

Developing a career as a Coast Guard officer

INTRODUCTION This short paper is designed to provide the officer corps, and the junior officer in particular, an overview of two issues – the leadership role that forms the foundation of Coast Guard officer careers, and some basic concepts of Coast Guard officer specialties and how they impact on a career. The demonstrated leadership and performance of each Coast Guard Officer provides the context around which assignment and promotion decisions are made. The Service’s specialty structure informs the pathways through which each officer develops his or her career. While this discussion is mostly oriented to the Active Duty officer, many of the issues within this paper apply to the Reserve officer as well.

It is critically important that each officer must understand the history and nature of our Service, what the Coast Guard brings to the Nation (our military, maritime, and multi-mission nature coupled with our Core Competencies), and the principles of Coast Guard operations. Coast Guard Publication 1 is an indispensable reference for these fundamentals about our service, and a desktop copy of that publication is an important handbook for all officers.

We will focus our entire organization on improving and sustaining Mission Execution.

ADM Thad Allen, May, 2006

The job of a Coast Guard officer is to lead people and manage resources.

RADM John Tozzi

OFFICER CORPS Officer billets in the Coast Guard are distributed among a number of specialties. Most assignments are operational, some are technical, and others are administrative or require licenses comparable to the Civilian sector. What is the common thread that ties these different requirements into an assignment for a Coast Guard officer?

CORE ROLES

A Coast Guard officer is first and foremost a Coast Guard officer – that role and all it entails comes before identification with any specialty title. Being a military officer is different than any other occupation. Each officer receives a commission, stating that the President has “special trust and confidence” in the ability of this person to act for the Nation. The words in that commission center on leadership and followership, and the oath that each officer takes makes clear that their highest allegiance is to the Constitution. Fundamental to the concept of a military force is the notion that the military compels sacrifice for the greater good.

What does it mean to be an officer in the Armed Forces of the

United States? The new edition of “The Armed Forces Officer”¹ provides this context to the officers’ commission:

As an officer in the armed forces of the United States, you are a warrior in the profession of arms, a leader of character, an unwavering defender of the Constitution, a servant of the nation, and an exemplar and champion of its ideals. You accept unmitigated personal responsibility and accountability to duty, for your actions and those of your subordinates. In so doing, you willingly take your place in an ancient and honorable calling, obligated equally to those who have gone before you, those you walk among and those who will follow.

Being a Coast Guard officer includes the traditions of officership in the United States military – and more. Coast Guard officers are unique because our multi-mission Coast Guard comes from having multi-mission officers. Coast Guard Publication 1 states that, “we are charged at once to be policemen and sailors, warriors, humanitarians, regulators, stewards of the environment, diplomats, and guardians of the coast.”² Coast Guard officers lead the Service as we “harmonize what seem to be contradictory mandates” on a daily basis.

The authorities exercised by our officer corps are also unique, since every Coast Guard officer is both an Armed Forces officer and carries various authorities spread throughout the U.S. Code.³ Our Service’s blend of its military nature and authority, coupled with law enforcement authority, is unique in the United States. Other nations often benchmark their maritime forces on the U.S. Coast Guard and our blend of authorities and responsibilities. Officers have the authority to ensure that orders involving military power are carried out. Other federal law enforcement officers cannot compel their subordinates to go into harms’ way with the full sanctions of the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

While our Core Values describe Service expectations for personal character, our regulations provide additional guidance on the example to be set by officers. Coast Guard Regulations call on officers to “show in themselves good examples of honor, patriotism, subordination, and fidelity to their oaths of office, be zealous in the performance of the duties entrusted to them, and vigilant respecting

¹ Department of Defense, *The Armed Forces Officer* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1950). The text contained in the pending new edition was obtained from CAPT Robert Desh, USCG; the Coast Guard Service representative in the preparation of the new version.

² United States Coast Guard, *U.S. Coast Guard: America’s Maritime Guardian* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 2002). Page 2.

³ Many Coast Guard authorities are unique – including Captain of the Port, the law enforcement authority of the Coast Guard Officer and Petty Officer (14USC89), Federal Maritime Security Coordinator, Federal On Scene Commander, regulatory rule-making, and SAR Mission Coordinator.

the conduct of all persons under their authority.”⁴ An officer’s conduct, if found ‘unbecoming an officer and a gentleman’, is punishable ‘as a court-martial may direct’ under Article 133 of the UCMJ. The expectations for the department and conduct of officers find their origins in Alexander Hamilton’s 1791 letter of instruction to officers in the Revenue Marine:

*“While I recommend in the strongest terms to the respective officers, activity, vigilance and firmness, I feel no less solicitude, that their department may be marked with prudence, moderation and good temper. Upon these last qualities, not less that the former, must depend the success, usefulness and consequently continuance of the establishment in which they are included. They cannot be insensible that there are some prepossessions against it, that the charge with which they are intrusted [sic] is a delicate one, and that it is easy by mismanagement, to produce serious and extensive clamour, disgust and alarm. They will always keep in mind that their countrymen are freemen, and, as such, are impatient of everything that bears the least mark of a domineering spirit. They will, therefore, refrain, with the most guarded circumspection, from whatever has the semblance of haughtiness, rudeness, or insult.”*⁵

The United States military develops careers and grows its officer and enlisted leadership through an ‘up from the bottom’ principle, where individuals have assignments that use their current skills and provide opportunities to develop their background and competencies for the next steps in their career. As military rank increases, typically the impact of the decisions made by personnel of that rank increases as well. We look to officers of more senior rank to make those decisions that have longer lasting effects, commit larger amounts of resources, affect greater number of people both within and outside the Coast Guard, have greater consequences, and require more authority.⁶ Hence leadership and career progression are directly tied together. The Command opportunities that the Coast Guard affords officers at the O-3 and O-4 level are envied by officers of other Services, and the development of specialty skills leading to command at the O-5 and O-6 level shapes the careers of many officers.

The Coast Guard officer corps is largely involved in duties that provide direct or indirect leadership to day-to-day activities of the deployable, mobile, or shore based forces which execute our missions. Billets with mission execution responsibilities, or that require experience in direct mission execution, number over two-thirds of the Coast Guard officer corps.

⁴ Coast Guard Regulations, Commandant Instruction M5000.3B, Article 8-1-3

⁵ Alexander Hamilton, Letter of Instruction, 4 June 1791; available on the Internet at <http://www.uscg.mil/hq/g-cp/history/hamiltonletter.html>

⁶ These principles were developed by a group of Flag Officers and Senior Executive Service members in the fall of 2001.

A 2003 analysis showed that 69% of all officer billets were operational (billets coded as Marine Safety, Engineering Afloat, Aviation, Operations); 13% in operational support (Other engineering, C4); 18% in administrative support. While this analysis pre-dated Sector implementation, the Operations and Marine Safety billet strength roughly reorganized into the Prevention and Response areas at shore-based units.

Not all officers are in front-line mission execution roles. However, all officers contribute to Coast Guard mission execution. Officers assigned in mission support organizations provide critical functions required to sustain the Coast Guard's mission performance. No matter which segment of the Coast Guard an officer is assigned, each officer should understand and be able to clearly articulate how their skills, leadership and management of the resources in their charge link to improving and sustaining mission execution.

**OFFICER CORPS
LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT**

The Coast Guard's responses to the 2001 terrorist attacks and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 clearly show that our Service's leadership at all levels has the ability to successfully overcome new challenges. Coast Guard forces performed superbly, innovated brilliantly, and earned a place in the national spotlight. In addition, our day-to-day operations continue to achieve notable success. How is it that the Coast Guard develops leaders who can take on these challenges with such success? Accession training, formal courses, and mentoring programs are critical facets of each officer's growth. But central to developing the leaders needed by the Coast Guard are our formal career development and assignment systems. Experiences gained in each assignment have the potential of contributing to overarching Coast Guard goals. By building on successive challenging positions, officers become better prepared to lead and develop subordinates who will one day carry on Coast Guard ideals.

The Coast Guard continually challenges its entire workforce, and particularly its officer corps, through new assignments. Each assignment provides new duties, environments, and unique opportunities that result in each officer growing and developing their skills and talents. The officer promotion system is linked to this leadership development. A selection board considers each officer when they become eligible by law for promotion, and selects those who are "best qualified" from among their peers for the duties of the next grade⁷. Each officer has only a few assignments in each grade

⁷ Promotion Boards and officer status is governed by law and implemented through the annual Officer Corps Management Plan. While most promotion boards operate under a "best qualified" standard, there are

– in some cases only one assignment - so continual growth in their specialty area **and** as a leader are critical to career advancement. The criteria in the Personnel Manual, Selection Board Precepts, and the Commandant's guidance to selection boards centers on performance, professionalism, leadership, and education.⁸ Those officers who continually develop and demonstrate their capabilities position themselves to be among those best qualified for new duties.

SPECIALTIES

The notion of officer corps leadership and officer corps specialties are closely related. No one can rise to command of a unit without the skills and abilities to effectively lead a unit of that type. The Commanding Officer of a Cutter must have the skills to effectively navigate the ship, prosecute its missions, lead the crew in challenging circumstances, and ensure operational effectiveness. Likewise, the Commanding Officer of an Air Station must be a skilled aviator, and a Sector Commander must have a firm understanding of the authorities, responsibilities, and practices in the Prevention and Response fields. Growing these competencies requires the division of the officer corps into specialties.

With a broad array of Coast Guard duties, no single individual can master all the knowledge required to be effective in every career field. The Service's specialty structure has evolved over time so that the specialties have a cohesive body of knowledge and skills. Our specialty structure is not static, but changes with new missions, new demands, and new technologies that must be employed to achieve mission effectiveness.

DEFINITIONS

An officer is called a **specialist** when he or she has acquired sufficient education, professional military training, a certification or license, qualifications, work experience, or a combination of these. Officers may have specialty designations in one or more specialties, and specialty designations are also assigned to billets to establish required capabilities for successful mission performance. In general, officers develop their specialty/technical/professional expertise in the O1-O4 pay grades.

An officer is termed a **broadened specialist** when he or she acquires in-depth knowledge and skills in one specific area of expertise, knowledge and skills in one or more additional specialties, and whose assignments between the grades of O-4 and O-6 are mixed

several boards that have a "fully qualified" standard. These include LTjg Selection, CWO Selection, Reserve Officer Extension, and Regular to Reserve Officer Commissioning.

⁸ See the Coast Guard Personnel Manual, Sections 5.A. and 14.A. for a full description of these criteria. The annual Commandant's Guidance and Promotion Board precepts are posted on the CG Personnel Command web site and on CG Central.

among these specialties⁹. One of the Coast Guard's objectives in developing its leadership is for officers to be agile, adaptive leaders. A goal of the 'broadened specialist' view of career management is that officers should develop the career experience that allows them to be capable of operating in a dynamic environment, think flexibly and innovatively, embrace partnerships, achieve unity of effort, and build the Coast Guard's future as they lead their areas of responsibility.

WHAT ARE THE SPECIALTIES?

The specialties in the Coast Guard officer corps were re-defined in the spring of 2006 and were approved by the Commandant for implementation in 2008-2009. The current list of specialties was provided to the Service in Flag Voice 292 of April 26, 2006. The specialty framework includes 13 specialties. The specialties are Aviation, C4IT, Engineering, Finance, Human Resources, Intelligence, Legal, Management, Medical, Operations Afloat, Operations Ashore-Prevention, Operations Ashore-Response, and Reserve Programs. Most specialties are sufficiently broad that they require further subdivision, and the specialties span the full range of mission execution and mission support roles. The Flag Voice and list of specialties can be found in CG Central.

Specialties are defined for those areas of expertise that have an associated billet structure that can sustain a viable population of officers who have the required experience.

HOW HAVE COAST GUARD SPECIALTIES EVOLVED?

In the years following World War II, the Coast Guard officer was a generalist educated in a quantitative field. Almost all officers continued in a seagoing or aviation track, and staff tours mostly provided command and control or resource management. The governing legislation for the current officer corps promotion system was enacted in 1963. Most Coast Guard officers then and now compete in one competitive category for promotion – the Active Duty Promotion List (ADPL).

During the 1970s, a reduction of the seagoing fleet, increase in technical requirements and knowledge required in several career fields, and growth in the Marine Safety and Environmental Protection fields resulted in an officer corps that was more focused on career tracks and specialties. In the 1980s and 1990s, the continued explosion in technology, demands for government efficiency and effectiveness, and increasing sophistication of Coast Guard missions caused a press towards officer specialization.

⁹ The concept of a 'specialist' and 'broadened specialist' is reflected in the Commandant's Guidance to PY-07 Promotion Boards, particularly in the section discussing promotion to LT and LCDR (for specialties) and for promotion to CDR and CAPT (for broadened specialists).

In today's Coast Guard very few officers are 'generalists,' meaning that they have skills in several areas of Coast Guard work. A 2003 assessment showed the number to be only about 5%.¹⁰ That same assessment showed that the percentage of 'broadened specialists' increase with grade. 27% of the O-4s officers were considered 'broadened specialists.' For CDR, 38% were in that category and for CAPT 42% had developed knowledge and skills in at least one area other than their primary specialty.¹¹

While the numbers of specialists have increased since the laws governing the promotion system were enacted, over 98% of Active Duty officers remain in one competitive category – the ADPL. The Commandant decided in 2002 to retain this system because of the Coast Guard's small size in comparison to the other Armed Forces and because of the critical role of the promotion system in developing our service's leadership.

**WHAT DOES THIS
MEAN FOR MY
CAREER?**

The discussion in this paper has provided important background and context for career management within the Coast Guard. Later sections will discuss the impact on both Junior and Senior officers.

Fundamentally, each officer must understand that while their day to day performance of duties is in the context of their specialty, all officers are considered for promotion equally, based on the precept provided to the selection board. The Personnel Manual provides the four major criteria – performance, professionalism, leadership, and education.¹² These criteria are considered by the Board, and each officer's official record is reviewed in the context of the criteria. While boards are composed of officers representing different specialties, each board is bound by law to arrive at a two-thirds majority decision regarding which officers are best qualified for promotion. Officers best position themselves for promotion by consistently high performance, professionalism, leadership, and education.

Each officer must also understand that assignments are made in the context of past performance, potential for increased responsibility, career development, and Service needs. Assignment Officers review all Officer Evaluation Reports so that they know the officers in their accounts and understand the responsibilities an officer has in their

¹⁰ Flag Voice 292 of 26 April 2006

¹¹ Future Force Officer Corps Management System Phase 2 – Coast Guard Officer Specialties Part 2 – An Evaluation of the Current State of Coast Guard Officer Specialty Management, Soza and Co., August 2003, Figure 15.

¹² See footnote 8.

current billet. The positions that are most demanding, have the most visibility, and carry the greatest impact will most often go to the highest performing officers.

It is true that the Coast Guard officer evaluation system does not call directly for a ranking of officers among their peers. Other Armed Forces evaluation systems provide this ranking on the evaluation form; however the size of our service and our units precludes this peer ranking system. We task Reporting Officers to rank each officer relative to those whom they have known over the course of a career. Consistently strong evaluations from a number of reporting officers are one indicator of record strength. Asking your Assignment Officer for an evaluation of your record is a helpful check on the strength of your record.

In the first 10 years or so of service (up through the grade of Lieutenant), the Coast Guard expects officers to grow in their specialties. From Lieutenant Commander through Captain, the Coast Guard expects that each officer's original specialty will form a basis from which they will continue to employ their specialty skills, but also broaden their horizons, interact with other specialties in the Coast Guard, understand how the Coast Guard works as an overall organization, and use that knowledge in senior leadership roles so that Coast Guard missions are effectively executed.¹³

Striking a balance between "specialty" assignments and broadening opportunities requires individual introspection about what stage an officer is currently in their career, their personal goals and aspirations, and how they see their background and skills contributing to Coast Guard goals. This begins with a personal assessment of background and capabilities. Mentors and Assignment Officers can provide an external assessment, but will often only do so if asked by the individual officer. It is up to each officer to manage his or her own career with strategic intent.

JUNIOR OFFICERS

As a Junior Officer, it is important to find your specialty and achieve its basic qualifications. The time to build your specialty expertise is within the first 10 years of your career. In 2006, the most senior officer in the zone for LCDR selection has 9 ½ years of commissioned service, so typically a candidate for LCDR will have three to five different assignments before that pivotal selection.

Basic qualifications for a specialty are gained in a number of ways.

¹³ This specialty construct and progression with rank was benchmarked from the Air Force and Marine Corps, whose promotion systems are much like the Coast Guard's. These services have promotion systems that promote the "best qualified" officers, considering most or all officers in one competitive category.

Some are through formal pathways such as flight training or Post-Graduate school. Some basic qualifications are gained through successive assignments coupled with qualifications earned in each assignment. Many operational specialties fall into this latter category. It is important for each officer to determine the needed qualifications for their specialty, and work to gain those early in a career. Mentors and chains of command can provide critical advice in this area.

Some officers are concerned because they find in their first assignment that their specialty plans need to be revised. By the time an officer is a junior Lieutenant, they should have fully begun their specialty qualifications. The later one finds his or her specialty niche, the shorter the time is to develop and perform in roles requiring those critical qualifications and competencies.

Our current billet structure dictates the assignment policy of providing most officers with a staff assignment following their initial operational tour. Many officers, eager to develop their operational careers, would rather be in a field role. However, in the long term, these staff tours can provide many of the elements of broadening that the Coast Guard seeks in their more senior officers while providing enhanced specialty expertise at the same time. Staff tours often provide the means for officers to see how the Coast Guard functions as an organization, how decisions are made and resources allocated, to gain valuable writing and speaking skills, and to be involved with wider ranging issues.

**LIEUTENANT
COMMANDERS
AND
COMMANDERS**

The years in LCDR and CDR grades are when a specialized career ideally will become more broadened. Once officers have made the decision to stay in the Coast Guard to retirement eligibility, the career choices made in these grades influence each officer's future.

Broadening can take two pathways, either through out-of-specialty assignments or through diverse assignments within one's specialty. Different specialties have different opportunities for broadening. Historically, Aviation and Operations Ashore – Prevention have had the least opportunity to gain assignments outside of specialty. In both cases, this is because the supply of officers and the demand for officers with those specialty skills is about the same. Several sub-specialties in Engineering and C4IT have experienced similar constraints. Officers should be aware that when the supply of specialists is close to the demand, there will be less opportunity for out-of-specialty assignments. Sustained superior performance is the best way to ensure that an out-of-specialty opportunity is available.

It is important to note that many officers continue in primarily specialty assignments for their entire career. The 2003 assessment mentioned earlier noted that 62% of Coast Guard commanders were considered 'specialists'. The Coast Guard needs experienced specialists, and a very successful career can be gained within specialty.

The Commandant's Guidance to Selection Boards recognizes these constraints on assignments. The guidance for promotion to CDR and CAPT specifically states that "the Coast Guard is requiring more officers to remain within their respective specialty areas." But these service expectations also state that officers moving into senior ranks must have "an understanding of the major issues facing the Coast Guard as a whole." The guidance states that this knowledge can be acquired in many different ways even though assigned within specialty, including assignment diversity, participation in studies/ task forces, and special assignments.

CAPTAINS

The advice most often provided to captains centers around the Captain Continuation milestone, and the three characteristics desired of officers at that point in their career.

- Successful captains should have had the opportunity to show they can improve and sustain mission execution at their units. Those having held command in the grade of captain have demonstrated performance that includes managing risk, achieving results, and leading large and complex organizations. Specialty backgrounds often provide the path to command as a commander or captain.
- Successful captains should also understand how the Coast Guard works within the broader governmental picture, how it works as a 'business' to allocate resources and achieve results, and have political savvy.
- Officers at this level should have exposure to areas of expertise outside the Coast Guard, and to develop a persona that brings external skills, abilities, and perspectives to the Service. These external credentials increase the Coast Guard's credibility with those whom we interact.

CONCLUSION

Developing a career has a number of important factors. This brief paper has centered on the basics of officership, promotions, and specialties. During each assignment year, one's personal situation and the availability of assignments are critical constraints to the available options. The Coast Guard's objectives in career management provide a needed backdrop to these individual choices.

The Coast Guard is working to provide a balanced career

development approach between specialties and broadening opportunities. From an individual perspective, new challenges expand one's horizons and offer new opportunities. From a Service perspective, specialty skills are critical to our Service's mission execution. Broadening beyond specialty bounds grows the characteristics that the Coast Guard needs in its senior captains.

Our Service culture is unique. Our relatively small size affords agility and provides officers of all ranks with the opportunity to make a lasting contribution to the Service's mission execution. Our bias for action is the envy of many high-performing organizations and largely the result of our ingrained core values of Honor, Respect, and Devotion to Duty. Together, these create the Coast Guard's value to our Nation -- our ability to shift among roles with the same platforms and personnel, capable and competent to perform a range of missions. The specialty and broadening pillars of a career provide the leadership qualities of the Coast Guard officer corps that has made our Service an organization that our Nation looks to in times of crisis. *Semper Paratus.*

EPILOGUE

This document was developed not as a prescriptive career template, but rather to inform the officer corps, and the junior officer in particular, of elements that have historically been tied to a successful career, and to inform how the Commandant's Guidance applies to one's career. Each officer's career is unique and no one document can capture all the different assignment permutations. To assist officers with aspects of career management, an Officer Career Management Branch (OPM-4) has been created within the CG Personnel Command. OPM-4 is a new branch that provides officer career management information, which revolves around three basic themes:

- Competencies and career paths (assignments; advanced education);
- Performance management (evaluations and promotions); and,
- Career broadening strategies (career goals; service schools; out-of-competency assignments).

OPM-4 can help with evaluating different career alternatives you may be considering, or provide insight into various aspects of the Coast Guard's Human Resources system.

If you would like to schedule a more formal career counseling session, please send an e-mail to: ARL-PF-CGPC-OPM-4. You will be contacted shortly thereafter to schedule an appointment to discuss your career.