

Busy Patrol for Coast Guard Cutter *Valiant*

Story by Lt. j.g. Jonathan Harris, PAO Cutter *Valiant* and PA3 Barry J Bena, D7 Public Affairs

The crew of the Coast Guard Cutter *Valiant* conducted a 51-day patrol in the Windward Passage and Florida Straits enforcing alien migrant interdiction operations and the enforcement of laws and treaties.



CARIBBEAN SEA -- Members of the Cutter *Valiant*'s tie-down crew clear the deck after securing the deployed HH-65 helicopter. Coast Guard photograph by OS3 Jason Roe, Coast Guard Cutter *Valiant*.

Valiant's crew, under the command of Cmdr. David S. Fiedler, worked closely with aircraft, patrol boats, and small boats operating under the tactical control of the Coast Guard's Seventh District to conduct operations supporting the Republic of Haiti, the Commonwealth of the Bahamas, and Coast Guard Sector Key West, Fla. During the dynamic patrol, *Valiant* and her assigned aircraft, patrol craft and small boats participated in three search and rescue cases and played a vital role in disrupting three illegal migrant smuggling attempts.

"The crew has once again performed superbly during a very challenging and diversified patrol which has taken us from areas such as Haiti, the Bahamas, Cuba and the Straits of Florida," said Fiedler.

Valiant began the patrol in the Windward Passage by relieving Coast Guard Cutter *Vigilant*, from Cape Canaveral, Fla., as the commander task unit (CTU). As CTU, *Valiant* was responsible for Coast Guard surface and aircraft operations and provided an offshore law enforcement and homeland security presence in the region.

Furthermore, *Valiant* worked through Coast Guard liaisons working in the U.S. embassies in Nassau, Bahamas and Port-Au-Prince, Haiti to help enforce local, U.S. and international law in the region.

Valiant was assigned a law enforcement boarding officer from the Royal Bahamian Defense Force (RBDF) to help enforce Bahamian and U.S. laws in the southwest Bahamas. Many of the issues in the region involve illegal fishing within Bahamian waters by vessels lacking the appropriate authorization. *Valiant* assisted the RBDF by conducting two fishing vessel boardings.

One of the surface patrol craft assigned to CTU Windward Pass early in the patrol was Coast Guard Cutter *Shamal*, from Pascagoula, Miss. This vessel is one of five U.S. Navy Cyclone Class patrol craft that have been leased to the Coast Guard to help with counter-drug and AMIO. The efforts of both *Shamal* and *Valiant* helped contribute to two successful drug interdictions by shore-side boarding parties based in Miami.

On February 27, a Haitian sail freighter with 54 people on board departed Haiti on a northbound voyage hoping to eventually reach the United States. Unfortunately, the attempted migration resulted in tragedy when an explosion and fire onboard led to the sinking of the vessel. Two survivors were rescued by the Motor Vessel *Woodwind* on Feb. 28, and *Valiant* was dispatched March 1 to search for any remaining survivors. *Valiant*, an HH-60J "jayhawk" helicopter, a C-130 "Hercules" airplane and an HU-25 "falcon" jet conducted an exhaustive, 60-hour search but were only able to locate five of the deceased and no additional survivors.

"This was a very, very tough few days for all of us, but the overwhelming comfort and support provided by each and every crewmember helped us to get through this experience," said Fiedler.

Valiant transited to Cap Haitian, Haiti to return the persons that were recovered to their families. Haitian government officials expressed their deepest thanks for the dignified recovery and vast search efforts conducted by the Coast Guard.

Departing Cap Haitian March 6, *Valiant's* assigned helicopter sighted the motor vessel *Leo Seal* with seven persons onboard adrift east of the Bahamian Island of Great Inagua. After arriving on scene, *Valiant's* rescue and assistance team quickly embarked the vessel and commenced repairing the damage to the vessel's propulsion and steering systems. Unfortunately, the vessel's crew was unable to restart the main engine. The next morning, *Valiant* took *Leo Seal* into tow just hours before it would have drifted aground on the east side of the island. *Valiant* towed the vessel back to Cap Haitian passing the tow off to the Haitian coast guard.

When a "falcon" aircraft located a 40-foot wooden sail freighter 20 miles north of Cap Haitian March 11, *Valiant* proceeded to the area and launched the embarked HH-65 helicopter to investigate. The aircrew determined that the vessel was overloaded with more than 30 people sitting on the main deck. *Valiant* arrived on scene and distributed lifejackets to the people aboard. *Valiant* escorted the vessel back to shore in Haiti after the vessel turned around.

"It was good to see that a migration event had been thwarted and the persons onboard returned safely to their homeland," said Fiedler.

Valiant arrived in Nassau for a well deserved port call for crew relaxation and recreation. Next, the crew proceeded to the Florida Straits to conduct Alien Migrant Interdiction Operations under direction of Coast Guard Sector Key West.

While working in the area, *Valiant* was tasked with protecting the U.S. border from illegal migrant and drug smuggling via "go-fast" boats. *Valiant* oversaw an operating area with assistance from Cutters *Key Biscayne*, from St. Petersburg, Fla., *Drummond*, from Key West, and *Cypress*, from Mobile, Ala., as well as an HH-65C "dolphin" helicopter deployed from Coast Guard Air Station Miami. Effective coordination between all units resulted in the disruption of several attempted smuggling attempts over three days assigned to the region.

The *Valiant* has a crew of 75 men and women and was commissioned in 1967. *Valiant* saw action in Operation Able Sentry, the Mariel Boat Lift, and is considered one of the most reliable cutters in the Atlantic Fleet. In the past year the cutter has steamed from the Gulf of Mexico to the far reaches of the eastern Caribbean conducting the Coast Guard's missions of homeland security, search and rescue, and the protection of natural resources.

USCG

