Mercy mission

Massive effort near Haiti keeps CG 'maxed out' during Operation Able Manner

PA2 Rob Wyman

When the old timers gather at the chief's mess in the year 2010, most of the sea stories they will tell will be about the summer of 1994.

One chief will tell the story about his days as a seaman aboard the *CGC Hamilton*, when he helped rescue 468 people from a leaking 50-foot sailboat.

Another chief will recall how he was aboard the *CGC Dependable* when two babies were born in the wardroom in less than two weeks.

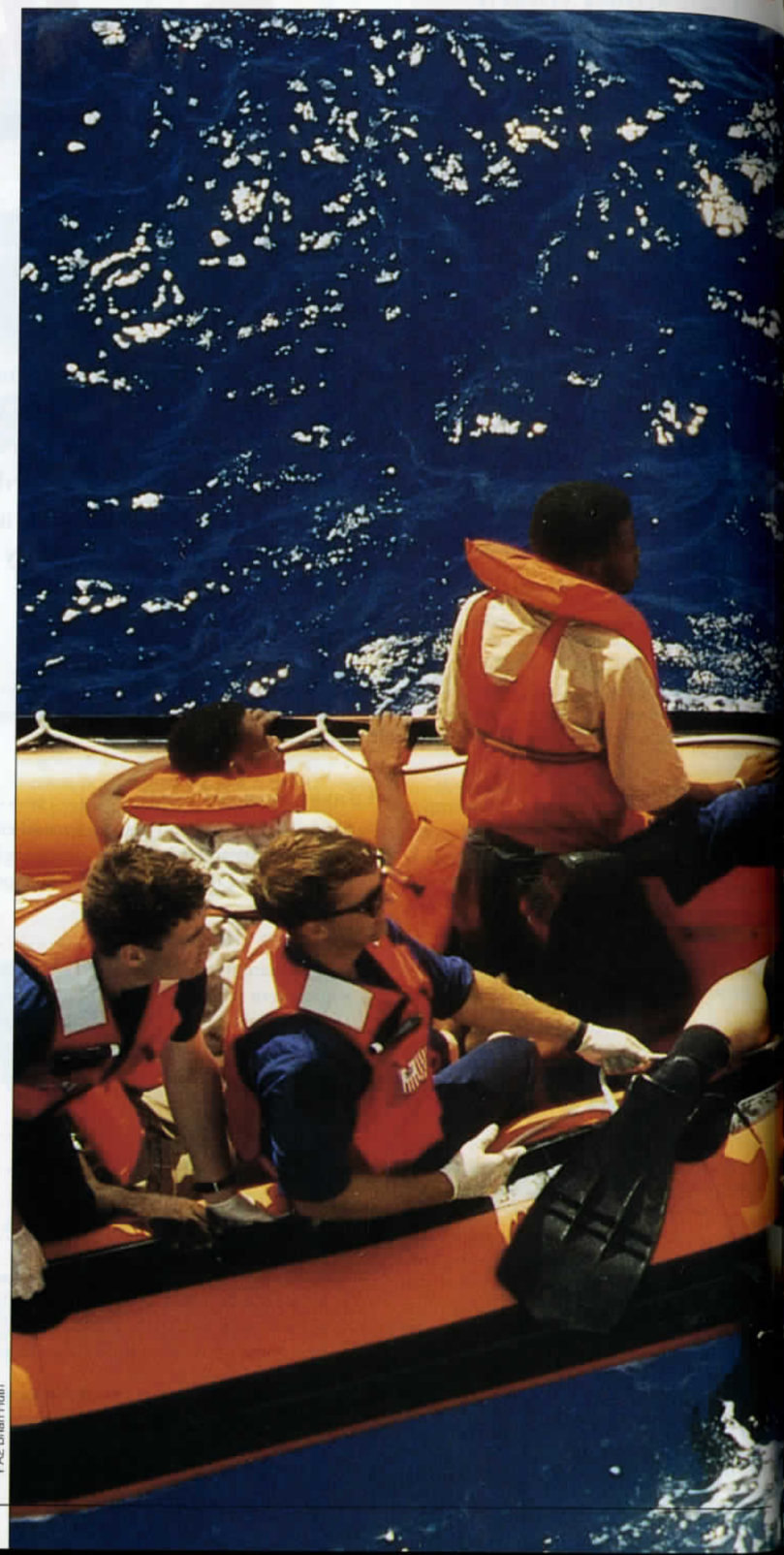
A third chief will boast about being a crewmember aboard the *CGC Decisive* when the cutter's crew rescued 336 people, working 17 rescue cases in 10 hours. They will all remember July 4, 1994, when 3,247 people were rescued from 70 sailboats in a single day.

Everyone knows that sea stories are like fish stories; it is perfectly acceptable to stretch the truth a tad. However, the amazing thing about the Operation Able Manner sea stories is that they are 100 percent true.

Largest search-and-rescue effort since WWII

Able Manner is the Coast Guard's largest search-and-rescue effort since World War II. On Aug. 20, 1940, Winston Churchill praised the Royal Air Force, saying, "Never was so much owed by so many to so few."

An apt way to describe Able Manner


PA2 Brian Huth

(Above) Crewmembers from the *CGC Hamilton* recover their rescue swimmer and several Haitian migrants after the migrants' sailboat overturned near the coast of Haiti. (Right) HSC Jim Amster examines a Haitian baby aboard the *Hamilton*.

PA2 Rob Wyman

might be, "Never have so few done so much for so many."

Patrols begin off Haiti after 1981 agreement

The Coast Guard commenced patrols off the coast of Haiti following the signs of a bilateral agreement between the United States and Haitian governments in October 1981. The agreement was written in response to the large number of Haitians — nearly 20,000 — making unsafe voyages each year.

Until October 1991, Haitians were given immigration screenings by Immigration and Naturalization Service officials aboard cutters. Following the coup that deposed former Haitian President Bertrand Aristide, a large outflow of migrants required that screenings be held ashore at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba.

Following a massive outflow of Haitians in May 1992, then President George Bush issued an executive order May 24 that allowed for direct repatriation without immigration screenings aboard cutters.

Operation Able Manner commenced Jan. 15, 1993, and was designed to deter Haitians from taking to sea in unsafe, overcrowded vessels, and to rescue those Haitians found on the high seas. Initially, Haitians found at sea were taken aboard cutters, given food, water and medical attention, and directly repatriated to Haiti. But a new policy that went into effect June 16 was designed to grant immigration screenings at sea. The screenings took place aboard cutters and the *USNS Comfort*, and at a migrant processing center. Another processing center opened June 29 at Guantanamo Bay.

On July 5, the policy was again changed to provide Haitians safe haven rather than asylum hearings. Currently, migrants rescued by the Coast Guard are turned over to Department of Defense officials at Guantanamo Bay, where they are offered safe haven. Those deciding to return to Haiti are repatriated by cutters.

Each day, Coast Guard cutters and helicopters patrol international waters near Haiti searching for migrant vessels. Boarding parties inspect virtually every vessel encountered in the region. As a secondary mission, the Coast Guard helps Joint Task Force 120 with Operation Support Democracy by enforcing United Nations sanctions against Haiti.

Sequence photos by PAC Rick Woods

(Left) A grossly overloaded Haitian sailboat ties up alongside the *CGC Hamilton*. (Right) After Haitian passengers rush to one side to disembark, the sailboat capsizes, causing panic, chaos, injuries and deaths.

CG dedication witnessed by photojournalist

Cindy Karp, a photojournalist who works for *U.S. News and World Report*, spent a week aboard Coast Guard cutters in the Windward Passage. Her assignment for the magazine was to shoot photographs and write a story about Haitian migration.

"I've been talking so much about the Coast Guard since I've returned, people ask me if I was covering the Coast Guard or the Haitian situation," Karp said. "I've never witnessed such incredible dedication or humanitarian concern."

RADM William Leahy, 7th District commander, agrees.

"The people working Operation Able Manner are some of the hardest working, most dedicated and professional people I have had the opportunity to be associated with in my Coast Guard career," said Leahy. "Senior Department of Defense officers and top-level officials from other federal agencies in Haitian operations have been awed by the Coast Guard's outstanding response to this humanitarian mission."

Commandant: Members prove CG premier outfit

Leahy, along with Commandant ADM Robert E. Kramek, visited several cutters assigned to Able Manner in early July.

"Working seven (days) by 24 (hours), the men and women of Operation Able Manner have had little rest, no time for port calls or holiday routine," said Kramek. "But, without complaint, they continue, as their predecessors have done for nearly 204 years: saving lives at sea. Like Coast Guard personnel around the world, the men and women of Operation Able Manner are once again proving that the U.S. Coast Guard is the world's premier maritime service."

CWO3 Dan Waldschmidt, 7th Dist.

PA1 Alastair Worden

A common sight aboard Coast Guard cutters participating in Operation Able Manner — *CGC Tampa's* HS1 Nils Ek hands out rations to rescued Haitian children.

Special deliveries at sea

As an afloat unit participating in Operation Able Manner, the *CGC Dependable* has been tasked with sometimes doing the impossible. During their last patrol, from June 10 to July 22, the cutter's crew often worked 20-hour days trying to deal with the massive outflow of Haitians fleeing their homeland. The last patrol also brought the *Dependable's* crew two special deliveries.

PA1 Alastair Worden

On June 24, the cutter deployed its smallboats to intercept a dangerously overloaded Haitian sailboat. As the smallboats began transporting the Haitians from their sailboat to the cutter, Garry Guerrier, the *Dependable's* interpreter, noticed that one of the Haitian women was far along in pregnancy.

Upon hearing that the woman was in her third trimester of pregnancy, HS2 John Nelson escorted her to the stern of the cutter for close monitoring. At the conclusion of quarters, around 12:45 p.m., the woman made a comment that would startle anyone. She told Guerrier, "It's trying to come out!"

The woman was immediately taken to the cutter's wardroom, which also serves as the cutter's battle-dressing station.

Although it is not among the ship's drills, the *Dependable's* wardroom was quickly transformed into a makeshift delivery room. Sterile sheets, towels, blankets, and a baby-delivery kit were in place. The crewmembers assisting Nelson were LTJG Caryn Jette, BMC Matthew Walter, BMl Tim Bogeman, YNl Robert Russel, DC3 Tim Walker and Guerrier.

Walter was the only crewmember who had prior experience delivering a baby. As an emergency medical technician in Atlantic City, N.J., he helped deliver a baby in an ambulance. Also providing assistance were RM3 Travis Mitchell and RMl Carlos Johnson. They conducted a phone patch with Air Station Miami's flight surgeon and would relay vital information to their fellow crewmembers in the wardroom.

After two hours of labor, the cutter's "birthing detail" realized the woman would be in labor for some time. To prevent fatigue, Nelson organized a two-person watch.

At 10:30 p.m., the contractions got closer together. In no time, the baby's head was crowning. A pipe was then made aboard the cutter: "Birthing detail lay to the wardroom." After 11 hours of labor, the moment of truth drew near. At 11:05 p.m., Nelson and Walter delivered a 5-pound, 8-ounce baby girl with no complications.

To inform the cutter's crew, another pipe was made: "For the information of all hands, a baby girl was born on the *Dependable* at 2305." The cutter's June 24 log entry, written by QM3 Todd Robinson, summarizes the extraordinary event best. It reads: "2305: female Haitian infant entered this world on board *USCGC DEPENDABLE* in position 17-59.5' N 074-37.8' W, child named Sabrina, (5) Five pounds at birth; mother and daughter doing well."

The *Dependable's* crew knows firsthand that lightning can strike the same place twice. On July 5, the birthing detail, consisting only of Walter, Nelson, and another Haitian female who served as interpreter and comforter, delivered a baby boy weighing approximately 6 pounds.

Soon after, the mast of the cutter, now decorated by symbols of drug busts and awards, would see the addition of two storks — one with a pink bundle in its beak and the other blue — to commemorate the patrol that delivered two humans into the world.

ENS Todd S. Bardin, *CGC Dependable*