Guarding our waters
A look at what calls these men and women to duty

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ON BOARD THE USCG CUTTER TAHOMA - News of disaster came in the briefest of dispatches last Saturday afternoon. The radio crackled. Five Canadian fishermen were abandoning their sinking 60-foot vessel and jumping into a life raft almost 200 miles out to sea.

On Georges Bank, it was sunny, and the seas were calm, at 6 feet. The 277-foot Coast Guard cutter Tahoma, on fisheries patrol for the first time since Sept. 11, was just three to four hours from the fishermen. A helicopter from Air Station Cape Cod was on the way, operating at the limits of its fuel supply. The Tahoma, the largest Coast Guard ship in New England, has a helicopter flight deck and hangar, and could refuel the helicopter in-flight.

Just 24 hours before the rescue call, the Tahoma was in Portland, Maine, and part of the 100-man crew was sitting down in the common mess room and talking with President George W. Bush. He looked them in the eye, shook their hands and commended them for their work in safeguarding both New York and Boston harbors immediately after Sept. 11.

The scope of Coast Guard duties widened that fateful day. The president is proposing a budget increase of $282 million next year to help this smallest of the military branches answer that call.

The crew had time for a brief celebration in port, then it was back to work with an 8 a.m. departure the next day.

One of four big cutters that ply the New England waters, the Tahoma is away from its home port of New Bedford on patrol, hundreds of miles out to sea, six to eight weeks at a time for 185 days a year. The crew has been on missions to Europe, the Caribbean and South America, and has participated in assignments such as drug interdiction and intercepting illegal immigrants at sea.

But mostly the Tahoma crew is in familiar New England waters enforcing fisheries laws and helping save the lives of mariners in distress.

They are the backbone of the Coast Guard presence at sea. When everyone else runs to port before a storm, their mission is to go where there is danger. At other times, their life on board ship is an unending routine of drills, maintenance, routine cleaning, and boredom spelled by TV, bingo, sleep and food.

But who volunteers for this kind of life, living in close quarters for extended periods of time away from home? And how will the Coast Guard hang on to those they already have, and meet the goal of recruiting 5,000 more in the next year to help with port defense?

If you've seen "Star Trek," you get the basic idea of the Tahoma's bridge and how it operates.

Capt. Gary Smialek never touches the helm or the throttle. He asks for information, and makes the decisions. Officers and enlisted men are stationed at the helm, radar, the satellite positioning screen, and the chart table, where the navigator does it the old-fashioned way, charting the ship's course with pencil and ruler on big maps.

The Tahoma's senior officers are a driven group. They generally possess multiple college degrees, including at least one advanced degree, and could succeed in management in any business in the country, and are paid accordingly. In this case, the success of the business is in surviving storms, saving lives and enforcing the law.

"Almost all the people (from the Coast Guard Academy) I keep in touch with have moved on to another line of work and are making quite a bit more than I am," said Lt. Sherman Lacey, the Tahoma's chief of operations. "I like the work and I like the people I'm working with. I'll stay in as long as I like it, and most of the time it's fun."

Turnover hurts, especially now that the Coast Guard's role in port security is expanding.

Capt. Paul Langlois, a Coast Guard personnel expert based in Washington, D.C., said the average age of the Coast Guardsman has been dropping ever since the service decided on mandatory retirement at 62 for enlisted men, and stands at 27 or 28.

The need right now is for petty officers with four to five years' experience, and the speculation that the Sept. 11 tragedy would swell the ranks of the military and inspire re-enlistment has not panned out.

"It's prevalent throughout the military, and the Coast Guard is no different, that we have a less experienced work force than we'd like for what we need," said Langlois, who said the Coast Guard was using bonuses and heavy recruitment campaigns to retain veterans and bring in new bodies. They were trying to raise the level of experience by encouraging civilians who left the Coast Guard to re-enlist.

Ohio-born and bred, Smialek is passionate about his work and about his commitment to see his staff learn and develop their abilities under his command.

At 44, with more than 20 years in the Coast Guard, he's served on the Great Lakes, in Alaska, Europe and the South Pacific. He is the father of three daughters and lives on the Cape. He has a master's degree in business administration, and ultimately wants to command a big polar ice breaker or the nearly 400-foot long larger cutters.

"When I'm not having fun, I'm not going to be here," he said.

Most of his Coast Guard Academy graduating class of 1980 is doing something else. Smialek said just 40 percent of them were still in active service five years after graduation.

He runs the ship like the president of company, placing confidence in the abilities of those under him, but with the

understanding that ultimate responsibility rests with him.

In normal conditions, the bridge resembles a teaching ship and there are always twice the number of people on the bridge as need be, learning new tasks.

"Training is everything, and there is always someone in training," said Smialek, who gets great satisfaction out of seeing people grow.

But this is no training cruise. This is a working vessel and Smialek's main job is to command.

With the rescue call for the Canadian fishermen, class was ended for the day. He swung up into the captain's chair perched one step higher than the rest of the room, and ordered the ship's speed brought up to almost 20 mph and the course plotted almost due east, from their location out to the stricken vessel.

At 38, 3rd Class Petty Officer David Martin is an old man on the Tahoma, where the average age is 23 and the oldest is Smialek at 44. On top of that, this 16-year veteran had never been to sea before joining the Tahoma this past spring.

Unlike many on the boat, who became seasick in that storm off Provincetown, Martin loved the adventure. A telephone technician, he'd served in Detroit, New York City, Juneau, Alaska, and St. Petersburg, Fla. He joined the Coast Guard at the suggestion of a friend in the Navy who said the Coast Guard was more family-oriented than the military branches and more close-knit.

"He said the Navy was so big, you feel like a number," said Martin.

But the Tahoma's long stints at sea make Martin's adventure tough on his wife and four kids at home in Dartmouth, who were accustomed to his previous 9 to 5 desk assignments.

"They're not used to it," he said.

Martin makes $40,000 and is just four years away from the 20-year mark when he can retire and receive half pay for the rest of his life. He figures his technical skills will get him a good job in civilian life and the combination of his military pension and new job will allow him to live comfortably.

Many career guardsmen start young, at 18 to 20, and retire young, at 40. But, like much of the military, the Coast Guard is highly dependent on those 18- to 20-year-olds for enlisted men, a group that forms the bulk of the workers. Many of those are in for the couple of years it takes to qualify for a G.I. Bill that finances their college education. The average salary for a seaman is around $18,000 plus housing expenses, and the enlistment duration for those deckhands in the Coast Guard is 14 to 18 months.

In Portland, Bush told the guardsmen at Southern Maine Technical College that part of his budget increase would go to raising salaries.

"Some of the junior enlisted men, particularly those with kids, could use more money. There are some who qualify for food stamps," said Mike Hathaway, a machinist technician, who at 32 was a 15-year veteran.

Ultimately, the Tahoma's search-and-rescue mission was downgraded. A nearby Canadian vessel rescued the five men from their life raft. Their fishing vessel sank soon after they were rescued. But the Tahoma was nearly on scene and was asked to continue on and pick up or sink a second life raft which had automatically deployed when the vessel sank.

The rescue had turned into a training mission. Smialek retired, and the junior officers took over, an enthusiastic corps, none of whom looked over 30.

They posted seamen at watches on the catwalk around the bridge, and calculated the course and arrival time.

It was dark when they came on scene. The bridge was lit only by the red glow of the night lamp on the chart table and wan lights of the instruments and radar.

The officers put the ship into its search pattern, a square-cornered spiral, charted on a computer screen that progressed in ever-expanding boxes outward from the sight of the sinking. Just a couple of minutes into the search, a member of the watch using night-vision goggles saw a light, a bright dot in the lime-green haze, intermittently bobbing up over the waves.

Smialek was called back on deck and made the decision to break off the search pattern and go check out the light.

The life raft was a lonely sight in the middle of nowhere, a small tent bobbing on the sea, the bright light bulb that had caught the watchman's eye as a pinprick in the surrounding blackness.

That five men could have been on board was a lesson not lost on those who found and recovered the raft. That they would have been praying for someone to find them, and that in that vast merciless expanse they would have been found by the crew of the Tahoma, made this more than just a drill.

This was why the ship's crew signed up for duty in the first place