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HAITIAN MIGRANT INTERDICTION OPERATION

The Caribbean's Windward Passage has long been a waterway for the mariner that dates back to the early explorers. Pirates, gunrunners, and a number of other unsavory characters have long plied their trade in the deep blue waters between the low green hills of Cuba and Haiti and the table-flat islands of the Bahamas, leaving their marks in the history books.

In recent years, the highly profitable drug trade that originates in South America has used the Windward Passage as one of the main avenues for the smuggling of drugs by boat. Coast Guard Cutters and their crews have boarded and seized these vessels in the continuing effort to stem the flow of illegal contraband into the United States.

Now, a new chapter has been added. This tale is a sorry and often tragic addition to an already old story. For the past several years, in addition to the narcotics trade, smugglers have been dealing in illegal human cargo - Haitians fleeing their homeland in search of jobs in the United States.

Since 1972, an estimated 60,000 Haitians have entered the U.S. illegally by sea at the rate of over 1,000 per month. Tales of starvation, beatings, and murder of Haitians at the hands of the unscrupulous smugglers have been reported to U.S. officials, although none have been substantiated.

In an effort to stop the flow of illegal migrants invading Florida's shores, President Reagan, in cooperation with the Haitian government, signed

an order on 29 September 1981 authorizing the Coast Guard to stop vessels on the high seas that are suspected of carrying illegal migrants bound for the United States. The Coast Guard Cutter HAMILTON, already on law enforcement patrol in the Caribbean, was directed to proceed immediately to the Windward Passage, marking the beginning of the Haitian Migrant Interdiction Operation (HMIO).

Following a week of meetings with representatives of the Haitian government in Port Au Prince, Haiti, HAMILTON assumed station in the Windward Passage and began the operation. For two weeks the HAMILTON conducted boardings of suspect vessels between Cuba and Haiti. On 24 October, the Boston-based cutter CHASE relieved the HAMILTON in Port Au Prince. Several hours later, CHASE departed for the Windward Passage to begin her involvement in HMIO.

Both ships received support from the air during the patrol. Flight crews from Air Stations Miami, Mobile, Brooklyn, Savannah, Traverse City, and Houston manned two HH-52 helicopters assigned to an aviation detachment established at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (GIMO). In addition, an HC-130 and crew from Air Station Clearwater was assigned to AVDET GIMO to provide long range surveillance for the operation. Aircraft support personnel from air stations throughout the United States were assigned TAD to AVDET GIMO to perform maintenance on all aircraft assigned to the patrol.

On the first day of the patrol, as CHASE steamed north of Port Au

Prince, the first interdiction took place. Fifty-six Haitians, including women and children, who had been at sea for six days and had no idea where they were, were removed from their leaky 35-foot sailboat, the EXORDE, and taken aboard CHASE. The decision to take the Haitians back to Port Au Prince aboard the CHASE was made after Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) agents had carefully screened the Haitians for political asylum and because of the alarming condition of the crude sailboat in the rising winds and seas. The sailboat sank a short time after all the migrants had been evacuated to CHASE.

It was a long evening of work for CHASE personnel when the EXORDE was interdicted. The vessel was sighted shortly after Five o'clock in the evening, and it was nearly sunset when CHASE was finally alongside and able to put its boat in the water. Because the rudder was lashed in place and the sails attached to the mast and boom could not be lowered, EXORDE never was able to heave to. Instead she continued on a westerly course while CHASE maintained station on her starboard quarter.

It took the boarding officer approximately 15 minutes to determine the status of the vessel and of its fifty six passengers, none of whom had the documents required for entry into the U.S. It took the INS agents on the EXORDE another ninety minutes to conduct interviews with the Haitians and determine that no one aboard the EXORDE was going to the U.S. for other than economic reasons.

Following the boarding officers return to CHASE, boat crews began the exhaustive work of bringing the Haitiana back to CHASE. Both motor surfboats were put in the water for the operation, which by now had to be conducted in darkness. The only light on the EXORDE to guide the coxswains back for another load of migrants was the hand held flashlight carried by one member of the boarding party left aboard the Exorde to supervise the evacuation of the Haitians. It was difficult work which took nearly two hours to complete, but when it was over, shortly before ten o'clock that evening, 56 people were safely aboard the CHASE, where a shower and hot food awaited them.

As CHASE proceeded toward Port Au Prince with the Haitians on board, a twist of fate drowned would-be migrants in the surf off the Florida coast. The bodies of 33 Haitians washed ashore on the beaches of Hillsborough, Florida after their homemade sailboat foundered in five foot seas just a few yards from the beach. Extensive media coverage of both incidents in the U.S. and particularly in Haiti, where local stations ran the story five consecutive nights, seemed to put a damper on the lucrative smuggling operation.

During a press conference held on board CHASE in Port Au Prince, CAPT Douglas G. CURRIER, the ships Commanding Officer, said that removal of the 56 Haitians from the unseaworthy EXORDE probably prevented a tragedy similar to the one off the Florida coast. Coast Guard officials have speculated that similar tragedies may have occurred far out at sea, but no one

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will ever know for sure.

Following the press conference in Haiti, CHASE made preparations for getting underway, but a sudden thunderstorm combined with a lack of navigation aids in the harbor to force CHASE to remain overnight. The crew of CHASE finally got a peaceful nights sleep following two long days with the migrants. CHASE got underway at seven o'clock the following morning and set course for the Windward Passage and the resumption of HMIO.

As days turned into weeks, 49 vessels were boarded by CHASE crewmembers accompanied by INS agents and interpreters. Of particular interest to boarding officers were vessels discovered with hidden centerline compartments. Most of these boats has been built within the last 18 months at a crude shipyard on ISLE DE LA TORTUE, situated just a few miles off shore from the Haitian village of Port de Paix. Senior INS agent aboard CHASE, Mr. Harold Boyce, said the small vessels were obviously built for the smuggling operation and that other vessels were under construction. The hidden compartments were installed to pack illegal migrants into an area designed for half the number as the vessel neared a U.S. port to avoid customs and INS officials.

Despite the fact that many of these vessels had probably been involved in past smuggling operations, none carried illegal Haitian migrants when boarded, and most had the passports and ships papers in order.

However, on 2 November, a CHASE boarding party found altered passports and documents referring to past smuggling operations on board the 40-foot Haitian motor vessel 'SACRE COEUR', which was drifting between Cuba and the northwest peninsula of Haiti without power. The SACRE COEUR and its eight crewman were towed to Port de Paix where they were turned over to Haitian officials for further investigation.

Following the case of the SACRE COEUR, routine boardings were the order of the day for CHASE boarding parties until the evening of 8 November, when CHASE found the U.S. registered sailing vessel RANDOM dead in the water in the Caicos Passage. The thirty foot sailboat was taking on water through its planking and had no electrical power for its running lights or bilge pumps at the time it was discovered. CHASE passed a towline to RANDOM and took her toward Providenciales Island during the night. CHASE engineers managed to effect repairs to the vessel's engine on the morning of the ninth, and RANDOM motored into a small marina on Providenciales for repairs.

On 12 November a CHASE boarding party discovered just over five tons of marijuana in the holds and crew compartments of the U.S. motor vessel FAO, northbound in the Windward Passage about 20 miles off the coast of Cuba. The FAO had been sighted earlier in the day by the HC-130 on a surveillance flight out of GIMO in support of HMIO. The FAO was taken into GIMO and turned over to U.S. Navy officials following destruction of her contraband at sea on 13 November. While the boarding officer escorted the

five crewmen from FAO to Miami on the C-130 flight, CHASE resumed station in the Windward Passage with a freshly painted hashmark on her bridgewing.

Day-to-day operations again became the routine until the night of 19 November, when CHASE was diverted by OPCENTER Miami to the fishing vessel MISS ANGIE, aground off the northwest coast of Great Inagua Island. CHASE was investigating another suspicious vessel at the time the distress call was received, and was only 25 miles away when she responded to MISS ANGIE's call for assistance. MISS ANGIE's ten crewmembers were evacuated using the rigid hull inflatable AVON aboard CHASE specifically for this operation. The MISS ANGIE was boarded using the embarked HH-52 the following morning and found to be hard aground on the coral reef which surrounds Great Inagua Island. Her ten crewmembers were put ashore on Great Inagua via helicopter and the case was closed.

On 24 November CHASE rendezvoused with the cutter VIGOROUS, newly deployed to the Windward Passage on drug patrol. The two vessels nested just off Mole St. Nicolas and transferred 1500 gallons of JP5 to CHASE, who had nearly exhausted her onboard supply of aviation fuel. The pace of operations kept the HH-52 helicopter and crew busy, making two or three flights per day in search of suspect vessels. During the transfer operation, personnel from VIGOROUS were briefed on HMIO operations and joined in the effort to suppress smuggling in the Windward Passage. The nesting did make the

378 sailors aboard CHASE appreciate the stability of their larger ship, as they watched the VIGOROUS pitch and rock in relatively small seas while alongside.

One of the busiest days for CHASE was 28 November, which began with a SAR call. OPCENTER Miami informed CHASE that a 48-foot sailboat was sinking about 70 miles northwest of the Windward Passage. CHASE brought both turbines on the line as she proceeded north to assist the stricken vessel. The HC-130 was on a logistics flight and was diverted to the scene, where she found three persons adrift in a raft. The HC-130 maintained contact with the vessel while CHASE launched its HH-52 to pick up the crewmen in the raft, which was still some 50 miles away from CHASE. Plans to salvage the sinking vessel were dropped when a Drug Enforcement Agency aircraft sighted a known smuggler headed north toward the Windward Passage. Following recovery of the helicopter with the S/V BUTTERFLY's crew, CHASE proceeded south to establish a barrier for the doper as he continued his northward trek.

At about 0200 on 29 November, while steaming a northwesterly leg of the barrier, a CHASE lookout sighted a small white light on the horizon. CHASE's OOD investigated the contact, which turned out to be the fishing vessel CARY, a U.S. vessel suspected of running drugs into the United States. The vessel was boarded by CHASE crewmen and found to contain some 2600 pounds of mari-

juana. The vessel was seized, her six crewmen arrested, and the boat later turned over to VIGOROUS for transport to Miami. CHASE resumed HMIO with her second bust for the patrol recorded in green.

On the evening of 30 November CHASE's embarked helicopter sighted the disabled Haitian Motor vessel ST SAUVEUR about 40 miles north of Port de Paix. The vessel was heavily laden and there were many people on deck. Due to a broken rudder, CHASE took the vessel in tow and headed toward Port de Paix. The Haitian Naval Vessel MH-16 took over the tow on 1 December and escorted the vessel in to Port de Paix.

On 3 December CHASE made a port call in Port Au Prince at which she hosted a luncheon for American embassy personnel, representatives of the government of Haiti, and CAPT BREED, Chief of Operations for the Seventh Coast Guard District. CHASE also hosted an open house later in the day for embassy personnel and their families.

On 5 December CHASE investigated another small contact and came upon the U.S. registered CAPT ROMIE, southbound in the Windward Passage off the coast of Haiti. The vessel was boarded at 0315 and found to have marijuana residue on board. The boarding officer seized the vessel and placed her ten crewmen under arrest. The CAPT ROMIE was turned over to the VIGOROUS later that day for escort to Miami. Again, CHASE resumed HMIO patrol.

On 8 December, CHASE pulled into CAP HAITIEN for a recreational port

call. The harbor was small, but the people were friendly and the crew enjoyed the best liberty of the trip. Most crewmen got rooms at local hotels, while some of the heartier members of the crew made the seven kilometer trip up into the mountains to the citadelle which overlooks Cap Haitien. A local hotel sponsored a party for the crew which was enjoyed by all in attendance. CHASE got underway at 0800 the following morning to resume operations.

On 11 December CHASE pulled into Guantanamo Bay for her final logistics stop of the patrol and to conduct Training Readiness Evaluations in preparation for Refresher Training scheduled in February at GTMO. The early TRE's will give CHASE personnel ample opportunity to correct those discrepancies which were noted during the two day check. Following her departure from GTMO on 12 December, CHASE resumed patrol to await the arrival of the GALLATIN, scheduled to relieve CHASE of ON SCENE COMMANDER, HMIO, within a few days.

CHASE rendezvoused with GALLATIN on 15 December and began a series of briefings to familiarize GALLATIN personnel with HMIO operations. The two ships steamed in company through the night, conducting dual ship operations and various drills, arriving in Port Au Prince early on the morning of 16 December. While tied up at Port Au Prince, both ships were honored by the arrival of Vice Commandant VADM SCARBOROUGH, who was travelling with Commander Seventh Coast Guard District RADM STABILE and President of the Navy League, Mr. RAU. The three visitors were guests at a small luncheon

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hosted aboard CHASE. The Vice Commandant then took a few minutes to speak with the CHASE crew before they enjoyed their final liberty in Port Au Prince.

At 1730 on 16 December, with both diesels on the line, CHASE got underway from Port Au Prince and began the 1592 mile transit north to Boston. The trip north was uneventful as CHASE made her way through fog and snow squalls for a 0900 arrival in Boston on 21 December. With liberty granted to three duty sections shortly after her arrival, CHASE settled down to enjoy the holidays after 64 days underway on HMIO.

During HMIO, CHASE steamed over 13,500 miles. She made three logistics stops at GIMO, six port calls at Port Au Prince, and one call at Cap Haitien on the northeast coast of Haiti. She assisted 42 persons on four SAR cases, arrested 21 in connection with her three drug busts, and returned 56 Haitians seeking to enter the U.S. illegally to Port Au Prince. Flight quarters were too numerous to count, and the fueling operations and towing operations can be added to the activity list. She had a very busy patrol, indeed!