

Charles David Jr. now in service



RIC BUSH/The Citizen

The USCGC Charles David Jr. was commissioned during a sunset ceremony Saturday at the Coast Guard Sector Key West headquarters at Trumbo Point..

KEY WEST

Coast Guard commissions newest high-tech cutter

BY ADAM LINHARDT
Citizen Staff

The future of the Coast Guard is here as Key West's newest cutter was officially unveiled

and commissioned for duty Saturday.

The 154-foot Sentinel-class Fast Response Cutter Charles David Jr. was unveiled at Sector Key West and marks the first

of six such ships that soon will change the maritime landscape of the Southernmost City and the Florida Keys.

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Charles David, Jr.



RIC BUSH/The Citizen

Lt. Junior Grade Daniel Cahill introduced the USCGC Charles David Jr. Fast Response Cutter during Saturday's commissioning ceremony.

Cutter

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A commissioning is different than a christening, in which the ship is named and a bottle of champagne often broken across the bow. A commissioning is a centuries-old maritime ceremony that places the ship in official, active service.

"We have transitioned from training to ready for operations," said Charles David Jr. Commanding Officer Lt. Kevin Beaudoin. "From that standpoint, we're ready and excited to be on patrol in the Florida Straits in support of Sector Key West. The commissioning is the culmination of all the work to get us there."

The Charles David Jr., like all the Sentinel-class vessels, is 154 feet long, has a 25-foot beam and a maximum speed of more than 28 knots. She is armed with a 25 mm gun and four .50-caliber machine guns.

The ship, along with other Fast Response Cutter crews, has actually been in Key West for some time training and preparing for commissioning. All such crews and all of the roughly \$73 million vessels, 58 total, will be passing through Sector Key West to be weaponized and outfitted.

Coast Guard Sector Key West Commander Capt. Al Young has likened all the activity to the feeling a child has on Christmas morning.

"When you look at any new vessel with increased capabilities, improved communications and the ability to stay out longer, as far as what that

means to the community: There should be a tremendous feeling of security knowing that the Coast Guard has such a footprint here in Key West," Young said.

Coast Guard crews in the Keys performed 776 search-and-rescue missions in fiscal year 2012, interdicting about 1,200 migrants. The new cutters will play an integral role in those missions.

The next five Fast Response Cutters will arrive over the next 18 months.

"There's going to be a lot of white hulls here and it's going to be busy," said Sector Key West spokesman Ensign Peter Belmont.

The plan is all part of a much larger, roughly \$3.4 billion Coast Guard project to replace its aging 110-foot Island-class cutters nationwide. In Key West, that includes the Pea Island, Kodiak Island, Knight Island and Key Biscayne. No decisions have been made as to the fate of the retired cutters.

It was decided to replace them after a failed retrofit in 2004 was plagued with structural problems.

"Getting all these folks certified on new platforms takes a tremendous amount of work so they can become a crew," Young said.

The cutters' go-fast boats can be deployed via their sterns as opposed to the cranes used now — a big improvement in the hunt for drug submarines that requires quick responses.

Called "over-the-horizon interceptors," the feature will allow go-fast boats to be deployed more quickly and in rougher seas than the current setup.

"This is the strongest seaworthy vessel ever built to keep your crew safe," Chris Bollinger, president of New Construction Bollinger Shipyards in Louisiana, where the cutter was built, told Beaudoin during the sunset ceremony Saturday night.

The 270-foot Thetis and Mohawk will remain in Key West, as will the 87-foot Sawfish, but what's to happen to the 110-footers will ultimately be up to Congress.



Sharon David

The new Fast Response Cutters and their fast-deployable go-fast boats look to have the biggest potential impact in the war on drugs as most drug cartels favor go-fast boats and semi-submersible submarines, but the new vessels impact and effectiveness remains to be seen, said John Pike, a national security analyst and director and founder of GlobalSecurity.org, a Washington, D.C.-based military think tank.

The new vessels' success will probably depend on how flexible the new platforms perform, Pike said.

"I think all that is going vary over time," Pike said. "As of now, they will certainly have their hands full with drug runners. I don't necessarily know

the whether the extent of counter-narcotics activities five to 10 years from now will be as they were five to 10 years ago in terms of how aggressive we operate. We could see a significant shift in how counter-narcotics operate. We haven't had a large boatlift recently, but that could happen as well."

Pike said the Fast Response Cutters based a "proven design" in that Coast Guard planners chose "not to reinvent the wheel" and went with a "low risk approach" in terms of fiscal concerns.

"These vessels offer capabilities that any country with a coastline is going to want to have," he said.

The Sentinel-class vessels are all named after people who served heroically in the Coast Guard.

Charles Walter David Jr. died of pneumonia after rescuing other sailors from the Atlantic Ocean off Greenland during World War II. David volunteered to dive into the frigid water to rescue exhausted crew from a troop transport sunk by a German U-boat, then rescued several of his own crew when they tired in the water.

Among those who took part in the commissioning were Sharon David, granddaughter of the ship's namesake, and 91-year-old Richard Swanson, fellow rescuer and crewmember of the Coast Guard Cutter Comanche, the same vessel to which Charles David Jr. was assigned when he performed the rescue.

"My grandfather's heroic actions in the stormy and frigid ice waters of the North Atlantic in February 1943, inspired the motto, 'STEWARDSHIP OF THE SEAS,' that appears as part of the cutter's coat of arms," David said during the ceremony. "As you, the crew of the USCGC Charles David Jr. embark on your brave service at sea, please take a part of my grandfather's 'STEWARDSHIP OF THE SEAS' spirit with you. Always know that he watches over you."

In addition to the Charles David Jr., the following Fast Response Cutters will soon call Key West home:

- Charles W. Sexton
 - Kathleen Moore
 - Joseph Napier
 - William Trump
 - Isaac Mayo
- alinhardt@keysnews.com



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