

A new mission

Decorated Coast Guard lieutenant gets a different rank —
1L — after selection for special JAG program **BY KEITH CARTER**

It was the night before Thanksgiving 1997 and Spencer Roach was looking forward to enjoying the holiday with the rest of the members of his U.S. Coast Guard unit stationed in Dutch Harbor, Alaska.

Outside, an early winter storm was raging — so severe that it had kept the cutter to which he was assigned in port that evening. But then came a distress signal from a Japanese oil tanker that had run aground on the nearby coast. Roach's ship was dispatched to rescue the 17 men trapped on the vessel.

Despite howling winds and high seas that swamped one Coast Guard rescue craft, Roach and others from his crew jumped into the frigid waters and pulled the lifeboat containing the tanker's crew to safety. Though two from the tanker were lost and Roach and the other Guard members were treated for severe hypothermia after their plunge into the icy sea, 15 men were saved.

For his efforts, Roach was personally decorated by Admiral Terry Cross. That heroic rescue marked the first in a long list of achievements by the Louisiana native that recently culminated in his selection as one of six individuals nationwide chosen for the Coast Guard's highly competitive Judge Advocate General (JAG) program.

Roach, who in 2006 was commissioned as a lieutenant in the Coast Guard, began his first year of law school this fall at the **University of Miami School of Law**, with his education funded by the Coast Guard.

"I've always had an interest in the law, but never thought there was a viable way to pursue law school," 31-year-old Roach said. He chose Miami after earning his bachelor's degree in political science from Florida Gulf Coast University, which he attended under another Coast Guard educational program.

"I got accepted to three or four other law schools, including some that were higher ranked, but when I visited the



Spencer Roach (above, foreground) assisted in the rescue of men from a Japanese oil tanker in 1997 with the Coast Guard.

University of Miami, everything fell into place," he said. "The staff was wonderful, the classmates were great and I fell in love with the area. It just felt right."

Roach never dreamed that he would wind up in law school after joining the Coast Guard in 1996 at age 19, about a year-and-a-half after graduation from high school.

"Because of financial reasons, college at the time was out of the question," he said.

During high school, he worked for four years at a water park as a lifeguard and became interested in water rescue. Looking to provide some direction to his life, he considered joining the military.

He chose the Coast Guard rather than one of the other branches of service

because he knew he would be involved in search and rescue and other types of humanitarian efforts.

"I'd rather save people than kill them," he said.

He started out at the bottom of the ladder, as "an average grunt," assigned to routine tasks such as washing dishes, taking out the trash and painting ships.

After spending four years with units in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, he was transferred in 2000 to a Coast Guard unit in Ft. Myers, Fla. It was there that he started to expand his interests in public service, becoming involved with the local Big Brothers-Big Sisters program and speaking to local groups on behalf of the Guard.

"I delivered a Memorial Day speech

two years in a row before 8,000 people,” he said.

He also took an active role in local politics, working with now-Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp on voter registration drivers and community organizing.

For his efforts, the Florida State Legislature honored him in 2004 for his work with civic and nonprofit organizations.

The Coast Guard, by now realizing Roach's special talents, in 2006 assigned him to a key role in rebuilding the readiness of Coast Guard units along the Gulf Coast that had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina.

Commander George Petras, who supervised Roach during that period, praised his work as critical to helping the 17 Coast Guard units in the New Orleans sector get back on their feet after the storm severely damaged facilities and equipment.

“Everything had been fractured” by Katrina, Petras said. But Roach led a team that visited each unit and conducted special training operations that made sure they would be able to carry out their duties.

“He’s one of the brightest and most astute junior officers that we have in the Coast Guard,” Petras said. “He’s in the top 1 percent.”

At Miami, Roach plans to study inter-

national law, which he believes will serve him well as the Coast Guard expands its mission geographically.

“The Coast Guard has been becoming more involved on a worldwide scale,” he said. “Coast Guard people have been providing advice to international agencies on the Somalia pirates and in the Middle East, training and developing local units that can police the Persian Gulf.”

Roach said he considers himself fortunate that he’s been able to take advantage of a series of educational opportunities that he never dreamed he would have.

“One thing led to another,” he said. “I have to pinch myself once in awhile.”

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