concerned that we lost a member in a training incident, Maritime Enforcement Specialist 3rd Class Shaun Lin of Maritime Safety and Security Team New York, doing things that I'm not sure we should have been doing.

In every accident that I've evaluated over the last few years and going back through my career, one of the root causes is inattention to detail.

So how do you develop a culture of paying attention to detail? Well one of the things we do is just basic training for anybody that enters any of the services. They teach you how to wear your uniform. It's all attention to detail. One of the things that I had observed, and even in some of these accidents, was ships where commanding officers decided, "I can ignore the commandant's policies on uniforms." And it set a tone within the ship that ultimately led to junior people probably not paying attention to detail on other things.

I have this saying that selective obedience leads to selective obedience. And if a leader demonstrates selective obedience, a junior member might very well learn that lesson. I

would suggest to any senior leader, you don't want your junior member making decisions on what rules they adhere to. If I wear my uniform sloppy, or I wear uniform items that aren't authorized, what signal does that send to the people of the Coast Guard? So this is a much broader issue in my estimation.

I want the Coast Guard to be a professional organization. I don't want to have to speak at memorial services, because we've killed people in training accidents. It starts with a hundred little things. Wearing the uniform properly is one of those things.

Q. Do you see the Coast Guard adopting a fitness standard?

A. I get this question at almost every all-hands meeting that I go to. And for years, I always said I think it's a personal responsibility.

For 30 years, I've been getting up at 4:30 in the morning and running and doing calisthenics, because it's an obligation I have as an officer to keep myself healthy and be prepared to do my duties. And I've been reluctant to prescribe a program for our Coast Guard people, who I think are already very busy doing things.

The master chief petty officer of the Coast Guard has convinced me otherwise. The challenge is, how do you come up with a program that is consistent and fairly applied. Master Chief [Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Michael] Levitt is working on a program, and we're going to get our doctors involved.

We weigh the entire service in April and October.

And in March and September, the gym is full. And then in May and November, you can get on a treadmill again down there. We want something that keeps people all year long thinking about fitness and staying in shape and looking good in their uniforms.

Q. Any service's physical fitness test that you like in particular?

A. They all vary a little bit. And no, I don't have a particular one. What does concern me is .

I mean, I joke a little bit about the weight program, and people getting out there in the months before the weigh-ins, [but] the reality is on some of these PT programs, you get people dying of heart attacks, because they only get out there just in advance of when the test is given.

So, once again, we want to come up with something which encourages people for lifelong fitness.

Q. In talking about the possible fitness standards, you currently have the weigh-in, basically. I know that in the firing of the Anacapa's CO earlier this year, among the problems was that the XO and the CO entered their own weight measurements in the computer system. Do you see cheating as a big problem? And how would you combat that?

A. We certainly don't want anybody cheating on [the weigh-ins]. What concerns me when you talk about cheating is there's some unhealthy practices that I've seen.

People have been going out trying to do body sculpting. I've even heard of people trying to do things which increase their wrist measurements or their neck measurements so that it changes the standards that they go by. We don't people doing that. So once again, I'm not necessarily convinced [our current weight program is] the best program.

I want something that encourages people to take personal responsibility for their appearance, their health and their fitness - something that encourages them to do it year-round, instead of just twice a year. And therein lies the challenge.

And I will admit right up front that I don't have the answer for that, and I'm hopeful that the people that I've got working on it will come up with it.

Q. Given budget constraints, when you're looking across the roles and missions of the Coast Guard, what are you looking for in terms of dialing back operational demands?

A. All of our missions are found in statute, and Congress or the administration has to make a recommendation or Congress has to say, "Stop doing something."

The one that always comes up is aids to navigation, because that would appear to be something that you can split right off. But if you split it off, that budget authority goes with it. There was a privatization effort that went on a number of years ago, and they found out that moving into the private sector was actually more expensive. So it came back to us.

But last summer, the only federally owned oil skimmers that we had to deploy to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill were the 16 sea-going buoy tenders. Oftentimes when we have mass migrations, the only way we can supplement our white cutter fleet is by sending our buoy tenders down there, and you can hold a lot of migrants on them.

This summer, we've had two of those buoy tenders deployed up to the Arctic, and we found out that they're the best assets we have for working off the North Slope, because they're ice reinforced and they can carry cargo and they're self-sustaining.

We have a philosophy in the Coast Guard that when we build resources, we make them multimission.

So, rather than focusing on carving off missions, on any given day, we still have the 11 missions. And we apply those resources to the highest priority.

Q. We're looking at fairly severe cuts across the government in 2012. Then in 2013, everyone's planning for 5 percent, possibly 10 percent budget- cut options. What is that going to mean for the Coast Guard?

A. I don't know at this point. Well, I have a good idea what the 2012 budget might be. We've got a House mark-up, and we've got a Senate mark-up. And quite frankly, they're not bad. They're not terrible. We can still continue to deliver our operations and still keep our acquisition programs going.

All I know is what I'm anticipating in the 2012 budget. We're negotiating 2013 budget within the [Obama] administration right now. And I can't talk about that yet, but what I have a great confidence in, is our secretary believes in the Coast Guard, and she has given us great support during her tenure, and she's convinced the President to give us good support.

I'm just going to say I've got a little bit of optimism right now that that support will continue. Will that last into 2013 or 2014, I'm not sure. But I think there's a certain expectation in terms of what the country needs for security. I think the Coast Guard provides a very valuable service and is more versatile and has greater authorities than any other agency in the government, particularly when it relates to the maritime.

Q. So unlike other agencies, you're not forecasting hiring freezes, travel, training - a lot of the typical things that we're seeing?

A. We've been taking a big round turn on our administrative expenses over the last two years.

Nonoperational travel, trying to consolidate administrative services, whether it's Help Desk for computers or other things - the whole department has been doing that in the Coast Guard as just a part of the [Homeland Security Department] effort to consolidate and make sure we're not duplicating efforts across the various agencies within the department.

And we've continued to come up with I would characterize as "marginal savings," but savings nonetheless, which we have reinvested in frontline operations and keeping our acquisition projects going on.

What I would say is that my philosophy is that multi-mission assets, versatile assets, are the things that I will hold to the longest. If I'm confronted with budget reductions, I might reduce them first. Why? Because if something's a single mission unit, it has less utility for me as the commandant. If I've got a ship that I can use for disaster response, for counter-drug, for migrants, for search and rescue, that has greater value to the country across the mission set than does perhaps a maritime safety and security team, which is only there to provide security operations.

That doesn't diminish the value of that Maritime Safety and Security Team, and I want to keep that MSST, because it was hard fought to get them, and I want to keep them. But I think I - it is fair to say that if I had to reduce the size of the service, what I would look at are those units that provide us the least utility across the broad mission set.

Q. I've been hearing from sources that the Coast Guard is considering getting rid of fast-rope and hook-and-climb for MSSTs and Marine Security Response Teams. Is that true?

A. I think it is a capability that we need at our MSRT. Post-9/11, we got 13 MSSTs. and if you read the description of an MSST, it is to provide fixed and moving security zones around security events. Pretty basic.

But what had happened in the interim is we kept on dreaming up for more things for them to do, and they started getting into some very high-end activities - the hook and climb and vertical insertion - which I believe these basic teams were never intended to do. We were spending more time training than we were actually carrying out operations.

I would say that I don't think we gave sufficient attention to the quality of the training we were giving out there, which may have contributed to Petty Officer Shaun Lin's death out there.

Q. So how would MSSTs board hostile vessels if they don't use those two methods?

A. Well we don't necessarily need them to board hostile vessels.

What we're going to do is we are going to constrain the numbers of capabilities that the MSST will do.

MSST is only about 75 people. If you're looking at just the time devoted to small arms qualification, that is a huge time investment. Plus, they need to be tactical boat drivers. That requires a lot of time and investment. Plus, they have to be able to fire mounted automatic weapons from those tactically driven boats.

Q. How are you preparing for drilling next year in the Arctic?

A. The Coast Guard currently has zero resources to apply in the Arctic on a full-time basis. We don't have a distress response system up there. And it's very hard to get word down to south Alaska in terms of providing responses for just even simple search and rescue. And even if we do get the word, the closest air station is in Kodiak. That's, at a minimum, about a 10-hour transit.

Q. In the case of a devastating oil spill up there, the Coast Guard must respond, and will be held responsible at congressional hearings.

A. Yes, the Coast Guard will be called to task if there is improper or inadequate response. A part of that is borne by the responsible party, in this case industry. Shell has to provide a response plan to the Department of Interior. We also review those response plans. And quite frankly, it looks to me like Shell has a pretty good plan. They're going to have helicopters up there, ships on standby, skimming capability. But at the end of the day, BP was supposed to have all those things.

At some point, we have to at least be able to monitor the progress. And we don't have any stations permanently up there. We don't even have a hangar where we could put a couple of helicopters or an aircraft. So there has to be some level of minimal Coast Guard resources up there to be able to sustain a forward operating base during the seasons while they're drilling.

Q. What are you doing to catch up?

A. Up until now, the 17th District was sort of taking a lead on it. But that's an operational-level command.

They shouldn't have to be dealing with these strategic issues.

We've put together a matrix team of cross-program expertise, and they are preparing, and I'm going to get briefed out on the first week of October on our campaign plan, which will include: How do we advocate for the resources? What do we need up there? And how are we going to go about it?

Q. If you could, talk a little about Deepwater.

A. We've recently had the GAO report come out on our shipbuilding and aircraft program formally known as, "Deepwater," so that's of interest to me, and I think getting the true story out there.

Q. When you say the "true story" of the program, what do you mean?

A. Well I would say I was a little disappointed in the stories that went out uh, in the aftermath of the GAO Report. You know, I'm a sailor. That's what I joined the Coast Guard to do.

And what I learned as a sailor, is I learned to navigate and I learned whenever you take a fix, a fix tells you where you were. It doesn't necessarily tell you where you are. There's some time delay between the time you take a fix, learn where you are, and you're still continuing to move forward.

I would characterize the GAO Report as a fix in time.

It tells you where we were in the program; it doesn't necessarily tell you where we are, although to be fair to them, they did say some positive things about improvements in our acquisition processes

Q. That GAO report mentioned that the Coast Guard hasn't pinned down a true cost or timeline for the Deepwater program. Have you all done that by this point?

A. That's a little unfair, because I'm constrained by the funding that I get. And the longer you stretch out a project like this, it's going to cost more money. Even though we negotiated [National Security Cutters]

4 and 5 in the same year, there was a \$2 million increase. That's because steel is skyrocketing; copper is skyrocketing. So there are inflation area costs that come into play that will may your subsequent ships more expensive.

There's just no getting around it, unless we go into a great worldwide depression where everything falls to the basement. So the longer you stretch this out, things are going to inflate.

You never know what the end of the project's going to be, because first of all in terms of timeline; it depends upon funding from Congress. It depends on what the president recommends to the Congress.

And then depending on the timeline, then you have inflationary costs that come in.

The further you kick this to the right, yes, it's going to be more expensive. And a part of that I will admit was caused by the Coast Guard. In an Associated Press story, one of the quotes that came out from me was, "I would be the first to admit that we were ill prepared to spend the money when we first got it."

And it's true, but it doesn't go into the depth of that story, which is during the '90s, the Coast Guard lost 6,000 people. And if we're going to keep up front- line operations during that period, what do you cut?

You cut acquisition professionals. You cut budget professionals. You cut a lot of things that don't necessarily contribute directly to getting the job done.

But when you start getting money, which we did, post-9/11, you're trying to build your acquisition workforce as you're trying to spend the money.

We made some mistakes. I'll admit it, but we're better today. We're doing great.

Q. The report said the plan is "expected to cost more than what its budget will likely support." So moving forward, how do you contain that cost? Or, are you looking at scaling back Deepwater in any way?

A. I kind of laugh sometimes, because for years, commandants have been criticized that they don't ask for what they need when they go up before Congress. And now, I've been - maybe criticized is too strong of a word - but people have said we're asking for too much.

I see it as my job to tell the country, to tell the administration and the Congress what the Coast Guard needs to get the job done. At the end of the day, either the administration will set a top line for me or the Congress, who controls appropriations, will set a top line.

Then it's my job to live within it and do the best we can. But, meanwhile, [Homeland Security Department Secretary Janet] Napolitano has given me pretty good license to go up there and tell the Congress what my needs are, what the Coast Guard's needs are, and what we need to provide the performance that the American people expect of their Coast Guard.

