

Commandant realigning Coast Guard units

Allen consolidating Atlantic, Pacific area commands

By Patricia Kime - Staff writer

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The head of the Coast Guard announced Tuesday that he will realign the service's major operational commands, consolidating them into a single fleet command led by a three-star admiral.

Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Thad Allen also announced plans to meld the service's support units into a single entity he says will better serve the operational forces.

In a speech to active-duty and reserve personnel in Washington, D.C., Allen said he'll eliminate Atlantic and Pacific area commands, headquartered in Portsmouth, Va., and Alameda, Calif., respectively, and place them under one operational field commander.

That field commander will answer to the deputy commandant for operations, a new position that falls below the vice commandant in the chain of command. Next to the deputy commandant for operations on the organizational chart is another new position, the deputy commandant for mission support, who will be responsible for overseeing all support staff, including financial systems, data systems, logistics, technology and communications.

Allen said the realignment will support the Coast Guard better as it adapts to its expanded role as the country's primary maritime security force.

"This is a radically changed mission environment," Allen said of the Coast Guard's post-Sept. 11, 2001, operations. "This is not my father's Coast Guard."

In his speech, Allen said the realignment of the operating forces will ensure that the service is "more responsive to mission execution."

Shortly after taking over as commandant in May 2005, Allen said he would divide the Coast Guard's operational units into three commands — shore-based sector forces, patrol (Deepwater) forces and deployable special forces.

He said the command changes he announced Tuesday also were needed, to eliminate turf battles and ensure cooperation with other military commands.

"Our structure at times works against us, in operations with Joint Interagency Task Forces and combatant commanders whose operating areas are not the same as our area boundaries," Allen said.

Allen said a decision has not been made as to where the field command would be based. The deputy commandant for operations, a three-star admiral, will work at Headquarters.

In terms of realigning the support units, Allen said he has listened to service members who complained of systemic problems within the Coast Guard's logistics, administrative and financial systems.

He said a streamlined support structure would better support operations and eliminate redundancy and some of the frustration with the Coast Guard's disparate systems.

"We have been running some parts of the Coast Guard like we're a small business, when we're a Fortune 500 company," Allen said.

Allen said the changes will not require additional personnel, and he added that a time line has not been set for implementing them. But he stressed that the service needs to adapt to its expanded mission set or risk readiness.

"I made a commitment to be a commandant of change, transition and transformation. I did not ask for this job to be the commandant of the status quo," Allen said.

The Coast Guard has come under fire in the past year for problems with its major acquisition program, known as Deepwater.

The \$24 billion, 25-year project has experienced a number of project delays, requirement changes and setbacks, but the service, which has the seventh oldest naval fleet in the world, needs the contract's promised ships, aircraft and communications equipment.

Earlier this year, Allen announced several changes to the Coast Guard's programs and acquisition offices, including hiring additional staff and increasing the service's scrutiny of Deepwater contractors Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman.

Allen also has spent the last two weeks pleading continuation of the massive contract to Capitol Hill.

The commandant said Tuesday he hopes his continued efforts to transform the Coast Guard will win over lawmakers.

"I need the support of Homeland Security and the Administration, and I've got that. I will continue to earn the support of Congress," Allen said.