USCGC Bertholf Returns Home following 77-day Counter-Narcotic Patrol, $14M Worth of Cocaine Seized



Crew from the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf (WMSL 750) inspect a low-profile vessel while conducting law enforcement operations in the Eastern Pacific Ocean, Oct. 18, 2022. *U.S. COAST GUARD / Chief Petty Officer Oliver Fernander*

ALAMEDA, Calif. – The U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf (WMSL 750) and crew returned to Alameda, Dec. 3, after traveling over 18,000 nautical miles during a 77-day counter-narcotic patrol throughout the Eastern Pacific Ocean, the Coast Guard Pacific Area said in a release.

Bertholf’s crew conducted multiple boardings of suspected drug-smuggling vessels while patrolling international waters off the coasts of Central and South America supporting Joint Interagency Task Force-South. The boardings led to the detainment of multiple suspected drug smugglers and the interdiction of more than 1,050 pounds of cocaine.

The Bertholf crew offloaded the seized cocaine and more than 4,000 pounds of marijuana that was interdicted by the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Campbell (WMEC 909), worth a combined total of more than $18 million in San Diego.

A Coast Guard Helicopter Interdiction Squadron (HITRON) MH-65E Dolphin helicopter and aircrew from Jacksonville, Florida, augmented Bertholf’s crew during the patrol. HITRON crews deploy aboard cutters to interdict vessels suspected of illicit smuggling throughout drug transit zones across the Eastern Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean.

The largest interdiction during the patrol was a joint effort between the Bertholf and the El Salvadorian Coast Guard. The crews worked together to interdict a 60-foot low-profile vessel.

During the patrol, the Bertholf’s crew also worked with Costa Rican counterparts to interdict a vessel that was suspected of being a supply vessel for go-fasts carrying excess fuel and parts.

In addition to law enforcement operations, Bertholf’s crew hosted the U.S. ambassador to Ecuador and multiple high-ranking Ecuadorian officials during a port call in Manta, Ecuador.

“It was a great honor to host Ambassador Fitzpatrick and important partners from Ecuador, including the head of their National Police, vice minister of Fisheries, and several other

high-ranking elected and military officials," said Capt. Timothy Brown, Bertholf's commanding officer. "While we were there, their country was rocked by a series of deadly attacks perpetrated by drug trafficking organizations, highlighting in an all too real way the importance of our international partnerships focused on fighting crime and violence across the Western Hemisphere. The meeting was an opportunity for Bertholf and the U.S. Coast Guard to highlight the importance of the drug-interdiction mission and the role our international partners have in maritime safety and security."

Bertholf's crew conducted multiple training exercises throughout the patrol. They supported two Coast Guard Maritime Security Response Team-West (MSRT-W) personnel fast-roping exercises with Coast Guard and Navy helicopter aircrews off the coast of San Diego. The training allowed the MSRT-W members to earn their fast-roping qualifications and increase their proficiency. It was also an opportunity for the Bertholf crew to qualify multiple landing signal officers, helicopter control officers and tie-down members.

For the first time in two years, Bertholf's crew conducted a fueling at sea (FAS) off the coast of San Diego with the U.S. Navy. A fueling at sea involves two ships sailing side-by-side with less than 200 feet of space in between while maintaining speed and course with precise coordination between deck and navigation departments. Thousands of gallons of fuel can be transferred between an oiler and a ship during an FAS allowing the crew to remain underway and in theatre for extended periods.

"I am highly impressed by the dedication and hard work displayed by the Bertholf crew throughout this patrol," said Brown. "Our friends and family at home should all take great pride in the service and sacrifice of your loved ones as they work to make the world a safer place."

During at-sea interdictions, a suspect vessel is initially detected and monitored by allied, military or law enforcement personnel coordinated by JIATF-S based in Key West, Florida. The law enforcement phase of counter-smuggling operations in the Eastern Pacific is conducted under the authority of the Coast Guard 11th District, headquartered in Alameda. The interdictions, including the actual boardings, are led and conducted by members of the U.S. Coast Guard.

Bertholf is one of four 418-foot Legend-class national security cutters homeported in Alameda capable of extended, worldwide deployment. National security cutters like Bertholf routinely deploy on multi-month patrols to support counter-narcotics operations, humanitarian missions, national security, domestic fisheries enforcement and international efforts to counter illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing.