The U.S. Coast Guard faced a number of significant events in 2019—from a 35-day government shutdown that saw active, reserve, civilian, and retired members missing a payday for the first time in the service’s history, to interdicting semisubmersibles, to dramatic search-and-rescue cases in response to Hurricane Dorian, to enhanced operations in the Indo-Pacific and Oceania.

In addition, in spring 2019, Commandant Admiral Karl Schultz indicated in the annual State of the Coast Guard address that the service was reaching a “tipping point” regarding readiness. “In a modestly funded organization like the Coast Guard, this has resulted in deferred maintenance, a strained and undersized workforce, and antiquated information systems,” he said. “And we continue to face an extensive shore infrastructure backlog that now exceeds $1.7 billion. That’s particularly problematic for an organization with facilities spread far and wide across the nation.”

Schultz, who previously served as Atlantic Area Commander, added, “Clearly, I don’t think there is a better investment of a federal taxpayer dollar than the Coast Guard. We’re a modestly funded organization, and we do good things with those dollars.”

**LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Throughout 2019, the Coast Guard continued to interdict illegal narcotics, migrants, and illegal fishing. But March through July was an especially busy period stopping narcotraffickers.

In April, the USCGC *Waesche* (WMSL-751) offloaded a significant amount of cocaine interdicted within the maritime global commons off the eastern Pacific Ocean from February to late March.

“The offload that you see behind me, the bales of cocaine, represents a successful example of the cycle of justice,” noted Rear Admiral Nathan Moore, who at the time was deputy commander of Coast Guard Pacific.

Then on 19 June, a Coast Guard law enforcement detachment boarding team deployed from the USCGC *Munro* (WMSL-755), under the command of Captain Jim Estramonte, interdicted a 40-foot self-propelled semisubmersible in the eastern Pacific Ocean carrying 17,000 pounds of cocaine valued at $232 million. The video clip of the stop—showing Coast Guardsmen banging on the hatch—made the nightly news on several national TV outlets. The interdiction also was picked by NBC *Today* host Willie Geist as the #4 “Highs” for 2019.

“This is as satisfying as it gets. It’s the largest [bust] in the Coast Guard since 2015,” Captain Estramonte told ABC News. “The crew is ecstatic, everyone plays a part in it, not just the folks on deck doing the boarding. . . . It was an all-hands-on-deck evolution.”

In May through July the cutter fleet had 14 other interdictions totaling 39,000 pounds of cocaine and 933 pounds of
In 2019, the Coast Guard met a number of challenges and continued to respond where and when needed. As Commandant Admiral Karl Schultz noted, "We’re a modestly funded organization, and we do good things with those dollars."
marijuana, with an estimated value of $569 million.

As the year came to a close, the Coast Guard did not slow down. The USCGC Bertholf (WMSL-750) alone conducted three busts totaling 5,851 pounds of cocaine valued at more than $100 million.

HURRICANE RESPONSE & SEARCH AND RESCUE

In September, the service was deeply involved in both the international and national response to Hurricane Dorian, as the storm ravaged the Bahamas and came ashore in South and North Carolina.

Dorian formed on 24 August 2019 and gradually strengthened, becoming a hurricane on 28 August. A period of rapid intensification followed. On 31 August, the storm became a Category 4 hurricane, growing less than a day later to Category 5—with top sustained winds of 185 mph—and inflicting $3.4 billion in damages in the Bahamas.

The Coast Guard response was immediate. By 2 September the service had fully completed a 105-day deployment to the Bahamas, and the service also played a key role in rescuing people on inland waterways. Last March, Coast Guard Station Marblehead, Ohio, received word that up to 100 ice fishermen were stranded on an ice floe near Catawba Island in western Lake Erie. The service launched both air and surface assets, augmented by local fire and emergency medical services and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. Coast Guard Station Marblehead established an extraction point and command post on Catawba Island with the Sandusky Fire Department so people could be triaged. Forty-six fishermen were rescued by the combined efforts of the two Air Station Detroit MH-65 Dolphin helicopters and the combined flotilla of first responder and Coast Guard small boats. An estimated 100 others were “self-rescued,” as many had fallen in the icy water and swam to safety.

HIGH LATITUDES

With interest in the Arctic and Antarctica continuing to grow, the icebreaker USCGC Polar Star (WAGB-10) successfully completed a 105-day deployment to Antarctica in support of Operation Deep Freeze. “This year marks the 63rd iteration of the annual operation,” noted Coast Guard Pacific Area Commander Vice Admiral Linda Fagan. “The Polar Star crew departed Seattle on November 27 for their sixth deployment in as many years and traveled 11,200 nautical miles to Antarctica.”

The 43-year-old cutter conducts the annual joint military mission to support the National Science Foundation, the lead agency for the U.S. Antarctic Program. This year, the Polar Star crushed through 6–10-foot ice, breaking a channel to allow the M/V Ocean Giant to get 10 million pounds of vital supplies to the McMurdo station.

During her deployment, the Polar Star’s garbage incinerator room caught fire about 650 miles north of McMurdo Sound. The crew responded quickly, the fire was extinguished, and there were no injuries, but maintaining this national resource is a challenge.

Every year after spending the Southern Hemisphere summer breaking ice near Antarctica, the Polar Star returns to dry dock to complete critical maintenance and repairs in preparation for the next Operation Deep Freeze mission. There have been significant mechanical issues over the past few years, and her annual deployment is able to continue only through the efforts of her experienced and dedicated engineering department.

Currently, the Coast Guard maintains just two icebreakers, the USCGC Healy (WAGB-20), a medium icebreaker designed primarily for scientific endeavor, and the Polar Star, a heavy icebreaker. If a catastrophic event such as an engine casualty were to happen to either ship near Antarctica, the service would be left without a self-rescue capability. This is a significant issue, as the ability to respond in an emergency with self-rescue, even at the international level, is almost nonexistent.

Fortunately, the fiscal year 2019 Homeland Security Appropriations Bill allocated $655 million to begin construction of the first heavy class Polar Security Cutter (PSC), and an additional $20 million was provided for the long lead
time material to support construction of a second PSC. The design and construction contract for the lead ship was awarded in April to VT Halter Marine in Pascagoula, Mississippi.

According to the Pacific Area Facebook page, “The Coast Guard . . . is seeking to increase its ice breaking fleet with six new polar icebreakers in order to ensure continued national presence and access to the Polar Regions.”

Russia currently operates more than 50 icebreakers, several of which are nuclear powered. The Russian Navy has one dedicated icebreaker, the Ilya Murmansk, and in October, the Russian government launched its first ice-rated warship, the Ivan Papanin. Published reports indicate it should be commissioned between 2022 and 2023.

**INTERNATIONAL & DOD OPS**

The Coast Guard continued operating with the U.S. Navy as part of the National Fleet. The Bertholf, commanded by Captain John Driscoll and under the tactical command of Seventh Fleet, deployed to the East China Sea to enforce U.N. Security Council economic sanctions on North Korea aimed at deterring its nuclear weapons development. The Bertholf worked with the USS Curtis Wilbur (DDG-54), patrolling the strategically significant waters between Taiwan and mainland China.

“The United States is a Pacific nation,” noted Vice Admiral Fagan. “We have deep and long-standing ties with our partners in the region, and more importantly, we share a strong commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific, governed by a rules-based international system that promotes peace, security, prosperity and sovereignty of all nations.”

**THE CHALLENGE OF TALENT MANAGEMENT**

By Lieutenant Donnie Brzuska, U.S. Coast Guard

All of this helps the Coast Guard tap into broader candidate pools to apply a full range of experiences, education, and backgrounds to its missions. However, retaining a highly technical workforce requires more than policy changes. Admiral Schultz has consistently advocated for improvements to the service’s information technology framework, shore infrastructure, and personnel readiness, which has resulted in key funding increases in the Coast Guard operations and support budget.

A modern Coast Guard requires a modern workforce, and the service’s leaders are attacking this challenge from every angle and seizing every opportunity to create the Coast Guard of the future.

**LIEUTENANT BRZUSKA**, a nearly 20-year veteran of the U.S. Coast Guard, currently serves on the Commandant’s Advisory Group. He is a proud former chief petty officer and chief warrant officer. He specializes in public affairs, digital media, and strategic communication.
In addition, the USCGC Stratton (WMSL-752), under the command of Captain Bob Little, deployed to the Seventh Fleet area of responsibility for six months, operating with the Wasp Expeditionary Strike Group.

The Stratton participated in Talisman Saber 2019 with the Australian military off the northern coast of that country. She also participated with several Navy elements in maritime training activities with Malaysia and exercised with New Zealand and Indonesia. One unique international engagement on this deployment occurred during a port call to Chennai, India, when the cutter’s crew conducted both shoreside and underway training with the Indian Navy, including simulated boardings.

In a 10 June article on Bloomberg, Philip Heijmans and Glen Carey noted the increased presence of the Coast Guard in the Seventh Fleet area of responsibility and the strategic ramifications:

The U.S. Navy has already put the American coast guard vessels to work, with the Bertholf joining a transit through the Taiwan Strait in March. Last month, the U.S. Coast Guard staged a joint exercise with two Philippine vessels in Chinese-claimed waters, reportedly sailing past two Chinese ships in the process.

“The Coast Guard’s areas of responsibility have grown over the last couple of decades,” said Paul Sullivan, a security expert at Georgetown University’s Center for Security Studies. “It looks like they are also being asked to do more to protect sea lanes and more in the Western Pacific as tensions mount with China.”

The USCGC Thetis (WMEC-910), homeported in Key West, Florida, deployed to Africa for 90 days in 2019. Under the command of Commander Randall Chong, the cutter carried out the living marine resource mission, antipiracy operations, and even search and rescue, rescuing two fishermen.

The Thetis made port calls in Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and São Tomé and Principe. In Nigeria, she operated with the Nigerian frigate Thunder, the former Coast Guard cutter Chase, which was transferred to Nigeria in 2011.

In 2019, the Coast Guard continued to transfer cutters to foreign governments. For example, two former Island-class patrol boats, the Cushing (WPB-1321) and Drummond (WPB-1323), were transferred to the Ukrainian Navy and renamed Sloviansk and Starybilsk, respectively.

SHIPBUILDING & OVERHAULS

The service took delivery of the eighth National Security Cutter, the Midgett (WMSL-757), built by Huntington Ingalls Industries, in 2019. The ninth unit, the USCGC Stone (WMSL-758) is under construction and set to deliver before the end of the 2020.

In addition, the 140-foot icebreaking tug Mobile Bay (WTGB-103) departed the Coast Guard Yard in Baltimore, Maryland, on 1 October following completion of a major service life extension project (SLEP). The Mobile Bay is the eighth in this class to complete SLEP, designed to restore mission readiness and extend service life by 15 years. Work includes repair of corroded and damaged hull plating, structural refurbishment, and replacement of unsupportable or maintenance-intensive equipment.

The ninth and final tug to undergo SLEP, the Biscayne Bay (WTGB-104), currently is at the Coast Guard Yard and is scheduled to return to the fleet in summer 2020.

The Mobile Bay and her sisters are the workhorses of the winter icebreaking fleet on the Great Lakes and in the Northeast, where they clear frozen channels for vessels navigating in support of domestic commerce. They can break up to 20-inch-thick ice while making way and up to 3 feet thick by ramming. The Bay-class tugs were commissioned between 1978 and 1988, and most hulls were operating well beyond their planned 30-year service life when the SLEP project started.

The SLEP is being conducted exclusively at the Coast Guard Yard in Baltimore. It is the service’s only organic shipyard and is particularly proficient at major renovations and class-wide upgrades—having demonstrated its value during previous Mission Effectiveness Projects, which replaced aging systems on 110-foot, 210-foot, and 270-foot ships to extend their service lives until replaced by fast response and offshore
patrol cutters. The first tug to undergo SLEP was scheduled for 12 months; however, efficiencies allowed scheduling two per year as the project matured.

Throughout 2019, the Coast Guard continued to commission new Sentinel-class fast response cutters (FRCs). The class is named for distinguished enlisted Coast Guard members. In October, at the service’s Training Center in Cape May, New Jersey, the USCGC Angela McShan (WPC-1135)—named after the first African American woman in the service to be promoted to master chief petty officer—was commissioned.

The service also announced the names for FRC hulls 55–64, all leaders, trailblazers, and heroes of the Coast Guard, including recipients of the Gold Lifesaving Medal, Silver Star Medal, and Medal of Freedom. These new cutters are scheduled for delivery starting in 2023.

As 2020 began, the Coast Guard commissioned the 36th FRC, the USCGC Daniel Tarr (WPC-1136), in Galveston, Texas. Tarr was one of the first four coxswains and first enlisted members to receive the Silver Star. It was awarded for his efforts in landing Marines at the invasion of Tulagi in the Solomon Islands during World War II.

OUTREACH & PERSONNEL

Upholding a 20-year tradition, the USCGC Mackinaw (WLB-30) was converted into the Chicago Christmas Ship during a Chicago port visit in early December. The Mackinaw crew delivered 1,200 Christmas trees for underprivileged families.

At a 10 December Navy League “Special Topics Breakfast,” Admiral Schultz noted some future planning for the service’s FRCs. Three of these highly versatile vessels will be stationed in Guam, and four others are slated to go to the Arabian Gulf to the Coast Guard’s Patrol Forces Southwest Asia. Currently, six Island-class 110-foot patrol boats are forward deployed. Schultz noted the first two FRCs will arrive in the Middle East in 2021.

Personnel issues also got some national attention in 2019. The service updated its tattoo policy, including adding provisions for a ring tattoo, as well as its Weight and Body Fat Program. A one-year pilot program provides additional opportunities for active-duty and reserve members to comply with Coast Guard readiness standards, including a new abdominal circumference and fitness test. Recent studies have shown that abdominal circumference is a more accurate measurement of overall health risk than the standard taping methods. In the pilot program, a two-person team will conduct measurements for increased reliability and accuracy.

In addition, the slogan “Every Coastie Is an Innovator” is now a reality. The service opened a new Innovation Lab at its headquarters featuring off-network computers, 3D printers, and other resources to support creative problem solving. The facility will be a resource for creativity, collaboration, and brainstorming.

The last World War II Coast Guard prisoner of war was laid to rest. Lieutenant James Crotty was stationed in the Philippines in 1941 and was taken prisoner. He died in July 1942 and was buried in a mass grave with other service members. On 19 September 2019 his remains were identified and returned home. He was laid to rest in Buffalo, New York, on 2 November.4


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