

New Orleans hero takes Coast Guard helm

Fairplay talks to Admiral Thad W Allen, hero of the Hurricane Katrina relief effort and now Coast Guard supremo, about his plans to secure US coasts



Photos: USCG



Will Watson, Senior Americas Correspondent

News stories in the US report that Admiral Thad W Allen has pinned on a fourth star and assumed command of the US Coast Guard. But most Americans – and many others around the globe – first heard of this native of Tucson, Arizona last September when he was designated principal federal official in charge of the Hurricane Katrina recovery.

Then vice-admiral, Allen was chief of staff of the Coast Guard when he was tabbed by Homeland Security secretary Michael Chertoff and just retired Commandant Tom Collins to bring

order out of the chaos that swept the Gulf Coast in the hurricane's wake.

Virtually from the outset, Allen's commanding presence, gruff tone and stony face exuded the control and calm that reassured tens of thousand affected by the storm – both inside and outside the maritime community.

"We worked closely with Admiral Allen following Hurricane Katrina at the Port of New Orleans. He proved himself to be a very effective leader and I look forward to working with him in his new role as USCG commandant," Gary LaGrange, president and CEO of the Port of New Orleans, tells *Fairplay*.

And Chuck Raymond, president and CEO of Horizon Lines, tells *Fairplay* that Allen's disaster response experience following Katrina and the efforts he made in beefing up US Atlantic Coast

security in the aftermath of 9/11 have equipped him well to lead a Coast Guard facing a whole new set of challenges.

"He's the right man at the right time for the Coast Guard," said Raymond.

"We have been very impressed with Admiral Allen's work for many years," said Tom Crowley Jr, head of Crowley Maritime, another Jones Act operator. "He has both the technical grasp of the issues, as well as the leadership skills, to be very successful as commandant."

The praise that followed his performance in New Orleans – after a 35-year career as a Coast Guard officer – certainly played a role in prompting President Bush to nominate Allen as commandant and eased his way through Senate confirmations that have proved so treacherous for several recent administration nominees. Of that

Path to the top

Like many Coast Guard officers, Thad Allen began his career after his 1971 graduation from the Coast Guard Academy aboard cutters. He served aboard the *Androscoggin* and *Gallatin* before commanding the *Citrus*.

After valuable seagoing experience, he moved ashore, serving as Captain of the Port in Long Island Sound and in New Jersey before being assigned to a station in Thailand.

He later co-ordinated search and rescue efforts from Puerto Rico and worked in intelligence at the Drug Enforcement Agency centre in Texas before briefly moving into budgeting and logistics duties.

Allen then rose to command the 7th District, encompassing the US Southeast Coast and Caribbean assets, and then to concurrent commands of the 5th District – which

encompasses the Mid-Atlantic states – and the overall Atlantic area, which covers over 14M square miles with responsibility for some 26,000 military and civilian personnel.

He was made chief of staff in May 2002 and took over general management functions for the entire Coast Guard organisation and also served as chairman of the Department of Homeland Security's joint requirements council.

confirmation, Chertoff commented: "I am delighted that Thad Allen has been confirmed by the Senate as the 23rd commandant of the Coast Guard. He is a highly respected Coast Guard veteran who has served our nation with distinction for more than three decades. He will more than justify the confidence the President and Senate place in him."

But in discussions with *Fairplay*, it is clear that Allen's perspective is turned to the future rather than the past. He says the Coast Guard's relationship with commercial shipping is excellent and looks forward to even better days ahead.

Allen pledges that maritime security will remain his highest priority, but hastens to add that he will ensure that commerce is not stifled: "We don't want to make American waters so safe that trade goes elsewhere."

He notes that the Coast Guard's mission has changed significantly over the years, commenting that the "bi-polar" threat posed by the Cold War has given way to an asymmetrical, non-traditional threat that brings a new range of concerns.

To face that threat, Allen stands foursquare in favour of what the Coast Guard calls Maritime Domain Awareness, pointing out that the more that is known about what is happening on the oceans, the safer all nations – and maritime interests – will be.

MDA developed before 9/11

He notes that MDA is nothing new and is not even a "post-9/11 concept". It dates back to the strategic thinking of the 1990s when then Commandant James Loy envisaged a threat by terrorist elements, including Al-Qaeda. "Now we want to meet those threats as far from shore as possible," he explains.

One element of MDA is the ability to track vessels further from shore. He voiced support for an electronic tracking system to identify and track vessels within 96 hours of US ports. The tracking scheme that is often referred to as the 2,000nm tracking programme is still being debated in the international arena.

"We have to work with port states and flag states to resolve issues like innocent passage in refining the proposal," Allen says. Among priorities in

safeguarding the seas, Allen says: "We must look at a worldwide threat." He stresses that port security is a major issue and points to vulnerabilities like the waterside threat to vessels inside ports. "Protecting the water is different from protecting the land. The water is ubiquitous."

Held in high regard by Congress

And action in that area will be swift as he promises that a new maritime security strategy will be developed for him to review within 90 days. Jay Grant, director of the Port Security Council, thinks highly of Allen and says the new commandant "will bring a new light to move port security forward."

Grant, also chief lobbyist for the American Association of Port Authorities, also points out that Allen is held in very high regard by US Congress and that can only help in funding maritime security needs.

Allen notes that the Coast Guard is now in a position where it must work well with numerous government entities to maximise efficiency in the war on terror and seagoing criminal behaviour.

He points to an already strong relationship with the US Navy in developing the National Fleet Policy and with partner agencies with DHS, like Customs & Border Protection, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Transportation Security Administration. Asked about recent issues in Coast Guard-FBI relations, he says: "We must all learn to work and play well together."

Mention of the FBI and the Justice Department raises the issue of charges that the US and the Coast Guard have been "criminalising seafarers". "We do not criminalise seafarers," he responds. "We criminalise illegal behaviour."

He says the Coast Guard would like nothing better than to have the shipping community police its own and abide by and enforce international conventions like MARPOL and ISPS: "All we would have to do then is to audit their successes to ensure compliance."

These are welcome words to Spyros Polemis, newly elected chairman of the International Chamber of Shipping, who looks forward to meeting and

NAME: Admiral Thad W Allen

AGE: 57

CURRENT POSITION: Commandant, US Coast Guard, as of 25 May

HOMETOWN:

Tucson, Arizona

PRESENT HOME:

Washington, DC

SCHOOLS:

US Coast Guard Academy, 1971

George Washington University, Masters of Public Administration

Sloan School of Management / Massachusetts Institute of Technology,

Masters of Science

PERSONAL:

Married to Pamela A Hess

Three grown children, two grandchildren

Son of a retired Coast Guard chief damage controlman

PASTIMES:

Reading, walking with his wife, spending time with his grandchildren

working with Allen. "I think the USCG is doing an excellent job of safeguarding shipping," he tells *Fairplay*, pledging to do all in his power to ensure that owners and operators do their part to "self-police" the industry.

To execute Allen's missions, the Coast Guard is going to need new ships and aircraft to replace the ageing cutters and helicopters and toward that end he pledged "ruthless execution" of the \$1Bn a year Deepwater Programme to "field a fleet".

But there's time for those daunting tasks next week. Today is relegated to the pageantry and tradition of the military maritime change of command ceremony, when after reading the President's order, Allen tells Collins: "Sir, I relieve you." And Collins says simply: "Sir, I stand relieved." **F**



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