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SEA POWER

Collins Strikes Balance Between Present, Future Resources

As commandant of the Coast Guard, Adm. Thomas J. Collins strikes a careful balance between today's readiness requirements and the future needs of his force of 41,000. The missions - and national profile - of the Coast Guard are growing at the very point in time that its ships, aircraft and communications systems are becoming a national embarrassment.

Transferred to the new Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in March 2003, the Coast Guard is a major element of the nation's anti-terrorism effort and responsible for heightened security of its ports and waterways. The Coast Guard's role in fisheries protection is growing due to new international treaties, and it continues its efforts against drug smuggling into the United States.

Meanwhile, many of its ships are decrepit and its fleet of helicopters is being renovated on an urgent basis. "There is always dynamic tension between your future readiness and your replacement assets," Collins said, because every dollar spent on existing systems "is not being invested in the future."

Collins takes great pride in the Coast Guard retention rates, which are the highest in 50 years. He recently discussed these and other issues with Editor in Chief Richard C. Barnard.

Now that you are in the Department of Homeland Security, do you get more attention from Congress?

Collins: The level of interaction has gone up; the number of hearings has gone up; as have the briefings to the staff and the questions for the record. Homeland Security is one of the issues du jour, as it should be. We want to make sure we get it right. But just doing the engagement with Congress makes for a pretty full schedule.

Are the nation's ports and coasts more secure today than they were three years ago?

Collins: They absolutely are. I say that with full confidence. Is there more to do? Yes, but we are much more secure than we were. We have additional authority through legislation. We have an additional international security convention that's been approved by over 140 nations and just went into effect on July 1. The Coast Guard has grown and we have a greater operational presence on our ports and waterways. We continue to grow additional capabilities to ensure that we are in a position to mitigate risk in the maritime arena.

What's the greatest challenge ahead?

Collins: How do you acquire, analyze, fuse, integrate and distribute security information to mitigate risk? Acquiring the right information at the right time and getting it to the right organizational element is the challenge of the day. It's not just a challenge for us. It's a challenge for the FBI, the CIA and for the DHS. We've coined a phrase called Maritime Domain Awareness. It's all about acquiring the right information, understanding what you've got and acting on it.

Other services want a common operational picture of the battle area. Do you want that in the maritime domain?

Collins: Absolutely. That is a subset of the idea of Maritime Domain Awareness. We have just chartered an interagency group led by [DHS Deputy Secretary James M. Loy and Paul F. McHale, assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense] to define the national architecture for Maritime Domain Awareness. It's more than just sensor systems. It is a reporting protocol; it's an intelligence infrastructure to obtain information; it's a whole host of things. We're excited about the prospect of having a national game plan for the maritime arena.

We have a couple of prototype organizations around the country. The best is probably the Joint Harbor Operations Center in San Diego. It's jointly manned [24/7] and jointly funded. Various sensors around the harbor are ported into this center: underwater sensor systems, low-light TV, radar systems and so forth. Everybody's looking at the same picture.

What is the appropriate size of the Coast Guard in 2010?

Collins: We've grown at a fairly reasonable pace; no more than 2,000 people a year. In 2001, we had 36,000 people in uniform. Now we're close to 41,000. I like that trend. I think we have to grow some more. We had been stagnant or shrinking. But there's a lot of downward pressure on the federal budget across the board, particularly as we go into 2006 and 2007. The five-year scenario for the Coast Guard provides for growth, but not at the pace of the last few years.

Do you have the middle managers for expansion?

Collins: If you plot our average time in service of the enlisted people across the Coast Guard, it has gone down. We have more junior people than we did before. And we've got 3rd class petty officers filling 1st class petty officers jobs. The good news is that they stepped up to the plate and they've excelled. We've gotten some incredible performance out of our junior personnel.

Should acquisition of the Integrated Deepwater System of new ships, planes and intelligence systems be accelerated?

Collins: The funding profile for Deepwater puts us on a 22-year guide path in terms of building out the entire system. We submitted a report to Congress that addressed the pros and cons of acceleration. We can accelerate to a 10-year program and specific benefits would accrue as to total costs and additional capability in ship hours, boat hours, etc., that would be put to very meaningful employment.

I have a sense of urgency about the capacity and capability and time limits of Deepwater. It is really critical for the Coast Guard and the nation, and 22 years seems like a long time to wait until we get the final capability.

You've been outspoken about the poor condition of the fleet. This spring, you directed the re-engining of the HH-65 helicopters on an urgent basis. The 110-foot patrol boats are in decrepit shape. There are other examples. How did the Coast Guard get into this condition?

Collins: We've got ships, planes, helicopters and sensor systems that are at the end of their service life. They're old, they're tired and they break down. They're breaking down at the very time that we are using them at a higher operational tempo. Every index shows you that we are in dire straits. The number of unplanned maintenance days in the fleet is an exponential curve. That's a stark measure of the condition of the fleet. The number of days free of casualties is about 35 to 40 percent. That's an alarming statistic.

So I have a sense of urgency about Deepwater assets. Another set of capital resources is the polar icebreakers. The Healy is fairly new, but it is really an arctic research vessel. The two true polar icebreakers, the Polar Sea and the Polar Star, are at the end of their service life, and we're spending twice the normal historical average per year for maintenance on those ships. There is nothing on the drawing boards to replace them and there is no money allocated to replace them.

Without those breakers, you don't have a channel in and out of McMurdo Sound [off Antarctica]. If you don't have a channel, you don't have the Antarctic Program [a 48-year U.S. science program to protect the Antarctic environment and study its interactions with the rest of the planet.]

Underfunding in prior years has done some serious damage. Does that make you angry?

Collins: No, I don't take anything personal. I don't get angry. These things are part of the overarching give and take within the government and within Congress to deal with priorities. There are many competing demands of great import.

How has the Coast Guard done in recent years?

Collins: Very well. In 2003-05, we received the president's request plus a little increase in the margin and that reflects, I think, the strong support of President Bush and [DHS] Secretary [Tom] Ridge and the support of Congress. So I have every reason to be

optimistic. We'll just keep making the case about the capital plant and see where it stacks up with all the nation's priorities.

Tell us about the Coast Guard deployment to Iraq. You have plenty to do these days. Is that where you should be and, if so, what added value does the Coast Guard bring to that effort?

Collins: The simplest answer is that the combatant commander asked for us. I didn't go over to the Joint Staff and say, "Coach, put me in." Our forces there are a proven asset. They've been in-theater for 10 years. Also, we're an armed force of the United States. We have a national defense [and] national security mission and we've been doing that since 1790.

We have a set of niche capabilities that can augment other forces. Boarding and inspecting ships at sea is a core competency. We board for a living. We have a core competence for port security and waterfront security and we've been doing that for a long, long time.

Also, it's a very positive thing for us to continue to operate with and for the Navy. We've never been closer and we have a long, long history of very close affiliation. Adm. Vern Clark [chief of naval operations] and I have signed a document we call the National Fleet Policy Statement, which says we want to manage, develop, acquire and deploy our fleets synergistically, together as a national fleet. That takes interoperability. It takes common training and common doctrine. We further those aims when we deploy and operate with the Navy.

What are your top priorities during the two years you have left as commandant?

Collins: Doing right by our people. If I wanted to be remembered for one thing, it would be as a guy whose first priority was the well-being, training and professional development of Coast Guard people.

I've doubled the tuition assistance so the personnel can get more education. We have under-invested in that. We've changed the entire work uniform for the service to a much more reliable, comfortable, sustainable uniform for our men and women. We've ensured that we maintain pay and compensation priority with the Department of Defense. The last thing that will be cut in our Coast Guard budget is pay and compensation.

One of the first things I did was to reprogram over \$17 million so our small boat crews that go out in evil weather have the proper customized fitted protective equipment.

Our people also have to have an individual plan for their professional development. It's going to be mandatory for all our junior people. Let's help them be successful. Let's not leave it to chance; let's not be ad hoc.

This is a people-friendly organization. One measure, of course is retention. We're retaining our first-term enlisted folks to the tune of 88.5 percent, the highest it has been since 1952; and 94.5 percent of our junior officers stay around at the end of their obligated service. So I think we are doing something right.