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Center for Homeland Defense and Security

Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California

<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/51308>

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CHDS Grad's Citizen Corps Vision Expands

 chds.us/c/item/656

U. S. Coast Guard Cmdr. Andre Billeaudeau was floating in a "yola" off the Puerto Rican coast in 1996, acting the part of an illegal immigrant, when he made a sobering realization.

Floating undetected was way too trouble-free.

"I found it to be fairly easy to elude the large vessels and aircraft," Billeaudeau said.

During that training exercise, in which he was trying to avoid Coast Guard notice, he looked on the beach, saw the houses dotting the area, and wondered why those residents could not be part of an effort to help the Border Patrol and the Coast Guard detect suspicious activity.

"It occurred to me then how simple this idea might be," he recalled.

That experience sparked a labor of love that Billeaudeau nurtures to the present day and provided a ready-made topic for a thesis assignment when he began working on his master's degree at the Naval Postgraduate School Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS).

The result is the Citizen's Action Network, or CAN, a network of well-informed coastal residents who act as the Coast Guard's eyes and ears on demand and stand watch on behalf of the Coast Guard. The 350-member network covers both busy ports and along lonely stretches of waterways in the Pacific Northwest where the Guard's resources are stretched thin.

What began as a vision in a makeshift boat is now a citizen cadre that is supporting the Coast Guard in the Pacific Northwest, with similar groups preparing for launch on the Gulf Coast and the in the waters along the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

Before 9/11 or the creation of CHDS, Billeaudeau implemented his vision of a citizen corps for the waterways of the country. When assigned as a Coast Guard operations officer to the Puget Sound region in 1999, he realized the idea he had back in Puerto Rico would be applicable to the Pacific Northwest.

"We only had a couple of Coast Guard stations to manage the whole area," he said, noting the total area encompasses more than 400,000 square miles. "I didn't have enough traditional assets to manage the busy caseload."

Billeaudeau began a program of asking citizens and businesses located on the waterfront if they would be willing to take an occasional phone call from the Coast Guard to help locate missing vessels, offer on-site weather observations and generally serve as an all-hazards watchdog group. CAN, as it came to be known, has less rigorous requirements than membership in the longstanding Coast Guard Auxiliary, though it capitalizes on the Auxiliary's volunteers and knowledge base. Auxiliary members are crucial to forming and administering the Network as they take on the task of recruiting and training members of the network as well as maintaining ongoing contact with Network participants.

Fast forward a few years. The events of September 11 heightened the nation's vigilance and created an increased



sense of urgency for domestic security. A few years later, Billeaudeau enrolled at CHDS, an institution forged in the wake of those attacks.

He brought a new academic backbone to his vision of citizen involvement and incorporated it into a thesis titled "Leveraging Citizens and Cultivating Vigilance for Force Multiplication in the Maritime Domain."

The research he conducted while at CHDS has helped transform his vision of the CAN program from a bit of a hobby into an effort that is being replicated elsewhere and a concept that is becoming part of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) national strategy.

"CHDS helped moved it from hobby to something much more formal; it gave it some backbone," Billeaudeau said. "The research and concept has been accepted into some national venues."

Billeaudeau points to DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano's remarks this summer to the Foreign Relations Council as validation of the importance of groups like CAN.

"For too long, we've treated the public as a liability to be protected rather than an asset in our nation's collective security," Napolitano said. "You (citizens) are the ones who know when something is not right in your communities."

Certainly, Billeaudeau agrees with that statement, noting that citizen involvement is cost-efficient all that is needed are concerned residents living on the water who are willing to be on call and have a way to communicate. Most of them possess longstanding knowledge about their particular waterway.

"I think this is one of the best bangs for buck the country has," he said. "The homeland security of the country rests on its citizenry."

With that validation breathing wind into its sails, CAN is expanding both numerically and in how it reaches out to its members.

Currently, the program operates on waterways in Idaho, Oregon and Washington, along with a similar Canadian group in British Columbia that operates through the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

In Louisiana, the 8th District Coast Guard and Auxiliary Flotilla 42 in Mandeville, La., are in the planning stages to establish a CAN along the upper Gulf Coast, an ocean shoreline that stretches from south Texas to the Florida panhandle. In between are waterways as expansive as the Mississippi River, Lake Pontchartrain and the Intracoastal Waterway as well as lonely bayous.

"It is up and down these bayous where CAN will really come in handy," said, Judy Darby, a member of Auxiliary Flotilla 42 who is spearheading the volunteer recruitment effort. "It (CAN) will allow the Coast Guard to do more with the assets they have."

The situation is similar in the Outer Banks of North Carolina, said Stephen McElroy, the Coast Guard Auxiliary's Deputy National Commodore-Mission Support. The Coast Guard's 5th District is headquartered in Portsmouth, Va., and covers an area from southern New Jersey to North Carolina.

"It's far from the (District 5 Coast Guard) sector headquarters and it's remote," McElroy said. "Where we really need them (CAN volunteers) is in the backwaters where we just don't get to that often."

While these networks are valuable in assisting high-profile search and rescue events or monitoring oil spills, they are also useful in post-storm activities.

"After every storm we have to check aids to navigation and bridge lights," said U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Jim Montgomery, noting that vessels such as tug boats depend on those aids to navigate the region's waters.

Auxiliary Flotilla 42 will be posting flyers and using local media to reach potential CAN members by the end of the year.

In North Carolina, McElroy and his colleagues are still in the preliminary phase of developing informational literature for recruitment. Eventually, McElroy would like to see CAN participation build to expand from the North Carolina coast inland to the Inter-coastal Waterway as well as northward into the waters of Virginia.

"I see it saving the Coast Guard a tremendous amount of money," McElroy said.

In the past month, CAN's Pacific Northwest operation has launched a page on the social networking website Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=173949413792&ref=mf>), marking a new chapter in how citizens and the Coast Guard can communicate with each other.

Taking advantage of social networking and the web shows CAN's continuing evolution – Billeaudeau recalls when the program first began the telephone was the basic medium of contact.

Social networking also complements the CAN strategy of keeping its participants informed, not only alerting them to watch for threats but also giving them feedback after an event.

"That really builds into the whole concept," Billeaudeau said. "You can do a lot with very little."

Program web resources located at: www.CitizensActionNetwork.info

There's a new Office of Inspector General Report out called: DHS' Strategy and Plans to Counter Small Vessel Threats Need Improvement. It discusses the CAN program as a national practice worthy of further attention. http://www.dhs.gov/xoig/assets/mgmt/rpts/OIG_09-100_Sep09.pdf

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