



Bulletin

## Thad Allen: Heeding the Call of Duty

The Coast Guard admiral put his life on hold to manage the Gulf oil spill crisis

by: Judi Hasson | from: [AARP Bulletin](#) | September 8, 2010



U.S. Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen postponed retirement to lead the government's response to the oil spill disaster in the Gulf. — Brendan Smialowski/Getty Images

Thad Allen had it all planned out. He would retire as the commandant of the [U.S. Coast Guard](#) in May after decades of

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service and take his wife on a relaxing two-week vacation to Ireland.

Then BP's [Deepwater Horizon](#) oil rig exploded on April 20, and Allen detoured to the Gulf of Mexico to lead the government's response to the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history.

In his sharply pressed, dark blue uniform, Adm. Thad Allen became a fixture on television nearly every day. He was a calming influence as he reported on efforts to protect the marshes, wildlife and marine life, and to halt the out-of-control well that was spewing millions of gallons of crude oil into the water.

"I had already decided there were things to do with the family and to travel," Allen says. Then duty called.

"But one thing about this assignment, it wasn't indefinite. I could pay back this country for some of the things it's done for me. My job is to do the best job I could do," he says.

### **Man of experience**

Allen, 61, spent 39 years in the Coast Guard and rose to its highest level as commandant in 2006. He officially retired on July 1 as he had planned, but he has continued in his role as the government's national incident commander for the oil spill disaster.

Allen's appointment was no accident. He had been in charge of the Bush administration's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 after the initial blunders by the [Federal Emergency Management Agency](#), and he won high marks for his leadership. He earlier played a pivotal role for the Coast Guard in the terrifying hours after the attacks on the World Trade Center towers in September 2001, when the cutters under his command blocked off every major port on the East Coast.

Allen has been going nonstop since April. His days have been filled with logistics and planning as well as working with BP, numerous engineers and scientists, federal, state and local government officials, local residents and, when needed, President Obama. By all accounts, he has been succeeding under difficult and stressful circumstances.

"I'm failing to get fired, I keep telling people," Allen says. If he wrote an autobiography, he says, he'd

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call it "The Accidental Admiral."

### **Inching to civilian life**

On the day he retired as the Coast Guard commandant, Allen hung up his uniform and donned civilian clothing. His wife, Pam, had gone shopping with him to buy civvies. "Being able to dress down outside of Washington has been a relief," Allen says.

Allen spends two to three days a week in the Gulf region with a small team, using New Orleans as their hub. Most of the time, he's working at Coast Guard headquarters in Washington, living in a townhouse in Burke, Va., with Pam, who is assistant dean for academic and career services at George Mason University's School of Management. The couple has three grown children, and two grandkids, ages 7 and 9.

Married for 35 years, his wife describes Allen as a problem solver.

"He always sees a solution. He keeps focused on the solution," she says. "He doesn't get emotional. People ask, 'Is he always that calm?' He truly is. He's levelheaded and calm."

When at home there's little time these days to unwind. The couple is in the process of moving to a permanent home, and Allen has put his piano and guitars in storage. He spends what little time he has working around their condo, but he's on call 24/7 for Gulf business.

### **Cool, calm and collected**

Rear Adm. Peter Neffenger, Allen's deputy in the Gulf, describes his colleague as extremely collaborative and someone who knows how to overcome obstacles.

"He looks for ideas wherever they happen to appear," Neffenger says. "He is, at base, a very humble individual and somebody who wants to help people understand what's going on."

Allen describes his own approach this way: "I learned a long time ago you have to manage your morale and stress level, and make sure you are not part of the problem. First thing is not to get too excited, keep a level head and keep your eye on where you need to go."

Although he's eyeing an Oct. 1 departure date to head back into the ranks of anonymous private citizens, Allen does not intend to leave his post until the people and operations are in place for the long-term restoration of the Gulf.

"The near-term focus has been to cap the well and kill it and create an effective transition to natural

resources and recovery," he says.

But he adds quickly, "There's still a lot of oil in the marshes, especially Louisiana. We need the commitment to stay on task until the marshes and beaches are as clean as we can get them."

As for his future, Allen will do some public speaking — he'll talk about the oil spill at his alma mater, George Washington University, on Sept. 24 and will teach a course there next spring. He says he'll also consider working for a nonprofit think tank and perhaps write a book.

And what about that vacation in Ireland? Well, that's likely to be on the Allens' calendar for next spring or summer.

*Judi Hasson is a writer in McLean, Va.*