

Operation Able Vigil

Service participates in its largest peacetime operation ever — keeping Cuban rafters alive



CWO3 Rich Rejniak

After more than a month of grueling, non-stop search and rescue off Haiti in late June and early July, many Atlantic Area cutters were dockside in early August. Crews were getting to some long-overdue maintenance chores. These hard-working men and women were also enjoying some precious time with their families. Some were even able to squeeze in a brief visit with their folks at the place they still call home.

In early August there were still several cutters patrolling off Haiti. A few patrol boats were underway between Cuba and the Florida Keys. It was the calm before the storm.

The number of Cubans making their way to the United States on rafts began to increase during the second week of August. The Cubans were also discovering unique new ways to journey to America. Two government-owned vessels, both carrying large groups of Cubans, left Mariel Harbor, Cuba, on a due-north course. Nearly 1,000 Cubans flooded onto a Greek-registered motor vessel that was tied to a pier in Mariel. Their effort to get underway was thwarted.

Crewmembers from the CGC Escape negotiate with Cuban migrants to stop their overloaded boat.

PA3 Robin Reister



Somewhere between Cuba and the Florida Keys, Cuban rafters wait to be rescued.
CWO3 Rich Rejniak

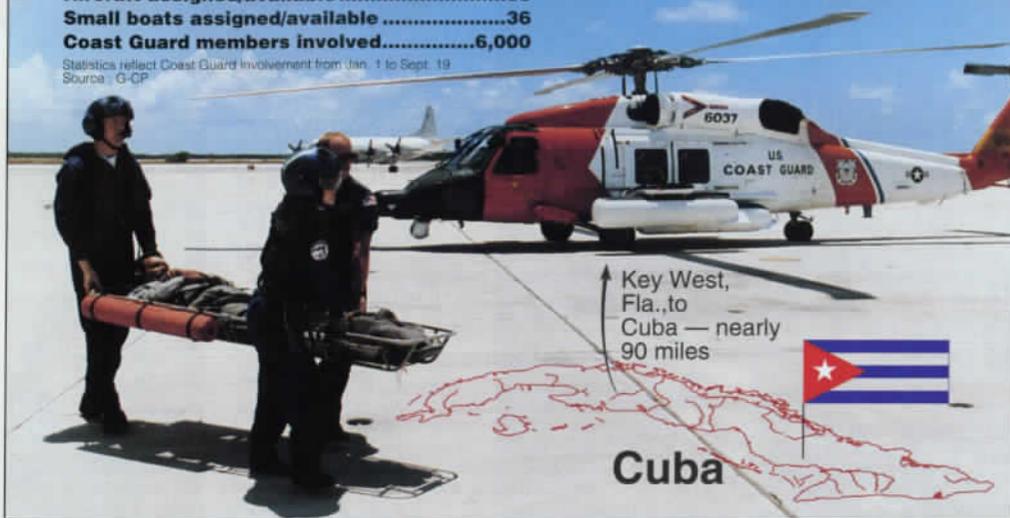
Rafters are transferred from the CGC Wrangell to the CGC Campbell.
Courtesy CGC Campbell



Operation Able Vigil

Cubans rescued this year37,076
 Cutters on scene34
 Aircraft assigned/available30
 Small boats assigned/available36
 Coast Guard members involved6,000

Statistics reflect Coast Guard involvement from Jan. 1 to Sept. 19
 Source: G-CP



An injured Cuban rafter is transferred by a Coast Guard aircrew at Key West, Fla.

It was beginning to look like a second Mariel Boatlift might be a distinct possibility. The Coast Guard would, once again, be put to the test as a major player in the effort to prevent a second Cuban mass exodus.

Sail orders were transmitted

to Atlantic Area cutters. Crews began to make their home-away-from-home ready to sail.

Another chapter of Coast Guard history began in mid-August with the start of Operation Able Vigil.

A fleet of cutters and several Navy ships were headed toward the Florida Straits. Meanwhile, a war of words be-

tween Havana and Washington, D.C., was conducted in the newspapers and on the nightly television news.

More than 2,000 Cubans were rescued during the first week of the operation. Most of these Cubans were taken to Key West, Fla., which prompted Florida politicians to join the war of words. The facilities used to house and care for Cubans were quickly filled to capacity. U.S. television crews were allowed to film in Cuba and their cameras were capturing hundreds of rafts being launched daily.

At 8 p.m. Aug. 19, President Bill Clinton announced that all Cuban migrants rescued at sea by the Coast Guard would be taken to the Navy Base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. More than 20 cutters and several Navy ships were in place to carry out the

president's order. Several more cutters and ships were still en route to the Florida Straits.

When 1,189 Cubans were rescued Aug. 20, during an incredible 125 search-and-rescue cases, it was just a warm-up for the amazing feats yet to come. Working non-stop, the men and women assigned to Able Vigil complet-

From trickle to wave — 10 years of Cuban rafter rescues

In June 1983, the Coast Guard rescued the first two Cubans to cross the Florida Straits since the Mariel boatlift of 1980 — and that was a media event.

Today, more than 40 Coast Guard cutters, several Navy ships, a flotilla of small boats and several Coast Guard planes and helicopters are patrolling the Florida Straits and Florida Keys, rescuing thousands of Cubans daily.

It is still a media event. Cubans have been risking their lives to cross the Florida Straits on almost anything that would float since 1983. It was just a trickle then. Between 1983 and 1988 the Coast Guard rescued 239 Cubans trying to float to the United States.

In 1989 the trickle became a small flow. A group of Cuban rafters was rescued almost every week. In two years, 7th District units rescued 858 Cubans from inner tubes or small, unsafe, makeshift rafts.

In 1991 the number of Cubans rescued climbed from a few per week to a few per day. More than 2,000 Cubans were rescued in both 1991 and 1992.

By 1993 the small flow became a steady stream. An average of 10 Cubans were rescued every day that year, for a record yearly total of 3,656. As the numbers increased, some of the rescues became more complicated. Crewmembers of Air Stations Miami and Clearwater, Fla., were kept busy rescuing people suffering from exposure or dehydration.

By 1994 Cuban rafter rescues were a daily occurrence and media interest declined somewhat. More than 2,500 Cubans were rescued during the first five months of 1994. In June 1994 the steady stream became a river. A monthly record of 1,173 Cubans were rescued. Another 1,010 Cubans were rescued in July.

By the middle of August the number of Cubans found on rafts in the Florida Straits skyrocketed. During the week beginning Aug. 13, 2,607 Cubans were rescued — more than twice the monthly record set in June. The trickle was now a wave.

Between Aug. 20 and Sept. 7, the Coast Guard saved more than 26,000 Cubans.

Media from all over the world are once again interested in Cuban rafter rescues. Once again the men and women of the Coast Guard are demonstrating why their motto is "Semper Paratus" — always ready.

A dehydrated Cuban woman is lifted aboard the CGC Escanaba for medical evacuation.



CWO3 Rich Rejzler

ed 1,206 search-and-rescue cases in four days beginning Aug. 21. A new record for people rescued in a day was set when 3,253 Cubans were rescued Aug. 23. More Cubans were rescued in that four-day period — 10,270 — than were rescued during the decade between 1983 and 1993.

"I witnessed firsthand the extraordinary efforts of our fellow Coasties in the Florida Straits," Commandant ADM Robert E. Kramek said after touring the Able Vigil theater during the height of the operation. "They're doing what we do best — saving lives at sea," the commandant said. "While in theater, I overflew the Straits of Florida and saw two dozen rafts in a short 15-minute period. I spoke with LT Gwen Keenan, commanding officer of the CGC Baranof. She reported that her crew had rescued an incredible 400 Cuban rafters in just 24 hours."

Kramek described Able Vigil as the largest joint peacetime operation in Coast Guard history. At that moment, a fleet of more than 35 cutters and patrol boats, along with 10 Navy ships, were plying the waters between Cuba and the United States. A flotilla of several dozen smallboats, including 41-footers, 25-footers and rigid-hull inflatable boats, were patrolling closer to shore in the Florida Keys.

A flight wing of almost 30 jets, planes and helicopters from Air Stations Miami, Clearwater, Fla., and Savannah, Ga., provided continuous air support to the surface vessels. More than 6,000 Coast Guard men and women, augmented by Reservists and Auxiliarists, were actively involved in the massive lifesaving effort.

CAPT Gary Boyer, 7th District operations chief, coordinated the efforts of all of these cutters, patrol boats, Navy ships, jets, planes and helicopters from the combat information center aboard

the CGC Gallatin. These many resources were used to best advantage to rescue 30,000 people during the first month of the operation.

The crews of Coast Guard jets, planes and helicopters were busy spotting rafts as the first rays of the sun illuminated the Florida Straits. Meanwhile, the men and women afloat were working on their rescue gear to be ready for the busy day ahead. In the faint green glow of the Gallatin's CIC, watchstanders logged the positions of these rafts.

Before the sun had climbed to 45 degrees above the horizon, the cutters, patrol boats and ships had been directed to their most advantageous rescue positions. Under the scorching mid-day sun, thousands of people were recovered from rickety, makeshift rafts and taken to safety. The rescuers managed to wolf down a mid-day meal as they fed and cared for the rescued Cubans. When the sun had completed three-fourths of its journey across the sky, a second scramble began. With only a few hours of daylight left the aircraft darted about the sky, locating rafters before darkness descended. The cutters and patrol boats sped about to as many rafts as possible so no one would be left to risk another night at sea.

"Coming on the heels of the Haitian mass migration in June and July of this year, these Cuban operations stretched our abilities to the limit," said Kramek.

However, the men and women assigned to Able Vigil responded in typical Coast Guard fashion, according to the commandant.

"On behalf of the Secretary of Transportation, the Honorable Federico

CG buys 6,500 baby bottles, more

"The limit on my credit card was raised to \$999,999.99," 7th District Purchasing Agent Georgia Coats said.

When rafter rescues reached record proportions in August, a plethora of supplies was needed to care for the Cubans. Coats and fellow Purchasing Agent Joyce Lasseter were responsible for buying a bulk of these supplies. The two women faced problems like where to buy 6 million paper plates.

"We're used to buying supplies for the district," Lasseter said. "However, this is the first time I've had to buy 6,000 baby bottles, 10,000 cans of formula, 40,000 jars of baby food or 70,000 disposable diapers. Those items aren't even in the federal supply schedule."

Even when goods could be found in the schedule, problems were encountered. The government warehouses could not supply the huge purchases needed for the operation. The purchasing agents also had difficulty buying some items in mass quantity from small commercial businesses. But the two women were also able to negotiate several good buys to save taxpayer dollars.

"When we told vendors we needed 100,000 blankets in South Florida they all wondered why," Lasseter said. "I told them that all of the rafters being saved by the Coast Guard are wet and cold. One vendor sold me blankets that sell in the government supply catalog for \$19.13 each for \$2.75."

The two women often spent the entire day on the phone trying to keep up with what the cutters needed.

"No matter how busy or hectic it got," Coats said, "it didn't bother me. I felt like I was helping to save people's lives."

Peña, and a grateful nation, I applaud your heroic efforts," said Kramek. Stories by CWO3 Dan Waldschmidt, 7th Dist.

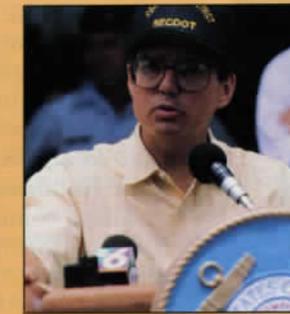
The many moods of Able Vigil



PA3 Robin Reszler



PA2 Adam Wine



PA3 Robin Reszler



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