



# *Proficiency:* The **Essence** of **Discipline**

By Admiral Robert J. Papp Jr., U.S. Coast Guard

**Putting new emphasis on mastery of craft and leadership will ensure the Coast Guard is prepared to confidently take the initiative in fulfilling its mission.**



U.S. COAST GUARD

**Training exercises, such as the 18-nation Operation Kuru Kuru in the Pacific, allow Coast Guard personnel to maintain and sharpen a variety of skills requisite to proficiency in their craft—a cornerstone of the author's vision for the Coast Guard. Here, crew from the cutter *Kukui* (WLB-203) prepare to board and inspect a fishing vessel during the November 2011 exercise.**

times, unavoidable at others. Reality demands the ability to adapt. At the same time, however, we must rely on the anchors that define us as Coast Guardsmen—members of the profession of arms—and that are crucial to our success: Those anchors that have been forged over time in the foundry of discipline, and those we know will hold fast.

When I became the 24th Commandant in May 2010, I was concerned about a growing number of serious operational accidents and some notable incidents of individual and group misconduct. After two fatal operational mishaps that year, I directed sweeping reviews to identify and address the underlying reasons. Every incident was unique in type and cause, but each carried in common some failure of discipline, marked by failures of leadership and clear departures from established standards. Driven by the continuing drumbeat of change, I wondered whether the Coast Guard was beginning to lose its operational edge. I saw a need to refocus on improving discipline through a renewed commitment to leadership and proficiency in the operational arts.

The Coast Guard is not alone; other services face similar challenges. Despite an incredible operational tempo and experience in the force, senior leaders' concerns are increasing over a series of high-profile incidents that indicate clear failures in discipline at the unit or individual level. In his February 2012 white paper, "America's Military—A Profession of Arms," Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, called for the military to "renew [its] commitment to the Profession of Arms. We're not a profession simply because we say we're a profession. We must continue to learn, to understand, and to promote the knowledge, skills, attributes, and behaviors that define us as a profession." For the Coast Guard, our foundation is proficiency.

## Proficiency

I began speaking of proficiency in my first "State of the Coast Guard" address in early 2011, and it generated a flood of questions. During all-hands meetings last year, I frequently was asked to describe "proficiency." I would reply by recounting how during a visit to a Coast Guard boat station I had asked the crew, "Who is the best boat coxswain?" Of course half a dozen boatswain's mates immediately raised their hands. So I rephrased the question. "If the search-and-rescue alarm sounded and you had to go out in a severe storm, who would you want to be the coxswain of the motor lifeboat?" Everyone turned and pointed to the commander, a chief warrant officer boatswain (BOSN4) and surfman with more than 30 years of experience. Clearly, we all know proficiency when we see it. But how do we become proficient? And proficient at what?

**T**he ability to harness and manage change has been widely heralded in the past decade, spurred on by the conventional wisdom that being change-centric is a key organizational value. The Coast Guard embraced that trend. We have grown in size, authorities, and capabilities since 2002—expanding operations, making sweeping organizational realignments. We pressed more operational and administrative requirements on our people, and increasing budgets fueled a proliferation of technology at every level as part of those changes. Over the past two years, however, we have moderated that pace of change through efforts to "Steady the Service"—one of my four guiding principles.

However, we remain an organization undergoing change while sustaining a broad range of operations and support activities across a diverse array of missions. Increased activity in the Arctic, the continued flow of drugs and migrants toward our shores, and our mandate to assure the safe and secure approaches to American ports all confront us like uncertain and stormy seas—and all in the context of shrinking budgets. Dynamic evolution is necessary at

Proficiency is being highly competent at what you do. It is not an end state, but a continuous pursuit toward mastering a specialty. It begins with the individual, then expands to proficiency of the team, unit, and organization. Proficiency consists of:

- Training, education, qualification, and certification
- Advanced knowledge, experience, and seasoning
- Self-discipline and voluntary adherence to a set of rules or governing standards
- Sustained drive to achieve higher levels of excellence
- The continuous pursuit of mastery of craft

The service is responsible for providing the first two elements to an individual. Individuals are duty-bound to perform the remaining elements for the good of the nation, the Coast Guard, and their shipmates.

We will be proficient in craft and proficient in leadership.

### Proficiency in Craft

We rely on proficiency in the operational arts of our profession—seamanship, airmanship, maritime law enforcement, marine safety and security, and joint military and interagency operations. And operations rely on proficiency in mission support (e.g., logistics, finance, engineering, personnel, and information technology) and other key enabling disciplines such as intelligence, law, and external affairs. Each Coast Guardsman—active duty, reserve, civilian, auxiliary—has a primary professional or occupational specialty. Enlisted personnel are categorized by ratings, commissioned officers by primary specialty and subspecialty, civilians and auxiliary by their own specialties.

Beyond accession training, the Coast Guard provides training, education, qualification, and certification to each person in at least one primary area. Through performance within a specialty, personnel gain advanced knowledge, experience, and seasoning. They earn qualification codes, specialty devices, and sometimes, professional licenses or certifications from outside authorities.

That grounding produces competence, but being proficient in specialty requires much more.

Coast Guardsmen must demonstrate the self-discipline to adhere to the governing standards and rules of their specialty. It is not enough to demonstrate knowledge of the policy, doctrine, tactics, techniques, and procedures that govern one's job. The service expects individuals to follow those standards and rules that govern all the time—even when no one is watching. We expect individuals to abide by the standards not just because they ensure safer, more effective, or more productive work, but because self-discipline is contagious and results in a disciplined team, unit, and Coast Guard. And discipline is the soul of a military service. We cannot function without it.

We must go further, demonstrating a sustained drive to achieve higher levels of excellence within a specialty through regular self-study, practice, and performance. In doing so, we transform a specialty area into a profession, a calling, a craft. As legendary football coach Vince Lombardi said, "We are going to relentlessly chase perfection, knowing full well we will not catch it, because nothing is perfect. But we are going to relentlessly chase it, because in the process we can catch excellence."

I expect Coast Guardsmen to continuously strive to become better at what they do. The ingredients are dedication to duty, persistence, and time. The result is excellence: pilots and crews dedicating time after duty hours to hold discussions in wardrooms and hangar-decks about flying; the aviation survival technician who swims an extra hour in the pool to hone physical stamina for the next jump; the operations center duty section on a quiet mid-watch practicing advanced search-and-rescue planning; the cutter-division

officer poring over technical manuals and procedures at night to become a better officer of the deck; the third class machinery technician who works on cars in his free time because he has a passion for repairing engines; and the judge advocate who reads professional journals after hours. We reward proficiency and excellence by



U.S. COAST GUARD/JENNIFER JOHNSON

**"Aircraft commanders, coxwains, boarding officers, team leaders—each has a solemn duty" with regard to authority, responsibility and accountability, Admiral Papp says of leadership in the Coast Guard. Here, Lieutenant (junior grade) Jeanine Menze, a C-130 Hercules pilot, prepares for a flight in her aircraft at Coast Guard Air Station Barbers Point, Hawaii.**

advancement/promotion, with accompanying increases in position and pay. But proficiency is its own reward, delivering a powerful satisfaction to the individual, team, and unit from doing it right and achieving excellence. The alternatives are mediocrity, complacency, and lack of discipline. We reject that path.

Finally, we must continually pursue mastery of craft. Professionals develop an internal passion for their craft, a hunger to continue to develop themselves and others, and to improve their profession. That BOSN4 surfman at the boat station everyone recognized as the master would be the first to tell you that there is always more to learn, more skills to sharpen, and that he is only as proficient as his last operational case. Being a surfman and boatswain's mate isn't something he does, it's a part of who he is.

Proficiency in craft is only half of what makes us disciplined. We must also be proficient as leaders.

### Proficiency in Leadership

The Coast Guard relies on leadership at every level to inspire and motivate others to reach that which was thought unachievable; to teach and mentor subordinates; to uphold the core values and moral standards that bind us as a profession of arms. We have renewed our emphasis on traditional concepts of leadership. We rely on every level of command to conduct operations safely and effectively in an inherently dangerous maritime environment. Those who lead hold the lives of a crew in their hands, not just in operations but also in mission support and other disciplines.

Authority, responsibility, and accountability flow through the chain to the commander, commanding officer, or officer in charge (CO/OINC). No matter the size of the command (area, district, sector, cutter, or boat station), there is always one individual vested with ultimate authority, responsibility, and accountability. Those same elements flow from the CO/OINC to the officers, chiefs, and petty officers entrusted with the responsibility for safely and effectively conducting the mission, including ensuring the welfare of their crew. They equally apply to civilians and auxiliaries responsible for others in their charge. Aircraft commanders, coxswains, boarding officers, team leaders—each has a solemn duty and responsibility in this regard.

Every member of a crew must take responsibility for self, shipmates, and accomplishing the mission.

Leadership extends beyond authority, responsibility, and accountability. Leaders place the duty to serve those they lead, and the Coast Guard, before their own well-being. Humility. They stand up for their people, take risks when prudence dictates, and do the right thing no matter the cost. Courage. They live the core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty—and demand that others meet the same high standards.

Proficiency in leadership requires the same commitment and sacrifice as proficiency in a craft: training, education, experience, self-discipline, sustained excellence, and continuous pursuit of mastery of the craft. Leaders never finish studying, learning, or practicing how to lead others.



U.S. COAST GUARD (BETH JOHNSON)

The author believes professionals develop an internal passion for their craft that often translates into after-hours training or study, as well as non-duty activities. Here, in the latter category, Petty Officer 2nd Class Josh Barrio (right), Petty Officer 1st Class Jacob Linder (center), and Petty officer 2nd Class Christopher Novak put their work skills to test at an aircraft maintenance technician's competition in Las Vegas, Nevada, in March 2012.

Despite conventional wisdom, the importance of proficiency in leadership does not change with rank or the level of authority, responsibility, and accountability. As one advances in seniority, the context shifts from small unit or group leadership to executive leadership. The latter may seem more significant because there are fewer flag officers and senior executives than petty officers and junior officers. And certainly the consequences of individual success or failure at the executive level may be greater and more visible. However, leadership at the team, small unit, and staff levels is vitally important, and must succeed

in thousands of places every day for the Coast Guard to function. Only leadership at each level ensures discipline throughout the force.

## Adhering To High Standards

Discipline is the soul of a military service. It is learning what to do, how to do it, and in what manner it should be done; then doing it right. Popular use has narrowed discipline to mean simply “to punish.” But discipline is much more than enforcing order and accountability after a problem. Derived from the Latin *disciplina*, discipline first means training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character of a person or group to an established set of standards of behavior or conduct.

We set and follow high standards in nearly every aspect of what we do (character, conduct, operations, work, uniform, and professionalism). Adherence to standards in all matters—great and small—results in a disciplined service.



Training helps instill the kind of discipline that ensures the Coast Guard can successfully operate in a dangerous and unforgiving environment and return safely to do it again, the author believes. Here, personnel at Coast Guard Station Barnegat Light, New Jersey, take advantage of heavy surf to instruct prospective surfmen and boat crew members.

Disregard for standards produces the opposite. A leader's selective obedience and lax enforcement of rules and standards will result in selective obedience by the crew. A crew's selective obedience in turn results in selective disobedience. Taken to its extreme, selective disobedience contributes to destructive behavior and the breakdown of unit cohesion. Sexual assault, hazing, and alcohol and drug abuse are manifestations of such breakdowns and indicators of an absence of leadership. Leaders do not sit on the sidelines. We have a duty to respect our shipmates, and that duty demands courage.

Small things matter. Maintaining uniform standards, customs, courtesies, and traditions are not about public affairs; they are the manners of our profession. Those

manners teach discipline, the same discipline that will ensure Coast Guardsmen are able to successfully conduct operations in a dangerous and unforgiving environment and return safely to do it again. If we're going to do it—and we are—we're going to do it right.

Some argue that such unwavering adherence to rules and standards undercuts initiative and creativity. Not so. Initiative without discipline is folly. Discipline is the fertile ground that initiative requires to flourish.

## Disciplined Initiative

Proficiency in craft and proficiency in leadership enable individuals, teams, and units to attain *disciplined initiative*. On-scene initiative remains a fundamental principle of Coast Guard and joint operations. We rely on Coast Guardsmen to act quickly and decisively within the scope of their authority, guided by a firm understanding of the desired objectives and commander's intent. That initiative

must be based in proficiency. As General Dempsey wrote, “We need leaders to be empowered to use initiative that is standards-based to conduct the mission.” Leaders don't control subordinates' every action. Instead, they make sure subordinates thoroughly understand the standards and expectations and how to meet them in a climate of mutual trust between leader and subordinates. The CO/OINC can't be physically present everywhere in the unit, but his or her leadership must be. I don't expect a chief petty officer on board every small boat, but the chief's leadership presence in that boat is felt and reflected by the disciplined operations of the coxswain and crew. Leaders hold themselves and their subordinates accountable

for following standards in all things. In that environment, discipline establishes a climate of trust for initiative to take root.

Are there circumstances in which Coast Guardsmen should deviate from operational doctrine and exercise on-scene initiative if necessary to achieve the mission? Certainly. We have a rich heritage of doing so. But such initiative must be disciplined, relying on the proficient leader to exercise prudent judgment, weigh risks, and reach the best decision given the circumstances. I realize that is not always so simple in the heat of operations. Judgment calls in difficult circumstances may not be obvious. Even disciplined initiative based on proficiency may not guarantee success in all cases, but we cannot succeed without it.

Beyond operations, disciplined initiative fosters creativity and innovation within the organization, empowering people to generate ideas and solutions to improve systems, processes, and policies.

## Next Steps

The Coast Guard is taking deliberate measures to improve proficiency:

- We stopped the revolving door of command tours by requiring commanding officers to serve full tours, except in extraordinary circumstances of Coast Guard need. This may seem evident, but officers were rotating from command tours before gaining needed proficiency in command and creating turmoil within the units.
- We are ensuring completion of full-length tours for enlisted personnel to increase experience levels and seasoning, and extending tour lengths for certain ratings in deployable specialized forces (DSF) units requiring the highest levels of tactical proficiency.
- We completed and continue to implement the results of the Aviation Safety Assessment Action Plan, emphasizing aviator focus and proficiency on honing the operational art and key aspects of leadership on the flight deck and hangar deck.
- We have implemented central board screening for all command positions to ensure candidates for command have appropriate levels of proficiency. That complements the rigorous qualification and board process for enlisted officer-in-charge positions.
- We now require all prospective commanding officers, whether afloat or ashore, to attend pre-command training (with a standard curriculum) to ensure fundamental concepts of leadership and mission command are taught to every prospective CO/OINC.
- I have issued and revised my guidance to officer promotion boards and selection panels to clearly emphasize proficiency in craft and leadership at each level.
- We completed and are implementing the DSF stem-to-stern review, organizing, training, equipping, and operating DSF as part of the Coast Guard Maritime Trident of Forces under the authority of senior operational commanders.
- We have issued fundamental doctrine that provides enduring guidance and standards in publications CG 3-0 (*Op-*



Proficiency, the author says, begins with the individual then expands to proficiency of the team, the unit, and finally, the organization, leading to a mastery of craft throughout. Here, Petty Officer 1st Class Daniell A. Lashbrook of the Pacific Strike Group sets up equipment to be used in a training session for National Strike Force members as part of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation 2011 in Honolulu.

*erations*), CG 3-1 (*Deployable Specialized Forces*), and CG 3-2 (*Short-Notice Maritime Response Operations*).

- We are launching this summer the first professional development career course for mid-grade officers, which will provide essential knowledge and skills to leaders.
- I have sent personal letters to all commanding officers emphasizing my intent, philosophy, and expectations for command.
- Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Michael Leavitt has redesigned and implemented the chief petty officer call-to-indoctrination process to remove any trace or perception of disrespectful ritual and replace it with a board process that stresses candidate proficiency and honoring our profession.

These visible service-wide initiatives are only a start. We must focus on proficiency at every level to hone the edge.

## Our Three Anchors

Proficiency in craft, proficiency in leadership, and disciplined initiative—these are the anchors on which we will hold fast in uncertain and stormy seas we are facing. They will

enable us to navigate through and weather the storm, for anchors are not solely for remaining in position. Skilled mariners use them at short stay, underfoot to successfully maneuver in difficult situations—just as we are doing now.

Beyond the current situation, those anchors are enduring. Their value and necessity to our ethos and our mission success is proven in our rich heritage and the long blue line of Coast Guard men and women who have gone before us. They will sustain us in the future as they have before and do now. By being proficient we will meet our duty to honor our profession.

I have described proficiency in terms of specialty, but in a larger sense our profession began well before we became a cutterman, a boatswain's mate, an aviator, an engineer, or a yeoman. It began the moment we took the oath of office as a Coast Guardsman. For this is our craft. This is our chosen profession. This is our way. This is what we do.

Stand a taut watch. Semper Paratus. ❄

Admiral Papp is Commandant of the Coast Guard.