

The Coast Guard Cutter KATHERINE WALKER – A Steward of the Environment

by LT Amy Florentino, USCGC KATHERINE WALKER (WLM 552)

Coast Guardsmen line the deck of the Coast Guard Cutter KATHERINE WALKER dressed in hard hats, life jackets and steel-toed boots. They prepare the large orange boom for deployment into New York Harbor to contain the oil that threatens the environment. A deck supervisor signals a command to the crane operator and expertly lowers a skimmer into the churning waters of New York Harbor. Among the din of activity on the deck, the crew pauses and sees a Coast Guard helicopter hovering above the ship providing information on the size and direction of the oil spill. This is a large-scale oil spill, but do not be alarmed. It was only an exercise.

Coast Guard Cutter KATHERINE WALKER recently arranged an opportunity to exercise its pollution response capabilities by deploying a Vessel of Opportunity Skimming System (VOSS) in New York Harbor. The VOSS is a modular oil recovery method that can be secured to, and operated from, a vessel at a spill site. It is pre-staged on a 48-foot low-bed tractor trailer in Earle, N.J. for immediate transport to the location of a spill. With this system, a vessel can quickly transform into an oil recovery platform with a maximum skimming capability of 190 gallons per minute. The VOSS can be split between two vessels or used as a two-sided sweeping system on a single vessel.

During this exercise, the VOSS was assembled and operated on the Coast Guard Cutter KATHERINE WALKER, a 175-foot buoy tender. The Coast Guard District One Response Advisory Team sailed aboard to evaluate the VOSS exercise. Other Coast Guard units participat-





CGC KATHERINE WALKER maneuvers with CGC LINE and the NEW JERSEY RESPONDER with numerous oil barges in the background.

ing included Coast Guard Sector New York, Air Station Atlantic City and the Atlantic Strike Team. Two civilian agencies, Marine Spill Response Corporation and Clean Harbors worked in tandem with Cutter KATHERINE WALKER during the exercise. These agencies directed the NEW JERSEY RESPONDER, a

210-foot oil spill recovery vessel, which deployed skimming equipment and participated in team maneuvers. This team deployment gave each agency the chance to learn more about each other's capabilities. Adding to the excitement of the event was an environmental education group sponsored by Conoco Phillips, one of the port's largest oil suppliers. The students of this science and technology program observed the exercise from the decks of Coast Guard Cutter LINE, getting a bird's eye view of the VOSS equipment and its unique capabilities. Petty Officer Mark Posey, the deck supervisor, led the KATHERINE WALKER's crew through the exercise. He stated, "I am very glad I was able to go to the Oil Spill Recovery training before we did this evolution. I was able to apply what I learned at the school in a real life experience. It really tested my ability to lead since there were resident experts onboard."

The crew of KATHERINE WALKER never needs to look very far to see why this type of oil spill recovery exercise is so important. One look at the crowded waters, the large tankers and the fleet of oil barges, reminds any onlooker that New York Harbor is the backbone of commerce for the North East corridor. In fact, the United States Energy Information Administration stated, "the New York Harbor area between New York and New Jersey has over 40 million barrels of refined product storage capacity (much of which is in New Jersey), making it the largest petroleum product hub in the United States." To put these statistics into perspective, Captain Robert O'Brien, Commander US Coast Guard Sector New York, recently related a comparison drawing a parallel to more familiar terms. He said, "In one average winter over 500 home heating oil and gasoline barges transit the Hudson River. The amount of oil carried in these barges amounts to 50,000 tank trucks." Can you imagine the extra load if these goods were carried on the highway systems - and that is just oil barges on the Hudson River during one winter to keep our homes warm!"



Luckily, for the American public, the pilots who navigate their ships and the captains who drive their tugs are experts. They safely deliver goods and services during all seasons and through the most demanding of waterways. However, there are always mistakes, equipment problems and bad weather; making our emergency preparations all that much more important. In December 2006 the coastal tanker KRISTIN POLING ran aground in East Rockaway Inlet about 450 yards from shore carrying 672,000 gallons of #2 home heating oil. In July 2007, just days after Cutter KATHERINE WALKER's VOSS exercise, the M/V WHITE SEA ran hard aground four miles north of Sandy Hook, NJ. The 800-foot doubled-hulled tank ship was traveling outbound from Bayonne, N.J. with 556,000 barrels of low sulfur fuel oil en route to Singapore when it lost steering and ran aground just outside the shipping channel. The owners of both ships worked feverishly with the Coast Guard to lighten the ships and use tugs to pull them off the sandy bottom at high tide. Luckily, neither ship suffered a major hull breach and both were removed safely. For both of these incidents the Coast Guard Atlantic Area Strike Team and the Cutter KATHERINE WALKER were standing by ready to respond; glad they had practiced this exercise before.



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