

Buoy Bound

Story and photos by Petty Officer Third Class Tara Molle

An eerie whistle floats across the foggy Pacific like a lone survivor calling for help at sea. A black-hulled vessel slowly approaches the source, a bobbing and whistling buoy. Figures in hardhats, stained coveralls and life jackets scurry about the deck prepping the red and white, 18,500 pound mass of steel and electronics. They hook line and chain to its base yelling commands across deck.



"Head's up! Buoy's coming in!" Bellows one crewmember.

"Head's up! Buoy's coming in aye, aye!" Yells the rest of the crew in unison.

A large crane with words 'No bar too rough, too tough, too far,' emblazoned on the side begins to pull the buoy up onto the deck.

It takes an immense amount of patience, timing, skill and most importantly a keen eye on safety. One wrong move and a crewmember could be seriously hurt or killed. This daunting task may frighten some, but all the members work together in a tight cohesive team.

For the crew of the Coast Guard Cutter Fir, homeported in Tongue Point, Ore., this dirty and dangerous work is just another day at the office.

The Fir is a 225-ft., black-hulled buoy tender that is part of the Juniper Class Coast Guard Cutters. Launched on Aug. 18, 2003 and commissioned on Nov. 8, 2003, it is outfitted to handle oil spill recovery, fisheries law enforcement, boating safety, oil spill response, search and rescue, homeland security and some ice breaking operations.

"She is the ultimate multi-mission platform," said Lt. Molly Waters, the executive officer on board Fir. "We are literally capable of taking care of almost all of the Coast Guard's missions."

Waters speaks with the confidence, pride and a knowledge of one that has been part of a buoy tender crew for years, although she has only been aboard since July 13, 2009.

The Fir has quite a range of mission requirements, however its primary mission revolves around aids to navigation.

"There are 150 buoys in our area of responsibility," said Petty Officer 2nd Class Rob Shores, a boatswains mate on board the Fir. "We typically work approximately 75 to 80 buoys a year. As soon as spring is over, we head out and try to work the most during the summer months to make sure we are set before winter."

Working buoys can be grueling for crews on board any buoy tender. Long hours are spent ensuring that each buoy is cleaned up, operational and placed back into the sea.



There are 18 types of buoys maintained by the crew on Fir. The size and weight range between 195 to 18,500 pounds and each buoy serves a specific purpose.

"We are responsible for 37 of the Coast Guard's 51, nine foot buoys," said Waters. "That's a big point of pride for us."

"We have the most 935's in the Coast Guard," said Shores. "A 935 (9x35 LWR) means that the buoy is nine feet wide, by 35 feet tall. We work all the bars up and down the coast, so the buoys need to be big and burly to handle the power of the heavy winter storms. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration buoys are some of our most difficult to work too."

"The most dangerous evolutions this crew will have to deal with will involve working nine foot buoys in some pretty serious swells, upwards of 10 feet, maybe even more," said Waters.

Between harsh, frigid temperatures, powerful gale force winds and high seas, winter provides some of the toughest work for the crew to endure.

Waves reach 10 to 20 feet in height, sometimes even higher, and can toss the buoy tender around like a rag doll. Regardless of the conditions, the crew is always ready for anything that comes their way. The working crew of a buoy deck resembles older, salty individuals who have been doing this job for years. On the contrary.

"One of the beauties of the Coast Guard is that young people can get a lot of responsibility at an early age," said Waters. "If you are good, if you get qualified, you can step up to the plate and take charge. When we are working buoys down on deck, we have a lot of very young people in their late teen's or early twenties who are playing very big roles in the evolutions."

"A majority of the people you have in the deck department are E-4 and below," said Chief Warrant Officer Timothy Tully, supervisor of the deck department on board Fir. "The people who join the Coast Guard or who are



E-4 and below, are usually anywhere from 17 years to 20 years old. They are the ones who are working out on deck. You do have a lot of senior people out there as well who are teaching them how to do it."

"The young people on board are like typical young people," said

Waters. "They like to have fun, joke around and relax during the few opportunities that they have to do so, but when they get down on that deck or they get down in that main space, a switch is flipped. It never ceases to amaze me how observant they are and how no detail escapes them and how professionally they run things."

Evolutions on board the Fir run like a well-oiled machine. Every person on the buoy deck serves a specific purpose. For things to run smoothly, the members wear different colored helmets to differentiate who conducts which job.

"A white helmet means safety supervisor and that is worn by Bos'n (Bos'n is a nickname given to the chief warrant officer boatswains mate on board

cutters),” said Shores. “He has been doing this for a long time and he keeps the overall picture of what is going on the buoy deck. He talks directly to the bridge and answers any questions or uncertainties. A yellow helmet is the buoy deck supervisor. Blue is all of the qualified riggers and green are all of the break-in's.”

Break-in's on board are the personnel essentially 'learning the ropes.' They do a lot of the work cleaning the buoys, the deck and learning all of the evolutions.

Aside from the demanding work that is done conducting buoy maintenance, Fir also spends a lot of time carrying out law enforcement missions. Buoy tenders across the Coast Guard are now considered multi-mission platforms more than ever.

“Most of the time we focus on the fishing vessels,” said Waters. “We make sure that everything on board is in a safe working condition, that their paperwork is up to date and legal. Our number one objective is to ensure that they get home alive and safe. That is the most important thing.”



Waters explained that the Fir has a full time Coast Guard law enforcement officer on board who ensures that every member on board is trained with the proper professional qualification standard requirements. It is an ongoing training evolution to make sure that the crew is proficient. If necessary, the members are sent to training or 'C-schools.'

The Fir is yet another hard working asset within the Coast Guard dedicated to being Semper Paratus (always ready). For all of the tireless work that is going on 24/7, the crew on board remains ever vigilant and keeps positive attitudes with one another.

“There is a great vibe on board this cutter,” said Waters. “The thing I like about it is that it reminds me more of a patrol boat in terms of how tight the crew is. We have upwards of about 50 souls on board but it is a pretty tight knit group.”

"I love my job," said Petty Officer 2nd Class Robert Perios, an electronics technician aboard Fir. "The crew is awesome. I've been on a few ships before and by far this is the best crew. I can't talk highly enough about them."



"I love being underway," said Tully. "I think you get a different camaraderie than you do if you are on shore. You get a lot tighter with the crew and people trust you a lot more because when you are out there, on the water, the only people who are going to save you, are yourselves."