

A Coast Guard in Distress

By Zachary Warrender

Conventional wisdom says that 9/11 changed everything—everything, it seems, except the chronic under-resourcing of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Despite expanded budgets and increased end-strength during the Bush administration, the service was still stretched thin, and its deepwater fleet continued to contract. Yet appropriations measures for Fiscal Year 2011 approved by the House and Senate only begin to address the situation. Each of the bills calls for minor increases to personnel end-strength for offshore oil monitoring, cancels the

In February, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the service failed to meet goals for defense readiness and living marine resources in 2009. The GAO said the defense readiness level of port-security units was at a meager 20 percent; Coast Guard assets met readiness levels only 44 percent of the time; and the readiness of high-endurance cutters was at 21 percent—and declining. The Janu-



U.S. COAST GUARD (DAVID MOBLEY)

When the Coast Guard answered the call to assist in relief efforts for earthquake-ravaged Haiti early this year, its response revealed readiness deficiencies: 10 of 12 deployed cutters experienced significant mechanical breakdowns; two aborted the mission. Here, a Coast Guard Dolphin helicopter waits its turn to refuel on board the USCGC *Legare* (WMEC-912) off Port-au-Prince on 26 January.

elimination of 1,100 billets, and decreases the number of ships and aircraft scheduled for decommissioning under the Obama administration's request. The bills, then, while a step in the right direction, fail to fund a Coast Guard that is fully capable of meeting the demands of the 21st century.

The Coast Guard's budget and size are simply out of sync with its post-9/11 responsibilities. Fulfilling its traditional role in 2008 alone, the Coast Guard responded to more than 24,000 search-and-rescue calls, seized 185 tons of narcotics, and detained 5,000 undocumented migrants. However, in an era of ever-growing security threats, the Coast Guard is continually charged with new homeland-security and defense missions, and it is beginning to crack under the strain.

ary 2010 earthquake in Haiti put the issue into sharp focus: 10 of 12 cutters assigned to relief efforts had significant breakdowns; two were forced to turn back for emergency repairs. Then-Commandant Admiral Thad Allen subsequently noted that the average age of high-endurance cutters (41 years) is "putting our crews at risk [and] jeopardizing our ability to do the job."

But equipment problems are not limited to cutters. Retired Captain Jim Howe and Lieutenant Jim Dolbow noted in *Proceedings* (August 2009) that the Coast Guard "has only half the aircraft patrol hours it needs . . . and that it will take nearly a dozen years for this gap to be closed through the procurement of new Deepwater [program] assets." They noted that operational requirements are based on decades-

old assumptions, and do not include likely new missions such as Arctic patrols.

The Coast Guard's own performance report for 2008 said that many deficiencies will likely remain until more Deepwater assets come online. Even that may be overly optimistic. A 2004 RAND study said the Deepwater modernization effort, conceived well before 9/11, was intended to maintain the status quo with fewer, more capable assets. But conditions have changed significantly, and despite beefing up those assets after 9/11, just working to maintain that status quo will continue to leave the Coast Guard woefully under-resourced.

Finding consensus on the necessary size for the service—fleet, budget, and personnel strength—is difficult. However, many observers believe that the Coast Guard must grow in those areas. The Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon suggested a 20 to 30 percent increase in personnel and fleet size in testimony before Congress in 2003. James Jay Carafano of the Heritage Foundation has repeatedly called for significant budget, personnel, and equipment increases. And finally, a recent report from the Center for American Progress recommends an immediate \$5 billion increase to the Coast Guard's budget. Those proposals, although more ambitious and significantly more expensive, would do far more for the long-term success of the service than the measures provided by Congress and called for by the administration. One needs to look no further than the cleanup effort in the Gulf of Mexico to understand the vast scope and variety of the Coast Guard's responsibilities—and to understand how risky it can be to skimp on the service.

Now is the time for a frank discussion on the level of investment the country should make in the Coast Guard. It's time to match its "can do" attitude by addressing all of its "must-fund" requirements. Budget competition is fierce. However, given the myriad challenges our country faces, a higher priority must be given to the unfulfilled requirements of the Coast Guard in its expanded role as the first line of defense. ❄

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