

## Boardings at Sea: Why Fishery Missions Matter

Story and photos by PA3 Rob Simpson, PADET St. Petersburg, Fla.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. -- Sweat pours down the faces of the boarding team members (BTMs) and a warm, salty sea-spray stings their eyes as the team's 22-foot, rigid-hull inflatable boat (RHI) hits a rogue wave in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. As the RHI approaches a shrimp boat, a nauseating smell of fish, baking all day in the hot sun, rolls over the boarding team.



GULF OF MEXICO – Chief Petty Officer Devin R. Spencer, a *Resolute* boarding officer, prepares to board the fishing vessel *Tran's Express*. The voyage of the *Tran's Express* was terminated due to flooding in the engine compartment and having empty, un-inspected fire extinguishers. The vessel was escorted back to their homeport where they were able to fix the problems and be inspected again by a Coast Guard marine inspector before the vessel was allowed to leave port. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Rob Simpson.

For a two-week period in August, *Resolute* BTMs conducted fishery boardings throughout the Gulf of Mexico, a mission they aren't used to doing. Normally, *Resolute* patrols the areas to the south of Florida, near Cuba and Haiti, in support of Alien Migrant Interdiction Operations.

A fishery boarding begins by bringing the RHI alongside a large fishing vessel. This can be dangerous, especially in high seas or during bad weather. No stranger to piloting the RHI, Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (BM2) Jason Norris, the primary coxswain aboard *Resolute*, has maneuvered Coast Guard small boats hundreds of times while stationed aboard both *Resolute* and his first unit, the Coast Guard Cutter *Seneca*, homeported in Boston.

“Whether the fishing boat is a trawler or a long-liner, as the coxswain it's my job to make sure the boarding team is safe, from beginning to end,” said Norris. “When I'm approaching the vessel I stay back as far as I can and watch how the boat is moving in the water. Then I find their fishing gear and watch for any lines that could foul the propeller or pose as a danger to anyone.”

Trawlers pull nets in the water behind the vessel, sometimes with net lengths of more than 100 feet. Long-liners use anchors to sink baited line that can sometimes be several miles long.

“For a long-liner, I find the side the fishermen are working on and approach on the opposite side,” said Norris. “But on a shrimp boat, I bring the small boat directly to the stern, between the nets in the water, and come along either side to embark the boarding teams.”

Upon boarding the vessel, BTMs inspect the vessel's safety equipment, ensuring the vessel is seaworthy and safe for the team conduct the boarding. The team started with the engine room and checked for the proper number and type of fire extinguishers.

“A ship's engine room is usually below the waterline and the bilges are often full of used oil and other flammable liquids coming from the engines,” said Petty Officer 1<sup>st</sup> Class David S. Williford (DC1), a *Resolute* boarding officer. “We try to express how important it is for the vessel captain to train his crew to fight fires and prepare them with the right equipment. Not doing so could compromise the safety of everyone on the ship and pose extreme hazards to the environment, should there be an incident.”

Once the team finished inspecting the engine room and notified *Resolute's* command, they moved to higher decks to check other safety equipment. They verified the expiration and inspection dates for the life rafts, signaling flares and the emergency position indicating radio beacon (EPIRB), and checked for a proper amount of throwable life rings.



GULF OF MEXICO - Seaman Rene Prieto, a *Resolute* crewmember and RHI small boat crewman, watches and waits while *Resolute's* boarding team conducts a boarding aboard the fishing vessel *Phouc Thanh Mai III*. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Rob Simpson.

“Going to sea is inherently dangerous enough, and risks increase with the addition of fishing gear, knives, hooks and long, sleep-deprived work hours,” said Ensign Walter C. Krolman, a BO aboard *Resolute*. “Everything we check on a boarding is to ensure the fishermen are taking the proper precautions so they can safely continue their livelihood. They have to be prepared if someone falls overboard, or if the crew has to abandon ship,” he continued. “If they don't, help isn't always immediately there, especially if they can't put in a distress call before the ship goes down.”

With the safety inspections completed, the team focused its attention on the vessel's fishing nets, specifically the Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs). Endangered sea turtles spend much of their time feeding in the same areas where shrimp live. Their presence in the fishing areas often results in shrimpers accidentally catching the turtles in their nets.

To keep sea turtles out of fishing nets, strict guidelines have been established requiring the use of TEDs. A TED is an oblong, metal gate about four-feet-wide that is weaved into the shrimp net at an angle. A section of the net is cut out in front of the TED with a flap covering it so the sea turtles can swim free of the net unharmed.

Some fishermen sew the flaps shut, believing that the mandatory TEDs keep shrimp from flowing into the nets. This causes the endangered turtles to be pinned against the bars, trapping and suffocating them.

The boarding team first measured the angle of the TEDs in the net to make sure turtles can escape safely. They also measure the skirt lengths, net width and inspect the buoys attached to the TEDs for damage.

Also required on the nets are Bycatch Reduction Devices (BRDs), a triangular set of bars woven into the net above the TED. Bycatch is fish that are not intended to be drawn into the nets, and this device allows the fish to swim past the shrimp in the net and back out into the open ocean. Some of the BRDs encountered by the boarding team were misshapen and bent, keeping fish from swimming free of the entrapment.



GULF OF MEXICO - *Resolute* boarding officers inspect the skirt on a shrimp net placed above the TED. The net's escape chute was sewn shut, shown here as the lighter green net, and a darker green false skirt was sewn over it to make the TED appear functional. The chutes above the TEDs must remain open to allow sea turtles to be ejected from the net. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Rob Simpson.

“Nets full of shrimp are dangerous on the moving deck of a ship, not to mention heavy,” said Petty Officer 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (OS2) David A. Dolphin, a *Resolute* boarding officer. “A lot of times, the BRDs can be bent under the weight of the shrimp nets or from being smashed around on the boats. The fishermen need to be sure these devices are working properly, to not only let the larger fish out, but to keep the catches legal.”

Upon completing the net checks, the team moved to the fish hold, a heavily insulated freezer located in the lower decks of the vessel, where fish or shrimp are stored while underway.

The hold was checked to ensure it was clean of mold, mildew and other health hazards, and that the temperature inside the hold was below freezing. Then, the bales of frozen shrimp within the hold were inspected to ensure the shrimpers were catching only the species of shrimp that their license allowed.

The boarding ends when *Resolute*'s BOs meet with the vessel's master to discuss any violations, discrepancies or issues. *Resolute* boarding teams, in conjunction with the 8<sup>th</sup> Coast Guard District, terminated the voyages of three fishing vessels and cited safety violations against four others during the two-week period of their patrol.

“This was a great opportunity for us to be out here and do this,” said Dolphin. “We normally don't get to do this sort of thing, and a lot of us just graduated from the Maritime Law Enforcement Academy, so it was nice to put those skills to good use.”



GULF OF MEXICO - CGC *Resolute* follows the fishing vessel *Phouc Thanh Mai III*, while a boarding team conducts a fisheries boarding aboard the vessel. During a two-week period, *Resolute* boarding teams inspected more than 16 fishing vessels, terminating the voyages of three and citing four others for major safety violations. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Rob Simpson.

Conducting boardings on sometimes shabby, hot and often downright rancid-smelling fishing boats may not be the most glorious job in the Coast Guard, but it is an essential job. It is a job that helps ensure the future of fish stocks by regulating the amount of fish that fishermen catch and keeping authorized fishing areas from becoming over-fished. It is a job that helps ensure the safety of fishermen that fill our grocery stores with fresh fish and shrimp. It is a job that helps to increase the populations of endangered species' in their natural habitat. It is a job that protects lives and livelihoods.

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