



November 2019

COAST GUARD

Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-20-33](#), a report to congressional committees

Why GAO Did This Study

The U.S. Coast Guard, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is the principal federal agency charged with ensuring the security and safety of the waters under U.S. jurisdiction. To help carry out its missions, the Coast Guard maintains Specialized Forces units with the capabilities needed to handle drug interdiction, terrorism, and other threats to the U.S. maritime environment. The Coast Guard reorganized the command structure of these units in 2007 and again in 2013.

The Maritime Security Improvement Act of 2018 included a provision for GAO to evaluate Specialized Forces units and provide a report to Congress. This report examines the extent to which the Coast Guard addressed key practices and considerations for assessing reorganization of its Specialized Forces units. GAO assessed the Coast Guard report and associated workforce planning documentation and data used for its 2013 reorganization and analyzed the extent to which the agency applied key practices. GAO also analyzed guidance and data on Specialized Forces capabilities and operations to identify potential overlap or gaps and interviewed agency officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO makes two recommendations to DHS. First, GAO recommends that the Coast Guard conduct an analysis of its Specialized Forces' workforce needs, with which DHS concurred. Second, GAO recommends that the Coast Guard assess the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists. Although DHS did not concur, GAO continues to believe the findings documented in the report support the recommendation.

View [GAO-20-33](#). For more information, contact Nathan Anderson at (202) 512-3841 or andersonn@gao.gov.

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Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities

What GAO Found

In reorganizing its Deployable Specialized Forces (Specialized Forces) in 2013, the Coast Guard generally applied three of five key practices for agency reorganization, including establishing goals and outcomes, engaging stakeholders, and addressing longstanding management challenges, such as training shortfalls. However, the Coast Guard did not fully apply the other two key practices—using data and evidence and addressing potential overlap and duplication within the Specialized Forces workforce. For example:

- The Coast Guard has not assessed the overall Specialized Forces workforce needs, as this practice recommends. Officials from some units stated that they experienced periods of underutilization, while other units with the same or similar capabilities turned down operations for lack of available personnel.
- GAO identified some overlap among the capabilities of the different Specialized Forces units and the Coast Guard missions they support—in some cases Specialized Forces units were co-located with other Specialized Forces units with many of the same capabilities and similar missions. In August 2019, Coast Guard officials acknowledged that the 2013 reorganization did not conduct an analysis of potential overlap or duplication of capabilities and agreed that overlap or gaps in Specialized Forces capabilities could exist.

Assessing workforce needs and the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication may exist among Specialized Forces would help ensure that the agency effectively allocates resources and uses them efficiently.

Coast Guard Personnel Conducting a Drug Interdiction Operation



Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-20-33

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Abbreviations

DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
GAO	Government Accountability Office
LANTAREA	Atlantic Area Command
LEDET	Law Enforcement Detachments
MSRT	Maritime Security Response Team
MSST	Maritime Safety and Security Team
NSF	National Strike Force
PACAREA	Pacific Area Command
PSU	Port Security Unit
TACLET	Tactical Law Enforcement Team

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November 21, 2019

Congressional Committees:

The U.S. Coast Guard, within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), is the principal federal agency charged with ensuring the security and safety of the waters under U.S. jurisdiction. To help carry out its missions, the Coast Guard maintains Deployable Specialized Forces (Specialized Forces) units with the capabilities needed to deploy with specialized training to handle counterdrug, terrorism, and other threats to the U.S. maritime environment. The Coast Guard's Specialized Forces units specialize in maritime counterterrorism operations; focus on antiterrorism to protect the nation's most critical commercial and military ports; provide marine environmental response; protect high value maritime assets and critical infrastructure; and conduct counterdrug and counterpiracy operations.

The Coast Guard established Specialized Forces with certain capabilities in the 1970s and 1980s. After the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, the Maritime Security Transportation Act of 2002 mandated that the Coast Guard establish new types of Specialized Forces units with capabilities to deter, protect against, and respond to the threat of a terrorist attack in the maritime environment, among other things.¹ The Coast Guard subsequently established the units and has since developed new Specialized Forces capabilities.² The Coast Guard also reorganized the command structure of these units in 2007 and again in 2013.

In April 2019, the Commandant of the Coast Guard testified before Congress about challenges the Coast Guard faces in meeting its missions and the need for additional resources.³ Given this Coast Guard request, it is critical that the Coast Guard ensure it is spending existing

¹Pub. L. No. 107-295, § 102(a), 116 Stat. 2064, 2074 (2002) (codified as amended at 46 U.S.C. § 70106).

²For example, the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2010 required that the specialized forces include no less than 2 enhanced teams to serve as deployable forces capable of combatting terrorism, engaging in interdiction, law enforcement, and advanced tactical maritime security operations. Pub. L. No. 111-281, § 804, 124 Stat. 2905, 2990.

³Testimony of Admiral Karl L. Schultz, Commandant, U.S. Coast Guard for the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security hearing titled "The Coast Guard's Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request." April 9, 2019.

resources as efficiently as possible, and since the 2013 reorganization, questions have been raised as to whether this is the case with Specialized Forces.

The Maritime Security Improvement Act of 2018 includes a provision for GAO to evaluate the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces.⁴ In this report, we examined the extent to which the Coast Guard considered key practices for assessing the reorganization of its deployable specialized forces. In addition, we provide information on Specialized Forces' operations and costs in Appendix I of this report.

To examine the extent to which the Coast Guard addressed key practices and considerations for assessing reorganization of its Specialized Forces, we identified a 2011 Coast Guard report that made recommendations for Specialized Forces organizational change and a 2012 review of the Coast Guard's report that preceded the Coast Guard's 2013 reorganization of these units.⁵ We verified with Coast Guard officials that these documents were to provide the justification for the 2013 organizational change. We assessed these reports, data, and documents against our criteria on key practices and considerations for agency reorganization.⁶ In prior work, we identified key practices agencies should consider for the development and implementation of agency reforms—such as establishing goals, and

⁴See Pub. L. No. 115-254, div. J, § 1808, 132 Stat. 3533, 3536-37. The act further provides that GAO is to submit a report to Congress that includes, at a minimum, specific operational and cost data for each type of Specialized Forces.

⁵Homeland Security Studies Analysis Institute, "Independent Review of the U.S. Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces Stem-to-Stern Review" (August 20, 2012, Arlington, VA). According to the Homeland Security Studies Analysis Institute report, its scope was limited to the Coast Guard's counterterrorism mission, and did not replicate or audit Coast Guard personnel, equipment, or other assets to verify Specialized Forces capabilities and capacity.

⁶GAO, *Government Reorganization: Key Questions to Assess Agency Reform Efforts*, [GAO-18-427](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 13, 2018). We selected key practices and considerations based on our assessment of which were relevant for responding to our mandated review requirements, and because we have an ongoing review focused on the Coast Guard's overall process for implementing its long term agency reforms and managing its workforce requirements analyses. In addition, because of the Coast Guard's 2007 reorganization, and a subsequent reorganization of Specialized Forces units that was completed in 2013, we selected the key practices that focused on the reform goals, outcomes, and process for developing the reforms.

using data and evidence.⁷ We used the following scale to evaluate the Coast Guard's report that recommended the 2013 reorganization against the key practices, questions, and considerations:

- **Generally applied**—the agency documents demonstrated that Coast Guard officials considered applicable key practices and considerations.⁸
- **Partially applied**—the agency documents demonstrated that Coast Guard officials considered some, but not all, key practices and considerations.
- **Not at all applied**—the agency documents did not demonstrate that Coast Guard officials considered any key practices and considerations.

In addition, we took the following steps:

- We collected and reviewed documentation on each Specialized Forces unit's missions, operations, and capabilities, such as guidance; memoranda of understanding or agreement; tactics, techniques, and procedures; and operations reports. Additionally, we conducted a network analysis in which we aggregated information on Coast Guard missions, operations, and capabilities, and developed a representation of the relationships among the Specialized Forces units and their capabilities.⁹ Using our Duplication, Overlap, and Fragmentation guide, we analyzed these networks to determine the extent of potential overlap among the units' primary, secondary, and collateral missions and their capabilities.¹⁰

⁷GAO-18-427. We used the term "reforms" to broadly include any organizational changes—such as major transformation, mergers, and other reorganizations—and efforts to streamline and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations. We define "efficiency" as maintaining federal government services or outcomes using fewer resources (such as time and money) or improving or increasing the quality and quantity of services or outcomes while maintaining (or reducing) resources.

⁸Because the key practices and considerations depend on what the agency is trying to achieve, not all practices may be applicable to a given reform.

⁹Network analysis is a set of quantitative and graphical methods to identify the underlying patterns and structures in a complex set of relationships among entities such as countries, organizations, or individuals. The analysis can reflect duplication or overlap among entities' activities.

¹⁰See GAO's Duplication and Cost Savings web page for links to the 2011 to 2019 annual reports: <http://www.gao.gov/duplication/overview>.

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- We interviewed officials from Coast Guard headquarters and the Specialized Forces to obtain their perspectives on the 2013 reorganization, current operating practices and challenges, if any, and to assess the extent to which Coast Guard actions align with key practices and considerations for agency reorganization. Specifically, we visited Specialized Forces in 3 of 18 locations—Miami, FL, San Diego, CA, and Seattle, WA—which we selected because they had more than one type of Specialized Forces co-located. Through these site visits or via phone, we interviewed officials representing Coast Guard headquarters perspectives on Specialized Forces and non-headquarters officials from both Maritime Security Response Teams (MSRTs), both Tactical Law Enforcement Teams (TACLETs), and the National Strike Force (NSF). We also interviewed officials from two of 10 Maritime Safety and Security Teams (MSSTs), one from each of the Coast Guard’s two operational commands—Atlantic Area Command and Pacific Area Command—and active duty officials from one of eight Port Security Units (PSUs), selected to obtain perspective from a PSU co-located with another Specialized Forces unit. We also interviewed officials from two Sectors to obtain their perspectives on working with Specialized Forces units, whom we selected because they were located in port areas with at least two of these units and different operational command areas. Additionally, we interviewed Specialized Forces officials about how the data and other inputs are used for workforce planning.
 - To describe Specialized Forces operations and costs, we identified and analyzed Coast Guard data on the number of operations and cost information associated with Specialized Forces units. This included the number of annual operations, personnel and operating cost levels, and resources used to carry out Coast Guard missions for fiscal years 2016 through 2018, and planned for fiscal year 2019.¹¹ To assess the reliability of the operations, costs, and Specialized Forces missions for fiscal years 2016 through 2018 and planned for 2019, we reviewed documentation, such as data dictionaries, system manuals, and user guides. We also interviewed Specialized Forces officials to better understand the processes for inputting and monitoring the quality of data, and how they identify and address any deficiencies. We found the data to be sufficiently reliable for the purposes of reporting the number of Specialized Forces operations and selected cost

¹¹The Maritime Security Improvement Act of 2018 provides that GAO is to report on the most recent 3 fiscal years. See Pub. L. No. 115-254, div. J, § 1808, 132 Stat. 3533, 3536-37.

information, as well as linking individual unit operations to Coast Guard missions.¹²

We conducted this performance audit from January 2019 to November 2019 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

Responsibilities of the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces

The Coast Guard has 11 statutory missions, which are divided into homeland security and non-homeland security missions (see appendix II).¹³ The Coast Guard's units that conduct operations to achieve its statutory missions are organized into shore-based forces such as boat stations, maritime patrol forces such as cutters and icebreakers, and Specialized Forces—the latter of which can serve as a force multiplier for the other units, such as by deploying for added capacity during homeland security missions, including port security, drug interdiction, and defense readiness.¹⁴ Table 1 details Specialized Forces teams, types of operations they conduct, and an example of an operation.

¹²We have previously reported that some Coast Guard data may not be accurate, which may limit the Coast Guard's ability to assess Specialized Forces units holistically. Specifically, in 2016, we reported that data on asset resource hours used to support each mission may not be accurate, which Coast Guard officials acknowledged as limitations but noted that the data were accurate enough for operational planning purposes. The Coast Guard agreed with our recommendation that it incorporate unit input, such as asset performance data, to inform more realistic asset allocation decisions. As of April 2019, the Coast Guard reported that it is close to completing an update to its guidance, to include how unit input on mission resource hours recorded, which will better position the Coast Guard to assess its Specialized Force's needs, but this recommendation remains open pending Coast Guard action. See GAO, *Coast Guard: Actions Needed to Improve Strategic Allocation of Assets and Determine Workforce Requirements*, [GAO-16-379](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 24, 2016).

¹³6 U.S.C. § 468(a).

¹⁴As defined in title 10, the "armed forces" are the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. 10 U.S.C. § 101(a)(4).

Table 1: The U.S. Coast Guard’s Deployable Specialized Forces (Specialized Forces)—Component Teams and Unit Descriptions

Specialized Forces	Unit description and representative example of an operation
Maritime Security Response Team (MSRT) (two teams)	<p>MSRTs are the Coast Guard’s specialized forces for counterterrorism and higher risk law enforcement operations, such as short notice maritime response. The teams provide a variety of capabilities and skills, including addressing threats posed by weapons of mass destruction, specialized dive capabilities, and inserting from a helicopter to a ship’s deck to engage potentially hostile personnel.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be deployed unilaterally or as part of a team. • Maintain their own specialized vessels but rely on other Coast Guard units and U.S. Navy aviation assets. • Example operation: 52 personnel deployed in support of the United Nations General Assembly. The MSRT provided protection for senior U.S. government leaders and foreign Heads of State.
Maritime Safety and Security Teams (MSST) (10 teams)	<p>MSSTs are a maritime security antiterrorism force. The teams are managed as national deployable units responsible for safeguarding the public and protecting vessels, harbors, ports, facilities, and cargo in U.S. territorial waters.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain readiness to respond to terrorist threats or incidents; storm recovery operations; and national special security events such as the presidential inauguration. The teams also enforce security zones during transit of high-interest vessels and at other times when additional levels of security are needed within the nation’s ports and waterways. • Can include canines teams trained to search for explosives and remotely operated submersible vehicles equipped with cameras used for a variety of underwater applications. • Maintain boats that can be trailered or air lifted to deployment locations. • Example operation: one boat and crew conduct daily counterdrug patrol around the San Juan Islands, WA for 6-weeks.
National Strike Force (NSF) (five teams)	<p>NSF is comprised of three strike teams, an incident management team, a public information assist team, and a coordination center. Collectively, the NSF is composed of Coast Guard personnel with incident-management skills and specialized equipment who deploy in response to oil and hazardous substance pollution incidents (i.e., biological, chemical, and radiological response).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each team is comprised of a mix of active duty, reservist, and civilian personnel who deploy for up to 21 days. • Teams vary in size depending on the response required, and maintain boats and equipment that are deployed with teams for incident response. • Example operation: 44 personnel deployed for five months to provide hazardous materials response capability.
Port Security Units (PSU) (eight teams)	<p>PSU’s primary mission is defense readiness, and they provide waterside and shoreside security for high value assets and critical maritime infrastructure. PSUs are largely reserve units and maintain boats that can be trailered or air lifted to deployment locations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example operation: 115 unit members deployed for one year including 2 months of pre-deployment training; 9 month deployment to Guantanamo Bay providing waterside and shoreside security, and 1 month of demobilization.

Specialized Forces	Unit description and representative example of an operation
Tactical Law Enforcement Teams (TACLET) (two units)	<p>TACLETs provide specialized law enforcement and maritime security capabilities to enforce U.S. laws, primarily offshore drug interdiction and vessel interception operations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprised of 18 Law Enforcement Detachment Teams (LEDETs) of law enforcement boarding officers and one Airborne Use of Force team of precision marksmen. • LEDETs primary mission is drug interdiction in the Caribbean Sea and Eastern Pacific Ocean. Teams have provided training to foreign naval, coast guard, and police forces in the Caribbean, Pacific Ocean, Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and the Middle East. • LEDETs of 6 to 12 personnel operate from U.S Navy, Allied, and partner ships, and smaller teams of 2 to 6 integrate onboard Coast Guard cutters. • Example operation: In June 2019, members of a LEDET deployed on a Coast Guard cutter, conducted a counterdrug boarding of a self-propelled, semi-submersible vessel, and interdicted 17,000 pounds of cocaine.

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard information. | GAO-20-33

Specialized Forces units deploy from their home locations, such as major U.S. port areas, to conduct operations in U.S. coastal waters and internationally.¹⁵ For example, some units such as MSRTs, MSSTs and PSUs deploy with specialized boats on trailers that can be towed or air lifted to the site of an antiterrorism patrol or defense readiness operation. Other Specialized Forces units do not maintain the vessels, such as cutters, or air assets, such as helicopters, from which they carry out operations. TACLETs, for example, do not maintain any boats and rely on and deploy via U.S. Navy or Allied vessels, as well as Coast Guard cutters, to conduct drug interdiction operations. Figure 1 shows Coast Guard personnel conducting a drug interdiction operation that included a TACLET member boarding a foreign, semi-submersible vessel, which resulted in seizing 17,000 pounds of cocaine.

¹⁵Figure 7, later in this report, details Specialized Forces homeport locations.

Figure 1: Coast Guard Specialized Forces Personnel Conducting a Drug Interdiction Operation in June 2019

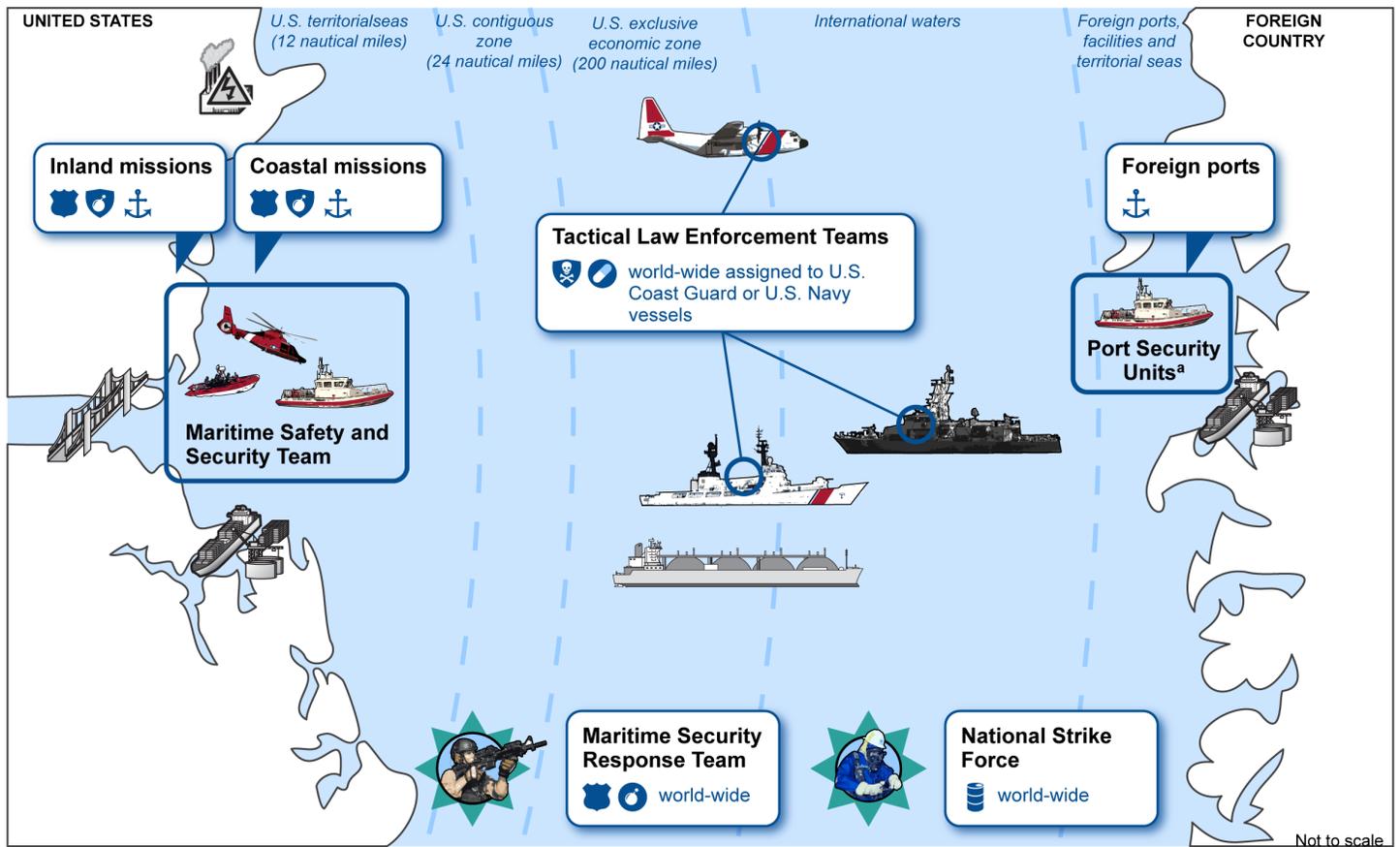


Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-20-33

The Coast Guard is the lead federal maritime law enforcement agency on waters beyond 12 nautical miles offshore of the U.S. coast. The Coast Guard shares responsibility for patrolling the U.S. maritime borders and territorial sea (i.e., maritime approaches 12 nautical miles seaward of the U.S. coast) to interdict drugs and foreign nationals illegally entering the United States with U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Air and Marine Operations and Border Patrol. Outside of DHS, the Department of Defense (DOD) is the lead federal agency for the detection and monitoring of the aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs into the United States, and it operates systems, such as radar, that can be used in support of DHS and other federal, state, and local law enforcement activities.¹⁶ Figure 2 depicts the geographic areas in which Specialized Forces operate and resources, such as vessels or aircraft, used to support their operations.

¹⁶See 14 U.S.C. § 89 (states Coast Guard's law enforcement authority on the high seas and U.S. waters, and provides that Coast Guard officers engaging in law enforcement pursuant to this section are deemed agents of the particular department or agency charged with the administration of the law being enforced); 19 U.S.C. § 1581 (Customs and Border Protection officers' authority over vessels or vehicles in the United States or within U.S. customs waters or a customs-enforcement area, or any other authorized place); Pres. Proc. No. 4865, 46 Fed. Reg. 48,107 (Sept. 29, 1981); and 19 C.F.R. § 162.3(a) (Customs and Border Protection officers may board any vessel in the United States or within U.S. customs waters; any American vessel on the high seas; and any vessel within a customs-enforcement area, but a foreign vessel is not to be boarded in violation of any treaty with the foreign government, or in the absence of a special arrangement). See also, *Border Security: Additional Actions Could Strengthen DHS Efforts to Address Subterranean, Aerial, and Maritime Smuggling*, [GAO-17-474](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 1, 2017). For additional information on DHS counterdrug efforts in the maritime transit zone, see *Coast Guard: Resources Provided for Drug Interdiction Operations in the Transit Zone, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands*, [GAO-14-527](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 16, 2014).

Figure 2: Geographic Areas Covered by Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Forces



Mission

- Law enforcement
- Port operations, security and defense
- Antiterrorism
- Counterterrorism
- Antipiracy
- Counterdrug
- Oil and hazardous substance pollution

Source: U.S. Coast Guard guidance. | GAO-20-33

^aPort Security Units also conduct homeland defense operations (in domestic ports) under Title 10 authority, and Ports, Waterways and Coastal Security under Title 14 authority in domestic ports as a secondary mission.

Coast Guard Reorganized its Deployable Specialized Forces in 2007 and 2013

In July 2007, the Coast Guard reorganized the command structure of its Specialized Forces and aligned them as an independent Coast Guard command—the Deployable Operations Group. The Deployable Operations Group was intended to enhance operational effectiveness and interagency coordination in responding to a range of national emergencies and events, such as terrorist threats or natural disasters. Prior to the Deployable Operations Group, Specialized Forces aligned geographically under Atlantic Area and Pacific Area commands. In 2010, we found that the unified command structure achieved its intended benefits of standardized training and centrally managing assets. We also reported in 2010 that the Deployable Operations Group faced human resource challenges such as selecting qualified candidates and achieving and maintaining qualifications to perform certain high-skill techniques, such as vertical insertion from a helicopter onto the deck of a ship during maritime interdiction missions.¹⁷ Because of the ongoing program changes at that time, we did not make recommendations.

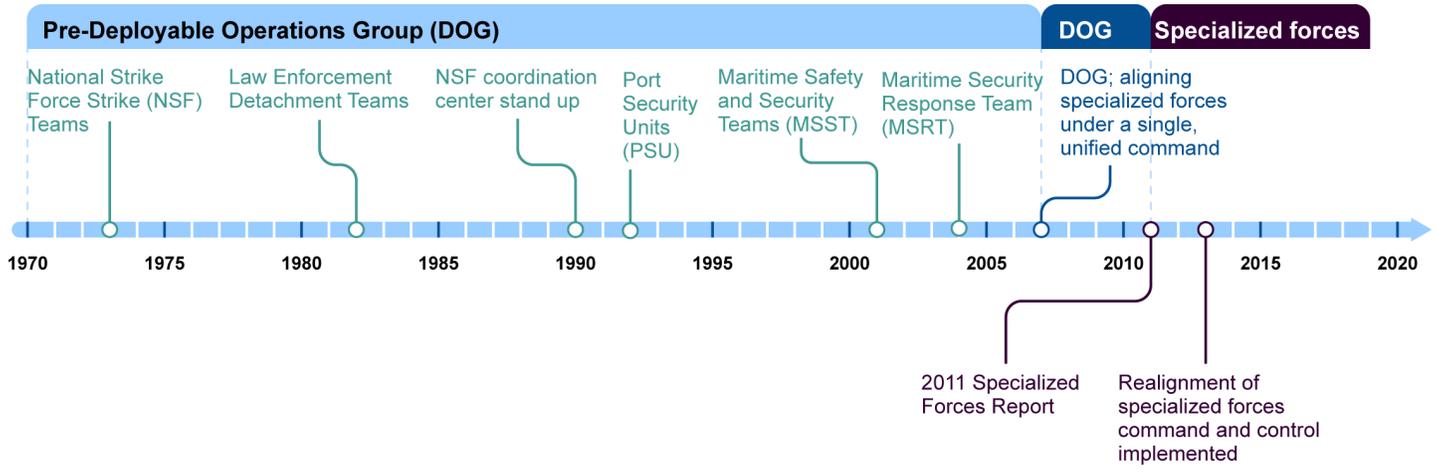
In 2010, a DHS Inspector General report recommended a systematic review and analysis of the MSST program to determine, in part, the optimal staffing levels, training, and competency mix needed.¹⁸ The Coast Guard agreed and cited planned MSST program changes in its response to the Inspector General report. The Coast Guard's Fiscal Year 2011 budget included a proposal to close five MSSTs and consolidate those forces to achieve cost savings, among other things.

A 2011 Coast Guard report recommended that the Coast Guard integrate Specialized Forces units across the Coast Guard, balance the capacity of the Specialized Forces with proficiency and safety levels, and manage risk. In April 2013, the Coast Guard disbanded the Deployable Operations Group, and Specialized Forces units returned to regional commands. Figure 3 shows the evolution of Coast Guard Specialized Forces units since 1970.

¹⁷Coast Guard: *Deployable Operations Group Achieving Organizational Benefits, but Challenges Remain*, [GAO-10-433R](#) (Washington, D.C.: April 7, 2010).

¹⁸See DHS Office of Inspector General, *The Coast Guard's Maritime Safety and Security Team Program*, [OIG-10-89](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 28, 2010).

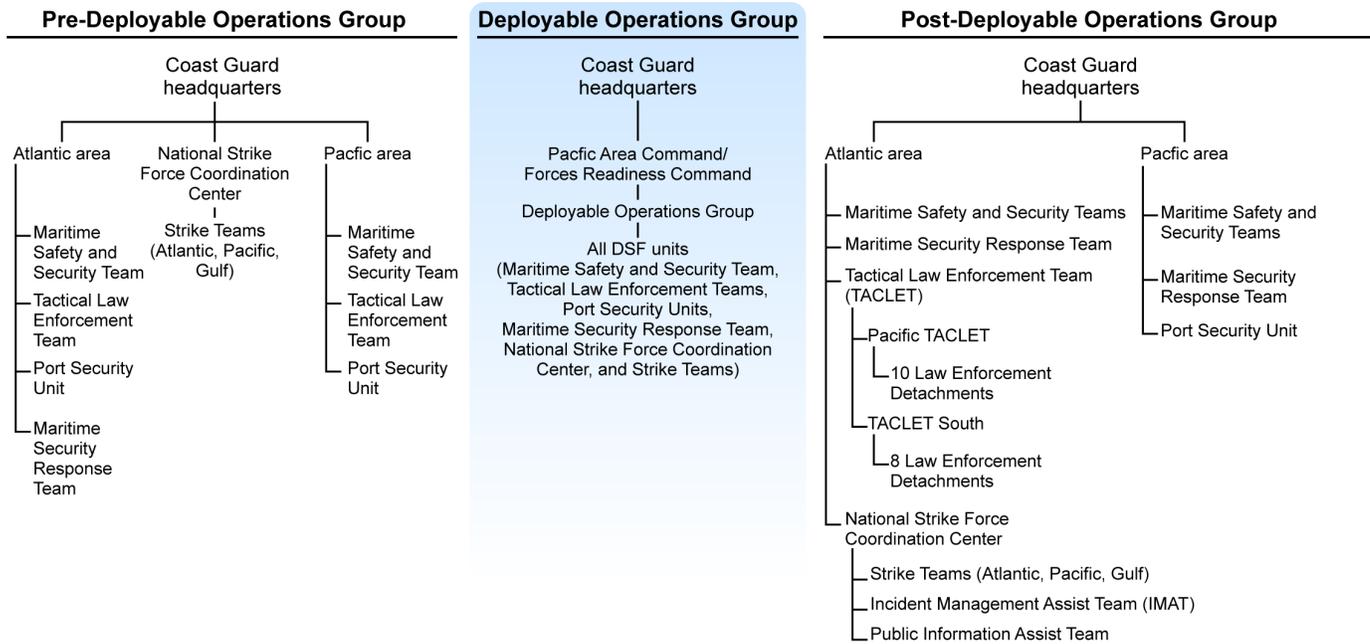
Figure 3: Evolution of Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Force (Specialized Forces) Units Established Since 1970



Source: U.S. Coast Guard guidance. | GAO-20-33

The April 2013 reorganization of the Coast Guard’s Specialized Forces units under regional commands more closely aligns with its original command structure that existed prior to the 2007 creation of the Deployable Operations Group. Figure 4 details the three command structures—pre-Deployable Operations Group, Deployable Operations Group, and Post-Deployable Operations Group.

Figure 4: Evolution of the Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces Command Structure



Source: U.S. Coast Guard guidance. | GAO-20-33

Coast Guard Applied Some Key Practices when Reorganizing its Deployable Specialized Forces, but Has Not Fully Analyzed Workforce Needs or Operational Capabilities

The Coast Guard generally applied three of five key practices for agency reform and partially applied two of five when developing its report that recommended the 2013 reorganization of its Specialized Forces units.¹⁹ Table 2 identifies the extent to which the Coast Guard's reorganization applied key practices and considerations.

¹⁹GAO-18-427.

Table 2: Extent to Which the Coast Guard’s Reorganization of its Specialized Forces Applied Key Practices

Key practice or consideration	Assessment
Establish goals and outcomes of reforms	Generally applied
Involve employees and key stakeholders	Generally applied
Address high risk areas and longstanding management challenges	Generally applied
Use data and evidence	Partially applied
Address fragmentation, overlap, and duplication	Partially applied

Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard documents. | GAO-20-33

Note: Generally applied—the agency documents demonstrated that Coast Guard officials generally applied key practices and considerations.

Partially applied—the agency documents demonstrated that Coast Guard officials applied some, but not all, key practices and considerations

Not at all applied—the agency documents did not demonstrate that Coast Guard officials applied any key practices and considerations.

Coast Guard Generally Applied Three of Five Key Practices for Reorganizing its Deployable Specialized Forces

Coast Guard generally applied three of five key practices for Specialized Forces reorganization, including establishing goals and outcomes, involving employees and key stakeholders, and addressing high risk areas and longstanding management challenges.

Establish Goals and Outcomes of Reforms

Establishing goals and outcomes of reforms can help decision makers determine what problems genuinely need to be fixed, how to balance differing objectives, and what steps need to be taken to create long-term gains. The Coast Guard generally applied this key practice in its analysis of Specialized Forces units. For example, the Coast Guard’s 2011 report cites personnel safety as a main reason to reform Specialized Forces operations.²⁰ According to Coast Guard officials, part of the rationale for this focus was because of a training mishap and a problem with equipment requirements. Specifically, officials stated that in 2010, a Coast Guard member drowned while training when he entered the water without self-inflating flotation equipment. Coast Guard officials told us that

²⁰The key questions to consider for the development and implementation of agency reforms, based on our prior work, used the term “reforms” to broadly include any organizational changes—such as major transformation, mergers, and other reorganizations—and efforts to streamline and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations. [GAO-18-427](#).

at the time of the incident, members of Specialized Forces units would carry in excess of 100 pounds of specialized gear and equipment.²¹ Officials also noted that at that time there were concerns that members' self-inflating flotation devices could inflate onboard aircraft, which in the event of a crash in the water could result in personnel being unable to exit the aircraft.²² The Coast Guard subsequently established a goal for its reorganization to mitigate this safety risk by decreasing gear weight and personal flotation devices.

Further, the report recommended reducing or eliminating inconsistencies between the Specialized Forces units and the rest of the Coast Guard. For example, a Coast Guard official told us that integration between the Deployable Operations Group and the rest of the Coast Guard was inconsistent, training programs were not standardized, and training took place at 15 different locations. This resulted in difficulties sharing assets, such as aircraft and boats, for use during training sessions. As a result of the report findings and its recommendation, the 2013 reorganization realigned Specialized Forces units under regional operational commands to integrate its logistics with the rest of the Coast Guard (fig 2.).²³

Involve Employees and Key Stakeholders in Developing Reforms

Involving employees and key stakeholders in the process of developing reforms is part of an integrated approach that helps facilitate the development of reform goals and objectives, as well as incorporate insights from a frontline perspective and increase customer acceptance of any changes. The Coast Guard generally applied this key practice because it involved senior officials representing the agency to develop the goals of the reorganization, how to address them, and to make reform recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of Specialized Forces operations. The Coast Guard's 2011 report included and incorporated input from a broad range of subject matter experts

²¹Specialized equipment are items such as batons, night vision goggles, and the ceramic plates worn in vests and meant to deflect direct gun shots.

²²Coast Guard officials stated in the event of a water landing, the helicopter would turn rotary blades down and a person wearing an inflatable device would be carried to the floor of the aircraft. To exit the aircraft in the event of a water crash would require personnel to swim downward to exit out the side door. A person wearing an inflatable device may not be able to swim downward. Because of this concern, self-inflating floatation devices are prohibited on rotary aircraft.

²³Coast Guard logistics encompasses support activities associated with developing, acquiring, testing, and sustaining the mission effectiveness of operating systems throughout their service lives.

including high level officers representing a comprehensive mix of Coast Guard units, with a diverse mix of experience, and it reflected different programs throughout the Coast Guard to ensure a comprehensive review. During site visits, Coast Guard officials told us the reorganization from the Deployable Operations Group to Specialized Forces had a positive effect by helping to ensure tactics, training, and techniques became standardized and ensuring better cooperation within the Coast Guard as well as with other agencies. For example, Coast Guard officials told us that because their area of responsibility is large and busy, they use MSSTs to augment their local capabilities and to apply the MSST's specialized capabilities that the local unit does not have. Coast Guard officials also emphasized an increase in safety, particularly with a decrease in a risk of drowning while in tactical gear.

Address High Risk Areas and Longstanding Management Challenges

Addressing long standing weaknesses in how some federal programs and agencies operate is a key practice, which can improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of the federal government. The Coast Guard generally applied this key practice because it considered high risk areas when considering Specialized Forces reorganization. Specifically, the Coast Guard addressed retention and training, which it identified in its 2011 report to be high risk areas and longstanding management challenges. For example, the Coast Guard's 2011 report identified the need for additional subject matter expertise and made recommendations to implement training standardization across the Specialized Forces. Our work has also identified retention and training as challenges. We found in 2010 that the Coast Guard was unable to retain qualified Specialized Forces personnel, in part because of additional training requirements.²⁴ For example, while personnel working on a cutter may need a boat driver certification, an MSST or MSRT member would need an additional tactical boat driver course.

The Coast Guard subsequently developed detailed guidance for Specialized Forces units that includes standardized training, requirements, and qualifications to be followed regardless of the unit location and to be applied consistently across organizational commands. During site visits to units in the Pacific and Atlantic Areas, we observed that equipment was standardized across Specialized Forces, and officials we spoke with described the benefits of the standardized training and equipment. Figure 5 shows Coast Guard MSST personnel conducting

²⁴[GAO-10-433R](#).

standardized training, which officials said has the added benefit of providing potential deterrence of illegal activities, such as drug smuggling, in the geographic area of the training.

Figure 5: Coast Guard Personnel Conduct Specialized Training in Florida



Source: GAO. | GAO-20-33

Coast Guard officials also told us that, prior to the 2007 reorganization to the Deployable Operations Group, Coast Guard personnel working in Specialized Forces units could not remain in those units and be competitive for promotions.²⁵ Coast Guard officials told us that this was because the Coast Guard has certain requirements for career progression, including personnel working in various assignments within a given career path. In 2010, we reported that the Coast Guard had developed a career path for maritime law enforcement personnel—who are part of operations that generally address the Coast Guard’s homeland

²⁵Officers in Specialized Forces units usually rotate to new units every 3 years while enlisted personnel will usually rotate every 3 to 4 years. This time may be shortened or extended based on the needs of the unit commander.

security missions. Coast Guard officials told us that this change was a response to challenges the agency faced retaining law enforcement personnel. Officials said this change created a maritime law enforcement career path within the Specialized Forces community. Coast Guard officials we spoke with also told that us the career path has helped them retain qualified Specialized Forces personnel.

Coast Guard Has Not Fully Used Data to Assess Workforce Needs or Evaluated Potential Overlap or Gaps in the Capabilities of its Deployable Specialized Forces

Use Data and Evidence to Assess Workforce Needs

Coast Guard partially applied two of five key practices for agency reorganization, including using data and evidence, and considering to some extent the possibility of fragmentation, duplication, and overlap. However, it has not used data and evidence to fully assess Specialized Forces workforce needs and has not comprehensively evaluated the potential for overlaps or gaps in the capabilities among them.

We have reported that agencies are better equipped to address management and performance challenges when managers use reliable data and evidence, such as evidence from program evaluations and performance data that provide information on how well a program or agency is achieving its goals. We have previously reported that when reforming a given program, the use of data and evidence is critical for setting program priorities and allocating resources.²⁶ The Coast Guard used some data and evidence related to a specific management challenge—training mishaps—but did not use data and evidence to fully assess Specialized Forces workforce needs. As previously mentioned, the Coast Guard analyzed equipment weight data and scenarios and made recommendations based on the results of these analyses to reduce the risk of drowning. The 2011 report affirmed the locations of the Specialized Forces units to ensure that unit capabilities were geographically distributed, but it recommended additional analyses of some unit locations, such as TACLETs. The Coast Guard found that the geographic distribution of the Specialized Forces, at the time of the analysis, provided coverage for their tactical law enforcement and waterside operations and did not recommend changes to the geographic locations of these units.

²⁶[GAO-18-427](#).

The Coast Guard partially applied this key practice because, when it reorganized its Specialized Forces command structure in 2013, it did not assess Specialized Forces workforce needs with regard to the number of personnel required to conduct its operations. The Coast Guard's 2011 report identified some capability and capacity shortfalls, including inadequate capacity to conduct certain security operations, and recommended an analysis of staffing levels for all Specialized Forces units. Similarly, a 2012 Homeland Security Studies and Analysis Institute peer review of the Coast Guard's 2011 report on its Specialized Forces noted the need for a more comprehensive analysis of all of the units to ensure the effective use of their specialized capabilities.²⁷

In the eight years since the Coast Guard study recommended workforce needs analyses, the Coast Guard has not assessed the overall Specialized Forces workforce needs or established such an analysis as a priority. The Coast Guard conducted a unit level analysis of its PSUs in January 2014, but it did not use the results because the analysis focused on non-deployed personnel. Officials stated the analysis identified gaps in personnel and recommended that the Coast Guard expand the size of the units to be able to fulfill mission requirements. However, Coast Guard officials said they did not act on the recommendations of the study to request different resource levels.²⁸ Officials told us that leadership changes among Specialized Forces can result in units, such as PSUs, getting study results based on scope decisions with which the new leader disagrees.

We found that the Coast Guard might not have the right mix and number of personnel relative to the mix and number of operations Specialized Forces conduct to meet mission demands. Our analysis of Specialized Forces data for fiscal years 2016 through 2018 and planned for 2019 found variation in the number of operations requested of some units during this period, even though the number of personnel remained relatively constant. For example, our analysis of Coast Guard data found that PSU requests—and the number of operations carried out—changed from three operations in 2016 to six in 2018, with two operations planned

²⁷Homeland Security Studies and Analysis Institute: Independent Review of the U.S. Coast Guard's Deployable Specialized Forces Stem-to-Stern Review, (Arlington, VA, August 20, 2012).

²⁸In March 2019, the Coast Guard initiated a review to validate previous and current analyses of PSUs to, among other things, enhance the readiness and force sustainment of the PSUs and address challenges related to maintaining personnel.

in 2019, spread among a constant of approximately 1,000 personnel. In another example, our analysis of Coast Guard data found that the number of operations requested for MSSTs varied from 85 in 2016 to 67 in 2018, and 39 planned for 2019. Our analysis of Coast Guard data found that the number of MSST operations carried out was 152 in 2016, 141 in 2018, and 379 planned operations in 2019, while the number of personnel assigned to MSSTs decreased from 562 in 2016 to 547 planned for 2019.²⁹

Such variations may affect the extent to which Specialized Forces units are used efficiently. Officials from some units we interviewed indicated that they experienced periods of underutilization, while other similar units turned down operations for lack of available personnel. For example, an official at one unit described efforts to increase the number of operations carried out by the unit, with officials describing outreach efforts to other Coast Guard units to encourage those units to call on them for specialized assistance. Officials at another unit conducted similar outreach, including passing out flyers describing Specialized Forces capabilities and contact information should the other Coast Guard units need assistance. In contrast, officials from a different Specialized Forces unit described instances where they had to decline operations because they did not have enough personnel to meet the demand. Further, an official from one Area Command responsible for assigning some of the Specialized Forces operations stated approximately 5 percent of requests for Specialized Forces assistance went unfulfilled.³⁰

Without an analysis of the Specialized Forces units as a whole, the Coast Guard does not have the assurance that it has the requisite number of personnel in the right units to conduct the required missions.³¹ Such an analysis would better position the Coast Guard to identify capability gaps between mission requirements and mission performance caused by deficiencies in the numbers of personnel available, as required by the

²⁹Appendix I includes additional information on Coast Guard operations.

³⁰According to the Coast Guard, other limiting factors include funding for travel, number of boats in proximity to the mission, and the timeframe required to move forces to the operating area.

³¹We reported on the lack of workforce analyses to support Coast Guard decision-making in 2016, including a recommendation to improve the transparency in allocating its limited resources, which the Coast Guard agreed with but has not fully addressed. See [GAO-16-379](#).

Address Fragmentation,
Overlap, and Duplication, If
Any Exists and is Unnecessary

Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2015.³² Coast Guard officials from Specialized Forces units we interviewed in 2019 acknowledged that an analysis of each unit would be useful and in August 2019, officials from headquarters affirmed this and stated the Coast Guard aims to conduct analyses of the individual units.³³ We found that these analyses consider each unit individually and do not comprehensively consider similar units, such as Specialized Forces. Therefore, without analyzing the Specialized Forces program as a whole, the Coast Guard may miss opportunities to optimize the allocation of personnel among Specialized Forces units, as well as the number of units. Using data and evidence to comprehensively assess workforce needs across Specialized Forces units would better position the Coast Guard to prioritize its Specialized Forces efforts to more effectively achieve desired outcomes.

As we have reported since 2011, agencies may be able to achieve greater efficiency or effectiveness by reducing or better managing programmatic fragmentation, overlap, and duplication. We have also reported that these issues should be considered during agency reform efforts.³⁴ We found that the Coast Guard partially considered how to reduce potential duplication and overlap when reorganizing the Specialized Forces units.

The 2011 Coast Guard report identified some duplication of one specialized unit and challenges associated with uncoordinated training and fragmented guidance. The Coast Guard recommended the elimination of one Specialized Forces unit with that specialized capability, and to change training requirements to reduce the duplication of roles within one specific Specialized Forces unit. Further, the report recommended training standardization and associated guidance, which

³²14 U.S.C. § 5104.

³³We have an ongoing evaluation of the Coast Guard's Modernization and Manpower Requirements Analysis process.

³⁴See GAO's Duplication and Cost Savings web page for links to the 2011 to 2019 annual reports: <http://www.gao.gov/duplication/overview>. Using the framework established in our prior work on addressing fragmentation, overlap, and duplication, we use the following definitions for the purpose of assessing the Coast Guard's Specialized Forces missions and capabilities: Fragmentation occurs when more than one agency (or more than one organization within an agency) is involved in the same broad area of national interest. Overlap occurs when multiple programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve those goals, or target similar beneficiaries. Duplication occurs when two or more agencies or programs are engaging in the same activities or providing the same services to the same beneficiaries.

the Coast Guard subsequently addressed by updating its guidance and standardizing training requirements. In addition, the Coast Guard report recommended changes to the capabilities maintained by some units, such as MSSTs. Specifically, the report recommended that the Coast Guard focus MSSTs on waterside security capabilities and eliminate law enforcement roles, among others, to reduce duplicative training costs. Further, according to officials, in response to the Coast Guard Authorization Act of 2010, the Coast Guard eliminated the MSST in San Diego, California and replaced it with MSRT West, a second MSRT.³⁵ The Coast Guard also placed all regional dive lockers under MSRT West.³⁶ According to Coast Guard officials, structuring regional dive lockers under a single command in a single geographic location is safer and more efficient, because dive operations require a high level of subject matter expertise in the command as well as personnel actually participating in the dives.

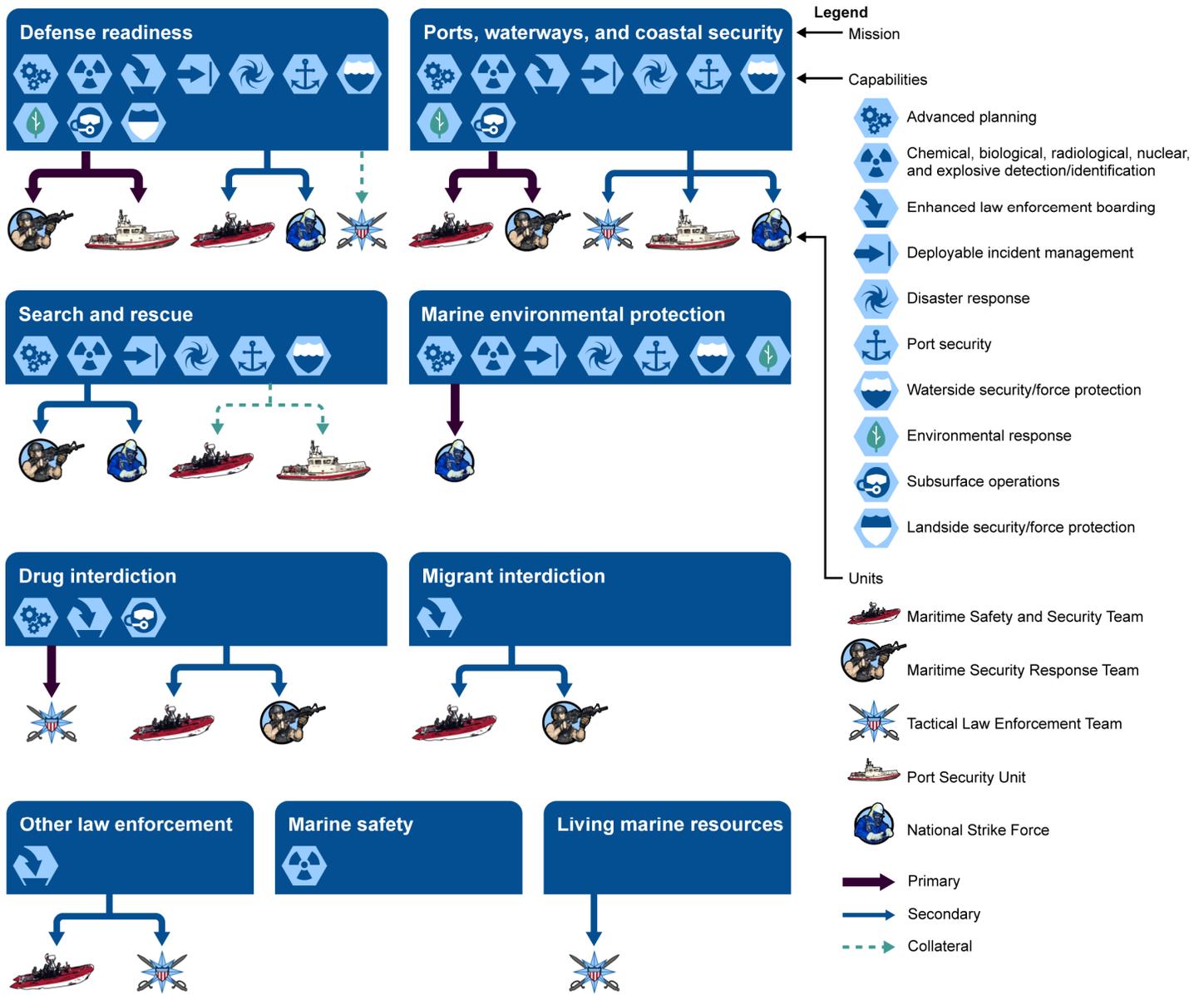
However, the Coast Guard partially applied this practice because it has not conducted the analyses necessary to fully identify potential overlap and the extent to which it could be unnecessarily duplicative. The Coast Guard categorizes Specialized Forces missions, such as drug interdiction or defense readiness, as primary, secondary or collateral, and assigns different levels of capabilities according to these categories.³⁷ Specifically, multiple Specialized Forces are used to support the same Coast Guard missions, which often require similar capabilities from the units, such as the ability to perform enhanced law enforcement boardings. Figure 6 provides a visual representation of the Specialized Forces missions, the capabilities to carry out operations in support of those missions, and the units that address the mission areas.

³⁵The act calls for the Coast Guard to maintain no less than two enhanced teams to serve as deployable forces capable of combatting terrorism, engaging in interdiction, law enforcement, and advanced tactical maritime security operations, among other things. 46 U.S.C. § 70106(a)(2). The Coast Guard transitioned MSST San Diego into MSRT West, formally completing the stand up of MSRT West in 2018.

³⁶Regional Dive Lockers are equipped, trained, and outfitted to conduct underwater operations in a variety of environments.

³⁷According to Coast Guard guidance, a Specialized Forces unit must be fully capable of performing its primary mission areas, may be expected to perform secondary missions, and may have an inherent ability to perform a collateral mission area. The capacity to perform secondary or collateral missions may be limited because the units may not be organized, manned, trained, equipped, or designed to perform these missions to the full extent.

Figure 6: Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Force Units, Missions, and Corresponding Capabilities



Source: GAO analysis of Coast Guard information. | GAO-20-33

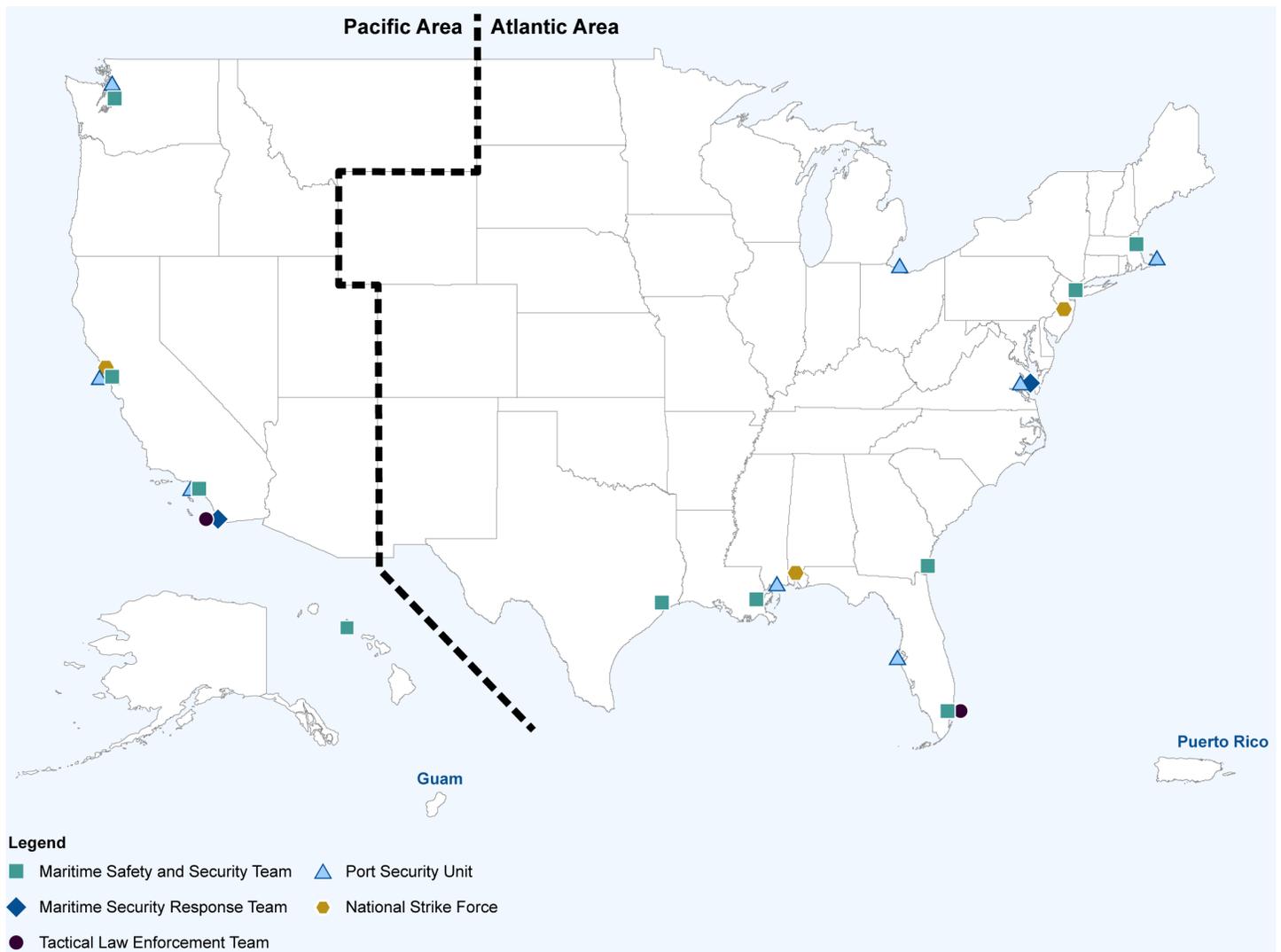
Note: Coast Guard guidance for its Specialized Forces identifies these missions and corresponding capabilities. Specialized Forces can conduct the marine safety mission but it is not identified as a primary, secondary, or collateral mission for these units.

As shown in figure 6, MSSTs and PSUs primary and secondary missions overlap, as do the capabilities necessary to conduct three of the same missions—Ports, Waterways, and Coastal Security; Defense Readiness; and Search and Rescue. MSSTs and PSUs have operational differences, but there may be benefits to assessing when to use PSUs in place of MSSTs or vice versa, such as when one Specialized Force can be deployed more rapidly, or because Specialized Forces are located in close proximity. For example, MSSTs maintain the ability to deploy almost immediately to carry out an operation, while PSUs generally require around 24 months to deploy. PSUs generally have a deployment preparation cycle of at least 24 months and up to 48 months.³⁸

Moreover, the variance in Specialized Forces utilization and the overlapping capabilities units maintain underscores a challenge and an opportunity, particularly given the close proximity of Specialized Forces units. For example, given that there are certain instances where Specialized Forces units appear to be substitutable, assessing the extent to which co-located units could be better leveraged could help the Coast Guard more efficiently manage its resources. Figure 7 shows the locations of Coast Guard Specialized Forces units and the close proximity of some units, such as co-located MSSTs and PSUs, which have overlapping primary and secondary defense readiness and ports waterways and coastal security missions (fig. 6) and related capabilities.

³⁸According to Coast Guard guidance, PSUs are organized, trained, and equipped to provide physical security, maritime interdiction capability, and defense of strategic shipping, designated critical infrastructure, and high value assets, including to support the Department of Defense. Coast Guard guidance states that PSUs may also provide limited support to Coast Guard's Port, Waterways, and Coastal Security mission, among others.

Figure 7: Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Force Locations



Source: GAO analysis of U.S. Coast Guard information; MapInfo (map). | GAO-20-33

In March 2019, as previously noted, Coast Guard leadership again called for a review of PSUs, citing overlap, personnel shortages, and excessive distance to training areas (such as waterways and weapon ranges). The challenge this new PSU study seeks to address underscores the importance of a contemporary and comprehensive assessment of these units' workforce needs. It also presents the Coast Guard with an opportunity to consider whether it could more effectively use its co-located Specialized Forces. For example, instead of deploying a PSU

within commuting distance of an operation occurring in San Francisco, CA that required surge capacity, the Coast Guard deployed an MSST from Seattle, WA for 7 days, even though both Specialized Forces are to maintain the same capabilities needed for the operation. Coast Guard officials stated that they decided to send the MSST to meet a surge capacity instead of the local PSU because Ports, Waterways and Coastal Security is a secondary mission for PSUs and PSUs do not bring law enforcement capability of boarding officers, among other things. According to Coast Guard officials, each PSU costs around \$1 million a year to operate when not deployed to Guantanamo Bay, and two of eight PSUs are deployed annually. Assessing Specialized Forces workforce needs to determine the optimal mix of units and analyzing trade-offs, such as eliminating underutilized units, could identify opportunities for the Coast Guard to save millions of dollars over time. Elimination of even one PSU could save around a million dollars annually. Because the exact amount of savings would depend on the outcomes of those analyses and currently available cost data is not available for making estimates, we cannot precisely estimate the value of potential savings.³⁹ However, given that the Coast Guard has begun an assessment of PSUs, it is reasonable to expect that a comprehensive analysis of Specialized Forces could find unnecessary duplication and could recommend PSU closures. Coast Guard officials did not state that they are considering this review as part of a comprehensive review of Specialized Forces that would include assessing the overlapping capabilities of other Specialized Forces units.

In August 2019, Coast Guard officials told us that overlap or gaps in Specialized Forces' capabilities could exist. Coast Guard officials also stated that some overlapping capability could be beneficial. While overlap may be beneficial, overlapping capabilities, if unnecessary, could indicate

³⁹The Coast Guard does not maintain standard personnel cost data for each type of Specialized Forces unit, and therefore cost information does not reflect full operating costs. In addition, we have previously reported that some Coast Guard data do not include the time Coast Guard personnel may spend on missions that do not include assets, and that some Coast Guard data may not be accurate. Specifically, in 2016, we reported that data on asset resource hours used to support each mission may not be accurate, which Coast Guard officials acknowledged as limitations but noted that the data were accurate enough for operational planning purposes. The Coast Guard agreed with our recommendation that it incorporate unit input, such as asset performance data, to inform more realistic asset allocation decisions. As of April 2019, the Coast Guard reported that it is close to completing an update to its guidance, to include how unit input on mission resource hours recorded, which will better position the Coast Guard to assess its Specialized Forces needs, but this recommendation remains open pending Coast Guard action. [GAO-16-379](#).

inefficiencies, such as excess capacity in some areas, including geographic areas, to the detriment of others where there may be capability gaps. The Coast Guard is not currently positioned to take action to reduce the risk of some potentially unnecessary overlap or duplication among the Specialized Forces units because it has yet to comprehensively assess the Specialized Forces program. Specifically, as reported above, Coast Guard officials stated that the Coast Guard has conducted some staffing analyses of standalone Specialized Forces units, but has not evaluated the Specialized Forces' workforce or operations as a whole. Until the Coast Guard comprehensively assesses Specialized Forces' needs, the Coast Guard will lack a complete picture of the extent to which overlapping capabilities are necessary or appropriate, or where there are capability gaps or areas where certain Specialized Forces units could be better leveraged to meet mission requirements. Assessing the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists among Specialized Forces' capabilities, would better position the Coast Guard to identify capability gaps and reallocate resources, as needed, to use them more efficiently.

Conclusions

The Coast Guard's Specialized Forces units include a range of specialized capabilities that are vital to the agency's ability to fulfill its mission, and they constitute a significant force multiplier to maintain readiness throughout major U.S. ports and cities. The Coast Guard faces the difficult decision of determining how best to invest its limited resources. Without having assessed its operational needs and mix of personnel for Specialized Forces units, the Coast Guard does not have the information it needs to ensure that it is investing its resources efficiently. GAO's key practices and considerations provide a framework for agency reorganization and a decision-making approach that can help ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and do not result in unnecessary overlap or duplication. The Coast Guard did not fully apply these practices when reorganizing the Specialized Forces. By comprehensively assessing Specialized Forces' workforce needs and determining the extent to which overlapping capabilities are necessary, or whether capability gaps may exist, the Coast Guard may be able to more efficiently allocate resources for its Specialized Forces.

Recommendations

The Coast Guard should conduct a comprehensive analysis of its Deployable Specialized Forces' workforce needs. (Recommendation 1)

The Coast Guard should assess the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists among Deployable Specialized Forces' capabilities. (Recommendation 2)

Agency Comments and Our Evaluation

We provided a draft of this report to DHS for comment. DHS provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate. On November 5, 2019, DHS also provided comments, reproduced in full in appendix III. DHS concurred with one of our two recommendations, and described actions planned to address it, but did not concur with the other.

DHS concurred with our first recommendation that the Coast Guard should conduct a comprehensive analysis of its Specialized Forces' workforce needs. DHS stated in its comments that the Coast Guard will conduct individual unit analyses, prioritizing for units that were not previously examined. Initial requests, according to the comments, will be submitted to staff responsible for the analyses by January 31, 2020, and estimated completion dates for the analyses are expected to be determined after assessing the availability of funding to support the analyses. These actions, if fully implemented, should address the intent of the recommendation.

DHS did not concur with our second recommendation that the Coast Guard assess the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists among Specialized Forces' capabilities. In its comments, DHS stated that when the priority of the missions, capabilities, and subsequent geographic operating areas are appropriately considered for each DSF unit type, unnecessary overlap or duplication does not exist among DSF capabilities. DHS further stated that our conclusions illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the corresponding missions of DSF units.

We note in our report that the way in which the Coast Guard deploys certain Specialized Forces units may not result in overlap, but overlapping capabilities amongst units could indicate inefficiencies in how they are used, such as excess capacity in some areas, including geographic areas, and missed opportunities for use in others. As noted in our report, the Coast Guard has not conducted the analyses necessary to fully identify potential overlap amongst units' capabilities and the extent to which opportunities may exist to use the units more efficiently. The Coast Guard categorizes Specialized Forces missions, such as drug interdiction or defense readiness, as primary, secondary, or collateral, and assigns different levels of capabilities according to these categories. We found

that multiple Specialized Forces are used to support the same Coast Guard missions, which often require similar capabilities from the units, such as the ability to perform enhanced law enforcement boardings. Further, as stated in our report, in August 2019, Coast Guard officials told us that overlap or gaps in Specialized Forces' capabilities could exist and that some overlapping capability could be beneficial. While overlap may be beneficial, overlapping capabilities, if unnecessary, could indicate inefficiencies, such as excess capacity in some areas, including geographic areas.

Also in its comments, DHS stated that we have not identified any substantive examples of unnecessary overlap or duplication nor provided any other compelling reasons for how implementing this recommendation could enhance Coast Guard mission effectiveness. DHS cited our use of MSST and PSU potential overlap as an example of misunderstanding DSF unit missions and active versus reserve personnel. However, MSST and PSU potential overlap is a prime example of why potential unnecessary overlap should be examined by the Coast Guard. Specifically, as noted in our report, MSST and PSU primary and secondary missions overlap, as do the capabilities necessary to conduct three of the same missions—Ports, Waterways, and Coastal Security; Defense Readiness; and Search and Rescue. MSSTs and PSUs have operational differences due to active versus reserve personnel status, but there may be benefits to assessing when to use PSUs in place of MSSTs or vice versa, such as when one Specialized Force can be deployed more rapidly, or when Specialized Forces are located in close proximity.

Beyond the MSST and PSU potential overlap, active duty units such as MSSTs and MSRTs provide an additional example. As shown in Figure 6 of our report, MSRTs and MSSTs share the primary missions of Ports, Waterways, and Coastal Security, as well as common secondary missions, including Drug and Migrant Interdiction. Additionally, MSRT-San Diego and MSST-Long Beach are within close proximity to one another, offering an opportunity to examine potential overlap. Also, as noted in our report, officials from some units we interviewed indicated that they experienced periods of underutilization, while other similar units turned down operations for lack of available personnel. For example, an official at one unit described efforts to increase the number of operations carried out by the unit, with officials describing outreach efforts to other Coast Guard units to encourage those units to call on them for specialized assistance. Officials at another unit conducted similar outreach, including passing out flyers describing Specialized Forces capabilities and contact information should the other Coast Guard units

need assistance. In contrast, officials from a different Specialized Forces unit described instances where they had to decline operations because they did not have enough personnel to meet the demand. Given that there are certain instances where Specialized Forces units appear to be substitutable, assessing the extent to which units could be better leveraged could help the Coast Guard more efficiently manage its resources.

In addition, in March 2019, Coast Guard leadership called for a review of PSUs, citing overlap, personnel shortages, and excessive distance to training areas (such as waterways and weapon ranges). As noted in our report, the challenge this new PSU study seeks to address underscores the importance of a contemporary and comprehensive assessment of these units' workforce needs and presents the Coast Guard with an opportunity to consider whether it could more effectively use its co-located Specialized Forces. According to Coast Guard officials, each PSU costs around \$1 million a year to operate when not deployed to Guantanamo Bay, and two of eight PSUs deploy annually. Assessing Specialized Forces workforce needs to determine the optimal mix of units and analyzing trade-offs, such as eliminating or moving underutilized units, could identify opportunities for the Coast Guard to save millions of dollars over time. As noted in our report, because the exact amount of savings would depend on the outcomes of those analyses and cost data that is not currently available for making estimates, we cannot precisely estimate the value of potential savings. However, given that the Coast Guard has begun an assessment of PSUs, it is reasonable to expect that a comprehensive analysis of Specialized Forces could provide either a defensible basis for the existing structure or find unnecessary duplication and could recommend changes to the number and location of Specialized Forces.

In summary, as we state in our report, a comprehensive assessment of Specialized Forces' needs would, among other things, help the Coast Guard have a more complete picture of the extent to which certain Specialized Forces units could be better leveraged to meet mission requirements. Assessing the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists among Specialized Forces' capabilities would better position the Coast Guard to identify capability gaps and reallocate resources, as needed, to use them more efficiently.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-3841 or AndersonN@gao.gov. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix IV.



Nathan J. Anderson
Director, Homeland Security and Justice

List of Committees

The Honorable Roger F. Wicker
Chairman
The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
United States Senate

The Honorable Ron Johnson
Chairman
The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

The Honorable Bennie G. Thompson
Chairman
The Honorable Mike Rogers
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
House of Representatives

The Honorable Peter A. DeFazio
Chairman
The Honorable Sam Graves
Ranking Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
House of Representatives

Appendix I: Coast Guard Deployable Specialized Force Cost and Operations Data from 2016 to 2019 and Unit Locations

This appendix provides Coast Guard data on Deployable Specialized Force (Specialized Forces) personnel, operations, costs, and resource hours¹ showing a mix of operational tempos, including variation in the number of operations requested of some units such as Tactical Law Enforcement Teams (TACLETs) and Port Security Units (PSUs), but relatively constant numbers of personnel assigned to them.

Table 3 provides operational and cost details for Coast Guard Specialized Forces units for fiscal years 2016 through 2018 and planned for 2019.²

Table 3: Selected Coast Guard’s Deployable Specialized Forces (Specialized Forces) Cost and Operation Information Fiscal Years 2016 through 2018 and Planned for 2019

Specialized Forces	Information	Fiscal Year			
		2016	2017	2018	2019 (planned)
Maritime Security Response Team (MSRT)	Number of personnel assigned	379	435	451	463
	Number of operations conducted	31	24	157	48
	Number of operations requested (requests received) ^a	23	13	36	26
	Training costs (\$)	1,395,076	1,280,798	1,254,820	1,254,820
	Operating costs (\$)	1,816,673	1,406,337	1,788,758	2,338,758
	Travel costs (\$)	840,378	677,257	646,356	646,356
	Resource hours expended	1,843	2,214	7,753	N/A
Planned resource hours	3,000	3,000	7,750	8,300	
Maritime Safety and Security Teams (MSST)	Number of personnel assigned	562	550	544	547
	Number of operations conducted	152	159	141	379
	Number of operations requested (requests received) ^a	85	15	67	39
	Training costs (\$)	1,979,516	1,622,529	1,451,143	1,451,143

¹Resource hours represent the actual hours that an asset, such as a boat or helicopter being used by a Specialized Forces or other Coast Guard unit, is operational, according to Coast Guard guidance. We have previously reported that resource hours do not include the time Coast Guard personnel may spend on missions that do not include assets, and therefore do not reflect full operating costs. For example, Coast Guard personnel conducting a dockside vessel inspection would not need to use an asset to carry out activities related to the marine safety mission, and, thus, these activities would not be captured in resource hour data.

²The Maritime Security Improvement Act of 2018 provides that GAO is to report, at a minimum, specific operational and cost data for each type of Specialized Forces. See Pub. L. No. 115-254, div. J, § 1808, 132 Stat. 3533, 3536-37.

**Appendix I: Coast Guard Deployable
Specialized Force Cost and Operations Data
from 2016 to 2019 and Unit Locations**

Specialized Forces	Information	Fiscal Year			
		2016	2017	2018	2019 (planned)
	Operating costs (\$)	7,673,123	9,011,164	7,478,301	7,478,301
	Travel costs (\$)	3,398,809	3,402,047	3,987,814	3,987,814
	Resource hours expended	22,497	24,362	26,988	N/A
	Planned resource hours	37,242	37,250	37,164	37,164
Port Security Units (PSU)	Number of personnel assigned	1,095	1,032	975	1,011
	Number of operations conducted	3	4	6	2
	Number of operations requested (requests received) ^a	3	4	6	2
	Training costs (\$)	2,853,799	3,029,751	1,300,222	4,337,600
	Operating costs (\$)	8,108,138	7,691,904	8,315,463	5,315,463
	Travel costs (\$)	55,369	326,971	1,762,223	1,762,223
	Resource hours expended	19,275	17,016	16,524	N/A
	Planned resource hours	19,100	17,000	16,269	15,002
Tactical Law Enforcement Teams (TACLET)	Number of personnel assigned	251	261	256	251
	Number of operations conducted	62	85	100	108
	Number of operations requested (requests received) ^a	2	5	6	8
	Training costs (\$)	1,215,703	1,225,510	1,143,913	1,143,913
	Operating costs (\$)	1,599,890	1,394,804	1,527,395	1,527,395
	Travel costs (\$)	653,579	613,253	749,935	750,000
	Resource hours expended	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	Planned resource hours	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
National Strike Force (NSF)	Number of personnel assigned	267	260	263	267
	Number of operations conducted	248	296	135	200
	Number of operations requested (requests received) ^a	104	86	87	85
	Training costs (\$)	313,169	157,685	213,416	213,416
	Operating costs (\$)	2,277,691	2,574,888	2,225,903	2,225,903
	Travel costs (\$)	726,042	670,663	867,938	867,938
	FTE Resource days expended	14,361	13,027	16,618	N/A
	FTE Resource days available	16,800	16,320	16,320	16,320

Legend: N/A = not applicable.

Source: GAO summary of Coast Guard data. | GAO-20-33

^aOperations requested includes requests from other agencies, such as agency requests for Coast Guard Canine Explosive Detection Teams to support an event that is not a Coast Guard operation, and does not include internal Coast Guard requests.

Appendix II: The Coast Guard Missions

This appendix details the Coast Guard’s 11 missions, which are characterized as non-homeland security and homeland-security missions (see Table 4).

Table 4: Information on the Coast Guard’s 11 Missions

	Mission	Description
Non-homeland security missions	Marine safety	Enforce laws which prevent death, injury, and property loss in the marine environment.
	Marine environmental protection	Enforce laws which deter the introduction of invasive species into the maritime environment, stop unauthorized ocean dumping, and prevent and respond to oil and chemical spills.
	Search and rescue	Search for, and provide aid to, people who are in distress or imminent danger.
	Aids to navigation	Mitigate the risk to safe navigation by providing and maintaining more than 51,000 buoys, beacons, lights, and other aids to mark channels and denote hazards.
	Living marine resources	Enforce laws governing the conservation, management, and recovery of living marine resources, marine protected species, and national marine sanctuaries and monuments.
	Ice operations	The Coast Guard is the only federal agency directed to operate and maintain icebreaking resources for the United States. This includes establishing and maintaining tracks for critical waterways, assisting and escorting vessels beset or stranded in ice, and removing navigational hazards created by ice in navigable waterways.
Homeland security missions	Ports, waterways, and coastal security	Ensure the security of the waters subject to the jurisdiction of the United States and the waterways, ports, and intermodal landside connections that comprise the marine transportation system and protect those who live or work on the water or who use the maritime environment for recreation.
	Drug interdiction	Stem the flow of illegal drugs into the United States.
	Migrant interdiction	Stem the flow of undocumented alien migration and human smuggling activities via maritime routes.
	Defense readiness	The Coast Guard maintains the training and capability necessary to immediately integrate with Department of Defense forces in both peacetime operations and during times of war.
	Other law enforcement	Enforcement of international treaties, including the prevention of illegal fishing in international waters and the dumping of plastics and other marine debris.

Source: U.S. Coast Guard. | GAO-20-33

Appendix III: Comments from the Department of Homeland Security

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528



**Homeland
Security**

November 5, 2019

Nathan J. Anderson
Director, Homeland Security and Justice
U.S. Government Accountability Office
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20548

Re: Management Response to Draft Report: GAO-20-33, "COAST GUARD: Assessing Deployable Specialized Forces' Workforce Needs Could Improve Efficiency and Reduce Potential Overlap or Gaps in Capabilities"

Dear Mr. Anderson:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this draft report. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) appreciates the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO) work in planning and conducting its review and issuing this report.

The Department is pleased to note GAO's acknowledgement that the Coast Guard generally or partially applied all five key practices for agency reform during the 2013 reorganization of its Deployable Specialized Forces (DSF) units. The Coast Guard remains committed to further optimizing the staffing levels, training, and competency mix across its DSF units by prioritizing and conducting analyses of DSF workforce needs to ensure the effective use of their specialized capabilities, as appropriate.

The draft report contained two recommendations, one with which the Department concurs and one with which the Department non-concurs. Attached find our detailed response to each recommendation. DHS previously submitted technical comments under a separate cover.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on this draft report. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. We look forward to working with you again in the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim H. Crumacker".

JIM H. CRUMPACKER, CIA, CFE
Director
Departmental GAO-OIG Liaison Office

Attachment

**Attachment: Management Response to Recommendations
Contained in GAO-20-33**

GAO recommended that the Coast Guard:

Recommendation 1: Conduct a comprehensive analysis of its Deployable Specialized Forces' workforce needs.

Response: Concur. Due to the varying missions of each unit type, the Coast Guard Office of Specialized Capabilities will work with the Manpower Requirements staff to conduct individual DSF unit type analyses. Unit type manpower requirements analyses will be prioritized for units that have not been previously examined. A request to conduct an analysis of the Port Security Units and Maritime Security Response Teams will be submitted to the Manpower Requirements staff by January 31, 2020. Requests to conduct Maritime Safety and Security Teams (MSST) and National Strike Forces (NSF) analyses will be submitted once the MSST and NSF program manuals currently under development are promulgated. We expect to complete these manuals during the second quarter of Fiscal Year (FY) 2020 and first quarter of FY 2021, respectively. In order to focus on less mature DSF unit types, we will conduct a Tactical Law Enforcement Teams analysis after the other analyses are completed. We will establish an estimated completion date (ECD) after assessing the availability of funding to award contracts needed to support the analyses. ECD: To Be Determined.

Recommendation 2: Assess the extent to which unnecessary overlap or duplication exists among Deployable Specialized Forces' capabilities.

Response: Non-concur. When the priority of the missions, capabilities, and subsequent geographic operating areas are appropriately considered for each DSF unit type, unnecessary overlap or duplication does not exist among DSF capabilities. GAO's conclusions illustrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the corresponding missions of DSF units. For example, GAO questioned why an MSST from Seattle, Washington, was deployed for seven days to an operation in San Francisco, California, instead of a Port Security Unit (PSU) within commuting distance.

While both PSU and MSST units maintain boats that deploy, there is a fundamental difference in the operations of these DSF unit types. MSSTs are active duty units available for near real-time deployment. PSUs are primarily reserve units where personnel prepare for several years for planned, overseas deployments in support of Department of Defense combatant commanders. PSUs do not train to conduct local law enforcement operations and do not maintain the qualifications necessary to surge in support of Sector Commanders. This fundamental difference is why a local PSU was not considered to support the Sector Commander's request for forces in the draft report example.

When considering the spectrum of DSF unit types, missions, training and qualifications, DSF units possess an appropriate balance and necessary intersection of capabilities tailored to accomplish the operational demands without unnecessary overlap or duplication. GAO has not identified any substantive examples of unnecessary overlap or duplication nor provided any other compelling reasons how implementing this recommendation could enhance Coast Guard mission effectiveness. Given current funding constraints and competing mission requirements, the Coast Guard cannot consider conducting analyses not directly tied to improving mission outcomes.

We request that GAO consider this recommendation resolved and closed.

Appendix IV: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgements

GAO Contact

Nathan J. Anderson, (202) 512-3841 or AndersonN@gao.gov.

Staff Acknowledgements

In addition to the contact above, Ben Atwater (Assistant Director), Andrew Curry (Analyst-in-Charge), Chuck Bausell, David Dornisch, Michele Fejfar, Tracey King, and Calaera Powroznik made key contributions to this report. Also contributing were: Jason Berman, Dominick Dale, Eric Hauswirth, and Jan Montgomery.

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