Coast Guard Cutter Alert Returns Home Following Counter-Drug Patrol, $83 Million Worth of Cocaine Seized

ASTORIA, Ore. – The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Alert returned home Feb. 1 following a 60-day counter-drug patrol in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, seizing more than $83 million worth of cocaine during the deployment, the Coast Guard Pacific area said in a Feb. 4 release.

The crew interdicted two suspected drug smuggling vessels, yielding more than 5,700 pounds of seized cocaine while patrolling international waters in support of Joint Interagency Task Force-South. Seven suspected drug traffickers were apprehended during the two interdictions.

The Alert crew received support from the U.S. Navy, Customs and Border Protection and Coast Guard maritime patrol aircrews, who provided the cutter with reconnaissance and over watch leading up to and during the interdictions.

“Coast Guard men and women operating under Joint Interagency Task Force-South, a U.S. Southern Command component, use military hardware and law enforcement authority to interdict smuggling vessels and bring the suspects to justice,” said Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz. “This disrupts key funding sources for these dangerous criminal networks and diminishes their influence in the Western Hemisphere. Aviation forces from the U.S. Navy, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, and others all support this crucial effort.”

A Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Tactical Squadron (HITRON) aircrew and an MH-65 dolphin helicopter from Jacksonville, Florida, deployed aboard Alert throughout the patrol to assist the cutter's boarding teams during the interdictions. When not in pursuit of suspect vessels, the HITRON team helped qualify multiple Alert crewmembers during training evolutions launching and landing helicopters from the cutter's flight deck while underway.

Deployed since early December, Alert's crew spent the holidays at sea. Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Jason M. Vanderhaden called the cutter to speak with crew members.

"We are fortunate to have such a high-spirited crew, happily celebrating Christmas and New Year's Eve together, at sea for 32 days between liberty stops," said Cmdr. Tobias Reid, Alert's commanding officer. "Between the holidays, two very interesting smuggling cases and our equator crossing ceremony, we had a very full and satisfying patrol. But, above all, we are thankful for the incredible generosity from the Astoria, Warrenton/Hammond and Seaside communities, who provide such tremendous support to our families while we were on patrol."

Commissioned in 1969, Alert is one of 14 remaining 210-foot reliance-class medium-endurance cutters built for the Coast Guard and one of three reliance-class cutters stationed on the West Coast. The cutter and crew perform search and rescue, living marine resource and environmental protection, and counter-drug missions throughout the Pacific Ocean from the U.S.-Canadian border to south of the Galapagos Islands. The fleet of aging medium-endurance cutters are operating beyond the original service lifespan and are becoming increasingly more expensive to maintain and operate.

The Coast Guard will be phasing out medium-endurance cutters with the addition of the 360-foot offshore patrol cutter (OPC). Acquisition of OPCs is one of the Coast Guard's highest investment priorities. The OPC will provide a capability

bridge between the 418-foot national security cutter, which patrols the open ocean, and the 154-foot fast response cutter, which serves closer to shore. The OPCs will feature state-of-the-art technology to meet the service’s long-term need for cutters capable of deploying independently or as part of task groups to conduct law enforcement, search and rescue, homeland security, and defense missions. The first OPC is scheduled for delivery in 2021.

The OPC will provide the tools to effectively enforce federal laws, secure our maritime borders, disrupt transnational criminal organizations and respond to 21st century threats,” said Schultz. “OPCs will be the backbone of the Coast Guard’s strategy to project and maintain an offshore presence.”