

## NASBLA BOAT Program

# The Coast Guard's Force Multiplier

By Ames Holbrook, U.S. Coast Guard Office of Boat Forces

Mentally concoct any maritime emergency, and you can bet that the United States Coast Guard has already considered it. Our Coast Guard makes its living anticipating and defending against the next maritime Major Event that will shake America. Catastrophic oil spill immediately off our shores – check. Near-simultaneous hurricanes flooding major population centers on our Atlantic and Gulf Coasts – check. Foreign-flagged tanker ship skirting our coast while dropping inflatable speed-boats loaded with armed terrorists and explosives into the water every half-mile (think Mumbai 2008 on a grand scale) – check. The U.S. Coast Guard has war-gamed these scenarios and countless others, and while it has prepared for them, it also acknowledges the inescapable truth: When the day of catastrophe arrives, there will not be enough Coast Guard boats in the water to handle the threat without help.

This is a sobering thought, but fortunately not a hopeless one. The U.S. Coast Guard does not subscribe to “hopeless.” As the smallest and by far the least funded branch of America’s military, the Coast Guard has a history of taking initiative to fix problems on its own (for a modern example, see the response to Katrina – while other agencies and their leaders were crucified by the public and media for poor reactions, the Coast Guard was honored as a model and then-Vice-Admiral Thad Allen was elevated to direct the recovery before his ultimate selection as Commandant of the Coast Guard).

With the same spirit of adaptability and innovation, the Coast Guard long ago set out to answer the question set up in paragraph one: If there

won't be enough Coast Guard boats in the water to adequately address the Major Event without help, and yet the Major Event must be adequately addressed, then where do we get our help?

Years have been spent struggling with this quandary, and, just now, it appears the Coast Guard is on the verge of a solution. The solution, it turns out, embodies a level of inter-agency cooperation with few parallels in our era. The same can be said for the route that was taken to arrive at it.

Back in the heightened security environment that followed September 11, 2001, a seasoned Coast Guard Boatswain named Mark DuPont was escorting liquefied natural gas carriers into Boston Harbor, when the Chief Warrant Officer came to the conclusion that he would have to train local partners in this same task. DuPont set up the first classes to train Massachusetts maritime law enforcement partners, and soon after he brought the training to Maine. The state of Maine took it a step further when it adopted the program and itself began training more local partners. This got the attention of Admiral Vivien Crea, who, as then-commander of First Coast Guard District, oversaw all Coast Guard operations from New Jersey to the Canadian border. Impressed with the tactical cooperation between agencies, Admiral Crea suggested it could be a workable program for the entire East Coast.

In the southern part of that East Coast, the state of Florida was occupied in an active quest to determine its own maritime enforcement requirements and capabilities. Then-Governor Jeb Bush had divided the state into seven regions

immediately after September 11, 2001, and had established a Regional Domestic Security Task Force (RDST) in each as a cooperative structure for multiple agencies to coordinate plans for terrorism and other disasters. Now, following a small-vessel threat summit, a Florida RDST consulted with SRI International’s Center for Maritime and Port Security (CMPS) in an effort to identify the state’s security needs.

Simultaneously, officials on Florida’s west coast were consulting with CMPS in an effort to develop a comprehensive naval security platform for the Tampa Bay area. When the CMPS staff and Gary Abernethy (who describes his employer SRI as a non-profit research and development company for the public good) analyzed Tampa Bay’s security preparedness, they uncovered two significant factors: a disconnect between state and local enforcement, and a strong requirement for mutual communication and force multiplication with the U.S. Coast Guard.

As it happened, the Coast Guard had someone working on this very inter-agency cooperation effort at the time: none other than Boatswain Mark DuPont, who had been reassigned down the coast to Florida as a Port Security Specialist following his Boston assignment. From the moment he’d arrived in the Sunshine State, Florida maritime authorities had pressed him to help with their biggest challenge. “We have 29 state and local enforcement agencies on the water in the Miami area alone,” Florida leaders told DuPont. “So how do we get them together?”

DuPont gave Florida the answer he’d already put into practice back in Boston and Portland.



Coast Guard Sector Corpus Christi and NASBLA state members rehearsed BOAT Program maneuvers at the recent National Association of State Boating Law Administrators annual conference.

“Train them together,” he said. “Get them doing the same tasks to the same standard.” Between the Coast Guard’s DuPont and SRI’s Abernethy, Florida was hearing a common chord. The urgent need was for the clear exchange of information and tactics across agency lines: What the Department of Homeland Security now likes to call interoperability.

Florida acted on the counsel. It was then that Florida Fish and Wildlife Captain Brad Williams, a former firefighter with roots back in Mississippi, began working on a training template that would lay the groundwork for the program that is emerging today – a national program of standardized training, typing, and credentialing across diverse enforcement agencies that is shaping up to be the most significant maritime security advance in the United States since Alexander Hamilton formed the Revenue Cutter Service in 1790.

But we’re not quite there yet. And on the way to where we are now, there were obstacles that threatened the entire effort. Different agencies working together on the same page is a terrific notion, but history is loaded with such cooperative notions that wound up derailed over territorial disputes, misunderstandings, and that particularly American brand of restless impatience. Years went by after Williams created the first template. Even the most valid project can die over time. Interest tends to wane, whims change, and supporters fall off board. Years of gestation are rarely healthy for a revolution.

By the time Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast on August 29, 2005, Mark DuPont was a retired Coast Guard Boatswain, working for Florida Fish and Wildlife alongside Brad Williams. Not surprisingly, given their hurricane experience and prime location – outside the Category-3 strike zone, but close enough to help – Florida Fish and

Wildlife got the call to respond to Katrina. Former Mississippi-boy Williams was the first to set up a command center there. His knowledge of the territory enabled him to assign the location before he’d arrived – a huge parking lot not far from the coastline. Only, when he landed on the ground, he discovered that part of his operating area was now occupied by the dockside casino that Katrina had ripped off its moorings and thrown down in the



*Coast Guard Vice Admiral David Pekoske (center) made a special appearance at NASBLA’s recent conference and spoke in support of the new BOAT Program. Also shown are (l-r) Gary Abernethy, Jeff Wheeler, Mark DuPont, and John Fetterman.*

middle of his parking lot. In the understated humor characteristic of veteran enforcers, Williams got on the radio and announced: “Well, there’s not as much room here as I thought there’d be, but it’ll work.”

Hurricane Katrina, we now know, turned out to be an epic disaster. But from bad events come good morals, and by the time her floodwaters eventually receded, Katrina had managed to make a lot of people wiser. Among her defining lessons were these: 1) Maritime agencies are going to have to work together, whether they like it or not. 2) Agencies have to evolve to do a better job in the next disaster, whatever it is. 3) Agencies have to engage in strict evaluation, of both training

and experience, to repeat the successes while not repeating the mistakes.

Lessons like these weren’t lost on Mark DuPont, who was now more determined than ever to get more units trained in security and recovery tasks. But stark challenges continued to emerge. The Coast Guard was going to need state and local help in a Major Event – that had been decided. But it wasn’t enough to simply provide training, even good training. The training would have to be standard. Otherwise – if the cooperating units didn’t share an operational framework, perform drills the same way, use identical terminology – the whole program would be useless. The U.S. Coast Guard couldn’t just trust another agency to tow a distressed passenger vessel, or establish security, or protect a high-value target, or conduct a search pattern, to take four essential examples, if there was no identifiable standard to indicate whether that agency was capable of performing the task. So how did one go about aligning several-hundred state and local agencies to a single standard? And where would this seemingly magic standard come from?

To answer that, DuPont turned to an old friend from his military days: a fellow former Boatswain by the name of Jeff Wheeler. Wheeler had retired from the Coast Guard as a Chief Warrant Officer three years earlier, taken a weekend off, and then jumped right back in as a civilian employee. Now he was Deputy Chief of the Office of Boat Forces, the headquarters program that oversees every Coast Guard vessel under 65 feet, which is to say the more maneuverable class of vessels and those that perform the majority of the Coast Guard’s search, rescue, patrol, and security missions. Wheeler immediately understood his old friend’s quandary, and he provided an answer in the form of the Coast Guard’s Boat Operations and Training (BOAT) Manual. This was the pub-



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lication outlining the basic skills of Coast Guard boat crews: everything from donning a life jacket to navigating a search pattern. Together, DuPont, Abernethy and Wheeler stripped the book of its Coast-Guard-specific material and adapted it to a civilian format covering the skills necessary for state and local boat units to assist in the handling of emergencies and emergent threats. A new training doctrine was born.

If this seems like a decisive moment, it was. No program like this had ever existed. But DuPont and Wheeler stopped short of celebrating. They had a great plan, but neither Florida Fish and Wildlife nor the U.S. Coast Guard was suitable to take it national. There remained the very large matter of implementation.

There was really only one player in the boating universe that had a chance of putting something like this into effect on the national level. The National Association of Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA), a nonprofit organization best known for developing public policy for recreational boating safety, was a philosophical match. NASBLA had a history of positive partnership with the Coast Guard in the arena of boating safety and grants. Beyond that, their countrywide network, developed over years of representing boating authorities in every U.S. state and territory, poised them perfectly to take the lead. With the help of DuPont and Wheeler, NASBLA rapidly emerged as the most important player on the scene, and, ultimately, as the father of the program that would dramatically advance maritime security in America.

In January 2009, NASBLA's board created a Council of Partners comprised of itself, some private entities, SRI, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, the U.S. Navy Center for Asymmetric Warfare, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, and the U.S. Coast Guard Office of Boat Forces (these last three in the Department of Homeland Security). NASBLA, in a letter explaining the BOAT Program, subsequently tasked the Council of Partners to stand up a maritime enforcement coalition whose purpose would be to train different local and state agencies to one standard, in order to "become a force multiplier on the nation's waterways for both local and regional interoperability." In essence, the final product would be a nationwide flotilla of skilled boat crews that knew each other's capabilities, spoke the same language in crises, and could be activated with a single call.

Returning to the dilemma of the Major Event

that the Coast Guard wouldn't be able to handle without help, NASBLA had just hatched the program that would deliver that help. The force multiplier would effectively put more good guys in the water, not only to help each other, but to work side-by-side to help the federal authorities – the Coast Guard, FEMA, and the rest – in times of national crisis.

By the end of summer, NASBLA had generated full-blown momentum for the plan. At their annual conference, held September, 2009, in Corpus Christi, Texas, the organization publicly unveiled its NASBLA Boat Operations and Training (BOAT) Program: the formal curriculum based on the Coast-Guard-standard manual Wheeler, Abernethy, and DuPont had created. The mood was high when NASBLA Past President John C. Fetterman pronounced: "If we roll this out inclusive of our partners, we will succeed."

Coast Guard Vice Admiral David Pekoske made a special appearance at the conference and spoke in support of the program. NASBLA bestowed its first Compass Award to Florida Fish and Wildlife for their having created the national model, with Mark DuPont and Brad Williams accepting. And for the invaluable help Jeff Wheeler had provided, Capt. Richard Moore, then-NASBLA President, personally presented Wheeler with the President's Award.

The words and awards were gratifying, but the NASBLA organization did not rest on them. The site of the conference being Texas, it seemed only appropriate to back up all the ceremony with an action-packed demonstration. Conference participants, including the U.S. Coast Guard, Florida Fish and Wildlife, Texas Parks and Wildlife, Kentucky Fish and Wildlife, Boston Whaler, Protector, SAFE Boat, and Zodiac, engaged in a realistic on-water exercise in the Gulf of Mexico. While a large audience braved the Texas afternoon sun to watch from shore, boat crews role-played good guys and bad guys in a string of scenarios, with boats performing maneuvers to defend a high-value marine asset from attack. The demonstration came off flawlessly, driving home the big theme: Behold what different agencies can accomplish together when we all train to a single standard.

The reaction in the field was overwhelming. State and local agencies lined up to become part of the BOAT program. And some unexpected parties came forward too. Vendors swarmed NASBLA to ask what kinds of boats and equipment they could offer to support the program. The Conference of Professional Operators for Response Tow-

ing (C-PORT, the foremost national water towing and salvage association) was equally eager. Said C-PORT Chairman Terry Hill: "We're the biggest first-responder on the water. The Coast Guard does twenty-four thousand search and rescue missions a year. We do over a hundred thousand. We also call in migrant and drug offenders. We've got two thousand licensed captains on boats right now. We're a natural for this."

If the conference buzz is a fair indication, the real challenge may be getting the program moving fast enough to keep up with demand. That too is underway. The first training course was scheduled for October, 2009, in Miami for Florida enforcement personnel, to be followed in November by a joint Coast Guard and Sheriff's Department course in Charleston, South Carolina.

This is where we stand today. The BOAT Program enables a maritime enforcement unit to qualify in standardized tasks that will be recognized by a national authority. State and local agencies may choose, a la carte, from useful maritime skills. Boat personnel can be trained and qualified in those skills, and have their certifications listed by date and type in the national database so that their neighbors and federal authorities can tap the skilled units in time of need. Participation in the program is purely voluntary, and units may take part to exactly the degree they desire. If New Orleans Harbor Police wants the Vessel Posing Imminent Threat (VPIT) training, but not the search pattern training, and the Oregon State Police wants it the other way around, this is fine. Every agency that qualifies in any standardized task will immediately become an asset to national security.

It will no longer be the Coast Guard alone protecting Americans from the effects of the catastrophic oil spill, the back-to-back hurricanes, and the speedboats full of terrorists. When the next Major Event strikes, the United States Coast Guard will respond, as they have throughout history. Only this time, if this program stays on track, the Coast Guard will look to its port and starboard on the water, and see all the help they need.

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# BOATING LAW ENFORCEMENT 2009 OFFICER OF THE YEAR



## Excelling Under Pressure

### Boating Law Enforcement 2009 Officer Of The Year

The responsibilities of today's marine enforcement officers encompass a wide diversity of disciplines. Boating officers are responsible for much more than enforcing laws. They must also educate the public, save lives, facilitate wildlife conservation, conduct homeland security details, protect citizens, among numerous other duties. Often these officers go well above the call of duty, and we honor these boating law enforcement officers in the following pages.

The National Association of State Boating Law Administrators (NASBLA) began awarding the Boating Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award in 2000 to recognize outstanding boating law enforcement officers. Each state selects a boating law enforcement officer. These officers then compete for one of three regional awards. The three regional officers of the year then vie for the national award. This year we had candidates from 41 states and territories nominated for this program. The officers described in the following pages represent the top boating law enforcement officers in the nation.



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