

Troubled Waters for Our Coast Guard

Our officials in Washington want this service to save lives *and* nab drug smugglers *and* protect coastal fisheries *and* stop illegal aliens. But they won't give it the money to do the job

By DAVID FAIRBANK WHITE

THE SOS CAME at 9:30 that night as the wind was mounting to 30 knots and sheets of spray were ripping past the bridge wings of the Coast Guard cutter *Dependable*. Somewhere off Tampa, far out in the Gulf of Mexico, the 30-foot fishing vessel *Vee Jay* had lost her engine and was taking on water in building seas.

Illuminated by the olive glow of a radar screen, the cutter's chief asked for more speed. "We've got a rescue case," he called into the bridge telephone. Four decks below, an engineer punched a large, green button to start the *Dependable's* second main engine, and 210 feet of deep-sea rescue power began pounding its way through the

troughs and cliffs of the darkened ocean, toward the *Vee Jay* 90 miles away. By 1 a.m. the next day, the fishing boat was safely in tow.

For Coast Guard cutter 626, it was only the second day of patrol—and things would get busier. Soon she would head south to the wide, blue expanses of the Yucatán Channel, which separates the Gulf of Mexico from the Caribbean Sea, steaming 3600 miles, moving from the traditional mission of saving lives to the new and troubled world in which the U.S. Coast Guard travels today.

She would hunt for drug smugglers in the Yucatán, she would be on the lookout for illegal Haitian immigrants, and she would even stumble on a Soviet intelligence



ship spying on British naval movements during the Falklands war.

Virtually none of these tasks would have been part of the *Dependable's* work when she was launched in 1968. But cutter 626 is part of a hard-pressed Coast Guard fleet, tackling a staggering array of new duties assigned to it by Congress and the President, with no proportionate increase in budget or equipment.

So severe is the crisis that it has forced the Coast Guard to use a kind of "triage," choosing which vital missions to carry out and which to discard for lack of resources. Already limited by shortages in its fleet and ranks, the 39,000-member service is the only branch of the United States armed forces facing a proposed budget reduction under President Reagan. In the view of many, these cuts whittle away an agency already at the bone.

The Guard is short more than 2000 personnel at its 210 shore stations around the country. Its fleet is old. Of nine ships randomly selected for review recently, not one was able to stay at sea even 50 percent of the time, because of maintenance problems.

Shortage of funds last year caused the cancellation of crucial drug- and fishery-enforcement patrols. In some cases, cutters needed to do critical work sat idle at the dock because there was no money for fuel. Indeed, but for the can-do spirit of the men and

women, one wonders if there would be a Coast Guard. Consider:

Five years ago, drug seizures were hardly of any concern to cutters. Today, narcotics enforcement is the Coast Guard's biggest patrol duty.

The *Dependable* has 30 hash marks painted on her mast, each signifying a drug bust. A gold marijuana leaf above the hash marks signifies that she has been responsible for marijuana seizures totaling more than one million pounds.

In August 1981, as the *Dependable* was closing on a vessel in the Yucatán darkness, smugglers tried to torch their own boat. A Coast Guard boarding party had to fight a stubborn fire in order to preserve 20 tons of marijuana aboard the "shrimp" boat. Two Americans were arrested.

One year before, the *Dependable* chased a vessel for 130 miles across the Gulf of Mexico. At the end of the chase, the cutter fired a warning burst with her .50-caliber machine gun. The vessel halted and 15 tons of marijuana were found on board. Ten Colombians were arrested.

The *Dependable's* captain at the time, Cmdr. Robert E. Fenton, described the situation as, "a war at sea. As we put pressure on the smugglers, the incentive is going to be there for them to do something." Shortly after he spoke those words, we learned that a Florida Marine Patrol boat had been fired upon during a bust.

Alongside the anti-drug initia-

tive, the new effort to interdict Haitian immigrants also uses up Coast Guard resources. Three ships must be rotated to keep one 378-foot cutter permanently on station in the Windward Passage of the Caribbean. One helicopter and a C-130 airplane also support the effort.

Altogether, 18 ships are required for the anti-drug and illegal-immigrant patrols. With a total of 44 oceangoing cutters in its lineup, nearly one-half of the Coast Guard's deep-sea fleet is tied up in a single district on two assignments that did not even exist ten years ago. To cope with this huge requirement, the Coast Guard's Seventh District, covering the Caribbean, has had to use ships pulled away from critical work in every other district on the East and Gulf coasts—from protecting our ocean fisheries to cleaning up oil spills to conducting search-and-rescue missions.

The shortage has forced the Guard to activate three old seagoing tugs. These 40-year-old ships have been operating with crew quarters far below minimal health standards. In the engine room of the USCGC *Ute*, for example, there is an exposed electrical switchboard that threatens the life of anyone who should be thrown against it by a rolling wave.

The Seventh District is getting five extra ships, but even with these it is hurting. Take the base at Key West, Fla., for example. This base has a fleet of 15 vessels, ranging

from tough 95-foot patrol boats armed with .50-caliber machine guns, down to 14-foot outboards armed only with crews' rifles and pistols. In the first seven months of 1982, Group Key West handled 882 search-and-rescue cases, maintained more than 192 buoys and beacons, coped with 38 pollution accidents, and participated in the seizure of more than one million pounds of marijuana (and 300 prisoners) in drug-smuggling cases.

Yet despite its importance, the outfit's total engineering and electrical staff numbers five people—only half the number needed for the job, according to Group Key West's Chief Warrant Officer James W. Allen. "Sometimes we're just overrun," he says. "If Key West has an electrical problem and Islamorada has an electrical problem, you just have to pick which is the more critical."

In the fall of 1981 the group even ran short of fuel for the two 95-foot patrol boats. For 30 days the vessels were restricted to six days' steaming time each—three days for rescue purposes and three days for law-enforcement purposes. And Key West represents one of the Coast Guard's best cases, not its worst. In New York Harbor, where the Coast Guard must oversee the arrival and departure of 7000 ships a year, an important new electronic traffic-control network was recently shut down for lack of funds just as it was being put into operation.

The Guard is also hard-pressed

in its role to protect the nation's vast Atlantic and Pacific fishery regions. The ocean fisheries, among our most valuable food resources, became so threatened by the overfishing by foreign fleets that the United States has extended its legal jurisdiction over ocean waters from 12 to 200 miles. While this demands an intense new patrol effort by the Coast Guard, the Alaskan patrol, guarding our important fish stocks from foreign trawlers, needs ten ships to guarantee that three to five cutters are ready to go to sea. On the East Coast, ships needed to patrol fishing waters have been diverted to perform drug and immigrant interdiction.

Since 1960, oil spills, too, have occupied the Coast Guard, as they have become a recurring fact of life in oceans, rivers, lakes and coves. While federal legislation provides some special funding and reimbursement, it does not come close to paying for the Guard's exhaustive anti-pollution activities.

Commenting on the scope of the Guard's new responsibilities, Captain M. Y. Suzich, deputy commander of the service's Atlantic area, says, "If the budget is cut, we will do the best we can with what we have—but we will have to decide what *not* to do."

Two recent federal studies—one by the General Accounting Office, the other by the House Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Naviga-

tion—agree. They warn that the Coast Guard simply does not have the resources—the money, cutters or personnel—to carry out the vital new missions assigned to it by law. The studies conclude that the Coast Guard's budget must be fundamentally redrafted.

Despite these two urgent warnings, the Reagan Administration has responded by cutting back funds. The Coast Guard budget was \$2.53 billion in fiscal year 1982. For fiscal 1983, the Office of Management and Budget has proposed a slash to \$2.30 billion.

All this seems very shortsighted for a nation that depends on the sea. If we let this service disintegrate, who will ensure the safety and orderly conduct of commerce and travel on American waters? "I don't see how we as a nation can avoid the conclusion that we depend on the sea. We have to maintain a capability to use it," says Adm. John B. Hayes, the Coast Guard commandant until he retired last May.

On a surveillance flight over the Caribbean, helicopter pilot Lt. (j.g.) Michael Kistner recently spoke of his service's job. "We're here to help people," he said.

Now it is up to all of us as citizens to keep the Coast Guard out there to do just that.

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