



U.S. Coast Guard Oral History Program

Interview with REAR ADMIRAL THOMAS ATKIN, USCG

Conducted by CHRISTOPHER HAVERN, Interviewer

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**RADM Thomas F. Atkin, USCG
Commander, U.S. Coast Guard Deployable Operations Group**

INTERVIEWER: Hello. My name is Christopher Havern. Today I'm here with Rear Admiral Thomas Atkin. We are here at the DOG [the Coast Guard's Deployable Operations Group] headquarters office space to conduct an oral history to talk about the Deployable Operations Group as part of the Oral History Program and an end-of-tour interview with Admiral Atkin.

All right. Could you just say and spell your name for the record, sir?

ATKIN: Thomas Atkin, A-t-k-i-n.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you, sir. Today's date is Tuesday, May 19th, and this interview is being conducted at 1315 on the 19th.

Sir, can you tell me what was the impetus for the creation of the DOG, and can you elaborate on its development?

ATKIN: Sure. The DOG impetus really goes back a few years where Admiral [Thad] Allen identified a gap in the way we were able to respond to catastrophes when he was the Atlantic Area commander. It probably even goes back further than that on how he envisioned the Coast Guard needed to be able to respond in an effective and efficient manner as adapted force packages concept.

But shortly after 9/11, as he looked at how we responded to the attacks on our country, he asked a group of his staff members to put together a concept of aligning, at that time, all of our deployable specialized forces, which were our Port Security Units, our Tactical Law Enforcement teams, our National Strike Force, as well as other entities and then the new Maritime Safety and Security Teams, which were just coming online underneath one command.

So there was a group of us who put together a planning proposal entitled the Maritime Operations Command that would have worked for both areas, initially starting out as an Atlantic Area unit, and would take all those types of units and align it underneath one command. That would enable us then to be able to better respond to threats.

So he signed out the planning proposal as the Atlantic Area commander in the spring of 2002. I want to say February, as we worked on it, and through the fall, and the staff briefed him several times on it. Through the spring, then, of 2002, it was up at the headquarters for review, and headquarters decided at that point that it needed more work, and the timing wasn't right and sent it back down to the Atlantic Area staff for more work. That was -- I don't know -- sometime in 2002.

So then I'm going to fast-forward a little bit to Katrina, and during Katrina, Admiral Allen was sent down first as a Deputy Principal Federal Official, and then

that's when he relieved Mike Brown as the Principal Federal Official. He was able to observe not only how the department responded to a catastrophic incident but how the nation responded as a Federal entity; how the interagency did work together and did not work together well, DoD's role, and DoD's interaction in integration with the rest of the interagency.

Based on his observations of the Coast Guard's performance, the performance of the Department, and the performance of the nation, he then tasked myself to put together what is now known as the DOG. That was part of his nomination package to the Secretary [of the Department of Homeland Security, Michael Chertoff]. He stated very clearly to the Secretary in his nomination package that this is the way he was moving forward and this was going to be one of his primary initiatives. Once he was nominated by the Secretary, he gave me the task direction to put the concept together.

Basically, I dusted off the old Maritime Operations Command concept. It evolved. It changed slightly. It grew. It shrunk. It did all of those things that you do as you go through an evolution process and based really on Admiral Allen's initial vision and what he learned during Katrina. So, based on his vision, we put together the concept. We briefed it out to him. He gave his approval to the Deployable Operations Group. We then took the concept to the Flag Conference in May of '06. Shortly after that, when he assumed command as Commandant of the Coast Guard, he directed the development through one of his Commandant [CIAOs].

What are the CIAOs called? Commandant Initial Action Orders, I think. C-I-A-O, CIAOs, to put together the DOG concept. So there was a working group together run by the two area commanders, and they basically took that initial concept that we put together -- it was in PowerPoint slides -- and put a whole lot of meat on the bones, identified, and worked through a whole lot of issues, did just an awesome job of putting together a final product that eventually led to the Deployable Operations Group.

INTERVIEWER: You've kind of touched on something that I was going to ask you about later, but now I figure was a good time, and that is, I've been told of the canine theme jargon or technical terms that are unique to the DOG. Did that just come about? What's the genesis of that?

ATKIN: Well, you know, again, it's Admiral Allen's vision, as always. One of the things that he talked about when we first went down to Katrina was he needed "Dogs that hunt." He needed basically folks that went out on their own and were able to identify areas, identify problems, and then resolve them on their own without necessarily always waiting for higher direction. You know, following those principles of operation that we find in "Pub 1" [*U.S. Coast Guard: America's Maritime Guardian: Coast Guard Publication 1*], they really apply to all of the Coast Guard.

So, using that, he surrounds himself with “dogs that hunt.” So, as we started putting together the old Maritime Operations Command concept into the new concept that had evolved following Katrina, he developed the terminology or the name -- or Admiral Allen developed the name: “Deployable Operations Group.” So that was really the impetus of the DOG as we know it today.

INTERVIEWER: You've mentioned the genesis of the plan, but what reorganization was required at its most basic level to implement that plan for the Coast Guard?

ATKIN: I guess really the most basic level was to build a staff headquarters for the DOG. Not necessarily the infrastructure, not the brick-and-mortar piece, but where would all the billets come from, and how would you put all that together to form the staff headquarters element?

All of the commands were already established. They had been up and running. They performed very effectively as individual commands. Obviously, the Coast Guard as a whole performed magnificently during Katrina and during 9/11, post 9/11. So it wasn't necessarily a matter of making something new or fixing something that was broken, but it was how do we prepare ourselves to be more efficient and more effective? And how do we better prepare ourselves to serve in the future and out-years to 2015, 2020 and beyond? So, at the most basic level, it was identifying what the staff was, what should it do, what are the functions it should take on, where were those functions performed now, who was performing those functions now, and then move those billets from where they currently were in 2006 and move them to the DOG staff in 2007.

INTERVIEWER: Other than yourself, what other individuals -- obviously Admiral Allen providing the overarching directive for the DOG, but what other individuals were key in the development of the DOG concept and also in the implementation of the DOG through its initial stages?

ATKIN: Wow. That would be a long list of folks. Certainly, leading the pack, there would be Vice Admiral [Vivien S.] Crea, Vice Admiral [David P.] Pekoske, Master Chief [Charles W.] Bowen, and Master Chief Jeff Smith were key certainly to implementing Admiral Allen's vision. Admiral [Brian] Peterman and Admiral Wooster led the DOG Planning Team. That came under their purview. So the DOG Planning Team final report, which was a nexus of the DOG establishment and where we are today, is based on that final report that came under their initiative.

Admiral Tim Riker, he led the DOG commissioning cell. So Tim did just an awesome job of taking the DOG Planning Team report and actually then making it work, operationalizing the report.

There are just a ton of folks. Captain Brad Jacobs who led the DOG Planning Team, Captain Gary Rasicot, an awesome job, and Captain Brian Kelley who led a couple of our Red Cell actions that would take a look at what we were planning and how we were going to move forward, Lieutenant Rebecca Albert, who was really a key help as we were standing up our development of the DOG concept.

The list is long. I don't have all the names right off the top of my head. So I'm a little bit hesitant. I've already named off a few, but I'm hesitant to try and get them all because I know I'll forget somebody. I would say this is a Coast Guard-wide effort.

One of the things that Admiral Allen does, he brings everybody together, and he allows folks to reach similar conclusions by just showing them the pros and cons of the decisions that can be made. He's an inclusive, collaborative kind of personality that has just really driven us to the right solution.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a model polish or reorganization was based -- I know in interviewing Admiral Allen for the transition history regarding the Coast Guard's transition from DOT to DHS, there was a lot of talk about IBM and Carly Fiorina and what she did with IBM. I know Admiral Allen was very familiar with that, and he said that was one of the guiding principles. Was there something of that sort that was part of the evolution of the DOG, or was it more Coast Guard-oriented in that regard, or was it based on some other -- either armed forces or corporate model for change?

ATKIN: You asked a great question, but I'm not bright enough to be able to link those things together.

I would say that the impetus for this change was Admiral Allen's vision. He's obviously the one who had the idea -- the concept that was the driver. So did he get that from another entity? I don't think so. I think he basically looked at the Coast Guard and how we are formed and how we are organized and said we can do better, and we need to do better. So it was really his vision.

I think there are a lot of entities that are similar to what the DOG is in certain ways. Certainly, the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command, which was set up shortly before the DOG, but certainly was worked almost in parallel, it seemed like, from a timeline perspective, it's one model. There are pieces certainly of the Naval Special Warfare Command that we looked at, pieces of the Special Operations Command that we looked, the pieces of the Joint Forces Command that we looked at. So from a DoD perspective, we looked at those entities and said what are things that we want to model and what are the best practices.

Taking a look across the interagency and how the interagency was modeled was certainly a driver from where the DOG is located physically and how we wanted to work with the interagency. Certainly, our FBI partners, our partners within CBP and ICE, how they were organized helped drive us to how we ended up as an end state.

INTERVIEWER: Actually, your response, that last response leads me to two questions. The first question is you mentioned multiple times in the course of this interview the issues of interoperability. How has interoperability with DoD affected the DOG in regards to things like training organization? I know you mentioned some of those already. And then the other question deals with the actual fact that you're located -- you mentioned the physical location of the DOG being outside of headquarters. How has that affected the development of the DOG?

ATKIN: I'll attack the physical location first. One of the things as we were trying to identify where the physical location of the DOG was, we wanted to be outside headquarters because we did not want the DOG to be perceived as a staff element of headquarters. It is and will always be a separate flag-level command. So it was key that the DOG be established as a flag-level command somewhere outside of the headquarters building that would be able to work with our interagency partners, which kind of then we said, all right where are interagency partners that we're going to work with at the DOG level.

As we looked throughout the DHS components first and then the rest of the interagency second and certainly within DoD, what we decided that the best location was somewhere inside the Beltway, so that we'd have easy access to all the basic DHS component headquarters, access to DHS, access to Coast Guard headquarters, access to the Pentagon, and access to our FBI partners that serve in Quantico. So it was a strategic intent that we put DOG headquarters in the spot where we are, so that as we started asking for liaisons or folks to help us work together with their agencies, that we could get to their headquarters location easily, and they could get to ours.

The interoperability piece -- and really there's two words there that I think are key. One is integration, and the other is interoperability. I don't have a Joint Staff Command dictionary. I'm not even sure if I have a regular Webster's dictionary. I usually use the Google definition thing, but when I start thinking about what does integration and interoperability mean from a DOG perspective or from my personal perspective, integration means how do we work well together, and how do we team up and attack a problem together.

Interoperability is very similar. Interoperability to me is more about how do we communicate well together, how can we work side by side, and how do we again attack the same problem side by side.

For instance, in an integrated manner, it might be a Coast Guard boat and a Navy boat working a security zone around a high-value asset in the Port of Ash Shuaiba, Kuwait. So that would be integrated effort.

Interoperability would be where we may have two Coast Guard boats working one security zone, two Navy boats working a second security zone, but they're able to talk to each other and work through one centralized operational command center.

So both are key, and the level of integration is going to be different for every type of event that you face. Traditionally you probably wouldn't necessarily take members of boarding teams and integrate them, but they certainly would have to be interoperable if they're going to both operate on the same vessel.

Those are challenging words, as you start talking about how do we work well with others, and I would say that although the definitions are probably very clear, how you actually operationalize those definitions is still a challenge and will continue to be, but we're making great inroads, and we're starting to train well together. We're starting to talk more, which is always important, so that we understand the challenges before us and how we can overcome them.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting you mentioned training. What role has DoD assets, primarily those of Special Operations Command, influenced the DOG, and by the same token, civilian agencies with which you work? You mentioned the FBI already, but also FEMA, given the response part of the DOG mission and that of FEMA, how have each of those entities, both civilian and military, affected the development of the DOG insofar as training and perhaps doctrine?

ATKIN: The biggest impact, I would say, as we looked at Naval Special Warfare Command, Naval Special Warfare Community, Special Operations Command, and really DoD as a whole is their emphasis on training.

It was clear as we established the DOG and we took a look at what were providing our operational and tactical commanders -- was a capability that wasn't necessarily the advertised capability. In other words, we were providing forces that were trained or were qualified, but not necessarily proficient in the capabilities that we were providing to the customer.

So, early in the fall of 2007, we took a decision memo to the Leadership Council to discuss our training. Our basic mantra is that historically the Coast Guard would operate and train when able, and we decided to change that and said we would train and then operate when capable. It's a big paradigm shift. We spend a ton of time on making sure we're qualified and certified to do the mission, but we don't spend as much time or effort on making sure we're proficient, which is where the training piece is. So we tried to make a distinction

between qualification, certification, and training, both semantically and operationally.

So that, I would say, was an influential part of what DoD -- it is more of the philosophical part of how you prepare folks for battle, that combat development *per se*, that training piece of making sure that folks are not only qualified and certified in what they do, but also proficient at what they do. And we elevated the training requirements to that same level as our operational requirements. Those were some tough decisions because we no longer said that we're going to cancel training to go and do an operation.

There will be times when in order to meet the demand, in order to have the right force and meet the requirements that the operational and tactical command we were asking for, we had to make sure we were training the force to do that. That not only makes sure we get the job done, but it also protects our people better. So we're making sure we're taking care of our folks.

I think with FEMA, the real challenge was planning. We were getting our feet on the ground. FEMA is obviously a very proud agency that's done some great things over the years. I think they took the brunt of the hit there for things that were outside of their control of what they were established to do as an agency during Katrina. They've bounced back very, very well from that, and they're making some great progress.

Our work with them is more about how do we support them at the Federal level, not necessarily just for Coast Guard mission assessment, for Federal efforts. So we have a deployable element at the DOG that goes in and supports FEMA in their stand-up at the joint field offices when there's a potential for disaster from a natural event, or if there's a manmade event, obviously we flow in there as soon as we can to support, and so how can we better support them, train with them as they stand up their instant management teams, and make sure we can integrate with them at the time of a crisis.

INTERVIEWER: What role would you say technology had, whether it be computers or technology in regard to equipment -- has influenced the development of the DOG and, again, this issue of interoperability and -- I'm sorry. I forgot which the term --

ATKIN: Integration

INTERVIEWER: Integration. Yes, sir.

ATKIN: Yeah, Chris. I would say that technology probably hasn't influenced as much, the DOG development. You've got to think of it in terms of we're not even two years old yet, although I've been working DOG issues for a little over three years now. The technology pieces haven't necessarily had that

big of an influence. Certainly we've identified where we need improved technology and where technology will assist us, and we're working towards that end, but there's no magic wand from a technology perspective that's going to make us more interoperable or more integrated.

There are a significant number of different challenges from everything about how do we measure our own readiness, what are the metrics, and what are the systems by then which we do that and how do we share information across all our deployable specialized forces, how do we talk to each other, not only in just normal workdays, but in times of crisis. I think those similar challenges are across the government, but there's no smoking gun, there's no silver bullet that technology is going to solve them. So it really is about communication, though, and it's really about person-to-person communication.

INTERVIEWER: Lastly, sir -- I know we have limited time -- you mentioned person-to-person. So I'm going to ask you what do you feel as you're about to leave command to go to your next assignment. What is your personal legacy as the commander of the DOG?

ATKIN: Hopefully, there isn't one. It's not about Tom Atkin. It's certainly all about the Deployable Operations Group taking Admiral Allen's vision and making it a reality. It's about the men and women that are out there doing the job. So my real hope is there is no Tom Atkin legacy. There's a drive to continue to do the best job they can.

There are four things that I tell folks all the time that's the DOG philosophy, as we say. It's take care of your teammates, take care of your family, be committed to doing the best job possible, and have fun at what you do. And I'd say if the folks at the DOG and the Deployable Specialized Forces continue to follow their DOG philosophy, then that's the best thing to do.

INTERVIEWER: All right. Well, thank you very much, sir. I appreciate your time.

ATKIN: No problem.

INTERVIEWER: This concludes our interview. Thank you.

