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## Education, experience prepared Austin for RDML role

Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School.

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## Education, experience prepared Austin for RDML role

Monterey CA - September 2014



When Meredith Austin graduated from the U.S. Coast Guard Academy in 1985, she served on an icebreaker when the Arctic Ocean was 100 percent ice-covered and the concept of homeland security was yet to be born.

Twenty-nine years later, Austin is now in the role of Rear Admiral (lower half) at a time where the U.S. Coast Guard leads the fight in protecting the nation's ports and waterways from terrorism and other domestic threats. Austin was promoted to the upper echelons of the Coast Guard in July.

Lessons learned in responding to some of the nation's most high-profile disasters coupled with a priority on education have prepared Austin for the top echelons of her agency.

Several years after graduating the Academy and launching her career, she completed a Master of Science in Public Health in Industrial Hygiene from the University of North Carolina before earning a master's at CHDS. Her first assignment as a Rear Admiral is as Commander of the Coast Guard Personnel Service Center (PSC). PSC supports mission execution by recruiting, accessing, assigning and developing careers, maintaining well-being, compensating, separating and retiring all Coast Guard military personnel.



Rear Adm. Meredith Austin receives new shoulder boards from Rear Adm. Cari Thomas, Fourteenth Coast Guard District commander, and Rear Adm. James Rendon, Joint Interagency Task Force West director, during a promotion ceremony, Jan. 15, 2014. Austin is the 10th Coast Guard female to be promoted to admiral. U.S. Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer 3rd Class Tara Molle.

"The Coast Guard places importance on continuous learning and expects our leaders to keep learning throughout their entire careers," Austin noted in a recent interview. "For me personally, my first master's degree in Industrial Hygiene helped me to ensure people working in maritime environments as well as responding to oil and hazardous materials spills could do so safely. My second master's degree in homeland security helped me better understand how the various levels of local, state and federal government work together to prevent and respond to security related incidents."



Austin has responded to the major incidents of the homeland security era, including the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center, hurricanes Katrina and Rita as well as the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. During the latter she initially served as Deputy Incident Commander before taking on the role of Incident Commander for the entire state overseeing more than 19,000 responders.

"In the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill I was able to apply what I learned in both graduate programs to help mitigate the effects of that spill in the Gulf of Mexico," she noted.

She paired her response background with academic research as she wrote her CHDS thesis, "Engage the Media: The Coast Guard's Public Affairs Posture during the Response to Hurricane Katrina."

That research along with her experience has taught her invaluable lessons. Foremost of those is ensuring transparency with the public during catastrophic events by frequently engaging the media and other stakeholders. During multi-agency responses, she noted, forming Unified Command as soon as possible and establishing a proactive Joint Information Center to keep stakeholders informed is critical.

"You can't provide the Coast Guard perspective if you don't talk with the media," she noted, "and your leadership really never likes to be blindsided, even if the news is good. If there is more than one agency responding to the disaster, form a Joint Information Center so that the message of all agencies are unified rather than sending conflicting message from individual agencies. You can have a great response but if the stakeholders don't understand what you're doing and why, it can be seen as our government not knowing what they are doing, and that isn't good."

In pursuing a CHDS master's degree, Austin was seeking to better her understanding of homeland security and increase her network of fellow responders from the state, local, federal and territorial levels. While serving as a Sector Commander from 2009-2012, she found the CHDS' critical infrastructure course proved especially applicable for protecting such maritime assets.

Her goal of expanding a professional network was more than successful.

"The network of alumni is very valuable," Austin noted. "I still contact members of my cohort to bounce off ideas and keep in contact."

