

1980 - Mariel Boatlift -U. S. Coast Guard Operations During the 1980 Cuban Exodus:

A huge Cuban refugee exodus took place in 1980. The reason is deeply rooted in that nation's internal affairs. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959 a steady flow of Cuban immigration took place as Castro moved deeper and deeper into the communist fold. This was temporarily halted by the Cuban Missile Crisis. In 1965, as economic conditions continued to deteriorate and opponents of government policies increased, Castro announced that the port of Camarioca would be opened to Cuban exiles who wished to return to Cuba to pick up relatives desiring to leave Cuba. This boatlift was terminated after President Johnson negotiated a safer and more orderly use of commercial aircraft for the transportation of refugees. These flights continued until August of 1971. A total of 263,540 Cubans came to the United States during this period. In April 1980 the Castro regime again initiated a large scale emigration to reduce discontent caused by Cuba's deteriorating economic conditions. The exodus grew in magnitude to a point where it seriously taxed the ability of the United States to accommodate it.

On 1 April 1980 a group of six Cubans crashed the gate of the Peruvian Embassy and requested asylum. Castro exploited the incident and announced the gates to the embassy would remain open to all who wished to leave Cuba. By 6 April there were over 10,000 Cubans crowded onto the grounds of the Embassy. Castro had not expected this number and found himself boxed in. He was experiencing considerable negative publicity but realized the situation was an excellent opportunity to initiate another boatlift. Shrewdly he made contact with the Cuban exile community and let it be known that if they came by small boat to the port of Mariel they could pick up relatives along with the refugees from the Peruvian Embassy. Castro's message to the Cuban exile community came through loud and clear. On 21 April two fishing vessels arrived in Key West with forty-eight Cuban refugees. The next day additional refugees arrived and during radio interviews they stated that the Cuban government had opened the port of Mariel to those wishing to leave. By 24 April there were close to 400 boats in Mariel harbor waiting to pick up refugees.

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wishing to leave. By 24 April there were close to 400 boats in Mariel harbor waiting to pick up refugees.

The United States Coast Guard's Seventh District, commanded by Rear Admiral Benedict L. Stabile, knew they were going to have a search and rescue problem to deal with. The question was: How large? Surveillance flights began 24 April from Air Station Miami utilizing HC-131 aircraft in the area south of Key West and twice daily patrol flights became



routine. An estimated 11 vessels had safely crossed to Cuba and had returned with over 700 refugees disembarking at Key West or Miami. Nearly one thousand craft were observed southbound on the afternoon of the 24th. At least twenty could be seen from the patrolling aircraft at any given moment. For the most part, these were Cuban-Americans who owned their own boat; typically a 20 to 40 footer primarily equipped for local pleasure boating. Those that did not have boats were paying large sums to small craft operators, such as shrimpers, to bring back relatives. At the end of April the Cuban Government reported over 1700 vessels were in the port of Mariel. The Coast Guard responded to distress calls on a case by case basis. Within a 21-hour period, Group Key West assisted sixteen craft and had a waiting list of twenty boats which had suffered mechanical failures and needed assistance. In addition to the Groups three patrol boats the cutters *Acushnet* (WAGO-167), *Dauntless* (WMEC-624), and *Dependable* (WMEC-626), the latter with a HH-52 helicopter embarked, patrolled the general area.

Recognition that the problem was going to grow was immediate. A request for supplemental assistance was made to the Atlantic Area Commander who ordered additional units transferred to the operational control of the Seventh District. The units consisted of two additional HC-131s with double crews; an HH-3F with double crew assigned to Group Key West; two HH-52 aircraft assigned for shipboard operations; four additional cutters and three additional patrol boats. The Coast Guard mission was to provide maximum protection for refugee vessels transiting between Florida and Cuba. The SAR workload continued unabated. Helicopters and surface ships coordinated efforts for maximum effectiveness. By the end of April the volume of cases had become so heavy that accurate records could not be kept. It was not uncommon for a cutter to have five or six boats in tow and a number of survivors on board from swamped boats. During one 24-hour period the cutter *Dauntless* picked up 131 persons from six overloaded boats, two of which were disabled. *Diligence* had six craft in tow, was escorting two others, and had twenty-three persons on board from a sunken vessel.



HH-52A – Working with CGC *Diligence*

Governor Bob Graham, in response to the rapidly expanding refugee problem, had declared Florida a disaster area by the end of April. During the first two weeks of May the number of refugees arriving Key West had approached 5,000 a day. The number of Immigration Service Officers had increased to fifty and an additional one-hundred Border Patrol Officers were assigned to the area. The refugee processing facilities were completely overwhelmed. Initially, Customs, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, the US Public Health Service and other



involved government agencies worked independently of each other and often agency efforts were duplicated. The agencies quickly realized that a coordinated effort with guidance and approval authority at the local level was the only way the escalating situation could be handled. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was assigned to coordinate the efforts of nine different government agencies and five private organization and charities. FEMA quickly recognized that Key West could not accommodate the continuing influx of refugees. Expeditious relocation of the refugees off the Island was critical. A logistical and transportation system capable of transporting up to 10,000 people a day out of Key West was developed.

By the middle of May emphasis was being placed on bringing order to the boatlift and stopping the flow of refugees. The revised Coast Guard Operations Order of May 15 contained an additional mission. Units were to be heavily engaged in law enforcement as well as Search and Rescue operations. In addition to preventing the loss of life, Coast Guard units were directed to interdict southbound boats for the purpose of curtailing the sea lift; to ensure that all northbound arrivals terminate at Key West for processing; and to provide all concerned agencies with up-to-date and accurate intelligence on vessel movements. The Seventh District staff realized that a timely system for detecting and reporting southbound vessels was critical to reducing the flow of refugees. Coast Guard fixed wing search aircraft – HC-131s from Air station Miami and HC-130s from Air station Clearwater and Air station Elizabeth City - flew surveillance flights. Navy long-range P-3 aircraft from Naval Air Station Jacksonville augmented the Coast Guard flights. The Seventh District's Operation Division coordinated patrols for fixed-wing aircraft; Group Key West scheduled coastal surveillance patrols for HH-3F and HH-52A helicopters operating out of NAS Key West; Flight deck equipped cutters scheduled flights for their own attached HH-52A helicopters. To facilitate the increased aviation activity, two additional HC-131, two HH-3F helicopter, and five additional HH-52A helicopters, four of which were deployed onboard flight-deck equipped cutters, were assigned from other aviation units.

Group Key West was under the command of LCDR Sam Dennis. Key West was the primary departure and arrival point for the exile boats making the trip to Mariel and back. The SAR responsibility was along the coast out to 30 miles offshore. The group had quadrupled in size and operated and supported an imposing group of additional resources consisting of 110-foot, 95-foot and 82-foot patrol boats, and a large number of 41-foot utility boats. To assist with coastal rescue and surveillance, an HH-52A and two HH-3F Coast Guard helicopters were also assigned, As the tempo of operations continued to increase, with no let up in sight, the Group Commander, burdened with increased



Direct water pickup of survivors

responsibilities, needed assistance in coordinating and maintaining air assets at his disposal. On 20 May 1980 the Coast Guard Aviation Detachment (AVDET) came into being with LCDR Mont J. Smith assigned as “Aviator-in-Charge.” The detachment consisted of an aircraft maintenance officer, an enlisted maintenance supervisor, four HH-3E flight crews, three HH-52A flight crews, and three seven-man maintenance support sections. NAS Key West provided ramps space, limited office space and messing for Coast Guard personnel. Ground support equipment was obtained from CGAS Clearwater and a supply network was set up with CGAS Miami, CGAS Clearwater and the Coast Guard Aviation Repair and Supply Center (AR&SC) at

Elizabeth City, N.C. AVDET Key West grew into an “ad-hoc” air station -- one of the busiest in Coast Guard history -- significantly contributing to the successful response to the Mariel Exodus. A more detailed account of the creation and operation of the Key West AVDET is addressed at the end of this narrative.

The Cuban exile community became aware that Castro had used them. The makeup of the people leaving Cuba was different than in previous years. During the Mariel Boatlift more than 20,000 men were forced to leave Cuba without their families; an extremely small percentage of the refugees were related to those in the exile community; close to 2000 of the 126,000 refugees were convicted felons and an estimated 3000 Cuban Intelligence Service agents, given a variety of assignments, entered the United States.

On 2 June, the Coast Guard encountered a new situation when the 118-foot M/V *Red Diamond* departed Mariel, escorted by three Cuban vessels, with hundreds of people on board. The Coast Guard was ordered to prevent the vessel from coming to Florida. When the Coast Guard cutters *Dallas*, *Acushnet* and *Cherokee* began to force the *Red Diamond* to change course the Cuban escort threatened to make a serious international incident. At 4:00 pm that afternoon the Coast Guard cutters were ordered to allow *Red Diamond* to proceed to Key West. The Justice Department said the decision had been made “for humanitarian reasons.” Additional attempts at this type of operation continued. The United States recognized the threat of large commercial vessels capable of transporting thousands of people. Fortunately, diplomatic efforts persuaded Panama and other flag states to pressure Cuba into rejecting their ships for the boatlift. Vessels were stopped before sailing for safety violations and those that did go and return were seized.

On 25 September 1980 the Coast Guard Cutter *Point Thatcher* was patrolling north of Mariel. A look at the cutters radar screen showed a series of blips on the radar screen departing the harbor entrance. By the next morning it had been confirmed that none of the 58 boats carried refugees. The boat crews told the Coast Guard that they had been forced to leave by the Cuban government. The 159-day boatlift was over! There were 600 stranded refugees who had already been processed that were flown out later.

RADM Stabile and staff, with Captain Raymond J. Copin as Chief of Operations, did an outstanding job. The task at hand was huge and they were forced to react to an ever changing situation orchestrated by Fidel Castro as well as an initial lack of a coherent policy on the part of the Administration. They opted to augment existing staff components and operational forces within the already established organization. Augmentation allowed the people most knowledgeable, having the greatest familiarity with the area and resource capabilities, to direct the operation on a day to day basis. This proved to be a wise decision. Operational authority was vested at the lowest level possible and was supported up through the chain of command providing a great degree of flexibility and the ability to meet the ever changing requirements. Jack Watson, President Carter’s Chief of Staff said “The Coast Guard’s response was outstanding, from the top of the organization to the boat operators on the scene --- “Semper

Paratus” was exactly right. The Coast Guard was ready and they had the flexibility to get the job done – they were creative in solving problems.”

This was a large operation. The Coast Guard utilized twenty-two large cutters, eleven 95-foot patrol boats, twenty-six 82-foot patrol boats and twenty-one 41-foot utility boats during this operation. The Navy provided fourteen additional ships and aircraft from four aviation units. This effort also saw the greatest concentration of Coast Guard aircraft up to this point.. Aviation resources were critical to the Coast Guard response to the exodus. Aircraft and aircrews were provided from fifteen Air stations. An additional eleven Air stations provided supplemental crews. There were a total of thirty-three fixed-wing aircraft and thirty-six helicopters that flew a total of 9,026 mission hours without an accident.

Over 126,000 refugees crossed the Straits of Florida in craft that were marginal and in various states of disrepair. Amazingly there were only forty-five known fatalities. This is directly attributable to the talent and professionalism of those personnel working the air and sea. Over 1,300 separate SAR cases were reported. This is an impressive number considering that there was a period at the end of April when the Coast Guard was too busy to record them. Thousands of lives were saved. This operation stands out in Coast Guard annals as one of the Service’s greatest achievements.