

Guarding the Launch

Story by PA2 Judy L. Silverstein, Rescue 21 Project

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. -- For 25 years, the Coast Guard has provided waterborne security for NASA space shuttle operations.

“Shuttle security and related operations are basically a contingency operation,” said Coast Guard Reservist Mark Carstens, a first class petty officer who recently assumed the role as Space Transportation Systems Coordinator at Station Canaveral, Fla. While reservists are often the backbone of the operation, its complexity requires a skillful blend of active duty and auxiliary members.

“Each launch kind of has its own unique character ... it’s like a microcosm of every Coast Guard evolution,” said Food Service Specialist James Smith, who has worked every shuttle launch since its inception. In the early days, when reservists camped out on floors, Smith prepared meals, earning him the moniker, “high fryin’ cook.” Now he provides logistics acumen and a depth of knowledge about people and platforms.



Photo courtesy of NASA.

STS-115, which saw delays ranging from a rare launch pad lightning strike to Tropical Storm Ernesto, was a reflection of past launches whose unpredictable challenges stretched into weeks of scheduling tailspins. Over the years, waterside shuttle security has morphed into a modern-day juggling routine requiring a well-choreographed system of details that appears seamless.

That appearance is due in part to a quarter century of process refinement and adaptability, the hallmark of Coast Guard response, said retired Rear Adm. G. Robert Merrilees, who once served as the senior reserve officer for Group Mayport, and was a key figure in establishing the security partnership with NASA. With 38 years of tenure at NASA as a civilian, and 16 launches as a reservist under his belt, Merrilees offers a unique, historical perspective and remains a trusted program advisor. Prior to the launch of STS-115, he escorted a group of officers from Atlantic Area and the Seventh Coast Guard District on a behind-the-scenes tour.

“It’s impressive that for a quarter century, shuttle security has been provided by Coast Guard crews working closely in partnership with NASA,” said Rear Admiral David W. Kunkel.

“Since the beginning, the Coast Guard has supported the Kennedy Space Center securing hundreds of miles of water and riverine areas,” added Mark Borsi, Special Agent in Charge of Security Operations, NASA’s Kennedy Space Center. “Our perspective is the Coast Guard never complains, never whines and always gets the job done,” he said.

Both fixed-wing and rotary wing aviation elements provide a critical element of support to the layered security system involved in shuttle security. Coast Guard vessel crews assist the U.S. Air Force in clearing an area known as the Launch Hazard Zone, prior to launch. Vessel operations include a blend of Coast Guard and auxiliary vessels that intercept and

communicate with recreational and commercial boaters to ensure understanding of the restrictions.

Though enhanced protection of the Kennedy Space Center and its roughly 145,000 acres has increased over the years, the land owned by NASA also encompasses a national wildlife refuge with thick foliage and protected species. That means several Coast Guard missions merge during shuttle operations. These include search and rescue, marine environmental protection and maritime homeland defense.

Back at the office, Carstens scribbled furiously on his notepad as his phone rang non-stop. Eventually, the STS-115 shuttle was cleared for lift-off following a launch pad lightning strike and thorough checks. Suddenly, Tropical Storm Ernesto threatened Florida's east coast. There was serious talk about returning the shuttle to the Orbiter Assembly Building – a six-hour move. The uncertainty threatened to throw the meticulous planning out of whack, but Carstens and his team maintained composure. "It's organized chaos," quipped Smith. "We're pretty much used to it."



Each shuttle launch has a patch unique to its crew. This one, from STS-115, included Coast Guard Capt. Daniel Burbank as a crew member during his second shuttle mission. Image courtesy of NASA

Flexibility is a helpful trait for crews aiming for operational success in security operations, said Carstens. What Carstens can rely on is a team of reservists with a long history of standing the shuttle security watch. Most of it together. Their collaboration with the active duty leadership and local agencies runs like a well-oiled machine, for which NASA leaders express gratitude.

"That kind of history makes it easy to work all this out," said Carstens, quick to credit support from CWO2 Michael J. Locke, commanding officer of Station Port Canaveral.

"Reservists support the active duty component and enable the ability to sustain waterside security prior to, during and also through delayed or postponed shuttle operations," Locke said. "The continuity they have provided for the past 25 years has provided a stable foundation for this ever-changing and critical operation."

According to Carstens, while each shuttle launch is unique, they all have a familiar rhythm and his team is used to unpredictability. Given an ambitious launch schedule, that bodes well for shuttle security operations.

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