

A Unique Support Operation

Story by Cmdr. Kenneth D. Ivery, commanding officer Naval Engineering Support Unit Charleston

CHARLESTON, S.C. -- Webster defines unique as; “one and only, sole, without like or equal, very unusual.” This defines the operation of Vessel Support Facility Charleston on the Cooper River at the “Old Charleston Naval Base” is one of the most unique support operations in the Coast Guard. Operated by a person staff at Naval Engineering Support Unit/Maintenance Augmentation Team, Vessel Support Facility provides port engineering and maintenance support to 25 cutters in three states, manages deep-water mooring for two 378-foot cutters, a 225-foot buoy tender and two major National Oceanographic and Aeronautical Administration vessels.



CHARLESTON, S.C. -- Pier Papa at the Coast Guard Vessel Support Facility Charleston with Coast Guard Cutters *Dallas*, *Gallatin*, and *Oak*, and NOAA ships *Ron Brown* and *Nancy Foster*. Coast Guard photograph.

Another aspect of VSF uniqueness is its responsibility as the landlord of 100-thousand square feet of office, shop, and storage space. VSF supports 17 tenants including the Department of Justice, Electronic Support Detachment Charleston, Coast Guard Investigative Service, Southeast Regional Fisheries Training Center, NOAA, and twelve other Federal, State and Local agencies. In addition to performing the traditional NESU/MAT responsibilities, VSF performs facilities maintenance, shipping and receiving, logistics, port services, heavy equipment and storage operations, which more closely resemble an Integrated Support Command

than a NESU.

To accomplish these missions, VSF relies on a single facilities manager in conjunction with the assistance of the 14-person MAT. VSF Charleston encompasses facilities management of four structures totaling more than 100-thousand square feet and port operations for the 1,350-foot long pier, homeport for five major vessels. Annually, VSF accommodates more than 25 visiting vessels from other U.S. military services, commercial vessels, and foreign naval vessels. Operation of the pier and its maintenance is a demanding endeavor. Sustaining the structural integrity of the 200 pilings supporting the pier, maintaining safe water depth through dredging and utility services are properly distributing and marking requires constant diligence.

VSF facilities manager and MAT also provides buoy on-load and offload support to Coast Guard Seventh District Command’s largest aides to navigation asset, Coast Guard Cutter *Oak*. VSF and MAT oversaw the construction of a 6,000-square foot concrete buoy storage facility. Accomplishing these missions requires the commitment and dedication of a well trained and devoted port operations and facilities staff, the impetus for accomplishing this vital task comes from the dedicated men and women of VSF/MAT Charleston.

Classifying this responsibility as a collateral duty for MAT diminishes the importance of this vital operation and the extensive training and expertise required to accomplish such important missions as ensuring the safe moorings of the Coast Guard's largest search and rescue and law enforcement platforms, two 378-foot high endurance cutters.

Typically, the evolution of preparing to get a cutter underway or returning to homeport begins with a message from the cutter days prior to the evolution. Once the VSF is notified of the cutter's impending return, qualified crane operators and riggers must be selected to begin positioning the brow, shore tie cables, hoses, and other equipment the cutter will need and preparing for in port projects. Qualification of crane operators is one of the most intensive processes accomplished by MAT, requiring 40 hours of supervised operator training, and testing. Operators must develop the practical and intuitive awareness necessary to assess the safety of the evolution by continually monitoring the situation and taking cues from the rigger. Routinely, the cutters plan work on their small boats, in which case it is necessary for the VSF to position the boat cradle on the pier and to conduct the precarious operation of offloading the small boat onto the cradle. Aside from handling small boats, the most anticipated and dangerous evolution performed by MAT personnel is the placement of the cutters' brow.

Tensions are usually high as the brow is prepared to be placed on the cutter. Once it's safely aligned and secured, family members are allowed to come aboard and greet loved ones that they haven't seen for weeks. In lies another one of the MAT's more hazardous duties, keeping loved ones behind barriers until the cutter's mooring lines and brow are safely secured. As sailors, we know that this is an anxious time in which people are excited about the prospect of seeing their families soon, but it can be very dangerous as well. MAT takes the responsibility of keeping the families and crewmembers safe until the evolution is complete seriously.



CHARLESTON, S.C. -- EMI Kevin Cooper directs crane movements while removing a small boat from the Coast Guard Cutter *Dallas*. Coast Guard photograph.

NESU Charleston was notified that the 378-foot cutter, *Gallatin*, had made a series of drug busts and was returning to Charleston. Preparing for the operation was routine until VSF was notified by Sector Charleston that the cutter had 29,000 of illegal narcotics, and the NESU should serve as armed pier security during the offload of the drugs. In addition to the normal hectic flurry surrounding the return of a cutter, there were numerous law enforcement agencies there including DEA, ICE, CBP, Sector Charleston, city and county law enforcement. Additionally, the families and media were adding to the complexity of this evolution. The task of controlling the crowd was further complicated because security and identification checks had to be completed on everyone entering or leaving the pier or the cutter.

To wrap up this hectic day, MAT was informed that *Oak* was scheduled to get underway and required their assistance to load buoys for their patrol. An evolution for VSF/MAT Charleston that began two days prior didn't end until tons of cocaine were safely transferred between federal agencies, and numerous buoys were loaded onto the 225-buoy tender well after mid-night on the second day. This was an unusually demanding day, but one that is not so foreign that it could not happen again, regardless of the circumstances, the dedicated men and women of VSF/NESU Charleston are prepared to get the job done.

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