

# Commanding the Lifesavers

## and Much More

*By Tom Philpott*

He commands the smallest armed force in the United States. Yet after listening to Adm Robert E. Kramek, commandant of the Coast Guard, it's hard to imagine another service touching as many American lives.

Kramek is a super salesman for a service that seems virtually to sell itself, given the breadth and importance of its missions. But, even as the Coast Guard celebrates its 206th birthday this month, Kramek doesn't take anything for granted in the current budget climate. His priority as commandant, he says, is to get his people the equipment and resources they need. And it has been anything but easy.

Kramek spends half his workdays visiting Coast Guard units, listening to his people's "alarm clock concerns," he says. "So when I testify before Congress, I don't use a hearing book. I say, 'I've just been there. This is the way it is. This is what we need.'"

And what are their concerns?

"They want to rescue mariners in distress, prevent drugs from entering the country, keep the oceans clean, break ice so our commerce can go from port to port," Kramek says. "They can't do it without adequate resources, and they are very, very worried."



**Adm Robert E. Kramek is waging a budget battle to ensure the U.S. Coast Guard stays the world's premiere maritime service.**

STEVE BARRETT





## Multimission man

Kramek, 56, entered the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in New London, Connecticut, at 17 and spent the ensuing 39 years in the life-saving service. He was educated as a naval engineer and trained as a surface operations specialist. The tall, youthful admiral is also a physical fitness enthusiast. His personal management priorities, in order of importance, are health (physical, mental, and spiritual); family and friends; and career.

"A lot of people say, 'Listen to that! He put his job last!' I don't, though," says Kramek. "Because the first two have been so successful, I'm able to do my job properly."

The scope of Coast Guard missions is reflected in Kramek's comfort discussing so many issues Americans care about. Curious about our progress on combating marine pollution? Kramek can fill you in. What's the status of U.S. fisheries? Kramek knows. How about the safety record of luxury cruise liners? Kramek's your man. The war on drugs? Can't do much better than the commandant. Safety at sea? He's an expert.

The Coast Guard's most costly mission, however, is one that grabs few headlines: maintaining more than 50,000 aids to navigation, from channel markers and buoys to sophisticated vessel traffic systems and historic lighthouses. Migrant interdiction has blossomed as a mission in recent years. Last year alone, Kramek's shrinking force of 37,000 active duty men and women conducted 47,000 search and rescue missions and saved 4,700 lives and more than \$2 billion in marine property.

**Clockwise from top left, two guardsmen confiscate a bale of illegal drugs after boarding a vessel; the icebreaking tug *Morro Bay* can break up to 20 inches of ice and is used in search and rescue operations; a crew member from the cutter *Reliance* monitors a commercial lobster catch; and a crew searches for victims in Alton, Missouri, during the great Mississippi River flood of 1993.**

The common thread, says Kramek, is that all the Coast Guard's missions help the public. His own critical mission is battling for budget dollars, a tough task when both Congress and the White House are searching for ways to balance the federal budget and when Coast Guard responsibilities—in law enforcement, environmental protection, and national defense—continue to grow.

## Budget battles

"It makes me laugh sometimes," says Kramek. "They don't want you to give up [missions], but they don't give you [enough money] to keep them going." A case in point is Kramek's repeated attempts to close 23 unnecessary rescue stations, most of them along the Great Lakes

choice than to reduce missions. I don't think the American public wants that."

Like every other armed force, the Coast Guard's most glaring budget shortfall today is in modernization. "It's an enormous gap," Kramek says. "It takes \$600 million to \$700 million a year to recapitalize the Coast Guard fleet of ships and planes and boats. Over the last three years, Congress, on average, has appropriated half that. That's why I have ships almost 50 years old. That's awful."

Kramek has pressed his people to find new technologies that will reduce operating costs. He points to a recent purchase of 30 buoy tenders to replace 37 now operating on the Great Lakes. Each new vessel will carry a third fewer crew members. Within five years, Kramek says,

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and Eastern seaboard. The move would save \$6.5 million annually. It also would disappoint constituents, so lawmakers have rejected the plan again and again. Last year, they rubbed salt in Kramek's wound by keeping the stations open but taking away the \$6.5 million. He wants the money back. "They can't have it both ways," he says.

Since becoming the Coast Guard's top officer in June 1994, and before that as the commandant's chief of staff, Kramek has watched Congress flat line a \$3.7 billion budget, denying increases sufficient to match inflation.

"Last year they left me \$400 million short. I had to ask for almost \$300 million in assistance from the Department of Defense for the defense operations we do." If the Coast Guard budget is underfunded again for 1997, he warns, "I'll have no other

"we'll save \$25 million a year in operations and maintenance."

The Coast Guard is spending \$15 million to enhance the accuracy of the Defense Department's Global Positioning System (GPS) through something called Differential Global Position stations. The GPS emits signals from 24 satellites in fixed orbit around the earth to allow ships, submarines, and aircraft to know their position to within a quarter mile. The Coast Guard's new signal processing sites, being installed at 48 remote sites around the world, will enable the service to locate mariners in distress to within 15 feet. When used in combination with improved emergency locator beacons and maritime cellular phones, search time should fall sharply. "It means high-speed helicopters and rescue swimmers can get to where you are with-

in 45 minutes and save your life," Kramek says.

But Kramek's larger effort to ease the budget crunch is a four-year streamlining plan already three-quarters complete. He's paring \$400 million in overhead and infrastructure and reducing personnel costs by 12 percent. When completed by late next year, the Coast Guard will have 3,200 fewer military personnel and 800 fewer civilians than in 1994. Left untouched, Kramek promises, will be "operational missions, our muscle."

He's transferring staff from high-cost areas and consolidating districts. Moving Atlantic area headquarters from Governors Island, New York, to Norfolk, Virginia, for example, will eliminate 500 billets and save \$40 million a year. Similar moves are underway on the West Coast. Kramek already has combined the Second District in St. Louis with the Eighth District in New Orleans, and he's cut his own headquarters staff by 25 percent.

"I'm also empowering our lower-level people, giving them the informa-

share with streamlining," he says. "We're a model in government," and Congress should "take that into consideration" when voting on Coast Guard budgets.

One thing Kramek refuses to do is push his people harder. "The average workweek at all of our stations is 68 hours a week," Kramek says. "That's enough." At some stations in Louisiana and Florida, crews routinely worked 82 to 90 hours a week. Kramek was allowed to reassign 500 personnel, however, so crews that had worked 90-hour weeks are now closer to the service average.

## Setting world standards

Kramek describes the Coast Guard as "the world's premiere maritime service" and calls it the "leader in maritime safety and maritime environmental protection." As U.S. representative to the International Maritime Organization in London, the Coast Guard sets "standards for the world in merchant vessel inspection and tanker construction and design."

**"I'm also empowering our lower-level people, giving them the information and ability to do the job."**

tion and ability to do the job, reducing layers of middle management." But streamlining is not easy, and, Kramek concedes, "I haven't made everybody happy." Despite retraining programs, jobs can't be found for all affected civilian employees. Active duty personnel face narrowed promotion gates and early retirements. Half of all captains (O-6s) with 25 years of service this year will be forced to retire, though most want 30-year careers. The number of admirals and senior civilian executives is dropping, too, by 12 percent to 15 percent.

Kramek hopes Congress acknowledges the sacrifice. "We've done our

And with more than 95 percent of U.S. imports and exports still moved by sea, the service claims a prominent role in managing U.S. commerce.

To prevent accidents and oil spills, the Coast Guard regulates both the U.S. merchant fleet and foreign vessels entering U.S. ports. The latter outnumber the U.S. fleet 14-to-1. Inspections target vessels from nations known to have lax standards that allow "unsafe operators and irresponsible owners," says Kramek.

A resurgence in the cruise-line industry over the past decade has more than 50 luxury liners moving in and out of U.S. ports. The Coast

Guard inspects them quarterly to ensure safety for five million U.S. passengers. Kramek calls the cruise liners the safest form of transportation in U.S. waters, having had no fatal accidents in 10 years.

But in regulating maritime traffic, he says, the Coast Guard is sensitive to the effect on U.S. shipping and American businesses. It coordinates rule-making with other nations "to make sure standards we set have international acceptance and don't put the United States at a global disadvantage."

The multimission nature of Coast Guard operations influences the design of its equipment. For example, new buoy tenders must be able not only to break ice, but also to place aids to navigation, skim oil, and conduct search and rescue missions. "Last year I had to pull a couple of tenders out of the Great Lakes to interdict migrant Haitians and Cubans" off Florida, Kramek says. "We get a lot of bangs for our bucks."

Coast Guard cutters and aircraft operate at greater distances from the U.S. mainland than perhaps most Americans realize. In the past year, a Coast Guard icebreaker circumnavigated the Antarctic to check on international treaty compliance. The service also enforces a U.S.-exclusive economic zone out to 200 miles. That encompasses a vast area, Kramek says, including waters off U.S. territories such as Micronesia in the

South Pacific and Alaska's Aleutian Islands, which stand watch over "the world's greatest fisheries."

The Coast Guard must protect both fisheries and fishermen. Foreign fishing fleets, restricted from U.S. fisheries for years, have been replaced by a robust \$50 billion U.S. industry with more than 100,000 vessels. That's twice the number needed to support domestic demand, Kramek says.

"The industry is the most dangerous regarding loss of life," Kramek says. His people inspect vessels to ensure they are seaworthy and properly equipped.

Moreover, "we have a very large domestic enforcement issue," Kramek says. Coast Guard patrols ensure that vessels fish "where they should, when they should, for what they should."

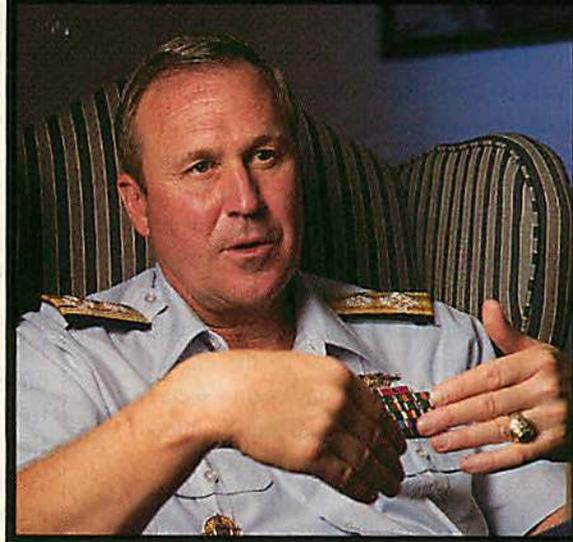
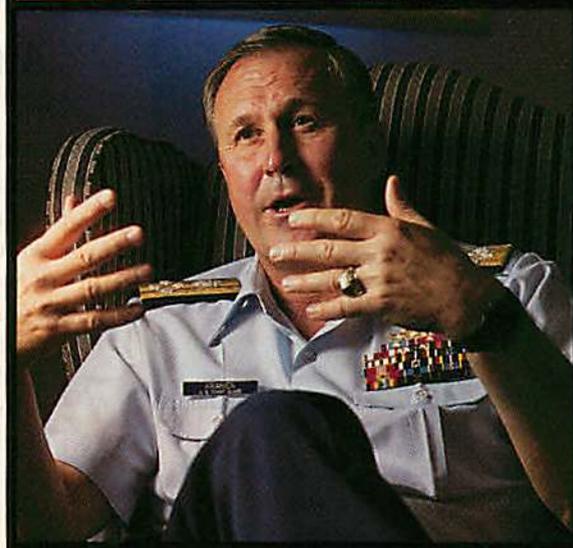
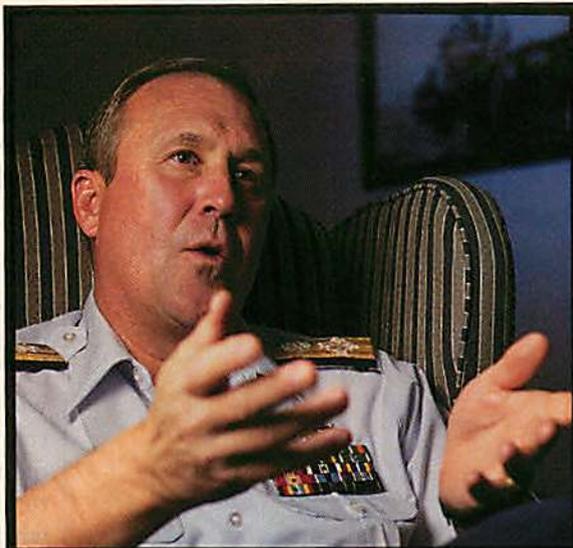
Each year, it seems, the Coast Guard gets drawn more deeply into peacetime defense operations, from providing port security units for the invasion of Haiti to helping the Navy enforce an economic embargo against Iraq. This summer the cutter *Gallatin* is cruising with the Navy's fleet in the Baltic, Black Sea, and Mediterranean to help train navies of former Soviet satellite nations, such as Lithuania, Latvia, and Romania, to enforce their own economic zones.

For drug enforcement and migrant interdiction operations off the U.S. coast, the Coast Guard often takes the lead, directing Navy ships and Air Force surveillance aircraft to gather intelligence and make intercepts. "I have total synergy with other armed forces in command, control, communications, and intelligence," Kramek says. "I mean, you're speaking to a graduate of the Naval War College."

That synergy is spilling over into shipbuilding. As the Navy focuses its dollars on large combatants, such as aircraft carriers, cruisers, and destroyers, it appears to be leaving requirements for smaller ships—once handled by destroyer escorts and light frigates—to the Coast Guard.

"The [high-endurance] cutter of the future will have deep-ocean capability and be able to provide for the Navy," Kramek says. It will be designed with space and weight reserve spaces to accept sophisticated combat systems when necessary. "We can provide the light frigate and destroyer escort capability. We're trained to do that," he says.

Kramek's a strong advocate for



PHOTOS BY STEVE BARRETT

"jointness" among services to reduce waste and enhance readiness. For example, he says, "we chose to buy the Blackhawk helicopter [which originally was designed for the Army]—we call it the Jayhawk—because they're so well supported with

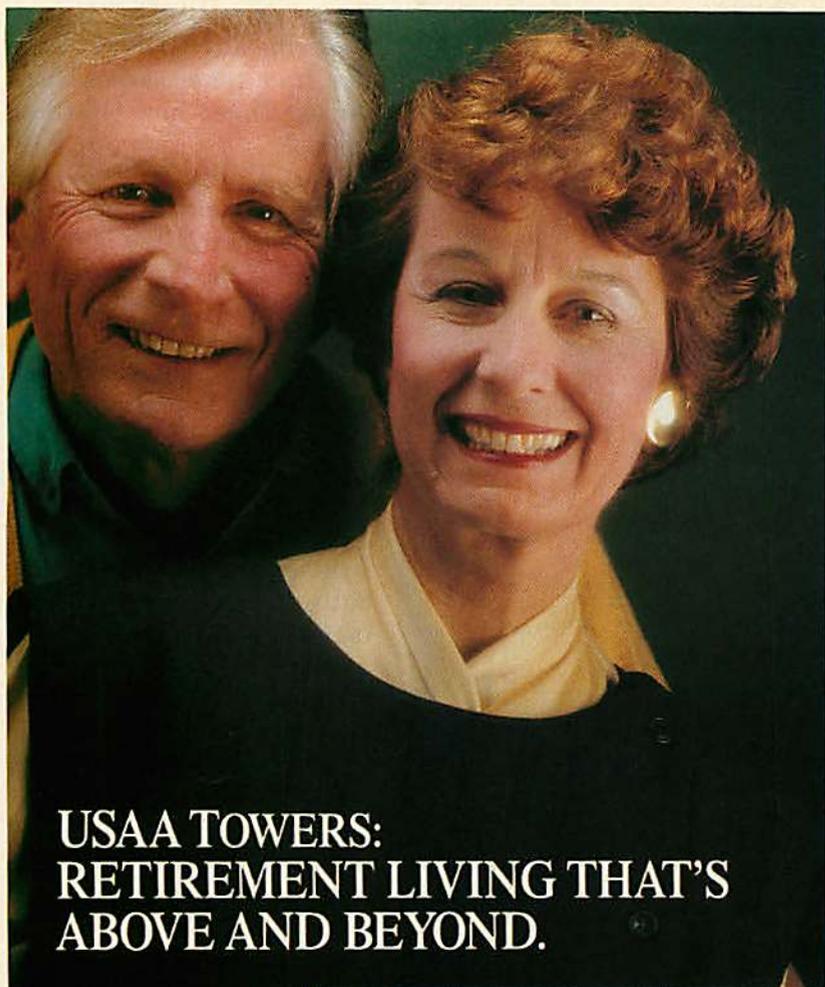
Department of Defense logistics. It's a tremendous savings for us. That's how jointness works."

The Center for Naval Analyses, which is designing SC21—the Navy's surface combatant for the 21st century—is working simultaneously on the Coast Guard's next generation high-endurance cutter. The Defense Department's Advanced Research Projects Agency, in studying stealth technology for future ships, is studying the possibility of building the first of the new cutter class from composite materials. Kramek says performance and cost would determine whether more than one gets built. But with 40 percent of Coast Guard operations focused on ships that don't want to be found—smugglers, migrants, drug traffickers, poachers—stealth could be a welcome advantage.

As for the war on drugs, Kramek contends Americans are winning, though the victory is gradual. Cocaine users in the United States have fallen from 22 million six years ago to 11 million today, he says. Health care costs associated with drug treatments have declined, too. But marijuana use in teenagers is up sharply.

"Where's the marijuana coming from?" Kramek asks. "Mexico? No. Colombia? No. It's coming from Kentucky, Oregon, Washington, Hawaii. Our national forests are growing 28 percent of the world's marijuana crop! People grow plants worth \$6,000 apiece in their basements with grow lights."

Interdiction is important, he says. But most of the \$15 billion in federal money spent in fighting illegal drugs goes into courts and the prison system. Only 9 percent is spent on interdiction. "But that's what gets all the focus: 'You're not catching enough bad guys.' I have 9 percent of the pie."



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The Coast Guard share has to increase, Kramek argues. "We have 300,000 crack babies a year born in this country. That's unbelievable. One hundred thousand people have died from drug overdoses since 1990. That's twice as many as we lost during Vietnam or Korea. Yet no one seems too worried about it. I don't see why. I think we are compelled as a nation to keep that stuff out."

That won't happen, Kramek says, without the full cooperation of Central and South American governments. "There's no way we can protect all of our shorelines and borders without working with them."

## Auditing attitudes

The Coast Guard continues to attract and retain the people it needs, Kramek says, in large part because it's a humanitarian service. "All of what we do is good for people." But Kramek says he wants to be sure Coast Guard people work in an environment where all Americans, regardless of race, religion, gender, or cultural background, have the same opportunity to succeed. Toward that end, he ordered a "cultural audit" of the work force's attitudes to uncover and eliminate barriers.

"I want the Coast Guard to be attractive to 100 percent of the population of the United States. Because if we're not, if we're only attractive to white males, as an example, I'm leaving too much talent on the table and can't be the premiere maritime service."

The survey is complete, and results will be analyzed this fall, when Kramek will meet with his other flag officers to "decide what we're going to do about it." That's the easy part, he says. "When we find we have culture barriers—and we will have some—changing an organization's culture is very difficult. It takes a large dose of leadership. That's really when we have to roll up our sleeves."



Tom Philpott is a contributing editor of *The Retired Officer Magazine*. His last article, "Sailing into the 21st Century," appeared in the March 1996 issue.