Cutter Munro Captain Cawthorn Retires

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Brianna Gibbs/KMXT

In June, the captain of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Munro will retire after 27 years in active duty. KMXT’s Brianna Gibbs had a conversation with Captain Mark Cawthorn last week and learned about his two years serving at the helm of the Kodiak-based cutter Munro.

While the majority of Captain Cawthorn’s career was spent on the East coast, he said the past two years on the Munro were certainly some of his fondest.

-- (Munro Captain 1 :26 “The Munro is sort of unique in that we are primarily a Bering Sea cutter. Most of our patrols are up in the Bering Sea. So we’ve traveled throughout the Bering Sea area. We’ve gone as far north as the Artic Circle, obviously we go to Dutch Harbor a lot, we love Adak, even though there’s not a lot out there. We had the opportunity to get out to Attu one time, where we stopped and went fishing, and that was fabulous.”)

Cawthorn said the Munro is a multi-mission cutter, but focuses on search and rescue and fisheries law enforcement. He said the first patrol he ever did on the Munro was a high seas drift net patrol.

-- (Munro Captain 2 :31 “And that’s an international effort between U.S., Japan, Russia, South Korea and Canada to enforce a UN General Assembly prohibition against high seas drift net. And what a high seas drift net does is it’s 10-20 miles long of net that just drifts out there. And if the fishing boat that deploys it doesn’t recover it, it just stays out there and fishes forever. And it fishes indiscriminately. So they’re targeting a lot of the migratory species, such as salmon, but it will catch anything and everything.”)

Cawthorn said there are ceremonies and traditions that take place whenever you cross one of the big lines – think Arctic Circle, Equator or Dateline. He said the Munro was in the Arctic during one patrol and had the opportunity to partake in some of those traditions.

-- (Munro Captain 3 :48 “So we decided to sneak on up there across the Arctic Circle and do the rights of initiation that go along with it for the crew. Can I ask what that is? Over the years it has become much more regulated and much more tame, is probably the right way to do it. And it is the right way to do it. But I’m sure in the olden days and certainly when I was a young sailor it was a lot more rough and probably bordering on hazing and we’ve sort of gotten rid of that over the years. But it involves, you know, dressing up and some skits and funny meals and stuff like that. But it’s fairly tame these days. And you’re a bluenose before you cross the Arctic Circle, and then you’re initiated into the realm of the polar bear. That and when you cross the dateline you go from being a pollywog to being a golden dragon.”)

On the topic of the Arctic, Cawthorn said there has definitely been a national push for the Coast Guard to have a larger presence in the Arctic. Likewise, he recognized the need for more cutters, especially as ones like the Munro start getting older.

-- (Munro Captain 4 :37 “She’s 42-years-old, you know, starting to show her age and difficult to maintain. I know we’re building our next generation of cutters, and I don’t know how fast we’re turning those out. But the Bertholf, which is one of our new ones, she went up there last summer and went as far north as Barrow and was up there as part of the oil industry. So the Coast Guard is looking at it and positioning itself to respond, but you know just like every other agency, with the sequestration and the budget cuts, we can only operate at the level at which we’ve been funded. So I think we’ll certainly do all we can to support the national goals and objectives, but it has to be funded before we can support it.”)

As far as fisheries law enforcement, Cawthorn said fishermen in Alaska are some of the best in the country.

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(Munro Captain 4 :40 “My observation is here in the Bering Sea and the Alaska Fisheries is the fishermen all comply very much with all the rules and regulations, and it’s a very compliant industry, a very compliant fishery. And we’ve had almost no issues whatsoever up here. Where as other patrols that I’ve done early in my career, like off of New England, it’s a much, much different mission over there. The fishermen over there are using undersized net or they don’t have the right licenses or they’re using improper gear or they’re retaining catch they’re not supposed to. But over here in Alaska it’s very compliant, very smoothly run, it’s very nice to be on this end of it.”)

Cawthorn will retire from the Coast Guard in June and will be stationed in Hawaii with his wife, who remains in active duty with the Coast Guard. Cawthorn said Captain Jeff Thomas will take charge of the Munro after a change of command ceremony at the Kodiak Coast Guard base on June 18.