

Sector Jacksonville Stays Semper

Story by PA2 Bobby Nash, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

The average South-Florida resident probably wouldn't think twice upon hearing that the Coast Guard was on the search for six missing migrants from the Dominican Republic in the water. And why not? Illegal migrant interdiction is a large part of what many Coast Guard units in South Florida do.

But this time, it wasn't South Florida residents that were reading about the Coast Guard's effort to enforce federal law; it was the residents of the First Coast.

The first report to Sector Jacksonville came from the St. Johns River Pilots at 8:15 p.m. Jan 6. The river pilots stated that they heard someone calling for help behind their office on the river and went out to investigate. Luckily for the two men, the river pilots were able to launch a boat and pull the two men out of the cold water.

According to the rescued migrants, they jumped from the Patriarch and Chicago Bridge, a U.S. flagged tug and barge, with two other migrants, and they never made it to shore. According to the two rescued men, they jumped because they thought they saw the lights of the restaurant. The two men were taken to Baptist Beaches Medical Center, in Jacksonville Beach, Fla., where they were treated for hypothermia and cuts. They were then turned over to Customs and Border Protection.

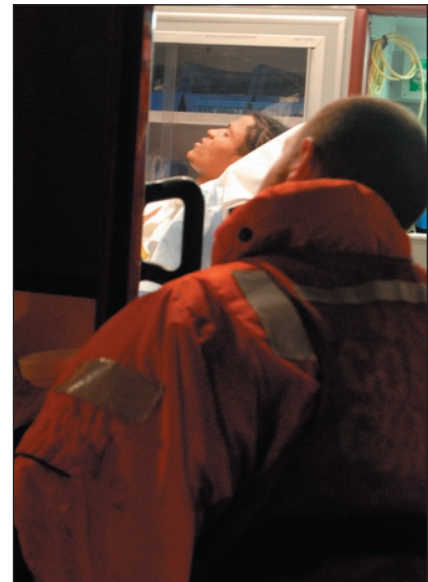
Coast Guard crews began searching for the two missing migrants along with a rescue boat crew from Jacksonville Fire-Rescue. The search efforts were even more crucial because of the low water temperatures and the migrant's lack of flotation or survival gear. It would be difficult for them to stay afloat and conscious for long in the 50 degree water.

Rescue crews didn't find any sign of the missing migrants after extensive searches in the St. Johns River and surrounding areas. Rescue crews search efforts were also hampered by the heavy fog that night.

Visibility eventually became so low that search efforts had to be stopped until the fog lifted the next morning.

Meanwhile, a CBP law enforcement team boarded the Patriarch and Chicago Bridge and discovered two additional illegal migrants hiding aboard the vessel Jan. 6.

"We've taken the four men into custody, and we will attempt to identify them. We will ascertain whether or not they have a criminal history, and then we'll decide if we'll return them to their



A member of the Coast Guard boat crew talks with two migrants that were rescued at the mouth of the St. Johns River, Fla. The two migrants were apparently stowaways aboard the barge Chicago Bridge being pushed by the tug Patriarch. According to the rescued migrants, they jumped from the Chicago Bridge with two other migrants, and they never made it to shore. (Coast Guard photo by PAC Donnie Brzuska, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.)

home country or prosecute them here in the United States,” said Jennifer Bradshaw, from Customs and Border Protection.

The search resumed the morning of Jan. 7. One of the missing migrants was found near the beach on Naval Station Mayport, Fla., and detained by base security. The man was also treated for hypothermia at Baptist Beaches Medical Center and turned over to CBP.

After 17-hours of searching, the Coast Guard suspended its search for the sixth and final migrant. The 17-hour search included seven agencies conducting shore and water side searches. The search area ranged from Nassau Sound, Fla., to Jacksonville Beach, Fla., and the Dane’s Point Bridge near the Port of Jacksonville to the mouth of the jetties of the St. Johns River.

“I have suspended the search (for the remaining migrant) because I don’t believe that someone could spend this entire time in the water and survive,” said Capt. Paul Thomas, commanding officer of Coast Guard Sector Jacksonville.

Rescue crews from the Navy, Jacksonville Sheriff’s Office, Jacksonville Fire-Rescue, Naval Station Mayport Security, Huguenot and Hannah Park personnel, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and Coast Guard all participated in the search.

The tug and barge’s last port of call was Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic.

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