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Leadership Profile

Vice Admiral John P. Currier Vice Commandant, United States Coast Guard

As Vice Commandant of the Coast Guard, Vice Admiral John Currier oversees the senior operational and mission support commanders leading some 42,000 active-duty, 8,000 reserve, 8,000 civilian, and 30,000 Auxiliary personnel. He is the Component Acquisition Executive for the service, including helicopter modernization. With more than 6,000 rotary- and fixed-wing flight hours, VADM Currier is also the Coast Guard's Ancient Albatross – its longest-serving active-duty aviator – and its senior proponent of aviation safety. He observes, "Naval aviation celebrated its 100th anniversary last year, and I was privileged to be a part of that along with my Navy and Marine Corps counterparts. Someone pointed out to me that I've been around more than 30% of those 100 years. I've seen a progressive change not only in pilot skills and training, but in cockpit workload, and I have some concerns. I have a different perspective than the younger people, but I think we're developing a more inside focus, a more systems management focus, less stick-and-rudder than in years past. I'm not sure that's a negative; it's just different. One of the things we need to guard against is the over-dependence on the electronics and flight management systems such that we let basic flying skills atrophy. You're liable in an emergency situation to have to fall back on those."

John Currier's flying skills trace back to his youth in Westbrook, Maine, outside Portland. "I've always wanted to fly. When I was a young kid, I used to

hang around the airport and worked at an FBO to get some time for a private license. I got that when I was a teenager and progressed on from there." Work and studies at the University of Southern Maine nevertheless took a different direction. "Actually, I was a police officer going to college part-time the last two years. I saw a future in law enforcement and got a degree in criminal justice thinking that I would go into the FBI or some other Federal law enforcement agency, but I came to the Coast Guard instead." Events proved the mix of aviation and law enforcement valuable in today's Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The Vice Commandant notes, "In the past, if you scratched a Coast Guard helicopter pilot, he or she would have bled Search And Rescue [SAR]. Since 9/11, we've taken a dual focus on Maritime Security and Maritime Safety. We really are now an airborne law enforcement agency."

VADM Currier recalls, "My wife's brother was a Navy helicopter pilot in the HSL [Helicopter Antisubmarine Light] world and said, 'I just found out about the Coast Guard and it looks like a pretty interesting way to make a living flying aircraft.' I applied for Officer Candidate School as a police officer thinking I'd never hear from them because it's a very selective program. I lucked out because what they were looking for at that time was law enforcement experience. It was the start of major marijuana interdiction in the Caribbean and the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone."

Commissioned in 1976, Ensign Currier was designated a Naval Aviator

at Pensacola, Florida a year later. He recalls, "I had fixed-wing private and commercial licenses before I came in, but there was no doubt in my mind that if I was going to fly for the Coast Guard, I wanted to be a helicopter pilot. In my opinion at the time, that's where the action was."

Standing Watch

The Coast Guard Aviation Training Center prepared the new pilot for duty at Air Station Cape Cod, Massachusetts. "I initially went to our training program at Mobile, Alabama and qualified in the HH-3F. At Cape Cod, most of the people were flying the HH-52 first for a year or two and then transitioning. They put me in the H-3 as an ensign, and as the junior guy, I was able to progress rapidly and made Aircraft Commander in about a year. Back then, it was at the height of the fishery activities off New England. We were doing hundreds of SAR cases a year. I was able to fly 1,500 hours in three years – that's how intense it was." The Cape Cod tour was interrupted by a deployment to Key West, Florida during the 1980 Mariel Boatlift. VADM Currier recounts, "We were actually flying down into Cuban airspace to do rescues. Their gunboats would be off Mariel tracking us with their weapons. One of my buddies got buzzed by a MiG one day; that was exciting."

Home station rescues provided their own excitement. VADM Currier explains, "The H-3 had enough legs to get about 300 miles off shore, so we would get really challenged at night and off-shore in storms in the North Atlantic." One

tough rescue in 1981 won Lt. (jg) Currier and his crew the AHS Frederick L. Feinberg Award. He remembers, "We had to go out at about 3 AM to take 10 people off a scalloper that was sinking 120 miles south of Nantucket. It was blowing about 60 to 80 knots. The seas were about 30 ft. It was at night, and it was snowing. When we arrived in a hover, we turned on the floodlights and neither myself, nor the co-pilot, nor the flight mechanic thought we could do it. It was blowing so hard we had to use a Danforth anchor to get the tending line to the boat. We got them off and got back. The helicopter was pretty beat up – they actually had to change the tail rotor because of overstresses.

"This was not a solo pilot operation. This was a reflection of an incredibly talented flight mechanic and a solid co-pilot. Actually, I think that was my co-pilot's first rescue mission after transitioning from the Marine Corps to the Coast Guard, and I think it was a heck of an eye-opener for him." VADM Currier adds, "In the Coast Guard we have some of the best rotary- and fixed-wing pilots there are. I can say that as the old Coast Guard aviator, but I've been around long enough in civil and military aviation to say our people are among the very best. They are challenged on a daily basis with missions that would be a big deal in other services. For us, they're how we do business – night, off-shore, poor visibility, terrible weather. It's always single-ship, and it's always single-crew. It requires skill, proficiency and individual initiative."

Flying Engineer

Coast Guard Air Station Sitka, Alaska provided new challenges and direction. "A lot of long missions, a lot of nasty weather – Cape Cod had been a terrific training ground for Alaska because the conditions weren't all that different, except for the terrain," recalls VADM Currier. "What I did do at Sitka was enter the Aviation Engineering Program, and that defined the rest of my career. It's a combination of resident schools in DoD and the Coast Guard, and a syllabus that you have to execute at the unit with mechanics, chief petty officers, and the



leaders on the hangar deck. It's about a 12-to 18-month program. On completion, you're designated an Aeronautical Engineering Officer in the Coast Guard."

The Great Lakes provided more flying and engineering opportunities. "Traverse City at that time had the H-52 and they were just getting the Falcon jet. I was able to dual-qualify as an aircraft commander in the jet and the helicopter. I did an aeronautical engineering tour at Traverse City, and Headquarters was looking for someone to be the Class Desk officer at the Naval Air Systems Command [NAVAIR] back then in Crystal City for the H-60."

The Coast Guard HH-60J was acquired in parallel with the Navy HH-60H. VADM Currier notes, "The value of the Seahawk to the Coast Guard was obvious, but we would never have been able to acquire the system without the full support of the Navy. My Navy brethren, although they did shorter tours in that assignment, were jealous because I was on flight orders. I would disappear a few days a month to deliver new aircraft to units or go to Pax River and participate in test flights. Quite frankly, in an intense four-year tour at NAVAIR, that's the way I stayed balanced."

Modernize and Fly Safe

Through successive command positions, John Currier achieved Flag rank in 2005, became Coast Guard Chief of Staff in 2009, and assumed his current post in 2012. As Component Acquisition Executive today, VADM Currier oversees diverse projects including depot modernization of Coast Guard helicopters. "We're not looking to recapitalize aviation assets – buy new helicopters – until 2027, although we will upgrade components. We will continue to acquire the fixed-wing HC-144 and C-130J in the interim."

The Coast Guard objective fleet is now 105 HH-65C Short Range Recovery (SRR) and 32 MH-60T Medium Range Recovery (MRR) helicopters. VADM Currier notes, "I'd like to see a gearbox upgrade on the H-65 that allows us to take full advantage of the power that the engines deliver. The Turbomecas are very reliable and outstanding engines, but the limitation now is the drivetrain.

"The enhancement I'd like to see in the H-60, over what we get in the MH conversion, is an enhanced surface search radar. That is an out-year budget issue now. To have a dedicated surface search radar on that machine would enhance effectiveness of the helo by an order of magnitude."

Communications, navigation, and sensor enhancements in the modernized MH-60T and HH-65C and

the new HC-130J and HC-144A broadened Coast Guard capabilities. They coincided with a renewed emphasis on aviation safety. "There was a two-and-a-half to three-year period where we had seven Class A mishaps and 20 fatalities. It was a wake-up call," acknowledges VADM Carrier. "About three years ago, we started an Aviation and Safety Action Program to look inside our own house. We formed this group led by some very talented senior aviators who actually scrubbed our aviation culture. What I charged them to do was look at the total aviation environment and look for subtle influences that had a negative impact on our safety culture, our methods of flying, and our approach to missions.

"The professionalism is there. We had to get back to some of the basics on how we addressed flight safety and risk management on the mission," says VADM Carrier. "The commitment we made to Crew Resource Management and Operational Resource Management is not just a banner. We incorporate that in how we do business across the community, and it has a very positive effect,"

Technology too can pose safety challenges. "My concern right now is the transition in a low-visibility environment at night in helicopters from Night Vision Goggles to visual

flight, and from surface contact to IFR flight. I don't think when we brought in the ANVIS Gen 9 goggles, as good as they are, that we really understood the added complexity for our crews. For instance, in a nighttime hover, you can get in a visual environment where you think you have a solid horizon, but you may not. Blowing fog and other visual degraders are playing tricks on your mind, so when you transition out, do you do a visual transition to forward flight? Do you do an instrument takeoff? How do we set up the game so that people will win consistently by following the rules to which they're trained? In that environment, it has to be a team sport. The guys in the back have to be paying attention to what's going on up front, to back the pilots up in that critical transition phase."

The Coast Guard is investigating new technology to address Degraded Visual Environments and other operational challenges. However, the Service lacks sufficient resources to develop advanced technologies – such as the ill-fated Eagle Eye tilt rotor Unmanned Aircraft System (UAS) – alone. VADM Carrier acknowledges, "I think the mistake we made with the Eagle Eye under the Deepwater program is we got ahead of our own science. We have now paired up with the Navy, as a junior partner, to explore unmanned rotary-

wing air vehicles jointly. We've been involved in their Fire Scout and other unmanned aircraft programs.

"Right now, we're looking at a broader spectrum that ranges from the Scan Eagle on our National Security Cutter Stratton on the West Coast for lightweight vehicle assessment to developing a partnership with Customs and Border Protection, another agency of DHS, on their Predator program. I think UASs have a real future in Coast Guard aviation as new eyes for our ships, enhancing the operational effectiveness of our surface/air packages."

What might a future Coast Guard rotorcraft be like? VADM Carrier offers, "I would love to find a machine – this is the ideal – that is fast enough, has the range, and is large enough inside to handle 10 survivors on long offshore missions, and be shipboard compatible. I would very much like us to take the SRR and the MRR requirements and reduce those assets to a single airframe. That's a challenge because of flight deck size and current rotary-wing technology. There are some incredible advances being made by industry that will get us out there with longer range yet still have helicopter-like characteristics when needed."



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