



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Attack on America: September 11, 2001 and the U.S. Coast Guard

U.S. COAST GUARD ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
Operation Noble Eagle Documentation Project

Interviewee: Rear Admiral Patrick Stillman, USCG
Program Executive Officer for the Deepwater Project

Interviewer: PAC Peter Capelotti, USCGR
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Coast Guard Headquarters
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Q: First of all, let me just say it's June 27th. I'm in the office of Rear Admiral Patrick Stillman; Head of the Deepwater Project. I wanted to ask you where you think this all might have been without 9/11 and how you think that Deepwater might have proceeded without the emphasis on Homeland Security and Maritime Security?

RADM Stillman: I think that, unquestionably, 9/11 provided additional impetus to the need for the capability that is circumscribed by the Integrated Deepwater System. I will say though, that like many other challenging issues, there's a paradox here. We had certainly justified the need for Deepwater based on a military multi-mission Coast Guard, which certainly justified the fact that asymmetric threats were fundamental to the strategic need for Deepwater. That had been confirmed, quite frankly, by Hart-Rudman [United States Commission on National Security/21st Century] and other initiatives that were in play to 9/11. It was assimilated into the language of messaging, if you will, on the part of the Commandant, as well as myself and others, as it pertains to the Coast Guard as a unique instrument of national security. Part of that, unquestionably, was the ability to respond to a terrorist threat that had not yet fully matured, but as Hart-Rudman and other studies indicated, was certainly developing and couldn't be expunged from the radar scope. Obviously on 9/11 that tended to reinforce the need for a presence of the Coast Guard.

Q: Did it make your job easier?

RADM Stillman: No. Actually it made it more difficult in that immediately after 9/11 there were a number of people, particularly on the Hill, who began to question whether or not there was a need for Deepwater now that we have gravitated to a far more port centric/port security focus. That posed a challenge and it was a complex one in that, unquestionably, immediately after the incident we did have a significant change as far as the lay down of assets and the level of effort as it related to actual presence within the port construct, and certainly over time a more reasonable sense of equilibrium has been gained, if you will. But notwithstanding the fact that you pulled cutters from multiple missions in the EEZ [Exclusive Economic Zone], you still use their C4ISR [Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance] capability. You still use their robust comms [communications] capability as well as the capability of the platform brains in terms of being able to launch helicopters and provide full consequence management, etc., etc., within the construct of "consequence management." But that said, most people gravitated on the fact that you had the PSUs [Port Security Units] called up. You had the need for far more small boats. You had this distinct gravitation to the container threat and the fact that really port security was becoming the center of gravity. We had to take that, and I think qualify it in a tactical sense under the proviso that unquestionably port security is fundamental to the way as it relates to homeland security. But homeland security is also very much tied to a neighborhood watch concept, the need to press one's borders out, the need to have a presence, the need to truly be able to attend to incidents before they reach the shore. Moreover, because we had the foundation of that performance sequence of surveillance, detection, classification, interdiction and prosecution of targets, that was fundamental to the Deepwater construct as far as the performance specification. I think we were able to convince people that, hey, this is the right wine in the bottle, metaphorically. They really had this stacked properly at the start. What we ought to do is think about expediting the capability that this program brings such that you truly can be far more adept in terms of your surveillance and response capabilities.

Q: In the integrated sense, has there been any discussion on bringing the C4ISR right down to the 25-foot MSST [Maritime Safety and Security Team] boat?

RADM Stillman: That's a great question and it's certainly another facet of the answer to your initial question tied to the challenge of 9/11. When all is said and done, particularly with the recognition that Intel [Intelligence] becomes too essential to proper response - knowing full well that risk management plays a fundamental role in the enterprise - you then are able to step back and recognize the importance of a Commandant rating picture, data fusion, you know, tactical reference concepts that bring all the practitioners together within the roadstead and the port, near the roadstead and out to those offshore.

Q: Because you have this sort of sense that you're pushing offshore and at the same time you've got this insidious in-port threat that may already be here?

RADM Stillman: That's right, and the good news is that technology's the glue that can bring those together, notwithstanding the fact that people have a propensity to think in watertight compartments and that's as true, or truer for the Coast Guard than any other organization. We may not want to admit it but the reality is it's true.

Q: I've seen it once or twice.

RADM Stillman: Well I'm sure. Yes indeed. So really that C4ISR connectivity - that glue, those metaphorical tentacles that can reach out and grab that Port Security Unit and whicker it with the Group Command Center, the Area Data Fusion Center, that in turn is whickered directly with the MEC [Medium Endurance Cutter] or HEC [High Endurance Cutter] offshore - makes for a seamless Coast Guard and that's where the . . .

Q: Speaking of seamless. One of the issues that's come up over and over again as I travel down to the different districts is this melding. I don't want to call it fusion because that would confuse it with intelligence, but the melding of the MSOs [Marine Safety Offices] and the groups. Do you see that as a done deal in the Coast Guard now or is that still something the Coast Guard is moving toward as an activities concept . . . ?

RADM Stillman: Well I'll give you my personal opinion. I think it should have been done years ago.

Q: Really?

RADM Stillman: The reality is that from a productivity standpoint I think that there's no question that there is an absolute synergy between the port security and port safety concerns and that really is encompassed within this construct of Maritime Security and now Homeland Security and that we need to be as productive as possible and not stovepipe an organization at the detriment of the taxpayer's dollar. I take [Commandant] Admiral [Thomas H.] Collins' focus on a stewardship to heart and I say everything's on the table, subject to question, and we ought to be looking for opportunities to leverage our infrastructure in our operations such that we can do it in a more productive manner. That means efficient and effective, alright, and I don't feel comfortable simply growing a Coast Guard with more and more numbers without a profound and distinct attachment to the necessities of productivity here.

Q: One of the things that follows right on that - that we talked about four months ago - that shocked me then, but I see it more and more now, the truth of what you said is even in the middle of this plus-up of a bigger Coast Guard and so forth, you had said, even then, that you saw the Coast Guard in ten years, smaller because you're going to have a smaller, smarter workforce.

RADM Stillman: It ought to be smaller. I am a distinct minority in that regard.

Q: And you say - when I looked at the Deepwater rollout package and the focus on technology and we talked about unmanned probes, which are prominently displayed in those - do you see the petty officer ratings going away in 20 years and becoming essentially a kind of officer corps of highly educated, highly trained people?

RADM Stillman: No, quite the contrary. I mean I'm running way ahead of the headlights here . . .

Q: Obviously.

RADM Stillman: I mean I'll tell you that I think it's important to do that sometimes. This is not a criticism of the Coast Guard, but generally speaking, like 99 percent of the other organizations - both public and private - we tend to gravitate toward what I call Adam Smith's definition of growth, and growth, more often than not, is numerical, particularly for a highly personnel intensive organization like the Coast Guard. I don't for a minute accept the fact that more people means more productivity. Quite the contrary. I think we've been sending ships to sea for years and having 12 people on the bridge at Special Sea Detail - not because there's 12 people needed, but only because there were 12 people there, and in many respects I think that's endemic to the military paradigm. Deepwater, constructively, is an opportunity to change that. I absolutely applaud the courage of the Coast Guard to approach it accordingly. There is no question that if you really want to wrap your arms around total ownership costs you've got to look at people. Okay, how do you look at people? Well you've got to assess the threat. You've got to integrate a very informed sense of risk management and you've got to make some hard decisions. Is it necessarily the case that you need more than twelve 378 replacement cutters in order to attend to the threat now, post 9/11? I'm not convinced that's the case. I don't honestly know. But I do think that through the use of overhead technology, through use of far more adroit Intel and data

fusion that quite frankly, in all honesty, you may not, and I readily admit to you I'm in the minority on that. I know the Commandant disagrees with me and I know that [Rear] Admiral [Harvey E.] Johnson [Jr.; the Director of Operations Capability, G-OC] and the sponsor, [Rear] Admiral [David S.] Belz [Commander, Joint Interagency Task Force], I'm sure that they'll disagree, but the reality is there's a reason why the Ameritex - now SBCs - and Verizons of the world measure their productivity - not by how many more people they've hired but how much more productivity they have brought to the marketplace. The employees per lines installed and their desire is to reduce the number of employees, not to increase the number of employees, and that's an issue of productivity. So I just feel that to truly be a steward of the Coast Guard and serve the men and women in the fleet I don't necessarily have to grow the business. I've got to grow the business in terms of productivity to give them the tools that they need to do their job. I don't necessarily need to give them a greater numerical count, because I've been out there for 60 days bored to death. The reality is absent, that C4ISR connectivity, that positive Intel, is not always the most grandiose motivational experience.

Q: You just hit the right word because I wanted to ask you about that. It seems that with a smaller force you're going to need even more cohesion and that it would rely even more and more on *esprit de corps*, on a sense of heritage and tradition.

RADM Stillman: I would think so. There's a great book that a British economist wrote - a guy named [E. F.] Schumacher - *Small is Beautiful*. The Coast Guard has been beautiful in part because in many respects it's been agile, mobile and flexible because it's been small. We've got our warts. We've got our problems like every organization, but what we do have - and without any reservation Chief, I'll tell you the greatest force multiplier in this Coast Guard is a profound adherence to core values. We truly do have wonderful men and women who are all true to us. They want to serve.

Q: The Marines . . .

RADM Stillman: Same for the Marines.

Q: The Marines have a small service, more or less comparably sized and seem to have an identity. One of the questions I've been asking the admirals as I go around the different districts is that if every Marine's a rifleman, what's every Coastguardsman?

RADM Stillman: A guardian. Every coastguardsman in his heart is a guardian. They perceive themselves as all true to us.

Q: Does that change now that you have this more military overlay of security?

RADM Stillman: No, absolutely not. I mean quite the contrary. I think that guardianship in today's world takes on the manifestation of the lighthouse in that democracy is damn difficult and I would say that the jury's out. Eighty percent of the LDCs, the Lesser Developed Countries, that really must begin to build institutions that are necessary in order to foster the success of democracy, need lighthouses, and post 9/11 - ironically enough - that has reinforced the absolute necessity for our military to truly be agents of engagement to bring examples of a proper civil-military philosophic and practical mix to the practicum of governments. The Coast Guard is a phenomenally important icon and lighthouse in that regard. You need to have young men and women who have a military character, but are nevertheless productive enough to be lifesavers, law enforcers and environmental stewards. Because you know what, that surplus has evaporated, and I've got news for you. It ain't gettin any better. It's going to get a lot worse. And if that ain't enough to motivate our Coast Guard to truly think about why small may be better, than I would suggest there's something wrong, and moreover, if we take solace in a dictum that

nobody else is doing it, why the hell should we, I've got news for you. We've just thrown our core values down the old [trash] can. So I think about that a lot.

Q: As possibly the most metaphorical officer in the fleet, I have to ask you just two final things. I know you've got to run. In this whole idea of *esprit de corps* and yet there's been such a focus on technology, especially in your position, but you think in metaphors, and I'm wondering if you've given any thought to when these vessels start to come online, how the Coast Guard, in lets say the naming process, will try to articulate to future generations the values of the service?

RADM Stillman: That's a good question. I think you've got to look to heroes. I mean I love Joseph Campbell. I guess I've got a few favorite books and one of my most favorite books of the old mental library here is Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*. I mean, to me, everyone that has joined the Coast Guard is on that journey and each of us in our own way is trying to be a hero, and thank the good Lord and the founding fathers for the opportunity to truly embrace that within the construct of the institution of the Coast Guard. Heroic adventures are fundamental to life and the Coast Guard is a manifestation of that, and to me, we have to covet that and we can never, ever lose sight of it. I mean that is truly the glue of the organization.

Q: One final question on that theme Sir. What's the biggest wave you ever saw on the [USCGB] *Eagle* [WIX-327]? Did you ever see a rogue wave?

RADM Stillman: Well I can recall a couple times when, you know, nothing to approach the *Perfect Storm* or anything like that, but, you know, 30/40 feet.

Q: I interviewed [Rear] Admiral [Jeffrey J.] Hathaway [Director, U.S. Navy Command Center and Counter Drug Division] last Thursday and I asked him the same question I asked you and I've asked several other admirals, is in a crisis do you feel you have to be a certain way for the people underneath you and he told me an interesting story about being on the [USCGC] *Citrus* [WLB/WMEC-300] out of Coos Bay, Oregon and coming out over the bar and, you know, a 60-foot wave coming at them and wiping out their whole superstructure and stuff floating in the water and a petty officer turning to him and saying, captain, are we all going to die, and he said I knew then what I did in the next 30 seconds was going to be the difference between whether we got out of there and whether people kept their heads or not, and he said I had the same sense after 9/11. He came over here for a board and when he went back, 42 of the 50 people that worked in his office were dead, and as far as I can tell the only Coast Guard admiral who's ever had people under his direct command wiped out like that. That would never happen in a wartime situation.

RADM Stillman: Right, no you're right.

Q: When we talked you talked a lot about the *Eagle* and I'm just trying to conceptualize these things when I write this history because I think these metaphors - like the lighthouses, the *Eagle* - this whole idea . . .

RADM Stillman: Well look. I mean like the metaphor for the *Eagle*, it's the standing rigging of the organization.

Q: Exactly.

RADM Stillman: I know that Admiral Collins is right in terms of his approach to organizational dynamics and institutions that are built to last. I mean his most current perspective is, I think, appropriate in that he has found - and I would agree with him - that the truly enduring institutions - in both the public and private marketplace, I think are those that are absolutely attached to core values. Now what's interesting in his research is that those core values don't necessarily have to be infused with moralism.

Q: Right.

RADM Stillman: Right.

Q: That might be a detriment to them.

RADM Stillman: That's another issue all together, which sometime we ought to get together over a cup of coffee. But to me that brings to vibrant reinforcement the concept of W.F. Bion who was a psychologist during World War II who . . . I don't know if you've ever read any of his stuff, but he talks about basic assumption of mental states in the subconscious of not only people but organizations, and that indeed there are propensities for societies to share that subconscious reflection and then manifest it into overt actions such as, well he calls it fight-flight independency, and then the highest state of a basic assumption - mental state - is really a transformation into what he would call a workgroup where really there's people that are motivated and an integrated product team by any other term. But you can look at history and see evidence of that across the board. You know, the paradox is as [John Henry] Cardinal Newman said, your faith is always subject to doubt. So maybe doubt is good Chief . Maybe doubt is good, you know. (Laughter)

Q: That's perfect.

RADM Stillman: So even if you don't doubt, knowledge, management will never be a reality.

Q: Yes Sir. Well I want to thank you for your time Sir. I know you've got to run. But anytime you're ready Sir, I'll take you up on that cup of coffee.

RADM Stillman: No, seriously, stop up. I'd love to chat and get smart with you.

END OF INTERVIEW

