

New vice commandant wants newer fleet

Second-in-command stresses cutter acquisition, Arctic mission expansion

By Jacqueline Klimas
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An aging fleet and increased mission capacity is not a good combination for the Coast Guard. That's why Vice Adm. John Currier said his top priority as vice commandant is rebuilding the service's stable of ships.

Currier, who became second-in-command of the Coast Guard on May 18, spoke with Navy Times recently in his first interview since taking office.

"The need for the assets still is there, even more pressing than ever, so my No. 1 priority will be to ensure that the mechanism of acquisition works well, and the assets are procured in a timely and cost-efficient manner," Currier said.

The national security cutter will remain a big piece of the Coast Guard's ship acquisition plan, Currier said, despite a lack of funding for the seventh and eighth ship in the class in the fiscal 2013 budget. The focus now is to put NSC 6 on contract in a cost-effective way, he said.

Acquiring the national security cutters in a one-year cycle will lower the cost because materials can be bought in bulk and production of cutters can overlap, said

Bob Conrad, the director of Coast Guard programs at Huntington Ingalls Industries, earlier this year.

NSC 4 and 5 are under construction at Huntington Ingalls shipyard in Pascagoula, Miss. NSC 6 is under contract to begin acquiring materials for production that will begin in one year.

The NSCs will replace the high endurance Hamilton-class cutters, which have been in operation for almost 50 years. National security cutters are the largest of the service's cutters and will support offshore homeland security missions through deployments ranging from 60 to 90 days.

A report released June 13 by Congress, titled "Coast Guard Cutter Procurement: Background and Issues for Congress," questioned whether NSCs 7 and 8 were being cut from the fiscal 2013 budget request at the expense of development of a new icebreaker. In fiscal 2013, the Coast Guard is asking for \$8 million to begin procurement and development of the ship, which could cost as much as \$1 billion.

Despite findings in the report, Currier said the Coast Guard still plans to build the cutters. The icebreaker is not a factor, Currier



Currier



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The national security cutter Stratton is the third ship in the NSC class, also known as the Legend class. NSC 4 and 5 are under construction.

said, because the final two national security cutters, 7 and 8, should be finished and in the water before the expense of actually building an icebreaker kicks in.

"It will be a 10-year evolution before we actually have a full-up icebreaker in the water," he said. "So I don't see it competing directly with the national security cutter because hopefully we'll have bought out that class of ships before we're in production on the icebreaker."

It's unclear what budget cycle will include NSC 7 and 8.

Increased Arctic assignments

While the vice commandant's focus is on rebuilding the fleet, he also stressed the importance of personnel. Though he couldn't rule out manning cuts in the future, he said the Coast Guard will continue to keep and promote strong performers.

More Coast Guardsmen are likely to move to colder weather — specifically the Arctic, Currier said.

"We feel we have a compelling need to be a federal presence up there because no one else is there. If it's not us, then who?" Currier said.

As the sea ice melts and the Arctic opens up to more commercial and private traffic, the Coast Guard's mission to protect U.S. and environmental interests in the region must expand. For example, Coast Guardsmen will be on scene in August when Shell Oil begins drilling in the Chukchi Sea to provide support and, if needed, emergency response.

While the Arctic mission gets bigger, Currier said he expected to see fewer forces in the next year involved in missions such as drug interdiction in the eastern Pacific or protection of natural resources in the western Pacific.

"We will be there, but we won't be there at the level of presence we have been in the past," he said.

Currier said developing new technology will be another of his priorities.

While recent acquisitions have given the service lots of assets to patrol the shoreline, one of the largest mission gaps, he said, is in the offshore patrol fleet.

Along with the NSCs, more long-range patrol aircraft and offshore patrol cutters are needed to interdict threats in the open seas — "as far from shore as possible," Currier said.

The fiscal 2013 budget request funds production of the 18th HC-144A Ocean Sentry medium-range surveillance aircraft, which can remain airborne for more than nine hours. The draft request for proposal for the offshore patrol cutter class was released June 15.

At the same time Currier is busy replacing the Coast Guard's aging assets, he is also trying to make the new ships as eco-friendly as possible, despite the added cost.

The coastal buoy tender Henry Blake, based in Everett, Wash., became the first cutter to use a biofuel blend of diesel and algae oil June 20.

"This doesn't come free," he said. "We're committed to it because ... we enforce environmental regulations, so we feel strongly that it's incumbent on us to make our ships as green as we can get them." □

Currier: Stepped-up aviation safety efforts are working

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Over the past year, the Coast Guard has tightened safety procedures in the aviation community to change the culture of complacency and encourage aviators to take responsibility. Vice Adm. John Currier said those efforts are working.

Officials announced in 2011 the Aviation Safety Assessment Action Plan, which included visits to air stations by high-level Coast Guardsmen to brief aviators on safety and policy changes. The plan followed a series of deadly crashes.

"In my opinion, they're having distinct effect," the vice commandant said of the new procedures.

"We're seeing fewer accidents, and the accidents we are seeing are not attributed to a complacency, or some of the things we were concerned about in the past."

One crash in particular raised the issue of accountability. Lt. Lance Leone, the only survivor of the helicopter crash in LaPush, Wash., was sent to an Article 32 hearing. The accident occurred in July 2010, when an MH-60T Jayhawk returning to Sitka, Alaska, crashed into power lines and broke apart, falling into shallow water. The pilot, Lt. Sean Kreuger, as well as Aviation Maintenance Technician 1st Class Adam Hoke and AMT2 Brett Banks, were killed.

Though charges were dropped, the final action report determined Leone, the co-pilot, failed by not questioning the pilot's decision to fly lower and faster than stated in the flight plan.

Currier said he's spoken with young aviators about Leone's story, stressing the message of accountability. He also wants to empower Coast Guardsmen with the responsibility and confidence to act.

"What we try to do is take a more positive bent to it and actually say, 'Look, you're charged with leadership of a crew. You're charged with a multimillion-dollar aircraft. ... We've spent millions of dollars training you,'" Currier said. "You have a mission to do and you have distinct guidelines on how to accomplish that mission."

"That said, if aircrews, boat

crews, cutter crews, anyone that operates, are out there willfully disobeying the law or our tactics, techniques and procedures on doctrine, then there is a level of accountability, just like there is when you're driving your car. If you're speeding and willfully disobeying traffic laws and you have an accident, you're held accountable and we're not immune from that."

Since 2008, 18 Coast Guardsmen have died in aviation accidents, according to Coast Guard data. There were fatal accidents in calendar years 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2012. The worst year was 2010, which had five Class A mishaps, causing death or damage exceeding \$2 million. Prior to 2008, there had not been a fatal accident since 2001.

The only fatal crash this year came in February, when an H-65

Dolphin helicopter crashed during a training flight over Mobile Bay, Ala., claiming the lives of Lt. Cmdr. Dale Taylor, Lt. j.g. Thomas Cameron, Chief Aviation Survival Technician Fernando Jorge and Avionics Electrical Technician 3rd Class Andrew Knight.

As the "ancient albatross," or most senior aviator on active duty, Currier said he is proud of the accomplishments of Coast Guard aviation, which he calls a "world-class enterprise."

"But, like any human enterprise, there are times when people lose focus," he said. "There are times when leadership isn't intrusive enough or strong enough."

"There are times when distractions, whether they be organizational or external, combine to affect the safety culture or the safety posture." □