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Official Coast Guard unit set up in desert

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The landscape surrounding the Loran-C navigational signal station is as dry and desolate as the desert southeast of La Mesa gets.

But Wednesday, there were dress blue uniforms aplenty for commissioning ceremonies to make the Long Range Aid to Navigation transmitter an official Coast Guard unit.

About 40 people — a mixture of Coast Guard officers, officials, family members and interested others — attended the ceremony in which station personnel received their orders and flags were run up a pole that was dwarfed by the 750-foot-tall, orange and white transmitter antenna.

The irony of an arm of the Coast Guard setting in a place of almost no water

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wasn't lost to the ceremony's participants. Lee Gemoets of Sen. Jeff Bingaman's Las Cruces office read a statement from the New Mexico Democrat that included the comment: "I would like to take the opportunity to welcome the Coast Guard to the desert."

The ceremony was also lightened by the late arrival of Las Cruces city officials at the very end of the ceremonies. City commissioner John Haltom joked that their car lacked the precise navigating abilities of the Loran system.

"Whatever went on, we agree with it," said Mayor Pro Tem Henry R. Benavidez.

Nevertheless, Coast Guard officials say the desert transmitter station fills a mid-continental gap of a nationwide navigational network. First created to guide ships lacking land or sky references, the Loran system has become useful to small aircrafts flying over the continent.

Once fully operational by the middle of this month, plane equipment will pick up the Las Cruces signal with Loran signals from Boise City, Okla., and Raymondville, Texas. Because the signal is exactly timed within a variance of 20-50 nanoseconds, the pilots or plane equipment can triangulate their position by time

differences in the three signals, said Cmdr. Perry Campbell.

The signal sent out by the Loran system is of a low frequency and hugs close to the ground, making it ideal for low-flying planes, Campbell said. Although the \$9 million transmitter is a complex system, he said, computer technology helps keep transmitter station staff down to five men.

Station Chief Robert Finstad said the number of people attending the guard station commissioning ceremony is probably the most people the remote station will ever see.

An estimated 100,000 general aviation aircraft in the United States are able to use the Loran system.

With the addition of the Las Cruces station, its signal covers much of the Southwest, Campbell said, including northern Mexico.