

# SEALs open doors to Coast Guardsmen

2 enlisted, 2 officers a year will train as elite commandos

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For the first time in the Navy SEALs' 46-year history, Coast Guardsmen will be allowed to try out for the elite team of special operators.

Coast Guardsmen who make it through the nearly two years of physically and mentally daunting training will be assigned to a SEAL team for five to seven years, although they still officially will be part of the Coast Guard.

But before the SEAL training begins, hopefuls first have to make it through the Coast Guard's screening process — the service plans to send only four people to the training each year.

Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Thad Allen announced the new program July 31 in a servicewide message.

Those who successfully complete the SEAL training and service commitment are not required to return to the Coast Guard after their assignment is up, but Allen said that is the goal.

"It would bring a tremendous amount of expertise and knowledge [to the Coast Guard], and that would really improve our program," Allen said. "It really was a win-win for us and the Navy special ops, because they will now have a broader group to draw on."

Men under the age of 29 may be considered for the program, but they first must meet all the SEALs' stringent standards. Rear Adm. Tom Atkin, commander of the Coast Guard's Deployable Operations Group, said Naval Special Warfare Command will be part of the internal solicitation process intended to find the right candidates with the best chance of success. Once the packages are reviewed, Atkin said, the candidates will have to complete a physical fitness test and a medical screening before being selected. It is unlikely any Coast Guardsmen will start training before February, he said.

The Coast Guard expects to send two officers and two enlisted members through the training annually.

Assuming four Coast Guardsmen successfully complete the training each year for seven years, Atkin said there eventually will be 28 Coast Guardsmen highly trained in special operations who can return to leadership positions within the Coast Guard. Historically, fewer than half of those who enter the program become SEALs.

There are about 2,300 SEALs, but the Navy hopes to expand the program to about 2,800 in the next three to four years, Naval Special Warfare Command spokesman Lt. Nathan Potter said.

Since SEALs training is one of the world's toughest regiments, some may wonder why anyone interested in being part of that team would first join the Coast Guard.

Atkin said a lot of Coast Guardsmen have expressed interest in being a part of both worlds. And though it could be assumed most candidates will come from the Coast Guard's rescue swimmer program, the most physically challenging in the service, Atkin said the response has come from all across the service.

"It's not always about what the Coast Guard can get out of it, it's about what the Coast Guard can do to help the nation," Atkin said. "It's a long-term partnership. We still have a lot of stuff to work out, but we have time."

Potter said the arrangement is the result of the sea services' National Maritime Strategy, written in part to enhance the teamwork of the Navy, Coast Guard and Marine Corps.

"They are maritime. They are sailors, too, so I don't think there is going to be any problem integrating," Potter said.

Retired Rear Adm. George Worthington, a former commander of Naval Special Warfare Command, said this will be the first time another service will be allowed to train with the SEALs.

"Shoulders are up, from the top down," Worthington said in a message to Navy Times, adding he doesn't anticipate any integration problems, noting that some foreign nationals have gone through the training.

At this point, Coast Guardsmen are not eligible to become special warfare combatant-craft crewmen, the sailors who operate boats that transport SEALs, although, Atkin said, "we are working on it."

"Our engagement with the SEALs is huge, but the Coast Guard, Navy and Marine Corps partnership, as outlined in the maritime strategy, is really the direction we are going here," he said.