

## Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard

# CHARLES “SKIP” BOWEN

By Jeanie Moore

On June 14, 2006, Charles “Skip” Bowen accepted the watch as the 10th master chief petty officer of the Coast Guard (MCPOCG), the primary liaison between the commandant and the enlisted men and women of the Coast Guard.

The master chief takes his new role seriously, and it is clear that he has thought hard about what he hopes to accomplish. Referring to his primary duty as the commandant’s enlisted “voice,” Master Chief Bowen asserts that his responsibility is to “First and foremost, help the new commandant succeed.” However, Bowen is acutely aware of the “ivory tower” effect that can grip the top levels of administration and understands that his role requires him to keep the senior leadership grounded by staying in touch with the “deckplate” personnel. He plans to be the operational field’s “flag waver” at high-level policy meetings. On behalf of the men and women under his watch, Bowen plans to promote an ambitious agenda that promises to improve both quality of life and career advancement through new skills and training. The list goes on. He sums up his thoughts on his plans to empower the men and women of the Coast Guard with a prediction: “watch out for the work force.”

One is inclined to believe that he will accomplish all he sets out to do. Bowen is a 28-year Coast Guard veteran with a chest full of medals that track a lifetime of heroism and courage. He comes to his position from Coast Guard Station Marathon (Florida), where he was officer-in-charge. But this is not his first stint at headquarters; he has served as the command master chief for USCG Headquarters, and in 2002, he was acting





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MCPOCG for four months. He has also been command master chief of one of the most challenging Coast Guard Districts – the Seventh District, a region that sees a non-stop flow of law enforcement operations.

The master chief's history in the Seventh District is almost as deep as his career is long. After attending basic training at Cape May, N.J., in 1978, his first duty station was to a patrol boat, the USCGC *Point Swift* in Clearwater, Fla. Shortly after, he began his first tour at Coast Guard Station Marathon, which coincided with the Mariel, Cuba, boatlift in 1980. Although he has conducted many alien migrant interdictions since then, this mission never becomes easier. Bowen describes intercepting illegal migrants as the hardest thing about being in the Coast Guard, a mission that takes an enormous emotional toll. His words on the subject are quiet but forceful, saying simply that, "It is gut wrenching – having to send people back – both for the crew and the people. It is very hard."

Despite the difficult aspects associated with alien migrant interdiction, Bowen describes the many Coast Guard missions as tremendously rewarding. But in spite of all he has done over his career, what the master chief remembers most are the people. He reflects on his time in service, saying "I remember less about the events than the people who were there ... the Coasties I've struggled alongside ... whether it was the MK2 who saved me off a sinking shrimper long ago or the team who helped me chase down a migrant smuggler last week."

Master Chief Bowen has earned approximately 30 awards over his career. They include four Meritorious Service Medals with "O" device, four Coast Guard Commendation Medals with "O" device, three Coast Guard Achievement Medals with "O" device, the Commandant's Letter of Commendation, six Meritorious Team Commendation Awards with "O" device, two Coast Guard Unit Commendations with "O" device, seven Coast Guard Meritorious Unit Commendations with "O" device, and the Coast Guard Sea Service Ribbon with two stars.

When asked which award he was most proud of, the master chief was typically humble.

"It is hard to say ... everybody has a piece of this. But I would have to say that the operational awards mean a lot. No matter what you are doing, it's hands-on. You look back and think to yourself, 'If only I hadn't smelled that or done this, or if I hadn't been in a particular place at the right time, then I wouldn't have found the drugs or someone would have died.'"

Master Chief Bowen credits two people with most influencing his leadership approach. The first is Chief Warrant Officer John Webb, from one of Bowen's first assignments. "He always led from the front ... he was always out there with us," Bowen recalls. The second person is Adm. Thad Allen, the new commandant, with whom Bowen has worked three times in the last 15 years. He admires the admiral for his "communication skills, because he cares so much about his people, and he always goes for excellence." Bowen looks forward to their term together,

saying of Adm. Allen that he is "a great leader. I liked working with him before, and I look forward to working with him again."

The master chief himself enjoys widespread respect for his leadership, from the working level all the way up to flag level officers who seek Bowen's opinions on personnel matters. That sentiment is not confined to the Coast Guard. While attending the U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy, Bowen was selected as one of the few non-Army students ever to serve as a class vice president. He graduated with distinction and received the William B. Bainbridge Chair of Ethics Award.

When asked what he would recommend to younger members of the Coast Guard who would follow in his footsteps, he is quick with an answer. "I would tell them to look beyond themselves. In society today, there is sometimes a 'me first' mentality – and that bleeds over into the Coast Guard. But in order to feel good about life, you have to find that one thing that really makes you feel good about what you're doing ... something positive beyond yourself."

However, when asked what he will do next, four years from now, the master chief laughs and clams up, categorically refusing to speculate. "I can only do one job at a time. I have the best job in the world, working with the best people in the world. I have to focus on doing my best in this job and let the future take care of itself."

In addition to stations mentioned in the article, Master Chief Bowen's previous posts included:

- Station Fort Pierce, Fla.
- USCGC *Farallon*, Miami, Fla.
- Executive petty officer, USCGC *Point Arena* (Norfolk, Va.)
- Officer in Charge, Station New Haven, Conn.
- Officer in Charge, Station Sand Key, Clearwater Beach, Fla.
- Officer in Charge, USCGC *Point Turner*, Newport, R.I.
- Officer in Charge, USCGC *Hammerhead*, Woods Hole, Mass.

Master Chief Bowen received his bachelor of science degree *magna cum laude* from Excelsior College and a master of business administration *summa cum laude* from Touro University International. He is married to the former Janet Kay Cartwright of Norfolk, Va., and they have four children: Mason, Joshua, Joseph, and Kristen. His son Mason is currently on active duty in the Coast Guard.