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HURRICANE KATRINA

HOW THE COAST GUARD GETS IT RIGHT

Where did those orange helicopters come from, anyway? The story of the little agency that could

By **AMANDA RIPLEY** NEW ORLEANS

WIL MILAM, 39, IS A RESCUE swimmer for the U.S. Coast Guard in Kodiak, Alaska, which means he spends most of his time jumping out of helicopters to help fishermen who break bones and pilots who crash their private planes. "We're pretty much the area ambulance service," he says. Before he was dispatched to New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Milam had never been called out of Alaska for a mission and had never done urban search-and-rescue work. But like thousands of other personnel, he was brought to Louisiana to do what the Coast Guard does best: improvise wildly.

Milam made his first rescue late one night near a warehouse outside New Orleans. After dropping him into the black miasma below, his helicopter did something he had never seen in his entire 13-year career: it flew away—so that he could hear the cries for help. He looked around through his night-vision goggles and saw what looked like caskets—in fallen trees, on porches. Yes, they were caskets, dislodged from a nearby cemetery. That night Milam found a man and four dogs and helped hoist them all safely into the helicopter when it returned. The man's pig, however, Milam left behind. "No way I'm taking a pig. The pig will be O.K.," he says. And so it went for 11 days, with Milam experiencing such firsts as flying over a semitrailer sitting on the roof of a house, seeing alligators undulating in the water below and finding himself surrounded by four men with shotguns in a dark, empty hospital. (They were security guards, as it turned out, and just as frightened as he was.) "I'm like, man, they didn't teach me this in swimmer school."

In Katrina's aftermath, the Coast Guard rescued or evacuated more than 33,500 people, six times as many as it saved in all of 2004. The Coast Guard was saving lives before any other federal agency—despite the fact that almost half the local Coast Guard personnel lost their own homes in the hurricane. In decimated St. Bernard Parish east of New Orleans, Sheriff Jack Stephens says the Coast Guard was the only federal agency to provide any significant assistance for a full week after the storm. Coast Guard personnel helped his deputies

SAFE GUARD

After Katrina, the Coast Guard showed its stuff by rescuing 33,500 people, using helicopters to snatch the elderly trapped atop roofs and skiffs to prowl the flooded streets

FROM TOP: US COAST GUARD; USCG PA3 L.F. CHAMBERS

commandeer boats and rescue thousands. So last week, when two representatives from the U.S. Government Accountability Office came to ask how he would fix the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), he had his answer ready: "I would abolish it," he told them. "I'd blow up FEMA and ask the Coast Guard what it needs."

In one sense, that has already happened. After the implosion of FEMA director Michael Brown, President George W. Bush placed Coast Guard Vice Admiral Thad Allen in charge of the federal response to Katrina. Before Hurricane Rita even hit land, the Administration placed a Coast Guard rear admiral in charge of that recovery. These are essentially urban-planning jobs—not something men and women who spend much of their professional lives on water are exactly trained to do.

So how is it that an agency that is underfunded and saddled with aging equipment—and about the size of the New York City police department—makes disaster response look like just another job, not a quagmire? How did an organization that, like FEMA, had been subsumed by the soul-killing Department of Homeland Security (DHS), remain a place where people took risks? And perhaps most important, can any of these traits be bottled?

For all its competence, the Coast Guard gets little respect within the military. "Puddle pirates" is one of its gentler nicknames. With 39,400 active-duty personnel, the Coast Guard is tiny. It is the only armed service that resides outside the Pentagon, and although it has been involved in every major war since the Civil War, combat is not its primary mission.

In fact, the Coast Guard has no primary mission—and it may be its eclectic history that explains its success in dealing with Katrina. For 215 years, it has always had to manage a litany of unrelated chores. The Revenue Cutter Service was established by Alexander Hamilton to collect taxes from a brand new nation of patriot smugglers. When the officers were out at sea, they were told to crack down on piracy; while they were at it, they might as well rescue anyone in distress. They made their first drug bust in 1890. Over the years, the Coast Guard fought the maritime "rum wars" during Prohibition, saved tens of thousands of Cuban refugees and became the nation's lead oil-spill cleanup unit. Now the Coast Guard is supposed to protect the nation's 95,000 miles of coastline against terrorist attacks too.

The Coast Guard has always been, in a word, busy—whether during war or peace. "We are deployed every day," says Allen. "We fly every day. We respond to oil spills every day." Also, since the Coast Guard is the only military branch allowed to perform

law-enforcement duties, it is accustomed to engaging with civilians. In one day, a Coast Guard boat crew off of California might arrest as many people as it saves.

But perhaps the most important distinction of the Coast Guard is that it trusts itself. On the morning of 9/11, Allen, then commander of the Atlantic Area, was getting a physical in Portsmouth, Va. By the time he got back to the office, shortly after the second plane had hit the Twin Towers, a captain in New York had already closed his port. Another captain closed waterways around Baltimore and Washington. They didn't need to ask Allen for permission, and he, in turn, didn't need to ask his commandant for permission to position three large cutters in New York harbor.

That kind of decentralization is essential if a large organization is to move quickly, as any good CEO knows. But the rest of the government has been moving in the opposite direction, centralizing dozens of agencies into the giant DHS bureaucracy.

On the Gulf Coast, this autonomy and flexibility mattered well before Katrina hit. On Aug. 27, the day before the mayor of New Orleans ordered a mandatory evacuation, the Coast Guard began moving its personnel out of the region. Officers left helicopters and boats in a ring around the area so that they could move in behind the storm, no matter which direction it took. "We have extraordinary autonomy to move assets," explained Allen during a flyover of the Mississippi Gulf Coast region a few weeks after Katrina. "I don't think any other agency has the ability to do that."

Throughout the flooded streets of New Orleans, if Coast Guard boat crews lost radio communication, they still knew what to do. "We give extraordinary, life-and-death responsibilities to 2nd class petty officers," says former Coast Guard Commandant James Loy, now retired and a senior counselor at the Cohen Group, a Washington consulting firm. Anna Steel, 24, a Coast Guard reservist from St. Louis, Mo., began navigating her 16-ft. skiff through New Orleans neighborhoods three days after the storm hit. She and her crewman brought 35 people to dry land at a highway on-ramp marked, appropriately enough, Elysian Fields. As the coxswain, Steel had extensive training in piloting the boat, so she made the decisions. "When we're out on the boat, I'm in charge. Even if my crewman is a lieutenant, which way outranks me, he reports to me. I had that authority within my first two years in the Coast Guard."

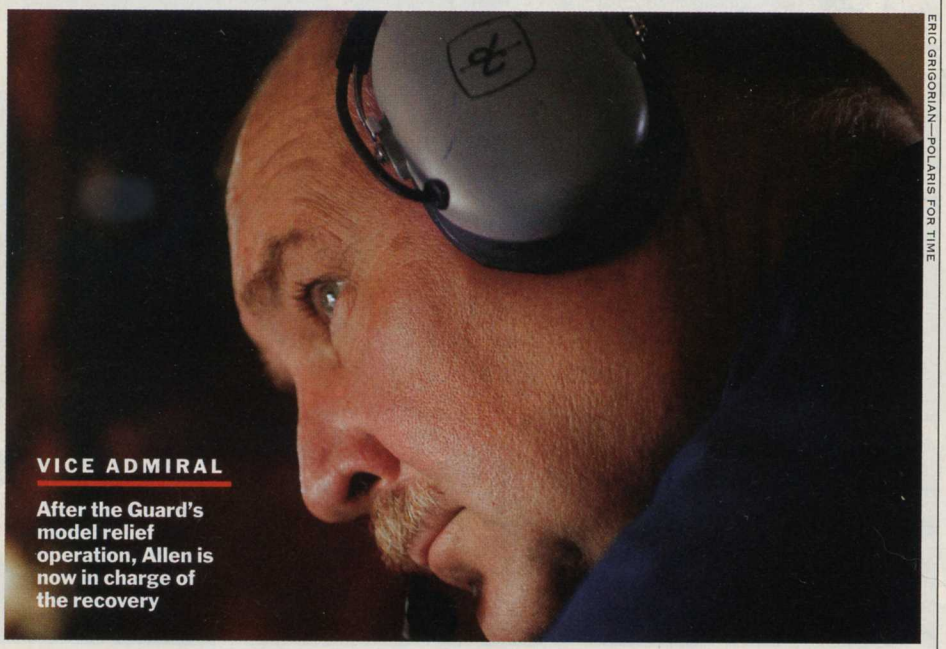
You can learn about the culture of an organization from the stories its members tell. One of the Coast Guard's most celebrated rescues was of the crew of the doomed oil tanker the *Pendleton* in 1952 off Massachusetts. In 60-ft. seas, during a snowstorm, Coast Guard officers managed to pile all 32 survivors onto a 36-ft. wooden lifeboat moments before the tanker capsized. But when the coxswain radioed his superiors for further direction, his commanders argued over the radio waves about what to do next. Instead of wasting precious time, the coxswain switched off the radio and made up his mind to head for shore. Everyone survived, and the Coast Guard crew received gold lifesaving medals. "There's no place to hide in the Coast Guard," says Rear Admiral Robert Duncan, commander of the Eighth Coast Guard District, which includes the Gulf Coast states. "So we end up with a culture that is not averse to taking measured risk."

Since 9/11, the Coast Guard has been given a heavy new burden of antiterrorism responsibilities—like protecting refineries, shipyards and bridges at the nation's 361 ports. When it was moved from the Department of Transportation to DHS in 2003, Coast Guard boosters like Senator Susan Collins of Maine made sure it retained all its functions. But, as with FEMA, there is always a risk that the new terrorism focus will detract from its traditional lifesaving role.

Last week, President Bush signed a DHS funding bill that includes $7.8 billion for the Coast Guard, $3 billion more than it received in 2001. But the agency—because of its small constituency and growing responsibilities—remains chronically underfunded. "The Coast Guard is a damn good building block, but you can't expect it to do what it did in Katrina on the current budget model it's on," says Stephen Flynn, a former Coast Guard commander who is now an expert in homeland security at the Council on Foreign Relations. "Its assets are falling apart," he says. Of the 41 major naval fleets in the world, the Coast Guard's is the 39th oldest, behind even Pakistan. It is in the middle of a massive, 25-year modernization project, but Flynn says that's too little, too late.

The truth is, even if the Coast Guard's budget doubled, the rest of the military—and thousands of other local, state and federal officials—would still have to do more, sooner, the next time a major catastrophe hits. So the Coast Guard's most valuable contribution to that effort may be as a model of flexibility, and most of all, spirit.

That's what first attracted Milam, the Coast Guard rescue swimmer from Alaska, to the Coast Guard. Before he joined, Milam was in the Navy. One day he and a friend took a small boat out into the ocean off San Diego. A wave flipped the boat, and it was the Coast Guard that came to rescue them. "I'm looking at the guy sitting in the door of the helicopter and I am thinking, man, what a cool job! I want that guy's job!" After 13 years, Milam has it, and he is still a true believer. "In the Navy, it was all about the mission. Practicing for war, training for war," he says. "In the Coast Guard, it was, take care of our people and the mission will take care of itself." ■



ERIC GRIGORIAN—POLARIS FOR TIME

VICE ADMIRAL

After the Guard's model relief operation, Allen is now in charge of the recovery

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