

BOSTON, MA – The Coast Guard’s Mission Effectiveness Project requires cutter crews to swap hulls with crews whose own cutter is in the shipyard. Typically, most “off-cycle” personnel opt for temporary duty either in their homeport or near their hometown. Others use the opportunity to see new parts of the country. While most of us think that the perfect place to go during the winter is somewhere in the Caribbean, two Firemen from CGC SPENCER decided to spend the coldest months of the year in one of the Coast Guard’s northernmost bases.



270 miles north of Dutch Harbor, Alaska is St. Paul Island. Only 40 square miles, the island is a port of call for the Bering Sea fishing fleet, processing their catch and providing repair services to their boats. Each January, the Coast Guard forward-deploys two HH-60J Jayhawk helicopters from Air Station Kodiak to tiny St. Paul Island. The aircraft and their crews provide much-needed search-and-rescue (SAR) coverage for the fishing fleet during the winter opilio crab season made famous by the Discovery Channel’s series *Deadliest Catch*. By forward-deploying the aircraft,

the crews eliminate a six-hour transit from Kodiak, extending their range and decreasing response time. In the past, the crew of Long Range Aids to Navigation (LORAN) Station St. Paul was responsible for maintaining the airfield and buildings, keeping the lights working and keeping the runway free of snow. With the closure of LORAN facilities, the airfield support tasks have fallen to a crew of volunteers who choose to spend the winter on the island.

This year, two of the volunteers were SPENCER’s Fireman Joseph Foust and Fireman John Thompson. Knowing that they would be without a ship as SPENCER participated in a crew-swap with CGC ESCANABA, they responded to a solicitation seeking volunteers to support the deployment. As they both desire to become Aviation Survival Technicians, they saw it as an ideal opportunity to get experience in the aviation field. The two flew from a mid-patrol break in Grand Cayman, where the average temperature hovered around 80^{oF}, to Alaska, where temperatures hovered around 0^{oF}.

Foust and Thompson worked with volunteers from other Coast Guard units to keep the airfield operational through the winter. The crew kept the runway free of snow, maintained the heating, plumbing, and electrical systems on base, and kept the local herd of reindeer away from the runway. “They’re really more like cows than deer,” said Thompson. “They’re completely adjusted to humans, we were often able to walk right up to them before they would move.”



The efforts of the St. Paul detachment proved their worth on February 26th, when the 58-foot fishing vessel *Neptune 1* suffered an engine failure and began drifting towards Umnak Island. The vessel ran aground in the middle of the night, at which point the crew abandoned ship and swam to the sparsely-populated island. An HH-60J launched from the island and rescued the crew, delivering them safely to Unalaska. Additionally, the aircrews conducted three medical evacuations of injured fishermen, airlifting them from their vessels and transporting them to hospitals.



In addition to their work in support of the aircrews, the airfield crew was also called upon to support the community of permanent residents of St. Paul. On the night of February 10th, a warehouse belonging to a local fish processing company caught fire and quickly blazed out of control. Located in the center of town, the fire threatened to spread to surrounding buildings, and the local fire department struggled to contain the blaze. Coast Guard personnel, including Foust and Thompson, responded to augment the fire department. Putting their damage-control skills to the test, they manned

hoses shoulder to shoulder with their local counterparts, allowing the fire crews to rest, and worked to keep the fire from spreading. After a 13-hour battle against the flames, the fire was finally declared extinguished. The fire was later determined to be deliberately set.

Firemen Thompson and Foust remained in Alaska until April, when they returned to Boston and SPENCER. Both men appreciated the opportunity to learn from the aircrews they supported. “Working in Alaska was an incredible experience and I got to meet some awesome people,” said Thompson. “The SAR operations up there are some of the most challenging in the service. I hope to have the opportunity to work in that area again in my career.” Foust agreed, stating that “getting to work with the rescue swimmers from Kodiak gave me a lot of insight into what I can expect to experience in the future. I learned a lot from them and I’m definitely better prepared for the airman program and A-School after this assignment.”

