

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
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Retired RADM Meredith Austin, CGNRC Co-Chair – Please welcome Mr. Craig George, who will provide us an update on the USCG Brand initiative.

Mr. Craig George (CG-0922) – I appreciate it and I also appreciate that not everybody thinks about branding all the time like I do. So I appreciate the time. Of note, you all are some of the first people seeing this this presentation. We have been brought on by the Coast Guard to codify the existing brand as we know it and understand it, set some rules around it, and ensure that it stays as dominant and understood as it has been for the last 235 years. So I'm going to run through kind of what branding is. And kind of talk about what we've been doing over the past year and get into kind of where we're headed with the Coast Guard brand. So again, I appreciate all of your time and we'll get going.

So just a quick note on branding. So this is sort of a personal anecdote. Just kind of trying to describe what a brand is. A lot of people think of, you know, when you think of a brand, you think of a logo, you think of a color scheme, you think of taglines. But what does that really mean? And I came across this example in my neighborhood. I have two gas stations on either side of the street.

One is a Sunoco. One is an Exxon. I mean, we're all very familiar with these logos. We we understand that, you know, we we recognize them when we see them. But the one on the left is Sunoco that gas station. You can if you just look at the pictures you can see it's it's crowded. People are there. If we zoomed in, we would see that it's a very clean gas station. There are planters with flowers next to the gas pumps. Everything is spotlessly clean. They have a well-renowned shop mechanic shop that everybody respects. They treat everybody fairly. They're really nice to deal with. They have a car wash. They have a beautiful little convenience store. Everything you would need and you can see it's just a popular place. While the Exxon across the street, as you can see, it's kind of dingy. It's run down. Nobody goes there. Really, they don't have a shop. They don't really have a small convenience store, but they don't have as much as as the Sunoco. And for me, this kind of gets behind what what brand actually is. So it's not the logo. It's what's behind the logo. It's the services that we provide provide. It's the interactions you have with that company. And that's important. That's an important distinction to make. So for me, I have a fond relationship with the Sunoco brand and less so with the Exxon brand because of the

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
Teams Voice to Text Transcript**

interactions I've had with these individual gas stations.

And this gets important when we think about the Coast Guard brand and how the public and stakeholders interact with the Coast Guard, especially in light of the recent goals to grow the force by 15,000 members. What's going to make Coast Guard that brand, more distinguished and a better place to be than, say, Navy or Army. And that's what we're trying to get behind, what is the Coast Guard brand? So more formally, we recognize a lot of these logos that are on the screen. And when you look at them, you almost instantly kind of get a feeling for the interactions you've had with those brands throughout your life. So again, a brand is more than a logo. It's kind of the sum of our promises. It's the behaviors. It's the experiences across every touch point, from press releases to social media posts, to uniforms. Hard assets. All of these logos that we see are representative of the feelings, experiences and impressions of the strong brands behind them. For us, in our case, the Coast Guard emblem has served as an enduring and instantly recognizable symbol. But our brand. The brand. The Coast Guard brand has never really been codified in the past. So how do we define the Coast Guard brand?

Well, what we did over the past year, we conducted a full brand audit. We looked at some competitive and aspirational peers. We looked at Army, Navy, Marines. We looked at NASA, we looked at Customs and Border Patrol. We looked at FEMA, NOAA, DEA, TSA, National Park Service and even some commercial brands like Subaru. We looked at market trends. We did some social listening. We looked at the the comments and the likes and dislikes on Coast Guard social media posts. We then did a total workforce survey. We just finished that recently and then we did a series of in-depth stakeholder interviews. And, in a nutshell, what we found is that Coast Guard has no true peer. As you know, you're all familiar with these. So our authorities and our many mission sets sort of make us a extremely unique service. That nobody else really can can touch with the amount of the breadth of our missions and the breadth of our authority. We found that public interest and engagement is strongest when we talk about our missions in a human and impactful and close to home way. So real world impact is is important. We noticed that there is a risk of politicization, especially in conjunction with Homeland Security and some of the bad press, that they're dealing with on a day-to-day basis, so sort of guilt by association. And then we've also noticed that the logos

2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand Teams Voice to Text Transcript

that we know and love the emblem, the racing stripes. We're fortunate in that they are recognized the world around.

But when we get a little bit deeper below those main touch points, the brand gets a little bit scattered. There's not a lot of rhyme or reason behind how logos, initiatives and programs are marketed and understood. So those were the high points that we came away with, but I wanted to share a couple of unique data points that we came across in our brand audit. I mentioned social listening, so we looked at Facebook, Twitter X, Instagram, and YouTube. And what we did is we kind of looked for a few months over time, we looked at all of the comments that came in on our social posts, the likes, the dislikes, the shares. And we saw some patterns of what resonated with with audience audiences and so. We saw that well publicized. Maritime operations, especially those that are were non deadly and search and rescue missions, received a lot of attention and mostly positive reactions. I'll point out that you see this 68% or 68 score here. Messages about retirees and veterans received a very high score. Some of the highest scores we saw across across channels, so people love hearing about those that have served in the past and still represent. The Coast Guard. Messages related to federal stakeholders so Congress, GOP, DHS, saw a markedly lower sentiment. Scores on average, demonstrating that when Coast Guard is pulled into the political leads it it sort of polarizes the brand. And then in contrast. Messages related to crisis response. SAR events. Received a more positive sentiment. Next, in our brand audit, we we sat down with stakeholders, we held in-depth interviews with people from different ranks, 10 years different levels of brand influence, job titles all across the service. And what we found is that the the services. Is is both humanitarian and military, and both of those aspects resonate with service members. It's approachable, but it also has real authority. It can keep the peace, but it also is prepared to act when necessary. So it's this dichotomy, this balance, that is that makes Coast Guard unique. So that what this means is. Coast Guard doesn't need to choose between compassionate and a strong image. The opportunity is to show how both of these work together. This is what makes Coast Guard unique and and this is the Coast Guard brand. You can see some of the some of the highlight quotes that we pulled. So I'll just read here in, in one hand. They have a life ring and the other hand they have a rifle. We both fight and we save. Another is we're always the people who are keeping the peace. So that dichotomy really stood out. And resonated quite loudly with service members. Next, what we did, we did a total

2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand Teams Voice to Text Transcript

workforce survey and we gave a list of words and we asked service members to pick the words that resonated most with them when they thought about Coast Guard. We also provided some images and to ask the same things and we can see. It maybe a little small, but some of the images below. From the left there's a SAR image. There is a contingency response image. Aids to navigation. Ice breaking. Law enforcement and then sort of more of a militaristic view. And when presented with adjectives and images, that representative the spectrum of Coast Guard operations responded strongly and consistently preferred those that represented their the humanitarian missions, so they chose. Words like prepared, protective, courageous over words like aggressive, fierce and assertive. So this was about eight months of work. Looking at all these different competitive brands doing these surveys, we're now in the process of kind of distilling all this down. And figuring out what this, what this all means and this is where you're getting a sneak peek of sort of where we're ending up with all of this?

And so I'd argue that Alexander Hamilton actually established the the modern Coast Guard brand as we know it back in 1791. If we go back in history, and if you think about it, the in the early 1790s, we're we're just post Revolutionary War and people. Are still very wary of monarchy. The the overstepping of authority and government hindrance on their. Personal ability for economic. Prosperity. And Hamilton knew this. But he also knew that this young government needed funds. So monitoring trade, monitoring, imports and exports. That it. That needed to happen. To help pay for this young government. So in his letter to his to the captains of the Revenue Marine written in 1791, Hamilton acknowledges the sense of nature of their their jobs. And I'll just read this this quote from Hamilton. He says. *"Always keep in mind that your countrymen are free men and as such are impatient of everything that bears the least mark of a domineering spirit. Refrain, therefore, with the most guarded circumspection from whatever has the semblance of haughtiness, rudeness or insult. Endeavor to overcome difficulties if any are experienced by a cool and temperate perseverance in your duty by address in moderation rather than vehemence and violence."* Reading that quote kind of gives me chills, because to us this is what all of our data is saying. This is exactly what the Coast Guard brand is. Today as Hamilton knew back in 1791. And if we can consider how this applies to today, imagine a recreational boater or a commercial fishing fishing vessel being boarded for a safety inspection. Or consider a migrant vessel being detained at a maritime border. Or a

2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand Teams Voice to Text Transcript

vessel suspected of moving drugs. Think about how this applies. Hamilton's words apply to even modern day. Hamilton go so far to as to even prescribe that these rules for behavior and operational standards are continually practiced and become enshrined in the culture of the organization.

To quote Admiral Lunday, his recent action order, he notes that our crews conduct missions in a dangerous and unforgiving maritime environment. Often against those who would do them harm. At the same time, we always uphold the sacred trust of the American people we serve while conducting operations. So even Admiral Lunday is acknowledging that Hamilton had it right back in 1791. So again, what is the Coast Guard brand for the modern Coast Guard, this means the branch should not only be built around what the service does, but around the disposition it's people bring to those missions the the calm authority, civic respect, restraint under pressure and devotion to the public trust. So honor, respect and devotion to duty. They are still very poignant. And the brand resonates through these values. So every U.S. service member, every Coast Guard service member, passed and present is an ambassador of the brand. Every interaction, the public or stakeholders have with the Coast Guard is either a reinforcement or a detraction of the brand. And if we all know that and we understand these sort of rules of engagement when it comes to talking about the Coast Guard brand. The Coast Guard brand will continue to thrive for the next 235 years.

So what does all this mean in in practice? So what we're doing is establishing a suite of tools to help integrate the brand into everyday lives of those who represent the brand. So the the research that I formally spoke about and our thinking in distilling of the messages that come out of that research will go into a brand playbook. I'll get more into what all these mean, but at a high level, we'll develop a brand playbook. We're going to design templates to make sure we're all speaking the same visual language across our marketing and communications tools. We're going to build a asset repository, so all of our logos stay consistent. Our ideas and communication tools stay consistent. We are in my team and I'm providing digital content and media support, so things that are going to be highly visible and represent the Coast Guard on a regional or national level. My team will design to make sure we're using a consistent voice. Across channels and then we'll much like this presentation today, we'll sort of brand training across the service to make sure

2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand Teams Voice to Text Transcript

that every service member up and down the chain understands how to represent the the brand, both verbally and visually. So I'll run through each of those real quick the the brand playbook. This is going to be sort of everything that we're talking about today. In a digital book format. So everything from how to use our logos, when to use them, but also how to represent the brand, how to think about the brand, how do we deliver a message or a press release that we have to write. How do we deliver that message in a Coast Guard way? So all that all those rules and guidelines will be in this playbook. I mentioned templates, so we'll have templates. We actually have quite a few now for word documents and PowerPoint templates for use. In fact, this presentation you're seeing today is done on built on one of the standard templates that we've built for the for the Coast Guard. We'll continue to develop templates for things like. E-mail signatures. Business cards. Virtual desktop backgrounds. Things like that, to help ensure that we're all we we, you know, we look like a uniform force. We are putting together an asset repository as I mentioned, so the setting the the gold standard for the logos. Up and down, whether it's a unit logo or the enterprise emblem or the racing stripes. So these will be the official source for logos. Well, also also in there are communications tools that we I mentioned, you know some of the force wide stuff that we designed. So here are a few examples of one pagers we've designed logos for different programs. All of these things will be available in their approved final approved state on the brand portal.

And then finally move into the the brand training and and management. So again, we'll this will become a roadshow this this something similar to this slideshow and we'll be presenting up and down the service so that we're making sure that everybody is speaking in the same language. And visually represented the same way. If we look beyond this fiscal year, how do we keep this momentum going? Again, we'll continue training. We will continue design support. We are will be sort of training the trainers so they will be a class of brand managers that will build a carry on this. This tradition of of instilling the brand up and down the Coast Guard service. And then we're gonna do some follow up research to sort of we'll set the bar here and we'll kinda. Make sure that we are, you know, our original thinking was right. So we'll give this a year or so. Let it sink in and we'll do some more research to make sure that it is sinking in and that we're heading down the right path. And we'll continue to monitor social listening to see if what we've what we've instilled is

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
Teams Voice to Text Transcript**

making a difference to the in the eyes of the public. So with that, I'll close and open up for any questions.

Comment – Glad we move away from the Postal Service Brand.

Craig George – In defense of the Postal Service brand, I hear that a lot. There was a lot of research that went into that and it's important to remember. That the research at the time. That logo resonated very well with the audience. It was designed to attract, so it it worked very well with. With 18 year old young men and women who are looking at a potential military career and that's why it was chosen. The rest of us who are beyond those.

Question – Is there any chance we're going to get the "Guardians" back from the Space Force? I think Sentinels is really anybody with the Sentinels term that was supposed to replace that, but I don't think that's caught on much.

Craig George - Good question. Actually, we did ask that question in our force wide survey recently. We kind of asked service members what should we be called and we gave some of the names, I don't think Guardian is coming back. Sentinels is dead. I can tell you that. You know what we'd call ourselves is a is a big question. I know internally everyone loves Coastie. It resonated very highly in the survey that we did. But does that represent who we are outside of the Service? Does that represent us in the public eye? That's the question. So short answer. Guardians probably won't come back. Sentinel was not favored. Coastie was favored. But does that really display the right message for us externally? So we'll have to think about it some more and figure out where that goes.

Retired VADM Joanna Nunan, new CGNRC Co-Chair –. I had written down the same notes because for a while we were Coast Guardsmen and I think some some of the women were like really, I mean, I kind of get it, but I don't know. And then when you say, well, Coast Guard men and women, that's true. But it's a mouthful. I understood. And I mean, I remember back to Admiral Papp. He was not in favor of Coastie. He thought it was sort of diminutive. And we're not supposed to call ourselves that. But I have to say it kind of works. And I've heard so many people use it in the warmest way. So what actually makes it not work is when we kind of react

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
Teams Voice to Text Transcript**

like. I don't know if that's us or not, but a lot of people at every level outside or inside really like it. We kind of should own it. That's my vote on that. And so that's just kind of a. Comment you're never getting away from Coastie, right? You're never getting away from it. So I'll just say that seems like you know, like if we if I were to take a vote in the room, like, who thinks that we're, you know, Coastie - raise your hand. OK. Every everybody raised their hands. So you know, just so you know, we took a vote. We should just own it.

Craig George – I'll say that isn't set in stone, but I do appreciate your comments that we may have slightly different brands or ways to communicate with different audiences. You mentioned the recruiting side, but you know we were sort of thinking also like what is this also our messaging to Congress? They're definitely one of the people who want to attract and also, I mean, I think some of this really has to go back to our core values. So, like who are we personally? You know, how do we present ourselves personally. So are we reinforcing those our core values? And then you know beyond our core values, just those concepts of, you know, being ethical leaders, being accountable, you know, how do we weave that into our character?

Retired VADM Joanna Nunan, new CGNRC Co-Chair – How much are you going to be empowering individuals on this or is there going to be, I hate to say it, but like. the branding Nazis, you know? Are the Branding Nazis going to be coming after people, if they get it wrong or are we really doing the old fashioned public affairs approach, that always seemed to work for us. The person who owns that story at the most junior level doesn't have to get a million approvals to basically tell their story. Are we still in that world or are we in a different world where everything has to go up to headquarters for approval for the words and pictures?

Craig George – All great points. Thank you. Yes, so. One of the things we struggled with, especially when we looked at competitive peers, when we looked at the Army, for example. Even visually, Army has a very regimented system, a visual system, all of their communications are laid out on this grid system. And on paper, it seems very nice and very easy to work with. All their messaging looks consistent. Their voice sounds the same. And when we share this with leadership here at Coast Guard. You know, we thought this is the way to go. This is what Coast Guard needs to do. What

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
Teams Voice to Text Transcript**

came about in discussions with leadership was that's not the Coast Guard. We have a personality. And this is that dichotomy I referred to earlier. This is the human element of things, and I think what makes the Coast Guard is that personality. It's the approachability. The human side of things. With authority in our back pocket. So the guidance and the thinking now is let's embrace that side of of Coast Guard. That less formal, more natural, more human side of Coast Guard 'cause that's what at the frontline when we are dealing with stakeholders, when we're dealing with the public, it's that line is very important how people experience Coast Guard, whether it's recreational boater or a commercial fisherman. It's that interaction, that daily interaction that happens. That's where the brand exists. And so if it's regimented and forceful and militaristic. I don't think that speaks to Coast Guard and that's not who we are. So the short answer is I think we're leaning toward owning Coastie. That human element of Coast Guard and ensuring that it stays part of who we are and the way we're looking at things is not necessarily dictating what needs to be said and how it is said. But sort of our goal is to provide tools to say things in a Coast Guard way, and that those tools may be guidance as to OK we can be a little less formal here. Let's add some personality in this message. Let's show who we really are as people in this message. That kind of thinking. So it'll be a system, but it will be a less regimented system to allow our personality to shine through.

CAPT John Henry, PPC CO – I appreciate those comments. I think it resonates with all of us. Just one thing that that kept triggering with me and this is kind of, you know branding upon the branding, you said a little bit less formal and while Coastie may sound a little bit less formal, I think the second-half is what we really need to jump on, which is more natural, rather than focusing on what it is not. Let's actually embrace what it is focusing on the fact that this is a more natural conversation when we have it, and that may be a better guiding light for all of our coasties across the entire service, active duty reserve, retired civilian. It doesn't matter all part of. the same family that when we talk about it, we talk about it with that, that natural feel that makes us feel like we are part of the Coast Guard family and you are. So that's just a bit of advice from an outsider listening to it for the first time and agreeing with with the entire concept and premise on how we should roll out.

Craig George – Great. Thank you. It's great to hear. Yeah, it's again, you all are some of the first people hearing hearing this and this is actually very, very helpful for

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
Teams Voice to Text Transcript**

me and I'm you can't see me, but I'm smiling hearing these comments because this is acknowledgment that we are sort of on the right path. So I feel like we're heading the right direction.

RADM Merrie Austin, CGNRC Co-Chair – This is all great stuff, really talks about the, you know, the culture and and really The Who and the essence of what we Coasties are. I'm wondering, will this campaign also include like you know, 30 second elevator speeches for what is the Coast Guard? Because I know when I've spoken to folks on the Hill, the Senate, whatever. They're like, yeah, you guys are great. I see you out there. You're saving, you know, boats there in the Potomac. Whatever. I'm here in Iowa, I have no interest in the Coast Guard. And you have to tell them. No, no, you're all your farmers, your grain goes by barge on rivers and what not. No one knows what the Coast Guard. Hey, everyone knows what the Navy does, what the Army does, whatever. No one knows what the Coast Guard does. And that's part of our brand as well. And you know, depending on where you grab an American, you know if they're on the coast or they're, you know, internal, they have no idea. Are they trying to also create some little snippets or something to kind of encapsulate what we do just to quickly so that again we as retirees going out talking to people and also every you know rank and file coast, he's walking around to be able to tell everyone this is what we do. You hear that famous story about NASA, but they ask the person sweeping the floor. It's like, what are you doing? We send men to the moon. And we need something like that.

Craig George – Yeah, we hear that a lot. We are actually embedded with CG Comms, CG-092, specifically in the strategic comms area, so part of our thinking is how do we encompass there are 11 statutory missions that cover Coast Guard services. Such a broad range, and that's that's also the difficulty is how do we encapsulate all of that into one. So there is some thinking going into that. How do we represent Coast Guard to those that may not think that they are touched in any way by Coast Guard. Or you know I don't live near the coast, so why do I care about Coast Guard? And sort of get the point across of seeing Coast Guard and its many missions are so yes, understood. We are working in that direction, trying to sort of wrangle all of the missions into one sort of talking point, yeah.

**2026 CGNRC Meeting – USCG Brand
Teams Voice to Text Transcript**

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Retired RADM Meredith Austin, CGNRC Co-Chair - Thank you for a very informative brief.

Craig George – Thank you all for having me again. Have a great day, everyone.