

Coast Guard Offloads More than 19,600 Pounds of Cocaine, Marijuana



The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Munro gather in formation behind seized contraband during a drug offload in Alameda, California, March 23, 2021. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 3rd Class Taylor Bacon*

ALAMEDA, Calif. – The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Munro (WMSL 755) offloaded approximately 8,200 pounds of seized cocaine and 11,450 pounds of marijuana March 23 at the ship's homeport at Coast Guard Base Alameda, the Coast Guard Pacific Area said in a release.

Prior to the Munro's arrival in Alameda, the crew transferred 12 detainees, approximately 9,200 pounds of cocaine and 2,150 pounds of marijuana to law enforcement officials in San Diego.

The drugs, in total worth an estimated \$330 million, were seized in international waters of the Eastern Pacific Ocean between January and March, representing 15 suspected drug smuggling vessel interdictions off the coasts of Mexico, Central and South America by the following Coast Guard and Navy ships:

The Coast Guard Cutter Munro (WMSL 755) crew was responsible for nine interdictions, seizing approximately 10,200 pounds of cocaine and 11,450 pounds of marijuana.

The Coast Guard Cutter Bear (WMEC 901) crew was responsible for two interdictions, seizing approximately 66 pounds of cocaine.

The Coast Guard Cutter Vigilant (WMEC 617) crew was responsible for one interdiction, seizing approximately 1,870 pounds of cocaine.

The Coast Guard Cutters Bear and Munro conducted a joint interdiction, seizing approximately 3,747 pounds of cocaine.

Coast Guard Law Enforcement Detachment 107 deployed aboard the USS Freedom (LCS 1) was responsible for two interdictions, seizing approximately 1,600 pounds of cocaine and 2,150 pounds of marijuana.

Video of the news conference can be viewed at <https://fb.watch/4pThfJ-raQ/>, and footage of the offload can be viewed and downloaded at <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/788115/coast-guard-offloads-more-than-19600-pounds-cocaine-marijuana-alameda-calif>

“National security cutters like Munro are national-level assets and are game changers for the United States government’s maritime interdiction capability,” said Vice Adm. Linda Fagan, the commander of Coast Guard Pacific Area. “As your Coast Guard, we use our unique capabilities and authorities as a military service and a law enforcement agency

to secure the nation's maritime border and to disrupt illegal activity of dangerous cartels. This offload demonstrates another successful cycle of justice."

"Transnational criminal organizations have not slowed down due to the pandemic, and the Coast Guard women and men continue to protect our nation on the frontlines," said Capt. Blake Novak, the commanding officer of the Munro. "Our crew intercepted a group of suspected smugglers, on average, every 90 hours for 45 days straight, seizing nearly 30,000 pounds of cocaine and marijuana valued at over \$330 million. Maintaining such a high level of performance was only possible because of a total team effort. This crew set the bar for excellence, and I am incredibly proud of all of them."

Munro is one of four national security cutters homeported in Alameda. These Legend class cutters are 418-feet long, 54-feet wide, and have a 4,600 long-ton displacement. They have a top speed in excess of 28 knots, a range of 12,000 nautical miles, endurance of up to 90 days and can hold a crew of nearly 150.

Coast Guard to Rename Training Center Wing after Arnold Palmer



Golfing great Arnold Palmer in his Coast Guard days. *U.S. COAST GUARD*

PETALUMA, Calif. – The Coast Guard announced plans to rename a training wing after golfing legend Arnold Palmer at Coast Guard Training Center Petaluma, the Coast Guard 11th District said in a March 23 release.

Training Center Petaluma plans to officiate the renaming of the Yeoman and Storekeeper “A” School wing of the Juliet Nichols Building in a ceremony later this year.

Palmer served with distinction as a yeoman in the Coast Guard from 1951 to 1953 and worked for the 9th Coast Guard District commander in Cleveland, Ohio.

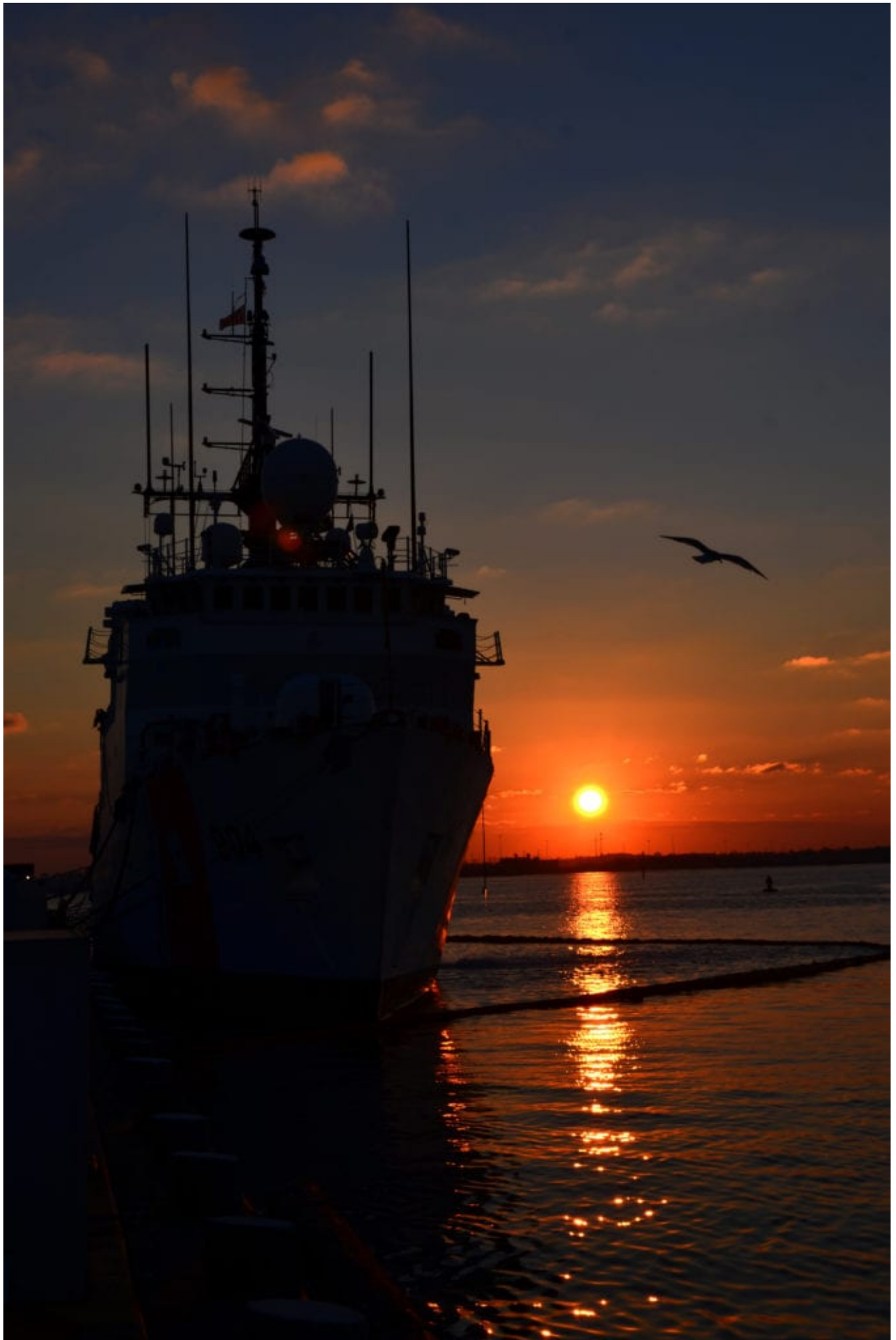
Palmer reportedly joined the Coast Guard after his college roommate was tragically killed in an automobile accident as a way to get away from how distraught he was over the loss of his friend.

“My dad said that the U.S. Coast Guard ‘made [him] a better person for the world,’” said Amy Palmer Saunders, chair of the

Arnold & Winnie Palmer Foundation. "He would be touched to know that others will be given the same opportunity to learn and grow in a space named for him, and my family and I are grateful to the Pennsylvania delegation, to members of the Coast Guard and to others who made this possible."

Located just west of the city of Petaluma, Training Center Petaluma is the Coast Guard's largest West Coast training center. The graduates are the latest chiefs, medics, storekeepers, yeoman, information system technicians, electronics technicians and operations specialists. Training Center Petaluma is also the home to the Coast Guard Leadership Development Center's Chief Petty Officer Academy.

Coast Guard Cutter Northland Returns from Gulf of Mexico Patrol



The Coast Guard 270-foot medium endurance cutter Northland lies in her berth at homeport, Coast Guard Base Portsmouth, Feb. 25, 2014. The Northland conducts search and rescue, law enforcement, homeland security, and defense operations missions in the Atlantic Ocean, Caribbean Sea, and Gulf of Mexico. *U.S. Coast Guard*

PORTSMOUTH, Va. – The Coast Guard Cutter Northland returned home March 22 to Portsmouth from a patrol in support of the Eighth Coast Guard District, the Coast Guard 5th District said in a March 23 release.

During the patrol, the crew of the Northland conducted daily law enforcement boardings and patrolled the waters for any illegal fishing boats or gear to ensure fair, safe, and sustainable practices.

The Northland crew embarked an MH-65 Dolphin helicopter aviation detachment for the patrol to assist in spotting vessels and targets of interest before launching the cutter small boats.

Prior to beginning patrol, the Northland crew underwent a training availability to test their ability to respond to a variety of shipboard scenarios, such as engine room fires and defense operations. Immediately following the inspection, the Northland crew sailed to Pensacola, Florida, where they successfully completed a biennial evaluation of shipboard helicopter operations.

Upon leaving Pensacola, the cutter patrolled the Maritime Boundary Line, between the United States and Mexico. Once on scene, the crew began fisheries enforcement, deterring illegal fishing and ensuring compliance with federal laws.

Constant surveillance led to the interdiction of one vessel illegally fishing in U.S. waters and the retrieval of miles of fishing gear intentionally left behind by foreign fishermen. The Northland's presence and enforcement of laws ensured the safety, fairness, and longevity of fisheries throughout the

Gulf of Mexico.

“I continue to be impressed with the drive and adaptability that the crew demonstrates on a daily basis,” said Cmdr. Patricia Bennett, commanding officer of Coast Guard Cutter Northland. “I am thankful for the crew’s desire for mission excellence, and also grateful for the Northland being afforded the opportunity to conduct domestic fisheries operations. It is a mission that helps ensure the safety of fishermen and helps sustain a natural marine resource with global implications. Halting illegal fishing through the combination of effective policy and enforcement actions is the best way to prevent the detrimental impact to coastal communities, nations reliant upon seafood as a primary source of protein, and the entire oceanic ecosystem.”

The Northland is a 270-foot medium-endurance cutter that routinely deploys in support of counter-drug, alien migrant interdiction, fisheries, search and rescue and homeland security missions.

**Coast Guard, CBP Stop
Suspected Human Smuggling
Venture Off West Palm Beach**



A Coast Guard Station Lake Worth Inlet law enforcement team and Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations law enforcement team interdict a 29-foot vessel with two Bahamians, seven Jamaicans, two Haitians and four Dominican Republicans aboard March 17, 2021 approximately 5 miles off West Palm Beach, Florida. Some passengers were brought ashore for further investigation of potential criminal charges by Homeland Security Investigations while the remaining passengers were repatriated to the Bahamas. U.S. COAST GUARD

MIAMI – A Coast Guard Station Lake Worth Inlet law enforcement team and Customs and Border Protection Air and Marine Operations (CBP AMO) law enforcement teams interdicted a 29-foot vessel with 16 people aboard Wednesday approximately 5 miles off West Palm Beach, the Coast Guard 7th District said in a March 19 release.

Coast Guard Robert Yered arrived on scene and a crew brought all the vessel occupants: two Bahamians, seven Jamaicans, two Haitians and four Dominican Republicans, aboard the ship. Some passengers were brought ashore for further investigation of potential criminal charges by Homeland Security

Investigations. The remaining passengers were repatriated to the Bahamas Friday.

A CBP AMO aircraft notified Coast Guard Station Miami watchstanders of the suspected smuggling vessel at approximately 12:20 a.m.

“Wednesday’s case spotlights the great work done every day by Air and Marine and our DHS partners,” stated John Priddy, executive director of the AMO Southeast Region. “With our integrated operations, we get the job done and protect our homeland.”

Since Oct. 1, 2020, Coast Guard crews have interdicted 78 Bahamians, eight Jamaicans, 182 Haitians, 194 Dominican Republicans compared to fiscal year 2020, where crews interdicted 194 Bahamians, four Jamaicans, 418 Haitians and 1,117 Dominican Republicans.

Once aboard a Coast Guard cutter, all migrants receive food, water, shelter and basic medical attention. Throughout the interdiction, Coast Guard crew members were equipped with personal protective equipment to minimize potential exposure to any possible case of COVID-19. There were no migrants in these cases reported to have any COVID-19 related symptoms.

Cutter Seneca Returns Home Following 42-Day Mid-Atlantic Patrol



Coast Guard Cutter Seneca approaches the Coast Guard Cutter Angela McShan for a towing exercise in the Mid-Atlantic Ocean in March 2021. U.S. COAST GUARD

PORTSMOUTH, Va. – The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Seneca returned to their homeport in Portsmouth on March 13 after a 42-day Mid-Atlantic patrol, the Coast Guard 5th District said in a March 19 release.

The ship's law enforcement teams boarded commercial fishing vessels from the coast of New Jersey to Florida in support of the Coast Guard's mission of protecting vital living marine resources. The Coast Guard Cutter Seneca also partnered with aircrews from Coast Guard Air Station Elizabeth City, North Carolina, to help train and maintain proficiency in shipboard helicopter operations.

The Seneca's law enforcement teams boarded over 24 U.S.-flagged fishing vessels, ensuring compliance with safety, fisheries and environmental regulations. The Seneca crew also worked with the Coast Guard Cutter Angela McShan and the Coast Guard Cutter Lawrence Lawson, two fast-response cutters

homeported in Cape May, New Jersey, by conducting joint law enforcement operations and fueling at sea evolutions.

These operations are integral to protecting the \$5.6 billion commercial fishing industry, a major economic driver throughout the East Coast, according to the release. Through fisheries enforcement operations, Seneca crews deterred illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing while standing by to answer any calls of distress to members of the commercial fishing industry, which is comprised of more than 39,000 fishermen in the United States.

“This has been a fast-paced and rewarding patrol,” said Cmdr. Matthew Rooney, commanding officer of the Seneca. “The crew did amazing work this patrol. The 30 at-sea boardings promoted safety and let the fishing fleet know the Coast Guard is out here and ready to assist if needed. Their outstanding results and positive attitudes set the standard for Coast Guard operations in the Mid-Atlantic.”

The Seneca is a 270-foot medium-endurance cutter with a crew compliment of 14 officers and 86 enlisted personnel. The cutter’s primary missions include search and rescue, living marine resources, illegal drug interdictions, counter narcotics, migrant interdictions, ensuring the safety of life at sea, and enforcing international and domestic maritime laws in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

**Coast Guard Commissions
Newest National Security**

Cutter



Fellow Aviators pay tribute to the USCGC Stone (WMSL- 758) during the commissioning ceremony at Coast Guard Base Charleston, S.C., Mar. 19, 2021. The cutter's namesake is the late Cmdr. Elmer "Archie" Fowler Stone, who in 1917 became the Coast Guard's first aviator and, two years later, was one of two pilots to successfully make a transatlantic flight in a Navy seaplane landing in Portugal. *U.S. Coast Guard / Petty Officer 3rd Class Vincent Moreno*

NORTH CHARLESTON, S.C., – The USCGC Stone (WMSL 758) became the Coast Guard's newest national security cutter during a commissioning ceremony March 19 at Coast Guard Base Charleston, the Coast Guard Atlantic Area said in a release.

Adm. Karl Schultz, commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, presided over the ceremony. Laura Cavallo, the grandniece of the ship's namesake and ship's sponsor, was also in attendance.

The cutter's name comes from Cmdr. Elmer "Archie" Fowler Stone, who in 1917 became the Coast Guard's first aviator and, two years later, was the pilot of the NC-4, a Navy airplane, which in 1919 was the first aircraft to accomplish a transatlantic flight, landing in Portugal.

The Stone is the ninth legend-class national security cutter in the Coast Guard's fleet. The Legend class national security cutters can execute the most challenging national security missions, including support to U.S. combatant commanders.

They are 418 feet in length, 54 feet in beam, and 4,600 long tons in displacement. They have a top speed of more than 28 knots, a range of 12,000 nautical miles, an endurance of up to 90 days, and can hold a crew of up to 150. These new cutters are replacing the high-endurance Hamilton-class cutters in service since the 1960s.

The Stone launched Oct. 4, 2019, for sea trials. Following sea trials, the crew conducted its first voyage, Operation Southern Cross, a patrol to the South Atlantic supporting counter illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Taking the newly accepted cutter on its shakedown cruise, Stone's crew covered over 21,000 miles (18,250 nautical miles) over 68 days. A mutual interest in combating IUUF activities offered an opportunity to collaborate for Stone's crew. They interacted with partners in Guyana, Brazil, Uruguay and Portugal, strengthening relationships and laying the foundation for increased partnerships to counter illicit maritime activity.

Ship commissioning is the act or ceremony of placing a ship in active service.

Coast Guard Cutter Douglas Munro Returns Home from Final patrol



The Coast Guard Cutter Douglas Munro (WHEC 724) is pictured during their last Bering Sea patrol, in which the crew conducted boarding evolutions of the fishing fleet and were available to respond to search and rescue cases in March 2021. The Douglas Munro is the last operational 378-foot Secretary class cutter and will officially be decommissioned on April 24, 2021. U.S. Coast Guard courtesy photo.

KODIAK, Alaska – The crew aboard Coast Guard Cutter Douglas Munro, the service's last operational 378-foot, high endurance cutter, returned home to Kodiak, Alaska, on March 13, following a 49-day deployment in the Bering Sea, the Coast Guard 17th District said in a March 17 release.

While deployed, the crew of the Douglas Munro and its embarked MH-65 helicopter aviation detachment from Air Station Kodiak safeguarded the \$13.9 billion Alaskan fishing industry and provided search and rescue coverage in an area spanning 890,000 square miles. The crew conducted multiple fisheries boardings, ensuring compliance with commercial fishing vessel regulations that ensure crew safety and the sustainability of fish stocks.

In addition to the operational challenges the crew faced in the Bering Sea, the COVID-19 pandemic required the crew to abide by strict health protection precautions and COVID testing regimens prior to the start of their deployment. While making a logistics stop in Dutch Harbor the crew received their first doses of the COVID-19 vaccinations.

"This has been an extremely exciting and rewarding patrol as it is the end of an era for not only this cutter, but also for all the 378s that have served the Coast Guard since 1967," said Capt. Riley Gatewood, the Douglas Munro's commanding officer. "The legacy of Signzman First Class Douglas Munro lives on due to the hard work put forth by the many crew members who spent time away from loved ones to accomplish Coast Guard missions aboard Douglas Munro. It is a great honor and privilege to serve as Commanding Officer of the Coast Guard's last 378-foot, high endurance cutter."

Commissioned Sept. 27, 1971, Douglas Munro was named in honor of Signzman First Class Douglas A. Munro, the U.S. Coast Guard's only Medal of Honor recipient, killed during the Guadalcanal Campaign of World War II on that same date in 1942. The ship is scheduled to be decommissioned later this year. Douglas Munro's legacy will continue with the National Security Class Cutter, Coast Guard Cutter Munro, homeported in Alameda, California.

Cutter Valiant Returns Home after 26-Day Law-Enforcement Patrol



The Coast Guard Cutter Valiant crew returns to homeport Wednesday, Oct. 3, 2018, at Naval Station Mayport, Florida. The Valiant crew returned to homeport after a six-week counter-drug patrol in the Caribbean. *U.S. Coast Guard / Petty Officer 3rd Class Ryan Dickinson*

JACKSONVILLE, Fla.— The USCGC Valiant (WMEC-621) crew returned home to Naval Station Mayport March 16 after completing a 26-day patrol conducting law enforcement operations in the Caribbean Sea, the Coast Guard 7th District said in a release.

Coast Guard Cutter Valiant patrolled over 4,600 nautical miles in the Caribbean Sea, conducting counter-narcotics operations in support of Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S), Coast Guard District 7 and Coast Guard Sector San Juan, Puerto Rico.

While preparing for flight operations training with Coast Guard Air Station Borinquen, Puerto Rico, Valiant received information about a potential target of interest in the Mona Pass from a maritime patrol aircraft. Valiant shifted gears from training to law enforcement and interdicted a 16-foot go-fast style vessel, seizing over 520 pounds of cocaine, valued at over \$8.8 million, and apprehending three suspected narcotics traffickers.

Valiant also partnered with the USS Wichita (LCS 13), to safely transfer nine suspected narcotics traffickers and 132 additional pounds of cocaine for prosecution in the United States. The joint team ensured the safe transfer of all suspected traffickers, evidence, and narcotics to the United States for future prosecution.

Valiant's patrol started with a training availability cycle. However, the COVID-19 pandemic continued to present challenges including limited port calls and the need to completely isolate for 14 days to ensure the crew's health and safety before getting underway after several COVID-19 positive cases. Additionally, Valiant had to overcome a variety of mechanical issues. However, by partnering with Coast Guard maintenance support teams stationed in San Juan, Puerto Rico and deployable technical experts, Valiant's team of technical experts was able to execute repairs and continue on the mission.

"This was an extremely challenging patrol for team Valiant and I could not be more proud of the entire crew to overcome every obstacle and ultimately have several operational successes," said Cmdr. Jeff Payne, Valiant's commanding officer. "Our

friends and families back home also deserve much of the credit for our success. While only underway for 26 days, Valiant's patrol truly started on 25 January when we began the training cycle. That was followed by a variety of mechanical and pandemic issues requiring both the crew and our families to constantly adjust and find solutions. However, we overcame each challenge, teamed with our Department of Defense counterparts, and ultimately executed textbook missions protecting our shores and nation."

The Valiant is a multi-mission 210-foot medium-endurance cutter. Missions include search and rescue, maritime law enforcement, marine environmental protection, homeland security and national defense operations.

Ex-Navy Helos Providing Folding Rotors, Tails for Cutter-Deploying H-60 Helos



A crew prepares to power down a Coast Guard MH-60T Jayhawk helicopter after landing at Sector Columbia River, Oregon, in 2012. The service is shifting the focus of some of its MH-60T fleet to use on board its large cutters. *U.S. Coast Guard / Petty Officer 3rd Class Nate Littlejohn*

ARLINGTON, Va. – The U.S. Coast Guard is shifting the focus of some of its MH-60T Jayhawk helicopter fleet to use on board its large cutters and is using components from some ex-U.S. Navy H-60 Seahawk helicopters to make that possible.

The Coast Guard operates a fleet of 45 Sikorsky-built MH-60Ts from eight air stations for medium-range missions that include search, rescue, drug interdiction and law enforcement. They can operate from the decks of the service's larger cutters but because they do not have folding tail rotors and tail booms, they cannot be hangered inside the superstructure of the larger cutters, such as the Legend-class national security cutters, future Argus-class offshore patrol cutters and the future class of Polar Security Cutters.

In his March 11 State-of-the-Coast Guard address, Coast Guard

Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz said the service will convert some MH-60Ts with folding rotors and tail booms to enable them to operate from the larger cutters and give the cutters a longer reach with their embarked helicopters. Currently the Coast Guard deploys the smaller MH-65D/E Dolphin helicopters on its larger cutters.

"Two weeks ago, in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, I observed our first MH-60T Jayhawk outfitted with Blade-fold/ Tail-fold capability that will enable deployment aboard National Security Cutters, and our future Polar Security and Offshore Patrol Cutters," Schultz said.

The commandant noted the range and endurance of the MH-60T would serve well on a polar security deployment to Antarctica, particularly for treaty inspections.

The Coast Guard has long used parts and structures from ex-Navy H-60 helicopters to help sustain its MH-60T fleet and even be rebuilt into MH-60Ts. Beginning in 2005, the Coast Guard Air Logistics Center (ALC) has converted six ex-Navy SH-60Fs to MH-60Ts. The ALC also has "overhauled and modified another SH-60F hull and four HH-60Hs (by July 2020) as part of the plan to retain the aircraft and extend the service life," said Tom Kaminski, an expert on Coast Guard aviation. "They also are reactivating the mechanisms that permit the tail to be folded.

"The service acquired 65 retired SH-60F and HH-60Hs from the U.S. Navy and a number of the Seahawk airframes were stripped by the ALC in preparation for conversion, " Kaminski said. "The plan is for a mix of reworked low-time hulls and the new production hulls from Sikorsky."

Schultz also said in his address that MH-60Ts will replace MH-65s at two air stations.

"This year we will transition Air Station Borinquen in Puerto Rico from a Dolphin to Jayhawk unit, adding additional reach

and contingency response capability to the Eastern Caribbean, not to mention a likely land-based Aviation Use of Force capability,” he said. “Air Station New Orleans will be the next to transition.”

Coast Guard, Navy Help Rescue Cold-Stunned Turtles, Return Them to Warmer Waters



Command Master Chief Eric Kinnaman rescues a cold-stunned green sea turtle from the waterfront at Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi. Sailors, civilians and family members worked with the Texas Parks and Wildlife department and the

National Park Service to transport the turtles to safety. The NAS Corpus Christi environmental team lead the multi-agency wildlife protection effort and rescued more than 600 turtles.
U.S. Navy / Capt. Christopher Jason

Texas recently experienced record-breaking cold temperatures, causing the largest cold-stunning event for sea turtles in the state's history. As the water temperature dropped to the mid-30s Fahrenheit, thousands of turtles were found stranded on beaches or floating in the water.

In the shallow bays and inlets of the Laguna Madre next to Padre Island, water temperatures can change rapidly. As reptiles, turtles are cold-blooded and cannot regulate their body temperature. Cold-stunned turtles experience hypothermia when the sea water drops to about 50°F or below, and become lethargic and unable to swim.

According to Sea Turtle Inc., a non-profit organization on South Padre Island, "cold-stun events happen when the water gets too cold for sea turtles to maintain their body temperature. As a result, the turtles are awake but unable to move or swim. If not rescued, while they are awake and alive, the turtles will drown from being unable to lift their head to draw their breath."

Fortunately, the Coast Guard and Navy were ready, willing and able to join in the effort with a team of organizations to help the turtles.

A consortium of organizations including the Turtle Survival Alliance, Sea Turtles, Inc., the Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville, the Texas Sealife Center, Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife and the National Park Service make up the South Padre Island Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network, which works to rescue and care for cold-stunned turtles. While the area has experienced cold weather before, the February 2021 cold weather event was unprecedented. With 7,000 or more turtles knocked out by the frigid waters, ranging in size from

a few pounds to more than 400 pounds. The rescuers were overwhelmed.

Active-duty Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen pitched in, including student pilots for Naval Air Station Corpus Christi. Volunteers also included Navy civilian employees, retirees, spouses and family members.

NAS Corpus Christi and Coast Guard Sector Corpus Christi, like many military installations, are used to encountering wildlife suffering from severe weather. But this 2021 event has resulted in thousands of turtles stupefied by the cold. It is remarkable that so few of them died, but without the intervention of the Navy, Coast Guard and others, the toll would have been much higher.

Capt. Christopher Jason, the commanding officer of Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, used his kayak to paddle out to the turtles and pull them out of the water. Turtles were kept in a hanger and later moved to a Defense Logistics Agency temperature-controlled warehouse to recover.

The rescues started with a base resident wanting to help a couple of injured birds. It turned into a large-scale operation involving dozens of volunteers rescuing more than 1,200 threatened sea turtles, at the same time as many of those volunteers did not have heat or water because of the unusually cold winter storm.

"The scale of the effort was unprecedented," said Biji Pandisseril, NASCC environmental director. "Usually, about 20 to 30 turtles are rescued here after a cold snap."

U.S. Coast Guard Rescue swimmers from Air Station Corpus Christi swam through rough and cold water to reach turtles far away from the shore. Petty Officer 3rd Class Will Groskritz and Petty Officer 2nd Class Russell Grizzard brought 60 turtles to safety in one day. The next day, Grizzard and Petty Officer 1st Class Rob Rendon saved another 40 to 50 turtles.

Responding to cold stun events is one of Sea Turtle Inc.'s ongoing rescue and rehabilitation efforts. For example, Sea Turtle Inc. has released over 55,000 sea turtle hatchlings into the Gulf of Mexico, and each year helps with any cold-stunned turtles that are found. But, with more rescued turtles coming in the Sea Turtle Inc.'s facility could handle. The rescued turtle filled the facility to capacity, with many turtles placed in children's play pools. A makeshift rescue center was established at the South Padre Island Convention Center and Visitors Bureau.

In addition to the turtles being affected by the cold, their rescuers also had to contend with power outages and water shortages of their own as the cold snap surprised Texans.

Aerospace Company SpaceX donated a large power generator from their Boca Chica launch facility in Brownsville to provide electricity to the Sea Turtles Inc. facility, which already had hatchlings and other turtles being cared for. The power helped to keep the water in facility's tanks warm enough for the turtles to survive.

"This event had the potential to be devastating to both the sea turtle population and our hospital and residents. We prepare for cold stun events, but to respond as efficiently as we have although the additional challenge of no power speaks volumes about the passion and commitment of the Sea Turtle Inc staff and the Rio Grande Valley community," said Wendy Knight, executive director of Sea Turtle Inc.



Volunteers pose with rescued green sea turtles at Naval Air Station (NAS) Corpus Christi, Texas. Sailors, civilians and family members worked with the Texas Parks and Wildlife department and the National Park Service to transport the turtles to safety. *U.S. Navy*

Unique ecosystem

Dr. Donna Shaver, chief of the division of sea turtle science and recovery with the National Park Service at Padre Island National Seashore, is the Texas coordinator of the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network.

Shaver and her team were not completely unprepared. Back in October, Shaver, along with Texas State Aquarium and U.S. Coast Guard representatives, held a tabletop exercise to discuss what the response to a mass cold-stunning event such as this would look like. Because of the planning and preparation of that exercise, rescue, rehabilitation, and release of these animals was swift and effective.

Shaver said the February cold snap was the coldest event since 1895, when a cold-stunning event was thought to have decimated the Green Sea Turtle population in Texas. She called it the “perfect storm” for cold study.

Shaver explained that the Laguna Madre, the salt water lagoon between mainland Texas and Padre Island, with lush sea grasses and algae, is a prime habitat for the juvenile green turtles, which represent the vast majority of the cold-stunned turtles.

Once-numerous, the green sea turtle is today a threatened species in Texas. Considered a delicacy, there was once a large commercial fishery harvesting turtles in the area. “This used to be a thriving population in Texas until it was decimated in the late 1800s. It’s rebuilding, but now needs our help with these rescues,” Shaver said.

At about 125 miles long, Laguna Madre is one of the few hypersaline lagoon systems in the world, meaning it is saltier than most seawater. There isn’t much inflow of fresh water or rainwater, and circulation with the Gulf of Mexico is limited. Laguna Madre is one of the most productive estuarine systems and a valuable habitat for wildlife. It is protected by Padre Island, the longest stretch of undeveloped barrier island in the world, and there are only a few channels that allow access to open water. The precipitous decline of the temperatures, how long it stayed cold, and the depth of the cold water spelled trouble for the trapped turtles.

The water temperature can change temperature rapidly, and sea turtles swimming in Laguna Madre may not have had enough time to swim out of to the deeper, warmer waters of the Gulf of Mexico before becoming cold stunned.

Rehabilitation is fairly straight forward, Shaver said. “The first step is to bring in them in out of the elements and gradually warm up – but not too quickly – and then determine

which ones are still alive, because we can't tell for many of these turtles."

"When they start to move around, we can put them in the water, let them expel some gas, and give them a swim test. Then we wait until the Gulf of Mexico waters when the waters are warm enough so we can release them there," Shaver said. "We don't want to release them back into the Laguna Madre, because they could become cold-stunned again."

"Working with our partners in the Texas State Aquarium and Texas Game Wardens to release these animals back into the wild is a surreal experience," said Coast Guard Ensign Austin Sawicki. "Getting to play a small part in keeping the green sea turtle population safe is a very rewarding experience."

Coast Guard Sector Corpus Christi and Station Port Aransas crewmembers assisted partner organizations to release the rehabilitated sea turtles back into the Gulf of Mexico in areas where the water was at least 55 degrees Fahrenheit were selected.