

Chapter Four: Principles of Coast Guard Operations

Our effectiveness as a military, multi-mission, and maritime service depends in no small part on a set of key ideas about the way we operate. These principles have emerged over time and have become part of our unwritten Service culture. They describe our operating style and underpin our ability to operate successfully, both domestically and internationally.

Principles of Coast Guard Operations

- ◆ Clear Objective
- ◆ Effective Presence
- ◆ Unity of Effort
- ◆ On-Scene Initiative
- ◆ Flexibility
- ◆ Managed Risk
- ◆ Restraint

As members of an armed service, Coast Guard men and women should be familiar with the principles of war as well as the principles of military operations other than war, which are

presented in Appendix B and Appendix C, respectively. However, the Coast Guard has adopted an additional set of operating principles that reflect both the civil and military elements of our roles and missions. These principles modify and extend the principles of war and military operations other than war to encompass the distinctions between war fighting and civil law enforcement and regulation.

The principles of Coast Guard operations discussed below apply across the range of Service roles and missions. There will be

times, during engagements with clearly hostile forces, for instance, when the importance of some of these principles will decrease. Nevertheless, these principles underpin our actions in the vast majority of situations we encounter on a day-to-day basis.

THE PRINCIPLE OF CLEAR OBJECTIVE

Direct every operation toward a clearly defined and attainable objective. The most significant action a leader can take in planning and executing an operation is to clearly express the overarching objective to subordinates. This principle holds whether the objective is one that has been defined by our national leaders or by the commander on scene at an oil spill or any other operation. Once the objective has been defined, we must focus our operations and efforts to achieve it.

Some operations are short lived, and the objectives are easily understood. Rescue the people. Prevent the spill. Clean up the spill. Seize the drugs. Other operations are of a long-term nature, and the objectives may not be as easily defined. For example, the primary focus of a cutter on patrol may be fisheries law enforcement. Yet, like a police officer on a beat, a cutter on patrol is also alert and prepared to perform all other Coast Guard missions. Regardless, leaders must be able to articulate the central objective of the mission at hand.

THE PRINCIPLE OF EFFECTIVE PRESENCE

At the most basic level, effective presence means having the right assets and capabilities at the right place at the right time. This principle traces its origins to the earliest days of the Revenue Marine. The first revenue cutters were designed specifically for effectiveness in their designated operating areas—rivers, harbors, and their approaches—and they were assigned to the most strategically important ports. The first Revenue Marine officers came from the ranks of the colonial merchant fleet, former privateers, and the former state and Continental navies. They were selected because they understood their operating areas and their adversaries' methods. This put the “right assets” in place.

Revenue Marine founder Alexander Hamilton explained another aspect of the concept of effective presence in a *Letter of Instruction* to his officers in 1791:

[I]t will be necessary for you from time to time to ply along the coasts in the neighborhood of your station, and to traverse the different parts of the waters which it comprehends. To fix yourself constantly or even generally at one position, would in a great measure defeat the purpose of the establishment. It would confine your vigilance to a particular spot, and allow full scope to fraudulent practices, everywhere else.⁴⁹

Hamilton was saying that to be *effective*, units must be active, because the “right place to be” changes over time. This is reflected in the assignment of units to different operating areas depending on the anticipated need. Once assigned, cutters and aircraft need to patrol operating areas, small boats need to cruise local waterways, and marine safety personnel need to patrol the port. To be effective we must be vigilant and ready to respond to situations as they arise, keeping in mind all of our principles of operations.

Ensuring an effective presence also requires careful attention to the ability to sustain our assets during normal operations. We should operate our assets to the level—and only to the level—that the logistics system (i.e., people, parts and equipment, and funding) can sustain. If we can achieve near-term performance only by operating our assets beyond the level of long-term sustainability, we risk harming the national interests by degrading our ability to respond effectively in the future.



An HC-130 Hercules long-range surveillance aircraft on patrol off the Florida coast.

A key component of effective presence is acceptable presence, which refers to the reality that foreign governments and non-state actors oftentimes regard Coast Guard forces as less threatening or objectionable than those of the other U.S. armed services. This is a powerful discriminator of the Coast Guard from the Department of Defense armed services. Due to the unique combination of military status, law enforcement authority, and humanitarian reputation, the Coast Guard offers the U.S. National Command Authorities a unique option with which to pursue national strategy and enforce national policy. Indeed, in many civil and military arenas worldwide, the Coast Guard is ideally suited to cooperate with and provide assistance to foreign governments, navies, and coast guards; international organizations; and domestic and international non-governmental organizations on a broad spectrum of defense- and maritime-related issues.

THE PRINCIPLE OF UNITY OF EFFORT

Most Coast Guard operations are performed by cooperative effort among a number of different units, or by the Coast Guard working in concert with and coordinating the efforts of a diverse set of governmental and non-governmental entities, to achieve the operational objective. Success in either case requires positive leadership to ensure clear understanding of the objective and the role each individual, unit, or organization is expected to play in meeting that objective.

The concept known as the “chain of command” is an essential element to achieving internal unity of effort. Chain of command recognizes the principle that every person—and every unit—in a military organization reports to someone higher up. In a given operation, there can be only one responsible



The high-endurance cutter *Gallatin* (WHEC 721) operates with a proof-of-concept MH-90 Enforcer helicopter and an Over-the-Horizon Rigid Hull Inflatable Boat (OTH RHIB), both of which were specifically designed to engage “go-fast” drug smuggling boats.

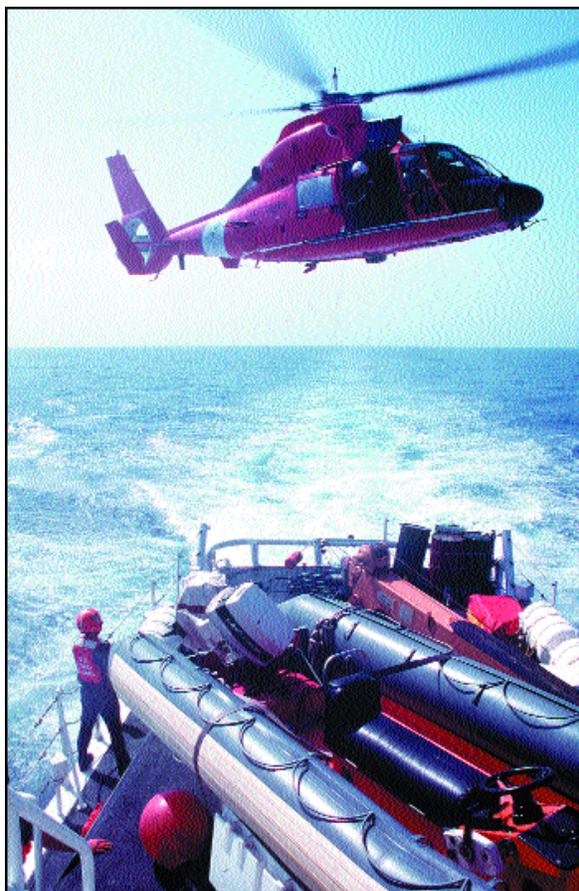
commander. The timely and accurate flow of information to and from the responsible commander via the chain of command is essential for ensuring the necessary resources, including information, get to the right place at the right time. Maintaining an effective and efficient chain of command requires constant attention, since we have multi-mission field units under higher echelon commanders whose staffs are organized along mission or other specialty lines. This calls for staff coordination. Respect for the chain of command, especially when coupled with proper staff coordination, contributes significantly to internal unity of effort.

Unity among organizations is the external counterpart to internal unity of effort. This external leadership challenge is in many respects the more demanding, because the external entities we deal with generally are not under the Coast Guard's authority and discerning those organizations' lines of authority may be problematic. Further, the Coast Guard frequently has to decide between the conflicting and divergent demands of various stakeholders, each of whom represents legitimate and worthy public or private interests. The Coast Guard does not have the final authority in all situations and when necessary refers decisions to the appropriate level. Nevertheless, the responsibilities and authorities given the Coast Guard by Congress, and the tendency of Congresses and Presidents to turn to the Coast Guard whenever difficult maritime issues arise, are testimonies to our history of providing effective leadership across diverse and competing interests.

THE PRINCIPLE OF ON-SCENE INITIATIVE

The nature of our operations demands that Coast Guard men and women be given latitude to act quickly and decisively within the scope of their authority, without waiting for direction from higher levels in the chain of command. Personal initiative has always been crucial to the success of our Service. Tight control from above was never really an option for the Revenue Marine, whose original ten cutters were based from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Savannah, Georgia; or for the nineteenth-century Life-Saving Service, which relied on 148 remote stations along the U.S. coast.⁵⁰ Since then, advances in technology have revolutionized our commanders' ability to communicate with and even control units in the field. But the concept of allowing the person on scene to take the initiative—guided by a firm understanding of the desired tactical objectives and the national interests at stake—remains central to the Coast Guard's view of its command relationships.

Many of our operations—responding to oil spills, searching for and rescuing mariners in distress, or interdicting smugglers, for instance—are of an emergent, unpredictable nature. History has shown that situations like these are best handled locally. Thus, we push both authority and responsibility to the lowest possible level. Our ethos is that the person on scene can be depended upon to assess the situation, seize the initiative, and take the action necessary for success.



An HH-65A Dolphin helicopter operating with an *Island*-class patrol boat.

This style of operational command is based upon the trust senior commanders place in their subordinates' judgment. Decisive action requires unity of effort—getting all parts of a force to work together. Rapid action, on the other hand, requires a large degree of decentralization, giving those closest to the problem the freedom to solve it. To reconcile these seemingly contradictory requirements, we use tools called the “commander’s intent” and “concept of operations.”

The commander’s intent conveys the objective and the desired course of action. The concept of operations details the

commander’s estimated sequence of actions to achieve the objective and contains essential elements of a plan—i.e., what is to be done and how the commander plans to do it. A significant change in the situation that requires action will alter the concept of operations, but the commander’s intent is overarching and usually remains unchanged.

Effective commanders at all levels neither expect nor attempt to control their subordinates’ every action. Instead, they ensure their subordinates thoroughly understand their expectations and how to meet those expectations in a variety of situations. Great commanders in naval history rarely issued detailed instructions to their subordinate commanders. Instead, they frequently gathered their captains to discuss a variety of tactical problems. Through these informal discussions, the captains became aware of what their commanders expected to accomplish and how they planned, in various situations, to accomplish it. Thus prepared, they later were able to act independently, following their commanders’ intent even though formal orders were brief or nonexistent.

Good decisions are made in unpredictable situations when Coast Guard personnel on the scene of an emergency or a crisis are rigorously trained to act as part of a cohesive, cooperative team. It works through the common understanding of how individual incidents or situations are normally handled. This shared understanding lies at the heart of effective decentralized command and control.

THE PRINCIPLE OF FLEXIBILITY



The revenue cutter *Bear*, veteran of 34 cruises to Alaskan waters during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This principle is the operational corollary to our multi-mission character. Arising from a combination of broad authority, diverse responsibilities, and limited resources, the principle means that if we are to succeed in pursuing multiple missions with the same people and assets, we must be able to adjust to a wide variety of tasks and circumstances.

As is true of our other principles of operations, the principle of flexibility has its roots in our early history. During their operations in Alaska during the nineteenth century, for example, the crew of the revenue cutter *Bear* conducted an incredible variety of tasks, including the transporting of reindeer and undertaking long, arduous rescue missions through the territory's interior. Many of these tasks went well beyond

Origin of *Semper Paratus*

The exact origin of our motto—“*Semper Paratus*”—has never been determined. The earliest recorded use of the phrase *semper paratus* in regards to the Service was in the New Orleans newspaper, *Bee*, in January 1836, which used the phrase in an article praising the revenue cutter *Ingham*. The motto appears to have been adopted sometime between October 1896 and May 1897, when a new seal containing the phrase appeared on a general order of the Division of Revenue Cutter Service on 21 May 1897.

Information obtained from the Coast Guard Historian's Office and an unpublished document by William R. Wells, II, “*SEMPER PARATUS*—The Perception of a Motto, 17 November 1991.

anything they could have imagined from their original orders. Thanks to their training, experience, and can-do attitude, the crew was able to adapt their operations to the needs of the people they served.

This notion of flexibility also is deeply embedded in our heritage of *semper paratus*. We built our reputation for being “always ready” to meet just about any maritime challenge by successfully and repeatedly adapting to the situation at hand. Thus, a cutter on fisheries patrol is as prepared to divert to a search and rescue operation, respond to a pollution incident, or intercept a suspected drug smuggler—in many cases across thousands of nautical miles of open ocean—as it is to enforce our fisheries laws.

Our units also frequently find themselves facing competing mission priorities as incidents unfold. Two examples illustrate the point. A cruise ship on fire and drifting toward the rocks is both a search-and-rescue case and potential pollution

incident. Similarly, an overloaded boat filled with migrants intent on reaching our shores is both a law enforcement and potential search-and-rescue case. In each instance, responding units must adapt to the circumstances as they unfold, giving priority to the mission most critical at the moment. And, since at least the late nineteenth century, the mission of aiding distressed mariners usually has trumped all other priorities.

The most demanding circumstances today require the Coast Guard to conduct “surge operations”—high-intensity efforts usually launched at short notice in response to an emergency situation. Recent examples of events requiring surge operations include the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill response in 1989 and the mass migrations from Haiti and Cuba that occurred in 1992 and 1994. Surge operations require the Coast Guard to reallocate large numbers of people, assets, and money to respond to the situation. This affects not only the people and units directly involved, it demands that the entire Service adapt to find the resources to meet the needs of the surge operation while still continuing critical day-to-day operations. Upon completion of the surge operation, the Coast Guard then must transition back to normal operations. Surge operations are very demanding, but our ability to transition to and from these operations provides an enormous benefit to the nation and serves as a testament to our flexibility.

THE PRINCIPLE OF MANAGED RISK

Just as the unity of effort principle has internal and external dimensions, so too

the principle of managed risk operates at two levels. The internal aspect of this principle involves the commander’s obligations to ensure the unit is properly trained, equipped, and maintained for the mission and to carefully assess crew and equipment capabilities against the operational scenario when assessing whether and how to execute a given mission.



A 47-foot motor lifeboat trains in waters off the coast of Station Cape Disappointment, Washington.

We do dangerous work in hostile environments. Our heritage is based in large part on the selfless acts of courageous men and women who used their tools and their wits under dangerous conditions to save the lives of others. This tradition continues today, as we perform duties that routinely place us in harm’s way. Without a continuing and observable commitment to the safety of our forces we unnecessarily endanger our people and jeopardize the mission.

Successful mission execution begins with a thorough understanding of the

environment in which we operate. Based on that understanding, we develop operational concepts, acquire appropriate equipment, and put our people through rigorous formal training. We build on that foundation by continuous training and drills, by improving our personal skills and by maintaining our equipment at the highest state of readiness. In short, consistently successful performance requires thorough preparation.

Preparation alone, however, is not enough. Success also requires that our people and equipment be used within the limits of their abilities. No small boat or aircraft, no matter how well maintained or skillfully piloted, can be expected to survive, much less execute a mission, when wind and sea conditions are beyond the strength of hull, airframe, or the human body. Responsible commanders evaluate the capability of crew and equipment against the conditions likely to be encountered when deciding on the proper course of action. Conscious attention to time-tested and time-honored principles of safe operation is a necessity.

Today's Coast Guard standard of response remains true to its rich legacy. We honor our heritage daily by casting off all lines or lifting off in severe weather to save lives and property in peril, accepting the risk that we may not come back. We honor our heritage as well by attending to the principle that a proper and practiced understanding of duties, a thorough evaluation of the risks involved in an operation, and the exercise of good judgment in executing that operation is of paramount importance for success.

The idea of managing risks is not limited to Coast Guard response operations. In fact, risk management through prevention (to reduce the probability of an adverse event) and response (to minimize consequences when an adverse event does occur) has long been a fundamental aspect of Coast Guard operations. Prevention includes such measures as placing aids to navigation in shipping channels; ensuring that commercial vessels are properly designed, built and maintained; and providing courtesy marine exams and safety education for recreational boaters. Prevention will never be perfect, however, so we maintain the ability to respond aggressively and capably, whether in a search and rescue situation or following an oil spill. We also use these same prevention and response concepts internally. We acquire rugged ships, boats, and aircraft and train our crews with prevention in mind. We also monitor unfolding operations and have back-up plans in place, ready to minimize negative consequences when the unwanted does occur.

Finally, prevention and response activities, while focused on different aspects of the same problem, are inextricably linked. Neither is superior to the other and neither is adequate by itself. More importantly, the Coast Guard's overall effectiveness depends on the synergy between these two very different means of achieving success: our operational strengths in the response arena make us more effective in the prevention arena, and vice versa. Prevention and response are both essential tools for Coast Guard success.

THE PRINCIPLE OF RESTRAINT

Coast Guard personnel have always been under a special obligation to exercise their powers prudently and with restraint. Title 14 of the U.S. Code, Section 89, confers on Coast Guard personnel an unparalleled level of law enforcement authority. Consequently, the portion of Treasury Secretary Hamilton's *Letter of Instruction* to Revenue Cutter officers, explaining the need for restraint and the standard to be met, remains as true today as it was in 1791:

[A]lways keep in mind that [your] countrymen are free men and, as such, are impatient of everything that bears the least mark of a domineering spirit.... [Refrain, therefore,] with the most guarded circumspection, from whatever has the semblance of haughtiness, rudeness, or insult.... [E]ndeavor to overcome difficulties, if any are experienced, by a cool and temperate perseverance in [your] duty—by address and moderation, rather than vehemence and violence.⁵¹

The Coast Guard has a legacy of public service that has shaped our tradition of restraint and good judgment. The Life-Saving Service rescued distressed mariners. The Steamboat Inspection Service protected ships' crews, passengers, and cargo. The Lighthouse Service had similar humanitarian commitments. The Revenue Marine cruised offshore in winter to aid mariners. Today, we do all this and more. Even our regulatory and law enforcement missions contribute to the safety and well being of the American public. A lack of restraint in Coast Guard operations, then, would be inconsistent

with one of the fundamental and long-standing practices of the Service, as well as potentially violating the constitutional protections afforded American citizens.

Restraint extends beyond how Coast Guard personnel treat American citizens—it also covers how we treat the foreign citizens with whom we come into contact. Our sensitive handling of alien migrants during the mass exoduses from Cuba and Haiti illustrate how Coast Guard forces safeguard U.S. interests at sea while also upholding the dignity and contributing to the well-being of the migrants. As the cutting edge of U.S. maritime law enforcement, the Coast Guard must also exercise restraint when dealing with the illegal acts by foreign vessels and their crews. We have a duty to enforce U.S. sovereignty, but in a manner that does honor to the Constitution we took an oath to uphold.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the characteristics and attributes discussed in *Coast Guard Publication 1* define a remarkable institution of noble purpose and enduring worth to the American Republic. We have developed a unique culture and sense of ourselves that continues to define us daily. We are public servants and the accomplishment of our roles and missions benefits society. The Coast Guard is the recipient of public trust and we must remain worthy of that trust. We recognize that few other organizations afford their members as much responsibility and authority at junior levels as does the Coast Guard. We are personally charged with stewardship of the authority

and resources that have been delegated to us, regardless of our rank or rate.

Whether we are members of a large unit, small station, or crew at sea, whether active duty, reservist, civilian, or auxiliary, we are one Coast Guard. The Coast Guard has many of the positive characteristics of a family-run firm. This permits personnel and units to be nimble and flexible, changing quickly with little effort. Our organization works on the basis of trust among people. In turn, their loyalty, responsibility, and professionalism inspire motivation to excel.

As Coast Guard men and women we enthusiastically embrace the heritage of *semper paratus* and our continuing responsibility to uphold the values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. We are heirs to this proud historical tradition. We understand that by their day-to-day attention to these values, our forebears developed and entrusted to us a venerable institution respected throughout the world for the work we perform as America's Maritime Guardian.



The high-endurance cutter *Hamilton* (WHEC 715) on patrol.