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## **Author calls Coast Guard 'forgotten heroes'**

By Judy Benson Day Staff Writer

### **Writer says service should get bigger, more publicity**

**New London** - The Coast Guard embodies a unique mixture of patriotism, altruism and adrenalin that enables the small but efficient service to successfully perform a wide variety of tasks, from dramatic rescues to buoy tending to water-pollution and oil-spill response, illegal drug interdiction, port-security patrols and marine-safety inspections, among others.

But its culture of quiet professionalism has, in some ways, been its own worst enemy.

So said David Helvarg, journalist and author who spent two years with the Coast Guard to research his book, "Rescue Warriors - The U.S. Coast Guard, America's Forgotten Heroes."

"The public doesn't know most of what you do," Helvarg said, addressing an audience of about 75 cadets Thursday at the Coast Guard Academy. The service, with 42,000 members the smallest of the five branches of the military, should be quadrupled in size by 2030, Helvarg said, to meet the increasing demands placed on it by terrorism threats and homeland security, hurricanes, piracy, and climate change that's opening up new sea routes and environmental risks in the Arctic and leaving coastal areas vulnerable, among other challenges.

"You try to do more with less, but obviously you need more," he said, advocating that the service shed its habit of self-effacing reticence and proactively tell its story to Congress and the public. At the beginning of his talk, he showed a short film clip of a Coast Guard helicopter rescue he said he was using to try to interest television producers in a new reality show about the service.

"You don't get enough publicity or enough funding, and the Coast Guard itself is partly to blame because, out of necessity, you're always trying to do more with less," he said.

Published in hardcover in 2009 and in paperback this year, Helvarg's book is on Adm. Thad Allen's recommended reading list this year. Helvarg, whose most recent book, "Saved by the Sea: A Love Story with Fish," was published this month, has written several books on the ocean. His admiration for the Coast Guard, he said, predated his decision to write "Rescue Warriors."

"I couldn't find a good book about the Coast Guard, so it was always in the back of my mind to write one," he said.

When Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast in 2005, and he saw that the Coast Guard was "the only agency that was really functioning," he decided the time had come. He spent the next two years observing crews from New Orleans to Alaska to Cape May, N.J., learning about officers' training at the academy in New London and the service's non-hierarchical leadership style.

He recounted some of the stories he learned over the two years, the kind he said the public needs to know. During the hurricane, the officer in charge of a Coast Guard vessel on the Mississippi River, acting on his own because communication was cut off, organized a flotilla of small boats to move 6,000 people out of St. Bernard Parish to safety. The largest maritime evacuation ever took place in the hours just after the Sept. 11, 2001, World Trade Center attacks, when the Coast Guard moved a half-million people trapped in lower Manhattan onto its own and private vessels, Helvarg said.

But equally important, he added, are the routine, day-to-day duties: ensuring navigation aids are working to keep marine commerce and recreational boaters safe; enforcing fisheries and pollution regulations; trying to prevent environmental disasters or cleaning up the ones that do occur, like the BP oil spill now wreaking massive damage on the Gulf of Mexico and its ecosystem.

"You protect men from the sea and the sea from men. You're people who want to serve your country, but you'd rather save lives than take them," he said, crediting both phrases to people he interviewed for his book.

One of the Coast Guard's unique strengths, he said, is that its leadership structure is not rigid, so that initiative and decision-making are encouraged at all levels. In emergencies, "people aren't just standing around waiting for commands.

"You push leadership down. You entrust the people below you to take initiative," he said. "Improvisation isn't punished. There is greater individual responsibility, and also greater risk."

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