Pelican goes on patrol

Cutter sees to homeland security, and much more

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PORT OF VERMILLION — The U.S. Coast Guard cutter Pelican is an attention-grabber as it cruises down the Vermilion River toward Vermilion Bay and the Gulf of Mexico beyond.

Fishermen stop watching their lines to admire the sleek, 87-foot vessel as it glides by. Tugboat captains sit up a little straighter in their helm chairs and give a respectful tip of their caps. Offshore supply boats invariably throttle back and give the cutter a wide berth as deck hands grin and wave.

One of the new Marine Protector class of cutter, built in Louisiana at Bollinger Shipyard in Lockport, the Pelican is one of the “Cadillacs of the Coast Guard fleet,” Senior Chief Petty Officer Mike Chadwick said.

For the past year, the Pelican, with a crew of 10, has operated out of its new home port, the Port of Vermilion on the river south of Abbeville. It replaced the 33-year-old Point Winslow out of Morgan City.

Chadwick, a Maine native who makes his home in Kentucky, said the people of Vermilion Parish have been enthusiastic and supportive hosts.

Rear Adm. Paul J. Pluta, commander of the Eighth Coast Guard District in New Orleans, agreed.

“We’ve been overwhelmed with all the people who have come out to wish us well, and we look forward to a long and mutually beneficial relationship,” he said.

The Daily Advertiser recently spent the better part of a day aboard the cutter as it underwent health and safety checks by Petty Officer 1st Class Bill Goetzee of district headquarters, but that was only a small part of the crew’s day.

The day began with a 3:30 a.m. telephone call to the Vermilion Parish Sheriff’s Office. The Pelican had pinpointed a fugitive from Texas, who was on his way from an offshore oil rig to Freshwater City aboard a supply boat.

Three crew members from the Pelican helped take the man into custody.

The Coast Guard cutter Pelican cruises down the Vermilion River on patrol. Below, Petty Officer 2nd Class Corey Fontenot, Erath, pilots one of the Pelican’s smaller boats on the river.

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On Super Bowl Sunday, the cutter helped to enforce a no-fishing ban on February 6, near the New Orleans Superdome. The rule was enforced for nearly four hours after the game. Nothing moved up or down the river during that period, said Bateman, who made three rounds of the area.

Since Sept. 11, the Coast Guard has also had homeland defense missions added to its roster of duties. Petty Officer 2nd Class Dwayne Eastman, the name of the cutter's food service specialist — said the cutter immediately headed for any offshore oil platforms and gas platforms when word of the tragedy came in.

Within a few days, the Pelican was on duty in the lower Mississippi River, helping patrol a security zone around the Port of New Orleans. Bateman, a product of the Louisiana Offshore Oil Port, said, “We’re there to support the Coast Guard.” He also mentioned the cutter’s ability to transport personnel and equipment.

The Pelican is a key player in the war on drugs, enforcing marine safety rules and helping protect the environment. A rising star in the fishing industry among other duties, Bateman said, was the Coast Guard, which is also in the Coast Guard.

Petty Officer 2nd Class Corey Fontenot, 25, an officer and a career Navy veteran, said, “The Pelican has logged over 900,000 miles since it was commissioned in January 2001.”

Painted at the Navy Yard, the Pelican is the only local boat on the Coast Guard, she said. Fontenot also said, “We’re there to support the Coast Guard.”

Jay Campbell, executive director of the port and the Abbeville Harbor & Terminal District, said it is an apt title. “The Pelican has provided a tremendous boost to the port, the parish and to marine safety and navigation throughout Acadia, where being on the water is second nature to so many people,” he said.

A change of command ceremony is scheduled to take place here May 31, Chalmette said.