

Rotating Tradition

Story and Photos by PAC Donnie Brzuska, PADET Jacksonville, Fla.

Nowhere is tradition more important and more relevant in the Coast Guard than aboard the medium endurance cutters that make up the Coast Guard's deepwater fleet.

Coast Guard crews aboard these ships still rise in the morning to the sound of a boatswain's pipe, still "lay before the mast" and salute the American flag every time they cross the brow of their ship.

One of the most lasting and prominent traditions is the ownership and commitment a cutterman has to the ship. That tradition is being tested by a new multi-crewing initiative aimed at improving the operational readiness of an aging Coast Guard fleet. Multi-crewing is a tough pill for some cuttermen to swallow because it parts the line from the traditional one-crew, one-ship approach. The multi-crewing concept means that more than one crew will operate one cutter.



Seaman Chad Brown steers the 210-foot Vigilant from Port Canaveral just off the Florida coast. The crew is preparing for a two-month patrol in the Florida Straights conducting immigration, counter drug, and search and rescue operations.



"We ingrain in our people that crews should love their ship and take ownership of their cutter," said

Cmdr. Samuel Walker, commanding officer Coast Guard Cutter Decisive. "This is a huge deviation in the culture we've bred into our cutter crews."

The crew of the cutters Vigilant from Port Canaveral, Fla., and Decisive from Pascagoula, Miss., recently tested the concept of multi-crewing a medium endurance cutter. They are participating in the effort because the Coast Guard's medium endurance reliance class cutters are currently going through a process known as the Mission Effectiveness Project.

Petty Officer 3rd Class Thomas Miller leads his fire fighting team into the machinery space aboard the Vigilant from Port Canaveral. Miller and his team are participating in a shakedown of the cutter and honing necessary shipboard skills in damage control, fire fighting, general quarters and flight operations.



Chief Petty Officer David Kohn serves food to hungry crewmembers aboard the Vigilant. Even though Kohn and his cooks were participating in a day of rigorous drills and training exercises off the Florida coast, they were still able to pull together a meal for the 75-person crew.

The goal of MEP is to extend the life span and habitability of reliance class cutters and 110-foot patrol boats until new cutters are built as part of the Deepwater Project. Medium endurance cutters and patrol boats are undergoing long-term dry dock periods (sometimes as long as six months) to replace hull plating, tanks, piping, and electrical wiring, as well as renewing decks, living quarters and engineering systems.

Coast Guard leaders are rotating crews via multi-crewing on cutters to minimize lost operational hours during extended dry dock periods as a result of the MEP.

“If we didn’t do this, the guys would be laid up in a shipyard for six months with the ship. By sharing a ship, we can keep our shipboard skills sharpened,” said Walker. “The down time between our patrols also allows us to take leave and focus on training.”

While multi-crewing deviates from the norm, commanding officers of the units participating are seizing the opportunity to focus on their crews’ well being during down times when they don’t have a ship. The crew of the Decisive hasn’t been in port for a full holiday season in three years. Walker and the Decisive’s command cadre ensured the crew of Decisive could “maximize” their ability to take leave.

“We had 15 members who had or were in jeopardy of losing leave. This gave them the opportunity to reduce their leave balances to a manageable level without affecting our unit’s operational commitments,” said Lt. Cmdr. Will Budovec, executive officer of the Decisive.

The crew of Decisive also spent time focusing on important training, sending members to “C” schools and allowing newer Coast Guard members opportunities to be temporarily assigned to other Coast Guard units nationwide.

According to Budovec, 24 out of 75 crewmembers attended “C” schools, and 19 Coast Guard units either hosted or received support from 54 crewmembers of Decisive during their down time.

Aside from the obvious personnel benefits multi-crewing has during extended dry dock periods, the crews of Decisive and Vigilant proved the operational effectiveness of the concept. The Decisive crew aboard Vigilant had a successful patrol caring for approximately 300 migrants, interdicting several migrant vessels and assisting a disabled Dominican Republic fishing vessel.

Petty Officer 1st Class Marvin Lamb mans a 50-caliber machine gun aboard the Vigilant as part of the training preparations the crew is conducting prior to their upcoming patrol throughout the Florida Straights.



“Multi-crewing is a perfect demonstration of both the professional dedication and flexibility of Coast Guard cutter crews,” Walker said. “Both crews took on the challenge in short order and proved they could make it work.”

Multi-crewing medium endurance and 110-foot cutters is only a temporary plan, but it may become the norm when new Deepwater cutters begin to arrive in the fleet with the Coast Guard’s Crew Rotation Concept. The new cutters would have an operational tempo of more than 230 days at sea each year. This patrol schedule would be an unacceptably high burden for the one-crew, one-ship approach.

Therefore, Coast Guard leaders are suggesting a ratio of three cutters to four operational cutter crews to achieve the desired balance.

“The lessons from the Coast Guard’s Mission Effectiveness Project provide a real-world perspective on the proposed Crew Rotation Concept for the new Deepwater cutters, and may lay the ground work for Coast Guard cutter crews in the future,” said Walker.

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