

# Looking for Balance

Coast Guard vice commandant says budget duress calls for risk-based decisions



LISA NIPP

The U.S. Coast Guard has 11 statutory missions, but in the years ahead the service could be stretching its assets thin trying to fulfill its requirements. **Vice Adm. John P. Currier**, the service's new vice commandant, will play a major role in deciding where assets are placed and what missions will be impacted in the effort to address emerging threats.

Some of those decisions include operating with a smaller force, preparing for increased operations in the Arctic, recapitalizing the fleet, and making sure the service is forward-looking and not entrenched in the past.

Currier assumed duty as vice commandant in May, upon the retirement of his predecessor, Vice Adm. Sally Brice-O'Hara. He is the Coast Guard's second-highest-ranking official, after Commandant Adm. Robert J. Papp Jr. Currier currently holds the honor of being the Coast Guard's Ancient Albatross, the service's longest-serving active-duty aviator, though he would prefer the title "Seasoned Albatross."

Currier has stood watch at six Coast Guard stations and was promoted to flag rank in 2005. Prior to his current assignment, he was the service's

first deputy commandant for mission support. Before that, he was the Coast Guard's chief of staff.

Currier discussed the impact of budget cuts and emerging threats with Assistant Editor John C. Marcario. Excerpts follow:

## Is the Coast Guard stretched too thin?

**CURRIER:** We are an extremely lean organization. If you reduce the resources, you have to ask, "What is it that we are not going to be able to do?"

For us to engage in the Arctic, I need to take it out of the base, and when I take it out of the base, that means something else is not being done. Whether it be Eastern Pacific counterdrug operations or our ability to engage in port security, whatever it is, it becomes a question, based on risk, of where are we going to put our [resources]? Where are we going to spend money?

The art of this is to balance it across the mission set such that you don't let your guard down in one area so

far that the threat overcomes your ability to counter it. I don't think we are at the point yet where we can't do our job, but we are a lean organization, so extracting resources in one area will cost in another.

## What are your top priorities as vice commandant?

**CURRIER:** Our priorities really are balancing current operations with our imperative to recapitalize our aging assets in the current budget environment, which makes it more difficult to do. We are faced with 40-plus-year-old ships and aircraft that need updating, and basically a whole asset base that requires recapitalization, or refurbishment at mid-life, all coming due

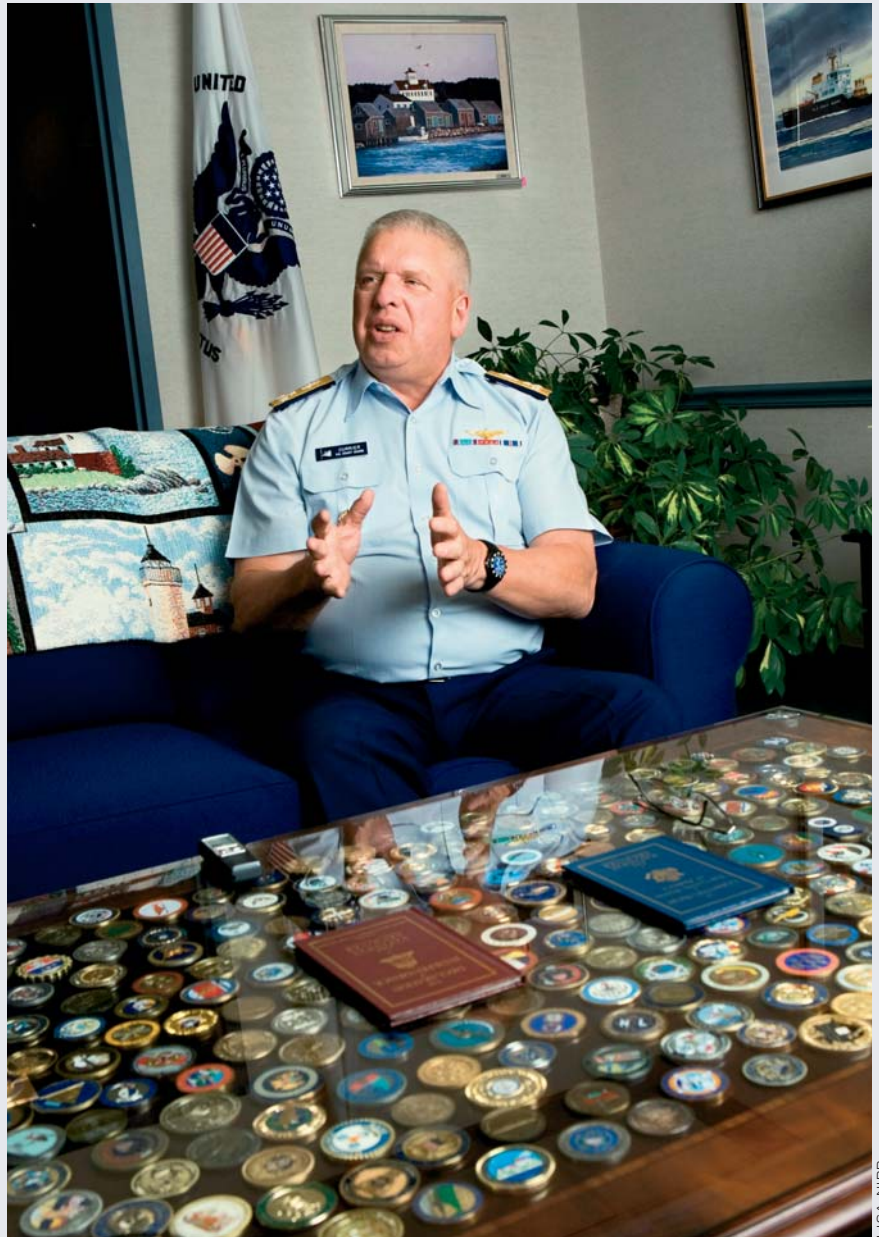
when the nation's economy is under extreme duress. Our priority is to balance current operations, the things that we do on a daily basis, with the requirements to recapitalize the asset base so we can continue to do those jobs.

Our time is not limitless. We are finding our backs against the wall because our major assets that we are recapitalizing are actually getting to the point where they are not economical to maintain nor are they reliable enough to do the job out on the mission space. We have cutters out there performing the work today with casualties, with degraded systems and just not operating at full capacity. Additional challenges are to develop and implement and communicate our family support programs. The strength of the Coast Guard is really its people and we are committed to supporting those families, because support of the family translates directly into readiness.

**What initiatives will be important for you over the next fiscal year?**

**CURRIER:** The continuation of our acquisition program, the execution of our program of record, specifically in the major cutter fleet. That will be our major push for the next two years. Combine that with what we are asked to do on a daily basis, which is not insignificant. We've got an 11 statutory mission set, with a capacity in each of those mission sets, and for us to continue to perform at, quite frankly, a level that is sometimes taken for granted by the public, is a little bit of a challenge.

I am also very passionate about getting the Coast Guard into the mindset of being a forward-looking organization. We have a rich history and we have a long past that's distinguished in many areas across a broad mission set. I don't want to see us restricted to looking in the rearview mirror. I want us to be an organization that fully utilizes knowledge management, is a learning organization and looks forward to what the Coast Guard needs to be to meet the nation's priorities of the future. Although we are grounded in the past, we don't live in the past.



LISA NIPP

**How important are the Coast Guard's specialized forces to being forward-thinking?**

**CURRIER:** Our deployable forces are part of our mission set and it's important that we maintain that capability. One of the attributes the Coast Guard absolutely needs is agility in responding to emergent missions. The deployable specialized forces are tailored for that. They do everything from advanced drug interdiction to counterpiracy to incident-management support. They are a central component of our capability set, but they are just that, a component of it. They are not exclusive and they need to be synced with the rest of our capability and asset base, so that we have a balance to meet the threats we are faced with.



LISA NIPP

### How will you make tough decisions related to upcoming budgets?

CURRIER: We have always been a lean agency. Even in good years we are challenged. In these years that we are facing now, we are fully mindful the pressures the national government is under. The entire economy is under stress. We are very mindful of that.

The tough budgetary decisions we need to make are to ensure that we are able to allocate resources, at whatever level, to the highest risk. So our decisions in the budget will be risk-based decisions. The other thing we need to do is to make sure that as we adjust our capacity in the capabilities we have in our 11 sta-

uary missions, we do not cause irreparable damage and that we still have the ability to be agile enough to respond to an emergent threat.

### Is the service prepared to be asked by Congress if you prefer enough funding for two National Security Cutters (NSCs) or one polar icebreaker?

CURRIER: I don't think either program is mutually exclusive. The reason I say that is because of the time involved. The recapitalization of the polar icebreaker, as envisioned by Congress and [President Barack Obama's] administration is a gold star. What we have to do first is to develop joint requirements with other federal agencies.

The new polar-class icebreaker will be a national asset. It won't just be a Coast Guard asset. It will be operated by the Coast Guard, but it will be a national asset by nature. We are embarking now on a joint requirements exercise with the National Science Foundation, Congress and other stakeholders. This takes time.

We are postured now to complete the program of record with the NSC and, because we are postured like we are and we are able to execute the contract, I feel like we will complete the NSC program of record [the service issued the contract for the sixth NSC earlier this year and plans to build eight], if funded, prior to engagement on cutting steel on a polar icebreaker. I think that both of those imperatives can be met and it's just a time-phased process.

### Will the Arctic continue to be a main focus for the Coast Guard?

CURRIER: I think the Arctic is going to be a mission imperative for the Coast Guard and, quite frankly, I would say, "If not us, then who?" We are the only agency that has the history in the Arctic, the equipment, even though we need to recapitalize it, and the experience base. The Revenue Cutter Service and then the Coast Guard have been really the federal presence in the Alaskan waters since the United States acquired Alaska.

"We have a rich history and we have a long past that's distinguished in many areas across a broad mission set. I don't want to see us restricted to looking in the rearview mirror. I want us to be an organization that fully utilizes knowledge management, is a learning organization and looks forward to what the Coast Guard needs to be to meet the nation's priorities of the future. Although we are grounded in the past, we don't live in the past."



We are attempting to be a forward-looking, agile agency, so we see the mission develop there. We see the Arctic as a growing area for mission engagement and I think it's incumbent on us to start the process of engagement early.

**What concerns do you have for the Coast Guard?**

**CURRIER:** We have a broad, expansive responsibility. We are required for the safety, security and stewardship of the maritime interests of the country. When you peel that back, it's a very expansive mission set.

My concern for the Coast Guard is that the public has a very high level of expectation for us. If there is a pollution case, they expect us to be there. If there is a search-and-rescue mission, we are expected to be there. If there is an inbound threat or a threat emergent in a port or a container, we are expected to be there. We are able to do these things, but the budgetary duress we are under is going to affect the level to which we can do them and our ability to meet those mission requirements.

Our relevance in the minds of the American people must be continually reinforced, because we bring to them vital capability in security, stewardship and safety that can be taken for granted.

**The incoming class at the Coast Guard Academy in New London, Conn., is the smallest since 1999. What trickle-down effect will this have on the service?**

**CURRIER:** The direct attribution there would be related to current budgetary duress. It's important to look at the academy as a system. It's part of our human capital system. The academy is a jewel in our crown. We are adjusting our intake because of two reasons: one is the force is being trimmed, and, secondly, we have a record level of retention. People are just not leaving.

All of the things you see at the Coast Guard Academy are actions we have taken as part of a greater whole to ensure our force size is reflective of the budget that we get. One of the biggest challenges becomes, if we are resourced in the future at a higher level, that we have the ability to do that.

**What keeps you up at night?**

**CURRIER:** I need to be able to look in the mirror and say, as one of the leaders of the organization, that when I send those young people out that I have done everything I can from an organizational perspective to mitigate every portion of risk that can be mitigated by the organization. So when they go and face uncontrolled risks, they are fully prepared and focused.

**What improvements do you want to make, both short and long term, for the service?**

**CURRIER:** We need to be more of a headlights organization. I want to see what the Coast Guard needs to be in five years, given what's growing — or shrinking — in the maritime environment, and then get the Coast Guard aligned with [that vision], and then have a strategic planning base such that we are working toward that five- to 10- to 20-year look. Not just lamenting by looking what we had in the past and what we might not have today.

We live in a very quickly changing global environment, where priorities and threats and requirements change quickly, and we need to be an adaptable first-response organization. That's where I am trying to push the Coast Guard today. ■



LISA NIFF

Vice Adm. John P. Currier, vice commandant of the Coast Guard, speaks during a Budget Challenges and Opportunities panel at the Navy League's Sea-Air-Space Exposition April 18 at National Harbor, Md. At his left is Adm. Mark V. Ferguson III, vice chief of naval operations, and Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., assistant commandant of the Marine Corps.