

Coast Guard Expects New Deployable Group Operating By Next Summer



By Calvin Biesecker

A new Coast Guard command that would bring together the service's various specialized incident response and security teams into adaptive force packages is expected to be up and running with an initial capability by next summer, according to Commandant Adm. Thad Allen.

The new command would create a single force structure for "surge operations," Allen said in an interview with *Defense Daily* last Friday.

The Deployable Operations Group would mix and match elements of the service's Maritime Safety and Security Teams (MSST), hazardous material and oil spill response units, law enforcement detachments, port security units, Airborne Use of Force capabilities, and some of patrol boat capabilities, to be trained to respond to specific mission requirements, Allen said.

For example, Allen pointed out, the MSSTs, which were stood up post-9/11 to give Coast Guard quick response capabilities for rapid homeland security protection and response, are composed of various elements such as tactical law enforcement operators, boat crews and divers. Depending on the event, one or more components of an MSST can be mixed with elements of another specialized team or teams in a new package for a "more effective response," he said. "We'd put them together to have an economy of force and be more tailored to the incident we're dealing with."

To begin to hammer out the training program and doctrine for the adaptive force packages, Allen said some baseline mission scenarios would be developed to deploy, test and exercise against. This would let you know if the new force packages work and what gaps exist such as interoperability issues, he said.

"So you train to the mission and, when you're called on, you're ready to do it," Allen said.

Allen briefed Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff on the new force concept while he was being interviewed earlier this year to become the Coast Guard's new commandant. Allen, who was the Coast Guard's Atlantic Area Commander on 9/11, came up with the concept along with his counterpart at the Pacific Area Command, after the terrorist strikes. He said their proposal for an expeditionary command never went anywhere. Allen said his confidence in the concept was reinforced last fall during his experience as the Principal Federal Officer in charge of the response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, where he had the opportunity to see other DHS elements working together.

After he assumed command of the Coast Guard in late May, Allen got the ball rolling again.

Allen said he issued a basic charter for the new command which is being reviewed by Coast Guard staff. They're looking at resource issues and plan to begin briefings inside the Department of Homeland Security and the Bush administration, he added. Moreover, a transition team will also be established "that could allow us to bring this Deployable Operations Group on line by next summer," he said.

The command element would have an initial operating capability and then work toward a full operating capability, Allen said. Also, initially, the plan is to have the new group be resource neutral, he said.

"This is not a resource grab," Allen said. "It's a move to make us more effective. It's also susceptible to being done in phases." However, there may have to be some shifts in resources between various Coast Guard units, he said.

Once the Coast Guard demonstrates that the adaptive force structure works, then possibly the concept could be broadened to include operational elements of DHS, Allen said. However, Allen said he didn't want to get out in front of Chertoff and emphasized that his focus is on developing the capability within the Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard already works with other DHS elements such as Customs and Border Protection in interdicting illegal drug shipments and migrants attempting to enter the United States and its territories in the maritime environment. The Coast Guard also works with the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) at times. During post-Katrina operations, Coast Guard helicopter crews hovered above buildings and coordinated with ground-based FEMA Urban Search and Rescue teams, Allen said.

The Deployable Operations Group would be the third and final leg in "locking down the Coast Guard's force structure," Allen said. The service already has a mobile maritime force for patrol and interdiction in the ports and at sea, he said. The Deepwater acquisition is based on operational concepts for this, he added.

In 2004 the service created sector commands to unify its various commands that were operating in and around ports.

"If you look at it, what you have is fixed shore-based operations, maritime mobile operations and deployable surge operations embodied in those three force structures and that allows us to address what we call layered defense, looking at port security, littoral operations and maritime security," Allen said. "It's impossible to defend against a terrorist attack along 95,000 miles of coast line so you're always doing risk-based decision making...And by coming up with a coherent force structure for the Coast Guard that spans the different areas we have to operate in we think we'll be more effective."