

Maritime Homeland Security or Recreational Boating Safety?

You don't have to make a choice

Commodore Gene M. Seibert, NAVCO-COS

AN OLD CHINESE CURSE SAID, "May you live in interesting times." While the people of that time didn't look forward to change, we can and must for in the Auxiliary today, we do indeed live in interesting times, and the opportunities for our members to contribute their talents and skills is unprecedented in American history.

Our role in improving Recreational Boating Safety (RBS) is undisputed. Across America, more boaters are having fewer mishaps. More boaters are coming home to their families and friends, based on fewer fatalities. Every public education class, vessel safety check, safety patrol, and marine dealer visit makes a difference in real people's lives. It does not get any better than that.

However, September 11, 2001 changed our world. The "new normalcy" has changed the way we look at things. Recent intelligence indicates that more attacks are imminent, and that our waterways are one of the principal avenues to be used by attackers who have been trained to use our waterways to destroy American lives and property. Because of this, many of us can never view our areas of responsibility the same.

The Coast Guard learned a lot in the last year. They learned that they could call on the Auxiliary to support them in areas they never thought possible. They learned that the Auxiliary would respond like a sleeping giant, that each individual makes their quiet contribution, and that at the end of the day, a seemingly unachievable goal has been met. They learned that the Auxiliary is truly a force multiplier and that all of these resources are available at nominal or no cost to the taxpayer. The Auxiliary's performance in the last year has driven that knowledge home.

The Auxiliary national leadership has been working with the Coast Guard to prioritize our efforts for the next two years and beyond. Although the details cannot be shared at this time, the main message is clear: "We will be asked to do more and more to support all aspects of the Coast Guard."

We continue to hear this message repeatedly. The message starts at the highest level in the Coast Guard. Our Commandant, Admiral Collins, acknowledges that the Auxiliary's mission portfolio is "robust." He recognizes the support that the Coast Guard has received from the Auxiliary since September 11 and believes that the Coast Guard could not have responded to the attacks on America as successfully without the high level of devotion to duty displayed by the Auxiliary.

In response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, the Coast Guard has significantly increased Homeland Security operations to protect U.S. ports and waterways from potential maritime terrorist threats. This has led to a reshuffling of the Coast Guard mission priorities. With the U.S. engaged in a multifront war against global terrorism both at home and abroad, Maritime Home Land Security (MHLS) is the Coast Guard's highest priority mission. As a result, the Auxiliary will have many opportunities to show its patriotism and support to the Coast Guard and the nation.

The Commandant has directed that the Auxiliary be included in the Coast Guard's Operational Plans. This is a significant development and, as a result, we are included as an integral part of Coast Guard forces. This incorporation into Coast Guard plans requires the Auxiliary to work even more closely with Coast Guard units to ensure that everyone involved knows, understands and is prepared to perform their role when required.

Likewise, the Coast Guard needs to have confidence that the Auxiliary is ready, available and capable of sustaining an operational posture in support of the active duty component. It needs to know what resources and assets that the Auxiliary has available and can commit for inclusion into its MHLS Plan, on an ongoing basis. Simply put, it boils down to the Coast Guard's confidence in the Auxiliary's capacity and capability to deliver what we say we can.

The Commandant has asked the Auxiliary to build its competencies and capabilities in MHLS. This will require more training with the active duty and within our own units. As the Auxiliary heightens its operational readiness, we encourage each member to complete and to update the Auxiliary's Operational Patriot Readiness survey, which is a vehicle to address our overall readiness, availability, commitment and training needs.

In addition, we are also being asked to support the Coast Guard's Maritime Domain Awareness Program (MDA). This is the new program that uses all waterway users - recreational boaters, commercial operations, and marine industry - to assist in maintaining vigilance over threats to our security. The program will require the Auxiliary to focus on and be consciously aware of its surroundings while performing harbor safety patrols, as well as vessel safety checks, marine dealer visits, and other activities. Likewise, through our RBS programs, we can have an even greater impact on MDA by encouraging the boating public to be ever watchful of its surroundings.

Clearly, the Commandant's message has been heard loud and clear, and "the times" are definitely changing as a result. The transition of the Coast Guard into the new Department of Homeland Security will require a unity of effort by all components of the Coast Guard and I believe the Auxiliary stands ready to do all that it can.

Some members may feel that our new responsibilities will affect our ability to maintain our important role in promoting RBS. For these members, I would like to assure you that although much emphasis has gone and will go into supporting MHLS, RBS *remains our major core mission*. It is our first line mission and will continue to be essential, even more so in the new normalcy. As the Coast Guard's attention is understandably filled with homeland security issues, it relies upon the Auxiliary stepping up its leadership role in this important mission area. By the Auxiliary increasing its efforts in RBS, it frees active duty resources for homeland security. Therefore, the Auxiliary needs to accelerate our preventative measures - public education, vessel safety checks, safety patrols - to reduce fatalities and to make our waterways safe. In short, RBS missions contribute not only to boating safety also to homeland security.

It is important that we view these two mission areas - Homeland Security and Recreational Boating Safety - as not conflicting but complementary to each other. Our new responsibilities do not comprise an "either/or" scenario, but rather an opportunity to accomplish our RBS mission, as well as our new MHLS mission. One cannot be sacrificed for the other.

These mission areas provide our members with a multitude of opportunities to be of service to the Coast Guard, the recreational boating public and to our nation. The abundance of opportunities allows a member to do what they want and what they can. Members do not need to choose one over the other but can contribute in either or both, with the satisfaction of knowing they are making a difference.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." These will be challenging times, and I look forward to working with you through these challenging times during the next two years.

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