

# The Coast Guard's Own COVID-19 Challenges



Masked members of the cutter James crew and Commandant Adm. Karl L. Schultz (front, center), along with interagency partners, stand among interdicted narcotics at Port Everglades, Florida, on June 9. U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 3rd Class Brandon Murray

All of the U.S. armed forces have been heavily impacted by the novel coronavirus – perhaps none more acutely than the U.S. Coast Guard.

A service focused on activities such as rescuing stranded boaters, apprehending criminals and boarding vessels for inspection has a lot of the human-to-human contact that everyone is trying to limit due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the service is having to walk a tightrope these days.

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Coast Guard spokesperson Lt. Cmdr. Brittany Panetta told *Seapower* that the sea service is working hard to properly balance the safety of Coast Guardsmen with continuing operations that are entirely necessary.

The Coast Guard ramped up counter-drug operations in support of U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) following an April 1 presidential directive, as the pandemic began to take hold worldwide.

In the meantime, the service has formed a coronavirus coordination team (CCT) that is working to improve productivity, share information and remove “unnecessary burdens” to ensure “mission readiness for Coast Guard personnel and their families,” Panetta said.

## **Now's No Time for the Coast Guard to Lower Its Guard**

As many governments stateside relax measures during the pandemic – even in several places where case numbers are skyrocketing – there is no timeline in the Coast Guard for easing mitigation measures due to COVID-19. In fact, the service is taking an aggressive approach to ensure Coast Guard personnel follow all guidelines when it comes to the virus and personally do their part to stop the spread, Panetta said.

“In [off-duty risk management], we expect members to employ a similar risk-based decision approach to off-duty behavior,” reads a July 1 directive posted on the Coast Guard website. “This health care crisis is not over, and the Coast Guard is not immune to the increasing COVID-19 cases occurring across the nation.”

*“You’re going to have to interact with [people from interdicted vessels], and you don’t have a good idea of their medical history.”*

*Capt. Jeffrey Randall, commanding officer of the cutter James*

That means all personnel are expected to “carefully consider” the risks of engaging in certain activities. Specifically, the Coast Guard should consider three fundamental COVID-19-related risk criteria: the physical location of the activity (indoors is a greater risk), the number and expected behavior of others at that location (proper spacing and mask-wearing) and the duration of time in close contact of others (contact that is longer than 10 minutes and within 6 feet is a high risk).

## **Interdicting People Who Are Possibly Infected**

Capt. Jeffrey Randall, commanding officer of the Legend-class national security cutter James, told *Seapower* in an interview that his ship spends about 70 to 90 days at sea twice per year, and the most recent trip departed in early April and

returned about 65 days later. The crew did a few stops, but just anchored off the coasts of Colombia, Ecuador, and Panama and avoided port visits as a COVID-19 mitigation measure.

The ship was involved in counter-narcotics work, which always carries a risk of virus exposure because the crew has to interact with people on vessels from places unknown who are suspected of running drugs.

"You're going to have to interact with them, and you don't have a good idea of their medical history," Randall said.

"So, we have processes in place. When we go to send a boarding party to do an inspection of a vessel, they're wearing masks, gloves, long sleeves, and sunglasses or eyeglasses. Then once we stop the vessel, we're going to ask some questions and observe for visible symptoms, then we'll conduct a boarding of the vessel with personal protective equipment on."

Once the boarding party returns, they have a team that decontaminates the weapons, body armor and the people themselves. "All of their stuff stays on the outside of the skin of the ship," Randall said.



Coast Guard Cutter Tern crew members transfer a cruise ship Grand Princess passenger in her mid-70s and her husband to EMS personnel awaiting at Coast Guard Sector San Francisco on March 7. U.S. COAST GUARD / Petty Officer 3rd Class Taylor Bacon

The crew has had risky encounters, coming across two separate groups of detainees who ended up testing positive for COVID-19. Fortunately, because of the processes on board, nobody from the crew came down with the illness.

But there's always risk. Even if the crew does everything right on ship, there's still the question of how they handle themselves after a deployment. That's why the Coast Guard also implements safety measures such as a restriction of movement for 14 days prior, limiting the crew to only the most

essential activities like going to the grocery store. The crew of the James is tested for COVID-19 before the ship departs.

“They basically have a self-isolation order,” Randall said, adding that the crew aims to finish all work requirements at least two weeks before deployment to limit the exposure of the crew during that critical period.

COVID-19 hasn’t limited operations but has crews have to be more methodical. The James also has a team of eight people who deal exclusively with detainees and are in a separate berthing area of the cutter.