

Newslines The Coast Guard

Commandant outlines a service in transition

From personnel to ports to polar icebreakers, Allen looks to future

By Amy McCullough

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The Coast Guard is getting ready to enter a two-year transition period, with a new president taking office and Commandant Adm. Thad Allen preparing to leave in 2010. Navy Times sat down with Allen on Oct. 27 to discuss the state of the Coast Guard and where the service is heading. Questions and answers have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Q The fiscal 2009 budget appropriated funds for 1,334 new personnel. Do you expect to see that growth continue? If so, at what rate?

A With what's happened in the financial markets, you don't know what kind of pressures ultimately are going to be placed on the entire financial budget, but certainly as a

service chief ... I have a duty to request the resources that I think we need, and I will continue to do that. I've said on a couple of occasions that we are too small. I don't know how big we need to be, but there is a limit on how many [people] we can bring in a particular year. We know that we can bring in somewhere between 1,500 and 2,000 a year and not have to have an extensive investment in our accession points, like putting more berthing or galley space, if you will.

Q You recently wrote an article about the threat of small vessels. What is the Coast Guard doing to improve port security and combat that threat?

A We don't have persistent radar surveillance around this country, and it would be way too expensive to do that, so the question be-

comes, what is it we can afford and what is it you need to do?

Since Sept. 11, 2001, we've tended to focus mostly on the 55 largest ports in the country, and what you see evolving is operations at the port level that used to be someone sitting there listening to a radio and somebody calling for mayday or assistance. Then we would launch a boat, almost as a fire-house model. [Now,] we are actively looking out there for what might be a problem, designating what we would call a "target of interest" and then trying to deal with that before something happens. That's a much different operational model from what the Coast Guard has ever had before.

It transforms sector operations from being a traditional search and rescue standby operation to being the equivalent of running a tactical operation as you would in a combat information center on the ship.

Q What is the Coast Guard's role in the Arctic, and how does the U.S. compete with other countries, specifically Russia, whose fleet is so much larger than ours?

A I hear the term "compete" a lot. We aren't competing against Russia. There is no race to the Arctic. Russia has extensive capability to operate in their exclusive economic zone and beyond if they have legal opportunity to do so, whether there is water there or not.

The question is how are we going to create capability and capacity to be able to manage the resources in and around our continental shelf, whether there is ice there or not, knowing that it's going to become more accessible in the future? That's the question.

Q The 2009 budget appropriated \$30.3 million to reactivate the Polar Star. What's the purpose of reactivating the icebreaker when there is no funding available to keep it operational for an extended period of time?

A If you have a car with a broken transmission and you have to drive to work, and you know that two years from now you will be in the position to get a loan to buy a new car, you have to make the decision now to replace the transmission and drive it because you have to have it.

Q Will the Coast Guard be in the position to buy a new icebreaker in two years?

A It doesn't matter. Right now, we have an icebreaker that is not working. We have a documented need for three icebreakers. We have one [operational] icebreaker and one research vessel, and one icebreaker that's laid up. I'm trying not to lose

current capability while we decide what to do in the future. I'm not asking for a decision on icebreakers. I'm saying, let's not risk the loss of one that we can't recover from.

Q Is the Coast Guard going to regain control of the icebreaker funding from the National Science Foundation?

A I would be delighted if it did. It would be my counsel, to anybody that asks, that it should. We've been directed by the [Joint Explanatory Statement to the Consolidated Security, Disaster Assistance and Continuing Appropriations Act of 2009] that the 2010 budget should present that shift. We are currently discussing that inside the administration.

Q The 2009 budget did not appropriate any additional funding for increased energy prices. Is that a concern?

A For the foreseeable future, energy should be a concern to anybody [who] operates an enterprise inside or out of government. It's a very difficult problem because we start working on budgets 2½ years before they come into play. If we could predict the price of oil 2½ years from now, I would get out of the Coast Guard and join Warren Buffett in whatever country club he belongs to. The problem is, we can't, and nobody else is any better.

Q Is the Coast Guard still getting pressure from Congress to change the academy admissions process? Where do you stand on that issue?

A A nomination process will actually raise barriers to entry, and it will make it more difficult and complex to compete to become a Coast Guard Academy cadet. Our system is basically sound and is probably aimed at the wrong populations and demographics. □

EXCLUSIVE
INTERVIEW



Allen

