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Coast Guard gets new 'medium' for patrols

By KARA HANSEN

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ILWACO, Wash. - The newest U.S. Coast Guard rescue boat debuted Thursday at Station Cape Disappointment, where crews plan to push her to the limits in the Graveyard of the Pacific.

A large audience including Coast Guard personnel from Kent, Wash., Yorktown, Va., Astoria and Cape "D" gathered at the docks for the grand arrival of the new Response Boat -Medium, making sure the prototype - the second delivered so far and the only one on the West Coast - was settled in at her new home.

ALEX PAJUNAS — The Daily Astorian

The U.S. Coast Guard Response Boat - Medium leaves the docks of Station Cape Disappointment Thursday carrying 17 Coast Guard personnel on a test drive. The new Response Boat was brought to Cape D for testing in some of the challenging conditions that are presented around the mouth of the Columbia River.

Although Cape Disappointment doesn't operate any of the 41-foot "day-to-day workhorses" the 44-foot RBM is destined to replace, the station stood out to project managers because of one key characteristic: heavy weather.

For the next six months, local boat crews will put the medium response boat to the ultimate test, launching in rough seas and breaking surf to see if the RBM can survive the clobbering.

If the boat makes the grade, it could fill a gap at places like Cape Disappointment, said Lt. Matthew Hobbie, the station's commanding officer. The Ilwaco station operates two 47-foot motor lifeboats, a 52-foot lifeboat and two 25-foot Defender-class response boats.

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"The Defender class boats are good harbor boats, and most of the time they're good river boats; the other boats are good in the surf," Hobbie said. "This boat has the capability of being something in between."

Designed for 30-knot winds and 8-foot waves, the medium response boat lacks some of the toughness of the 47-footer, which can take a hammering from 50- or 60-knot winds while cutting through 20- to 30-foot seas. But the slightly larger lifeboat would lose the race against the new response vessel, which travels almost twice its speed. Powered by dual diesel engines and two Rolls Royce water jets, the RBM is nearly as fast as the smaller 25-foot response boats. Virtually unsinkable, it can right itself from an upside-down, underwater roll. A mount for automatic weapons accommodates homeland security or port defense missions.

And the RBM offers plenty of amenities for boat crews, including shock-absorbing seats, survivors' seating, a microwave and a cooler below deck. Air conditioning is standard. For safety, screens in the pilot house can flip on a camera in the engine room to zero in on problems before sending anyone down to fix them.

Sensors, navigation and communications equipment have been upgraded. Although many fishermen employ heat-sensing equipment to track their catch, the Coast Guard's small boats until now haven't used FLIR, or forward-looking infrared. The new boat's thermal-imaging system will show crews the heat signature of people on the water.

ALEX PAJUNAS — *The Daily Astorian*

Master Chief Chuck Hamerle, middle, and BM1 Mike White, right, inspect one of two 825-horsepower Detroit Diesel engines with waterjet propulsion located below deck aboard the Coast Guard's Response Boat Medium Thursday at Station Cape Disappointment.

Hobbie has selected two crews for initiating field tests next week. They'll start with "baby steps," he said, operating the boat in good conditions. "Then, we're going to take special steps in pushing those limits, to test the survivability limits." While the RBM is designed for weaker, it may be able to take 12-foot seas and 50-knot winds, conditions prevalent on the notorious Columbia River bar, he said.

Cape Disappointment is one of six stations testing the boat before it goes into full-scale production. Each is charged with specific tasks, which vary by environment, said Leroy Hurt, a Coast Guard employee with the Response Boat-Medium acquisition project.

"Station Little Creek in Virginia, that's a high-operational-tempo station, where the boat is continually going out ... doing different things such as VIP treatment, a wide variety of missions," Hurt said. "We're also sending a boat to Station Milwaukie (Wis.), and one of the things they'll be looking at there is how the boat does in a very cold and icy environment. That's another high-operational-tempo environment, where the boat will be tested on how it does in very high-traffic sea lanes or commerce lanes.

"Cape Disappointment, as I've been told, is distinguished as having the heaviest surf conditions in the country. We wanted to see how the boat does in heavy weather environments, and this is the place to come."

In addition diverse environments, the boat will be evaluated across mission types, said Cmdr. Jerry Doherty, outgoing commanding officer of the Response Boat-Medium Project Resident Office.

Whether working inland waterways or the open ocean, he said, the medium response boat so far has proven "a much better platform for executing that middle range of missions."

"This is going to allow these stations to be much more successful at doing what we do best, in particular, here: saving people, escorting the high-interest vessels up and down (the river), doing security missions," Doherty said. "All the multiple things we do for the American taxpayer, we're going to be able to do better."

By 2015, the RBM fleet could include more than 180 boats, at a cost of about \$2 million each. Whether the new vessel ends up at Cape Disappointment depends on input gathered from crews over the next few months.

The real test will come in late fall, when surf starts kicking up at the river's mouth.

"We obviously want you to put this boat into some things, but we do not want you to do anything unsafe, anything destructive," Chief Warrant Officer Jim Estes, heading a Yorktown training team, told Cape Disappointment crews Thursday.

"We're going to crawl before we walk and we're going to walk before we run. You do not have a whole lot of weather now anyway. October - is that when it starts getting nice?"



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