

## Whither goes the U.S. Coast Guard?

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As the United States Coast Guard prepares to celebrate the 200th anniversary of its founding, it becomes increasingly clear that this venerable service is suffering from an identity crisis. Whither goes the Coast Guard has been the subject of "studies" and articles for the past decade.

In the early 1980's the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on the Coast Guard and Navigation, chaired by Congressman Gerry Studds (D) of Massachusetts, conducted a series of hearings on the service and published the much heralded report: *Semi Paratus* [1].

This report, more than any of those to follow, set the tone for the decade. The study suggested that the Coast Guard should "give its highest priority to the performance of its at-sea operational missions ... to improving and modernizing aids to navigation." To support these high priority missions the Committee stressed the need "to perform essential training, particularly in law enforcement, to conduct a vigorous program of research and development, and to ensure the effective routine maintenance of its cutters, aircraft, and shoreside facilities."

The Committee recommended that the Coast Guard "be relieved of any responsibilities which can be fulfilled with equal or greater competence and efficiency by other federal agencies, by state or local government, or by the **private sector**." Responsibilities of which Coast Guard could be relieved, according to the Committee, included icebreaking, towing and salvage, bridge administration, and the Commercial Vessel Safety Program.

In March 1982 the Department of Transportation (DOT) published a report titled *Coast Guard Roles and Missions* [2]. This study had been requested by the House Appropriations Committee (Committee Report 96-1193), with the expressed hope "that this review will result in something more comprehensive than a simple reaffirmation of all the Coast Guard's existing tasks."

The study, which began in 1981, focused on determining "which Coast Guard functions: (a) might be eliminated as no longer justified, or might be reduced in scope; (b) might better be done by private sector organizations (by contract or otherwise), public authorities, local or state governments, or other Federal agencies; (c) should be done by the Federal Government and could be best assigned to the Coast Guard; and, (d) are wartime and peacetime activities."

In fact the *Roles and Missions* study broke little fresh ground, merely reviewing each of the Coast Guard's thirteen identifiable programs, drawing some conclusions, and making recommendations for future program direction.

In January 1983 the National Advisory Committee on Oceans and Atmosphere (NACOA) published *A Special Report to the President and the Congress, U.S. Coast Guard: Status, Problems, and Potential* [3]. This report reviewed all the previous studies: by the General Accounting Office (GAO) [4], by the House [1] and Senate [5], and by the Administration [2], as well as articles published in the October 1980 issue of *Proceedings* of the U.S. Naval Institute

[6]. Like the studies before, NACOA reviewed the Coast Guard's existing missions (in this case fourteen, since Port and Environmental Safety, and Marine Environmental Response were divided into two separate missions), and made recommendations as to future program direction.

These three reports, along with those of the GAO and the Senate, formed the foundation for what has become a decade long-debate on the future of the Coast Guard. Throughout this period there has been a steady stream of articles in *Proceedings* and elsewhere analyzing and discussing the missions and future organization of the Coast Guard. Some have proposed that the Coast Guard be transferred to the Department of Defense (DOD), others to the Justice Department, and still others have suggested the creation of a new Maritime Administration within DOT. This proposal would merge the Coast Guard with other maritime related functions belonging to the Department of Commerce, such as elements of the National Weather Service(NWS)and National Ocean Service(NOS).

Recent articles in *The New Yorker*, [7] *Proceedings*, [8] and *The Bulletin* of the United States Coast Guard Academy Alumni Association have all to one degree or another posed the question set forth by Commander Craig P. Coy in his *Bulletin* article: "Who needs the Coast Guard Anyway?" [9].

Tony Gibbs in his comprehensive article in *The New Yorker*, provides a broad view of the Coast Guard, its traditional mission of search and rescue, its recent emphasis on drug interdiction, and its ever present budget woes.

Gibbs suggests, and many others, including Coast Guardsmen themselves confirm, that the Coast 'Guard, under the leadership of Admiral Paul A. Yost – with an eye to obtaining Administration support and DOD dollars – focused almost exclusively "on military preparedness and winning the war on drugs." Admiral Yost "lumps the remaining Coast Guard functions under the heading of safety of life at sea." [7]

In the last decade the Coast Guard was transformed from "lifesavers" to "law enforcers," with the major focus on increasing the Coast Guard's role in the "war on drugs" and its military functions as they relate to the newly created Maritime Defense Zones.

Admiral Yost recognized that there is a conflict between his view of the Coast Guardsman's military role as "a hard professional killer" [7] and that of "lifesaver." He understood that the safety of life at sea functions is "where my (Yost speaks of the Coast Guard in the first person) reputation is . . . We're experts at search and rescue, at putting in buoys and running lighthouses. If I lose that expertise – that is where I live, where my roots are – then the rest of it goes glimmering." [7]

Some analysts expect that DOD budgets will continue to shrink and that Coast Guard budget allocations for Maritime Defense will decline. Further, as Lieutenant Christopher A. Able suggests in his article in *Proceedings*, "The war on drugs is going to end. Nothing lasts forever. Ultimately, the U.S. government will abandon its enforcement-oriented campaign against illegal narcotics use in favor of an alternative strategy focused on education and treatment." [8] Given

these expected changes in priorities, what is the role of the Coast Guard?

A major part of the Coast Guard's continuing problem both with its identity and consequently with funding ("The Coast Guard just doesn't have a constituency here." [7]), is that it continues to define itself in terms of its "roles and missions" rather than its **purpose**.

In all the years of its existence, and particularly since the end of the World War II – by which time most of its current component pieces were assembled – there has been no attempt to define the **purpose** of the Coast Guard. Many have studied its "roles and missions." But, roles and missions do not a purpose make.

In March 1984, at a hearing on Coast Guard Operations in the First Coast Guard District, held in Boston – Congressman Studds presiding it was suggested (by your author) that without a concise statement of purpose, it is not surprising that the public and internal image of the Coast Guard is constantly changing -- from lifesaver to law enforcer, from regulatory to operational [10].

What was proposed then, and still is needed, is the development of a "robust concept that can survive distortion by political pressures and inter-service rivalries" [11]. Such a concept would define the purpose of the Coast Guard, merging operational and regulatory functions. Establishing such a concept, or purpose, would, it is hoped, bring into perspective organizational shortcomings and operational details -- providing a framework for improvement and change.

The Coast Guard's primary purpose is marine safety, not military, as suggested by Admiral Yost. Unlike other armed services the Coast Guard has many nonmilitary functions, which it is **required** to perform with other public agencies and the public itself. As long as the Coast Guard continues to focus on individual roles and missions rather than on an overall purpose, the service will continue to be pulled and pushed from one "priority" to another, rather than providing steady and consistent marine safety services to the nation.

The purpose or concept that best describes the Coast Guard is: **Protection**. Protection encompasses all the Coast Guard's major regulatory and operational roles: Marine Safety, Enforcement of Laws and Treaties, and Military Readiness. The primary mission of the military role is protection of ports and waterways and combat Search and Rescue.

Most Coast Guard protection functions fall within the broad category of Marine Safety. For practical purposes the Coast Guard's purpose could be defined as – **Marine Safety: protection of life and property at sea**. Marine Safety programs protect lives, property, and the environment through prevention – Commercial and Recreational Vessel Safety programs, Aids to Navigation, Domestic Ice Breaking Operations, Port/Waterways and Environmental Safety and Security. Marine Safety also has an operational or response component in Search and Rescue, Marine Environmental Response, and Enforcement of Laws and Treaties.

If we define the Coast Guard as the nation's primary Marine Safety organization, it follows that we will emphasize its role in these areas rather than de-emphasize or privatize

them. Let us look at each of these Marine Safety and Protection functions as a public safety role, not unlike that of other public safety organizations such as police and fire departments, but in the context of a service organization.

Before examining the service's individual functions, we should focus on the importance of training in the execution of public safety functions. Most if not all public safety training programs rely on military style training to develop and instill quick response to command and leadership. This need not mean that public safety officers are warriors. Likewise, the Coast Guard is not – in the classic sense – a military (warrior) organization, as suggested by Admiral Yost's term "professional killers" [7]. Public safety professionals learn discipline, protective and self-protection techniques for legitimate and well-established reasons.

**Aids to Navigation.** Whether it is a day mark in the Intra coastal Waterway (ICW) or a sophisticated satellite orbiting the globe, each clearly has as its sole purpose the safe navigation of vessels. And this marine safety function – the construction and maintenance of lighthouses and other aids – is the oldest governmental service in the country, having been established by the First Congress on 7 August 1789. While we consider the establishment of the Revenue Cutter Service in 1790 as the historical beginning of the Coast Guard, in reality the very pedestrian function of providing navigational aids for mariners, while not transferred to the Coast Guard until 1939, was the nation's first commitment to maritime safety.

**Commercial and Recreational Vessel Safety** programs trace their origin to the Steamboat Inspection Service, which was established in 1838 to regulate the safety of the growing number of steam-propelled vessels plying U.S. waters, particularly the Western Rivers. As with the development of most vessel safety statutes and regulations, the Steamboat Inspection Service was created by Congress in reaction to a series of major disasters. It was designed "to provide for the better security of the lives of passengers on board (of) vessels propelled in whole or in part by steam." [12]

Congress has reacted to major marine casualties ever since, with the continued enactment of progressively more inclusive marine safety statutes. In 1932 the Steamboat Inspection Service and the Bureau of Navigation were merged within the Department of Commerce, into the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection. In 1936, after several major maritime disasters, including the fire on board the Ward Line passenger-vessel *MORRO CASTLE* in 1934 with the loss of 134 lives, the Bureau again was reorganized and professionalized, with the addition of the technical division, and renamed the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation (BMIN).

The vessel safety functions of the BMIN were temporarily transferred to the Coast Guard in February 1942 to better serve the marine safety needs of the war effort. The transfer was made permanent in 1946 by Reorganization plan Number 3. Thus, what began as an effort to provide safety on steam passenger vessels in 1838 evolved – in a little more than one hundred years – into the Coast Guard Office of Merchant Marine Safety, now the Office of Marine Safety,

## Security and Environmental Protection.

Because marine safety statutes tend to be developed in response to specific maritime disasters, inconsistencies and loopholes are inherent in the process. In 1983, in an effort to modernize all marine safety statutes, Congress codified all its past efforts into Subtitle II, Title 46 United States Code (46 U.S.C.), and continues to make modifications regularly. Recently, Congress adopted a measure to provide additional safety for "commercial fishing industry vessels." This new responsibility – along with major concerns regarding both small passenger vessels and domestic and foreign flag cruise vessels – is just one of many pending Coast Guard marine safety initiatives involving commercial vessels.

The Motor Boat Act of 1910 was the beginning of what has developed into a continuing Federal involvement in pleasure (recreational) vessel safety. This effort culminated in the Federal Boating Safety Act of 1971 (now 46 U.S.C., Chapter 43), with continued Coast Guard responsibility for: recreational-vessel factory visits, coordinating national education and enforcement campaigns, and continued modification of regulatory requirements, involving both construction and equipment, for recreational vessels.

**Port and Waterways Protection** had its origins in World War I when it became necessary to provide security for vessels loading cargo, particularly ammunition and explosives, for shipment to the European war zone. The position of Captain of the Port was established and has been a continuous Coast Guard responsibility ever since. [13]

Beyond this, responsibilities of Port and Waterways protection programs have expanded to include protection of the marine environment and surrounding waterfront areas. The Port and Waterways Safety Act, Federal Water Pollution Control Act, and the Hazardous Materials Transportation Act dramatically enhanced Coast Guard responsibilities in this area. Nevertheless, these programs are, as they were originally, primarily responsible for marine safety, security, and protection.

A major component of port safety is the development of vessel traffic systems, which like air traffic control systems, monitor and control the flow of vessels in and out of busy ports. In recent years we have seen the Coast Guard cut back or close vessel traffic systems. The VTS in Valdez, Alaska, for example – site of the major EXXON oil spill -- was scaled back, and requirements for pilotage waived.

The origin of Coast Guard responsibility for **domestic icebreaking** is unclear, but the service had been involved with icebreaking operations for some years before the task was formally assigned by executive order of President Franklin D. Roosevelt in December 1936. As early as 1909 the cutter *ANDROSCOGGIN* had been designed for icebreaking service [13].

Domestic icebreaking is clearly a marine safety operation designed to provide for the safe passage of commercial vessels during cold winter months. Without this service many northern ports and cities would be without safe maritime commerce for many months of the year.

**Marine Safety** has a vital operational responsibility in **Search and Rescue, Marine Environmental Response, and Enforcement of Laws and Treaties.**

**Search and Rescue**, the most recognized Coast Guard function, traces its origins to the establishment of the Massachusetts Humane Society in 1786 and the creation of the Life Saving Service in 1848. Beginning in 1831, Revenue cutters had as a collateral duty, offshore safety patrols. Later cutters were responsible for enforcement of steam vessel requirements.

Modern Coast Guard Search and Rescue operations evolved out of military operations for Air-Land-Sea Rescue and the development of emergency rescue equipment for armed forces and merchant services. The Air-Sea Rescue Agency, the direct predecessor of the Search and Rescue Division, was established as part of the Coast Guard in 1944.

The creation of this specialized agency was a primary recommendation of the Liaison Committee for Emergency Rescue Equipment established by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in May 1943. The Liaison Committee was coordinated by the Navy with technical assistance provided by the Coast Guard. Chief technical aide to the Liaison Committee was a former principal traveling inspector in the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation (BMIN).

Additional members of the Committee included a representative from the Army Air Forces, the Maritime Commission, the Office of Scientific Research and Development, and the Office of Strategic Service (OSS). The Liaison Committee and the Air-Sea Rescue Agency that followed, developed much of the equipment and many of the techniques that are still part of the combined marine safety, search and rescue regulations and operations of the Coast Guard [14].

As Search and Rescue is the emergency response for vessels and persons at sea, **Marine Environmental Response** is the emergency response for assaults on the marine environment. The major example of Coast Guard responsibility in this regard is oil spill containment and cleanup. The recent disaster in Prince William Sound, Alaska, demonstrates the need for constant vigilance and preparation to respond meaningfully to an incident such as the grounding of the *EXXON VALDEZ*.

In the past the Coast Guard maintained three Strike Teams – the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific – whose sole responsibilities were to train and prepare for response to major environmental threats. In 1976 when the *ARGO MERCHANT* went aground on Fishing Rip off Nantucket Island, Massachusetts the Atlantic Strike Team located at Elizabeth City, North Carolina, responded immediately. In 1984 the Atlantic Strike Team was called on to assist when the *M/V ELDIA* came ashore at Nauset Beach in Orleans, Massachusetts. In 1987 the Atlantic Strike Team was merged with the Gulf Strike Team – Mobile Alabama [15].

Training and preparation for major environmental catastrophes can be tedious work, particularly when every effort is being made to reduce the number of incidents. But, like a fire department that tries by every means available to prevent fires, marine environmental rescue teams must be available and trained to respond to the inevitable maritime catastrophe.

**Enforcement of Laws and Treaties** is the other major operational responsibility of the

nation's water-borne public safety force. Not unlike the police department that responds to motor vehicle accidents and homicides, and at the same time attempts to enforce laws related to drugs, prostitution, and gambling, the Coast Guard is responsible for enforcing, not just laws related to illegal importation of controlled substances (drug smuggling), but also for enforcement and administration of Federal Laws, particularly those related to the operation of vessels, bridges, and use of waterways. The list of statutes and international agreements that the Coast Guard is responsible for enforcing is staggering. It is no wonder that the Coast Guard finds itself focusing only on those laws that the Executive and the public find fashionable at the moment.

The major peacetime responsibilities of the Coast Guard resemble those of a police/fire department – a public safety organization rather than those of a military, or defense, organization. As Admiral Yost steps down as the Coast Guard's 18th Commandant, it is time to reexamine the future direction and image that has evolved in the past decade. There can be no denying that "The Yost Years," like no other period in recent Coast Guard history, have resulted in a radical change in the image of the service: from "Lifesavers to warriors." [16]

Now, it is time to recognize that the Coast Guard is not an "armed service and more" with a major military role but rather – as suggested by Rear Admiral Robert E. Kramek, Commander 13th Coast Guard District – "the big issue facing the Coast Guard in the next decade will be maritime transportation safety..." [17] Recently Samuel K. Skinner, Secretary of Transportation, stated in the Administration's *Statement of National Transportation Policy* that: "The most important mission of the U.S. Coast Guard is to protect life and property on the seas and the Nation's navigable waters." [18]

It appears agreement is growing that the Coast Guard has neglected its true *raison d'être* - protecting life, property and the environment at sea. The new Commandant, Admiral J. William Kime is, it would appear, ideally qualified to lead the Coast Guard as it begins its third century. He is the first Commandant in recent memory with a strong background in Marine and Environmental Safety and Protection, as well as in Operational missions.

It is hoped that Admiral Kime will – in addition to recognizing that it is a public service that the dedicated men and women of the Coast Guard perform – begin the process of developing a "robust" **purpose** for this venerable organization.

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