

The **COAST GUARD**



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is Discovering a New Force-Multiplier — and it's Already on Board

By Art Pine

Members of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary are working more closely with their parent service. The question: Can they make the grade filling in for active-duty Coasties?

Every Saturday morning from early April through mid-December, Jim Welday dons his dark-blue Coast Guard work uniform, trailers his 19-foot rigid-inflatable boat to a launching ramp near Annapolis, and motors down the South River to the Chesapeake Bay for a day out on the water.

Unlike many Bay mariners, however, Mr. Welday doesn't fish or quaff beer. Instead, he spends his helm-time looking for boaters in trouble. Last year, on 34 patrols that stretched over 203 hours on the water, the 62-year-old data-storage company manager carried out seven full-fledged rescues. Two involved boat fires and the rest included everything from unexpected engine failures to boats that got into trouble in choppy waters.

Moreover, rescuing boaters in distress isn't the only specialty in Mr. Welday's repertoire. He also stands watches as a radio operator at the U.S. Coast Guard Station Annapolis. And he shoulders some administrative chores. Last year, he put in more than 800 hours in uniform—without a dollar of pay.

"I really get an adrenaline rush when I can do something to help people out there," he says, with visible enthusiasm.

Mr. Welday isn't just a Coast Guard groupie—he's a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, the service's official volunteer component. The 29,412-member nationwide organization was established in 1939 to involve

experienced recreational boaters in helping promote boating safety. But it is rapidly becoming a valuable force-multiplier for its active-duty parent, which is awash in new homeland security missions and chronically short of funds.

While admittedly few Auxiliarists match Mr. Welday's time and dedication, Auxiliary members collectively racked up 4.1 million hours of service last year. That included some 745,648 hours in which they replaced active-duty Coasties, whom

the service was then able to divert to other duties, according to Coast Guard figures.

Last year, Auxiliary boats made 4,300 on-the-water rescues and saved 241 lives. Overall, the Auxiliary accounts for some 12 percent of the Coast Guard's total search-and-rescue (SAR) caseload. Auxiliarists also teach public courses in seamanship, navigation, and other specialties; provide free courtesy "vessel safety checks" of recreational boats to make sure they meet federal and state requirements for safety gear and equipment; help monitor buoys and other aids to navigation; and provide speakers to help promote boating safety. The group also has a small aviation arm that flies surveillance and SAR patrols over coastal areas. (See sidebar, p. 37.)

The Coast Guard Connection

In the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks the Auxiliary has expanded its work as an arm of the Coast Guard. Specially trained Auxiliarists have begun to serve part-time alongside active-duty Coasties in communications watchstanding and pollution-control operations. They help conduct container inspections and commercial fishing vessel inspections and work at regional Merchant Marine license examination centers. They perform on-the-water security patrols during high-profile events such as presidential inaugurations. Top Auxiliary officials now sit on the Coast Guard's own flag-level policymaking committees. And Auxiliarists help train active-duty Coasties in small-boat operations. Some 2,000 Auxiliarists served on scene in Louisiana and Mississippi during the service's massive rescue efforts after Hurricane Katrina, though that experience was less satisfying than most.

JESSICA MCCONNELL

ON THEIR WAY Coast Guard Auxiliary members from the Baltimore-Annapolis area dock their boat after passing a certification test administered by a special qualification examiner.



U.S. COAST GUARD AUXILIARY

THE REAL THING A Coast Guard Auxiliary patrol boat practices handling the trail line for a rescue basket lowered from a Coast Guard HH-65 in San Francisco Bay. Auxiliarists use their own boats—specially equipped and inspected—for boater-assistance patrols.

that some older Auxiliarists found cumbersome or intrusive.

The Auxiliary was jolted when members showed up in droves after Hurricane Katrina—often bringing their boats with them—only to discover that conditions in New Orleans weren't a very good fit for what they had been trained and equipped to do. The Auxiliarists' recreational boats typically were too large to patrol the city's debris-filled flooded streets. There was no place to buy fuel or food supplies. And their lack of weapons and any law enforcement authority made it dangerous for Auxiliarists to enter some parts of the city. The lucky ones found a role filling in for active-duty radio watchstanders or ferrying supplies around the region by air. Others went home disappointed.

"There are lash-ups between the Auxiliary and the Coast Guard that just didn't exist ten years ago," says Captain Barry P. Smith, who serves in Washington as chief director of the Auxiliary—the active-duty officer who oversees the organization on behalf of the Coast Guard. "The kind of things the Auxiliary is doing these days you wouldn't have found pre-9/11. It really is a force-multiplier."

At the same time, the Auxiliary's transition is producing some strains. While some Auxiliary boat crews are as competent on the water as their active-duty counterparts, many have skill levels that clearly are minimal, and upgrading them may prove difficult. The Auxiliary is facing a retention problem: some of those who joined right after 9/11, in a burst of patriotic spirit, have become bored—or burned out—and are quitting. Many of its training manuals are out of date and in short supply. The group still is plagued by a good-old-boy (and -girl) network that some say impedes newer members who want to advance. And the organization is suffering from a financial squeeze: Its revenues—derived mostly from teaching boating classes for the public at a modest fee—are drying up as baby-boomer-era boaters increasingly turn to quick online courses elsewhere to learn about seamanship.

The Auxiliary also is struggling with its own new roles as a force-multiplier. While members clearly relish their expanded Coast Guard connection, actual participation in new missions such as container inspection, commercial fishing vessel inspection, and pollution control has been modest. The number of certified patrol-boat skippers is declining. Although recruiting is on the rebound, the organization lost some 10 percent of its membership over the past two years after the Coast Guard began requiring security checks

A Real Eye-Opener

"Our experience with Katrina was a real eye-opener for us," says Steven Budar, the 55-year-old Kona, Hawaii, insurance agency owner who serves as the Auxiliary's elected national commodore, its highest-ranking officer. "What we learned was that the Auxiliary is not suited to be a first responder in natural disasters such as this," Mr. Budar says. "We realized that putting our people in where there were no support facilities for them would only add to the problem, not help solve it. Our real value isn't in getting out there first—it's in serving as replacements for the active-duty personnel who are sent out as first responders. Our training needs to focus more on how we can step into those slots."

Mr. Budar says the organization's leadership is addressing these and other problems and is making some progress. The Auxiliary already has begun toughening requirements for certifying—and maintaining—the skill levels of its boat crews. It has begun experimenting with more online courses to appeal to younger boaters. And it is aggressively pursuing corporate contributors to sponsor various programs and activities.

By any measure, the Auxiliary is an unusual animal. While officially part of the Coast Guard, the organization is run by its own elected officers in cooperation with the Coast Guard Auxiliary Association, a private corporation that helps finance its activities and lobbies for more government money. An active-duty commander, assisted by a warrant officer, and a handful of yeomen and civilian staffers, manages the Auxiliary program in each of the nine Coast Guard districts.

By any measure, the Auxiliary is an unusual animal.

There are myriad contradictions: Auxiliary members wear officers' uniforms, perform tasks that in the Coast Guard are carried out by enlisted personnel, and are legally civilians, not subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Although Auxiliarists have no rank, they wear officers' insignia (with a capital A embossed on them) to denote the most important job they've held in the Auxiliary. And while they don't salute one another (and don't rate a salute from anyone else), they're expected to salute active-duty military officers who have more stripes.

Similarly, while Auxiliarists don't get paid—indeed, they must buy their own uniforms, and they use their own boats and aircraft for patrols—their boats and planes are considered “public vessels of the United States” while they're on duty under Coast Guard orders. The Coast Guard reimburses them for fuel used on patrols, and provides a token maintenance allowance. And the service will help provide a legal defense if their vessels are in an accident while on patrol. Membership entitles Auxiliarists to free training and Coast Guard courses. They also enjoy limited base-exchange privileges—mostly for buying uniforms.

Finally, though Auxiliarists are often called upon to keep spectator boats away from maritime events such as harborside fireworks displays, and they provide security at other public events, they have no law enforcement powers. They can't board other vessels on their own or issue citations and are flatly prohibited from carrying weapons. (If Auxiliarists run into trouble, they call in the active-duty Coasties, who are on the same radio network.) The disparity is even more uncomfortable in situations such as container inspections, where four-man boarding teams sometimes include two armed Coasties and two unarmed Auxiliarists. Authorities are still mulling how to cope with that situation.

Incongruous as the system may seem, it works. Out of more than 29,000 Auxiliarists on the books this year, some 3,726 are certified as coxswains, 5,009 as crewmembers, and 217 as personal-watercraft operators (the Auxiliary has begun using jet-skis for river and harbor patrols). Another 653 are certified as aviators, air crewmen, or air observers. Some 4,145 Auxiliarists offered their own boats for use as patrol boats last year, and 233 made their aircraft available for patrol flights. Many put in 10, 35, even 100 or more hours a month on Auxiliary activities. Although the minimum age for joining the Auxiliary is 17, the lion's share of its membership is decidedly middle-aged. There

aren't any physical requirements. Even in surface operations, you can go out on patrol as long as you're able to function properly.

In all, it costs about \$16.5 million a year to operate the Auxiliary. The Coast Guard provides about \$8.3 million in direct financing, along with another \$7 million in indirect support, such as salaries of active-duty personnel at Coast Guard headquarters and in each district who are assigned full-time to help administer the program. The rest comes from fees for boating safety classes, dues from members, and an increasing number of “partnerships” with businesses that the Coast Guard Auxiliary Association has been setting up.

Controversial Ventures

The partnerships have proven controversial among some Auxiliarists. The organization's quest for more such business deals has led to arrangements such as imprinting the



FROM THE BRIDGE Coast Guard Auxiliary coxswain Jim Welday, right, guides his 19-foot rigid inflatable patrol boat in the shadow of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Like other Auxiliarists, Welday bought and maintains the boat at his own expense.

logo of State Farm Insurance on the decals that the Auxiliary affixes to boats that pass the popular vessel safety checks—a commercial plug that was taboo back in the old days, when the program was financed in-house instead of by a corporation. In the latest such partnership, Auxiliarists appeared—in uniform—at Bass Pro sports shops to advise customers on the pros and cons of various types of life-jackets as part of a marketing program for Bass Pro and Stearns, Inc., the life-jacket maker. “It is very important to understand that we will not be endorsing any particular manufacturer,” an Auxiliary call for volunteers insists.

Mr. Budar is unfazed by the adverse reaction from some longtime Auxiliarists. “That’s how business is done these days,” he says. “The money’s got to come from somewhere.”

Another weak point is that the Auxiliary’s operations program is so loosely structured that it can’t guarantee that its members will be there when they’re needed—say, to conduct regular patrols at specific times and places or to provide picket boats for fireworks displays. That’s different from other volunteer groups, such as fire departments, where members typically are placed on a watch-bill—and expected to show up when they’re scheduled or risk expulsion.

By contrast, Auxiliarists can easily turn down a request that they provide their boat or crew-time when needed. And even with the recent tightening of standards, they can still retain their boat-crew qualifications by going on as

few as two patrols a year—hardly enough to maintain serious competency. Also, unlike volunteer firemen, who train on a single piece of equipment and become fully familiar with it, Auxiliarists go out on any patrol boat that’s available, whether it’s a 19-foot sailboat or a 55-foot luxury yacht—another impediment to high performance.

But, as Auxiliary officials point out, fire departments provide—and maintain—their trucks and equipment at government expense, rather than asking members to use their own equipment, as the Auxiliary does. So does the Civil Air Patrol, which conducts its surveillance flights using small planes provided by the Air Force.

Mr. Budar concedes that the Auxiliary’s relatively undemanding system is “a detriment,” but says fixing it won’t be easy—particularly without more Coast Guard financing.



AUXILIARY AT WORK Jim Welday, manager of a data storage company, instructs candidates for boat-crew and coxswain certification.

He says the fire-department-style structure is in effect at a few Coast Guard stations—mostly in Alaska and Hawaii, where Auxiliarists are permitted to use Coast Guard-owned vessels—but that it will be a long time before the organization can rely on Uncle Sam to provide its patrol boats. Meanwhile, he says, “We’re trying to change the culture so people have a stronger sense of commitment to fill these needs.” But it’s coming slowly.

To be sure, neither the Coast Guard nor the Auxiliary’s leadership is anxious to transform the organization into a second Coast Guard Reserve. Both sides emphasize that the Auxiliary’s primary role will continue to center on teaching courses, conducting vessel safety checks and on-the-water boater-assistance patrols, and encouraging proper boating practices and equipment. “It’s

incumbent upon the Auxiliary to be a bit more flexible these days because it reflects the needs of the parent organization,” says the Coast Guard’s Captain Smith. But, he adds, “The Auxiliary will continue to focus on its cornerstone mission of recreational boating safety.”

Adjusting to Opportunities

Even so, the Auxiliary is adjusting to respond to its new opportunities. Its new, somewhat tougher requirements for initial certification and recertification as coxswain or crew member were put into force this year, and Mr. Budar is working, gingerly, on some of the other problems the organization has. Over the past few months, he has trimmed the bloated volunteer national staff. And he has been pondering trying to nudge the organization away

USCG Auxiliary Aviation: In the Game, Too

By Ron Darcey

The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Aviation (AuxAir) component is small in comparison with the surface Auxiliary but equally important for a multitude of missions and operations. An aviation capability has always been a primary extension of the Coast Guard in all operations. AuxAir with more than 600 pilots, air crewmen, and air observers, certainly complements that capability.

Small general aviation aircraft are ideally suited for a wide range of operations that include search-and-rescue

(SAR), observation, reconnaissance, marine environmental protection, maritime domain awareness, and Department of Homeland Security missions. AuxAir also participates in training for intercept operations over the nation’s capital. These units provide dissimilar aircraft as targets for training of helo crews flying monthly intercept drills. Auxiliary aircraft and aircrews fit nicely into this specialized, integrated training mission and its aircraft are the type helo crews are likely to engage.

Small, utility aircraft gained fame from the opening days of World War II through Korea and Vietnam by conducting observation, reconnaissance, and liaison missions along with other vital air operations. Today the Coast Guard preserves that heritage and capability through its active AuxAir program of dedicated, well-trained aviators and variety of general aviation aircraft facilities. Of great benefit are the numbers and types of Auxiliary aircraft available that conserves regular Coast Guard

from its practice of electing the two top officials at each level of the bureaucracy—national, district, division, and flotilla—instead of having them appointed by a selection board, as the military does. Some critics say electing officers fosters the preservation of the good-old-boy network and injects too much politics into higher-office-seeking.

Indeed, to many rank-and-file members, the national staff has bungled efforts over the past five years—before Mr. Budar’s time—to computerize the Auxiliary’s record-keeping; to institute the new system of personal security investigations; and to equip the Auxiliary with a handful of surplus powerboats left over from the Coast Guard’s post-9/11 rush to lease more patrol vessels. The computerized recordkeeping system and the personal security investigations procedure have since been straightened out, and the Coast Guard is taking the last of the patrol vessels off line this year as their contracts expire.

The increased use of the Auxiliary as a force-multiplier derives from two developments. First, the terrorist attacks of September 2001 dramatically broadened the Coast Guard’s own missions. Second, the service’s recent internal reorganization gave more responsibility to “sector” commanders—those in charge of more immediate regional operations, rather than broad geographical areas.

Where district-level commanders (the Coast Guard’s districts pretty much parallel naval districts) often had little contact with the Auxiliary other than to speak at annual installation-of-officers dinners, sector commanders often are hungry for manpower—and have begun to recognize that the Auxiliary can help ease their burdens.

The extent to which the Coast Guard actually uses the Auxiliary varies widely among the service’s 32 sector commands around the country. In some districts, the two have little contact at all. In others, the two are becoming more and more intertwined as the service and its volunteer arm get used to working with one another.


How all the changes will alter the Auxiliary still isn’t certain. The Coast Guard’s initial post-9/11 insistence that Auxiliarists undergo a significant background check

prompted the resignations of about 3,200 members, who decided the paperwork was too daunting or, in some cases, was an invasion of privacy. The security requirements have been eased recently, but there’s still typically a delay of six-months or more before a new applicant can become a full-fledged member—a much slower entry than in the rival U.S. Power Squadrons, a civilian boating organization not tied directly to the Coast Guard. Officials insist the Auxiliary didn’t lose critical members, such as patrol-boat skippers and crew members, during the recent exodus, and recruiting has picked up again this year.

The modest tightening of standards may prompt some Auxiliarists to give up their boat-crew status, but officials are hoping it also will encourage others—who feel challenged by the stiffer requirements—to sign up for training.

The Auxiliary’s push to overcome some of its pre-9/11 cultural problems—the good-old-boy network and the absence of fire-department-style demands that boat crews show up for assignments when they come up—is still in flux. While demographics may help spur some of the change—some 76 percent of the Auxiliary’s membership is over 50—there’s still resistance to major overhaul.

Nevertheless, Mr. Budar, for one, is convinced that as early as five years from now, the Auxiliary will be working even more closely with the active-duty Coast Guard and will be cementing its role as a backup for communications watchstanders and myriad other jobs now done by the Coasties themselves. And Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Thad Allen is pushing for tougher licensing and training requirements for operators of recreational boats. The Auxiliary almost certainly will play a part in that training.

“We’re going to be seeing the Auxiliary taking on a larger and larger role,” Mr. Budar says. 

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units for more hazardous or specialized missions.

Auxiliary aviation operations are routinely carried out over open water, along the nation’s coastlines, inland waterways, and lakes by flying recreational boating safety patrols. The relatively slow speed and range of Auxiliary aircraft provide the right capability for SAR missions such as searches for small vessels and persons in distress, debris, and hazardous materials. The low fuel consumption of the aircraft is also of great benefit and loiter time can be extended under reduced power settings. It is usual when SARs are called off, that AuxAir (air and surface) assets continue

the search on safety patrols, often with considerable success.

Auxiliary pilots and flight crews bring a broad spectrum of diversity to the mission. Many have extensive military and civil aviation experience with thousands of hours in the air. Others who have never served in the military or even flown in a small airplane view Auxiliary aviation as an exciting way to serve their country.

Because aviation is a demanding activity, AuxAir regularly conducts aviation safety workshops, survival techniques, and refresher academic training courses that include all areas of general aviation, FAA regulations and the Coast

Guard mission. This assures that everyone in the cockpit maintains high skill levels and does things in a professional, safe, and uniform manner.

Most important with respect to Auxiliary aviation is an understanding of the capability of this valuable asset, along with the desire and ability of its well-trained pilots to take on any mission assigned.

Mr. Darcey, a former U.S. Marine, served two years in the California Air National Guard. He is a military historian specializing in World War II and Vietnam air combat. A pilot in the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, he is a squadron public affairs officer and currently heads AuxAir training in Coast Guard District 11 North Region.