

Saving Lives Before Distress

Story by PA3 James P. Judge Jr., D7 Public Affairs

CARIBBEAN SEA -- Thousands of miles away from home the waves gently graced the hull of the 225-foot buoy tender as the crew continued their journey into the heart of the Caribbean Sea to embark on a mission to save lives in a different sort of way than most people are accustomed to seeing.

They didn't pluck helpless people from the water, extinguish a massive boat fire, stop an overloaded smuggling vessel full of migrants or interdict a go-fast carrying tons of cocaine, instead, they went home knowing their hard work and contribution to search and rescue may not be appreciated for years to come. It seems hard to believe a mission of this magnitude could go overlooked, but more than likely it will, and the little coverage it may get will all be soon forgotten.



CARIBBEAN SEA (April 17, 2007) -- Crewmembers from the Coast Guard Cutter Elm, return in the cutter's small boat after finishing the deployment of one of the two new NOAA hurricane detection buoys April 17, 2007. Coast Guard photo by PA3 James Judge Jr.

But then again, why should their efforts be remembered? This crew is most certainly not in it for the glory. Their mission is not as glamorous as jumping out of a helicopter. It's not as action packed as battling rigorous currents and heavy seas in a 47-foot motor lifeboat to go out and save a life.

They don't receive flight pay nor do they receive hazardous duty pay, yet they still risk their lives in what are most decidedly dangerous situations, moving 20 thousand-pound buoys off their decks through the air and into the water, 12 thousand-pound anchors attached to miles of line or moving tens of thousands of pounds of chain across the deck of a less than beautiful, battered, beaten and easily forgotten black-hulled ship. At any moment a wave could strike the ship in the wrong way and send all of that chain flying off the deck uncontrollably, possibly injuring or killing someone.

"There's nothing more comforting than putting a buoy in the water and knowing the average Joe fisherman will be able to find his way home safely at night by using that buoy," said Petty Officer 2nd Class Patrick J. Lyons, a boatswains mate stationed onboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Elm*.

Since last years release of Hollywood's blockbuster motion picture, *The Guardian*, crews of the black-hull fleet find themselves being misunderstood by people who ask them just what they do. Not thinking twice, their usual reply is, "I'm in the Coast Guard." Almost

automatically this depiction of a rescue swimmer jumping from a helicopter into cold dark seas races into the person's mind who just asked the question. Then, just as suddenly, the intrigue and mystique quickly vanish and it somehow loses its luster when Coasties explain they work on buoys and other aids to navigation.

Somehow, even in *The Guardian*, this misunderstood group of men and women can't escape the butt of a bad joke when Ashton Kutcher's character cracks a joke in reference to an opening on his buoy tender.

Without aids to navigation how would cargo ships, cruise liners, yachts and the general boating public safely navigate through the ocean's little masquerade between what appears safe on the surface and what indeed actually lingers below?

It is this small group of young men and women who work together everyday to risk their lives on the perilous seas to keep America's waterways marked and guiding the public from one point to another by maintaining aids to navigation.

"Maintaining aids to navigation is one of the Coast Guard's most dangerous missions, but it's also one of the Coast Guard's most rewarding," said Lyons.

During the *Elm's* last mission they faced a variety of struggles. Their mission was to deliver to Poseidon's stomping grounds the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's new hurricane-detection buoys in hopes of preventing another tragedy such as Hurricane Katrina by providing more advanced and accurate warnings.

The new buoys measure wind, waves, barometric pressure and air and sea temperatures to determine hurricane formation or dissipation, extent of wind circulation, maximum intensity and center location and then relay the information gathered to

meteorologists at the National Weather Service, which will help improve forecasting of these dangerous storms, said NOAA spokeswoman Theresa Eisenman.

"The location of these buoys fills an important gap between coastal buoys and the six hurricane buoys deployed in the spring of 2005," said Eisenman. "These will provide year-round data, but are more robust than the typical weather buoy."



CARIBBEAN SEA -- Coast Guard Seaman Matthew Huntingford, a deck force member onboard the Coast Guard Cutter Elm, pulls a line tight around a cleat on one of the new NOAA buoys as the crew makes preparations to deploy the buoy in 16,000-feet of water in the Caribbean Sea April 17, 2007. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 James P. Judge Jr.

The reason for a more robust, tougher buoy, is simply because of the violent weather conditions these buoys will be subjected to.

But before the *Elm* could actually pick up these buoys and deploy them, things would take an unexpected turn. The ship suffered a massive casualty to one of its main diesel engines. A blown turbo required immediate repairs.

After the crew of the *Elm* ordered the \$68,000 replacement, it was sent to the wrong place. This happened again before they actually received the part in Miami.

By the time the crew finally received the new turbo and replaced the damaged one, 12 days had gone by, The day they actually resumed their mission, was the day they should have been preparing to pull into their home port of Atlantic Beach, N.C.



CARIBBEAN SEA -- Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class, Patrick Lyons, the buoy deck supervisor onboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Elm* gives a signal to the crane operator April 12, 2007. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 James P. Judge Jr.

With the added stress and uncertainty of what type of schedule lay ahead, the *Elm's* took to the briny deep and held strong. Humble servants to a salty society, they ventured on.

Before the final mooring line left the pier, last minute phone calls were placed to tell loved ones they would be missed and how they longed for the day they should meet again.

After a brief stop in San Juan, Puerto Rico to embark NOAA technicians as well as the buoys, the mission was finally ready to be undertaken.

Approximately 150 miles northeast of Puerto Rico, the ship came to all stop as the warm golden rays of sun showed through the early morning skies.

Besides the rumble of the engines, all was peaceful and quiet until a loud “Now, set the ATON detail, set the ATON detail” echoed over the ship’s intercom.

When it comes to aids to navigation and the ATON detail, this boat of extremely experienced professionals trusts only one person to be in charge of the buoy-deck and that just happens to be Lyons.

The self-proclaimed, greatest buoy-deck supervisor ever, may not seem humble but his experience and professional knowledge certainly support his confident attitude.

The proud Boston Southie has around 20, green three leaf clover stickers on his scratched-up white hard hat for each underway deployment since his arrival.

While executing his responsibility of buoy deck supervisor, he has a certain charisma and a commanding presence with the way he screams out commands and orders the deck hands around.

“It’s not yelling as in angry yelling, but it’s yelling so I can be heard,” said Lyons, “It can be extremely dangerous out there, with an 18,000-pound buoy hanging a few feet directly above your head, all of the rigging, line and chain, there are plenty of things that could go wrong and instantly take someone to the bottom of Davy Jones’ locker.”

For Lyons, the father of a 5-year old boy, this is nothing new. The aids to navigation veteran has been stationed at two other ATON units. For four years before being stationed aboard the *Elm* he was assigned to Aids to Navigation Team Woods Hole, Mass., and for three and a half years before that he was stationed onboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Abbie Burgess*, home-ported in Rockland, Maine.

When asked how long he plans on sticking with aids to navigation, Lyons simply smiled, and said, “forever, there is nothing else I’d rather do.”



CARIBBEAN SEA - A NOAA technician welds the shackle that connects the chain to the anchor of the buoy before it is lowered 16,000 feet to the bottom of the ocean April 17, 2007. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 James P. Judge Jr.

USCG