

The Coast Guard Auxiliary: A Day in the Life

February 11, 2012 by [Barry Mines](#) ·

Chances are good that if you boat in the waters near East Moriches, you have seen Captain Vin Pica of the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary (USCGA) patrolling in his 26' Parker. The odds are, if you have seen Captain Pica, you have probably also waved to him like your fellow boaters often do.

Pica and at least one crew member patrol on weekends, ensuring that the waterways are safe for boaters, and— more importantly— that those boaters are safe for the waterways. I rode along with Pica and 23-year-old Greg Sarafin during a four-hour patrol in the waters surrounding Moriches Inlet on a picturesque fall day.

At 9:00 am, Pica radios in to the Coast Guard Station Shinnecock to inform headquarters he will be beginning his patrol. “Roger that, vessel 251384,” comes the reply.

“We are now property of the federal government,” comments Pica as he pulls out of his slip at Remsenburg Marina and aims his boat for Moriches inlet. He classifies this notoriously rough inlet as the most dangerous location of his patrol. “If something is going to go wrong,” he says, “odds are that’s where it’ll happen.”

The USCGA patrollers seem to be the only boaters not idly enjoying a lazy



day on the water. Passing by anglers bobbing for fluke, Pica and Sarafin return their waves as they continue looking for anyone who may be in distress.

With all quiet at the inlet, they begin cross-referencing the location of each buoy and 5-mile-per-hour marker with its last known position on the chart plotter to ensure none have broken free (using the chart plotter is a formality, as Pica and Sarafin know their locations by heart). While a humdrum way for many to spend a Saturday morning, there’s a thrill for the crew of vessel 251384 in preventing the mishaps that accompany misplaced channel markers.

Pica and Sarafin's routine includes stopping and inspecting multiple drawbridges, looking for potentially dangerous wear and tear. But they also keep an eye out for deviations from the routine.

"Debris in the water, off our stern," shouts Sarafin.

"Debris in the water off our stern, aye," acknowledges Pica as he maneuvers the boat next to a floating 2x8. The men reach over and pull the plank from the water, as Pica notes that this possible leftover from Tropical Storm Irene "could have been bad news for anyone on a smaller boat."

Pica explains that much of the USCGA's focus is on preventing accidents and emergencies from happening, rather than actually responding to them or acting as law enforcers. In fact, contrary to popular belief, the USCGA does not issue tickets; members help the public and perform tasks that free the active Coast Guard to respond to emergencies farther offshore.

The notion that the USCGA hands out tickets causes many boaters to try to avoid them. While on patrol, we came upon a boat with three generations aboard. As the young kids did not have life jackets on, the grandfather was heard shouting, "Quick, hide! The Coast guard is coming." Pica was angry. "I told him he should be ashamed of himself. We are here to help, not hurt you."

Adds Sarafin, "I hate hearing about cases where a boat capsizes and the Coast Guard is out looking for one missing crew member because there weren't enough life jackets on board. If I had inspected that vessel beforehand, a death could have been prevented."

Why do USCGA members get up early and take their boats on patrol instead



of enjoying leisure time? Certainly not for the money, as they never receive a dime for their efforts. Pica says something "clicked in his head" after working on Wall Street for 25 years before losing six close co-workers on September 11, 2001.

Knowing things were going to change for him and for the country, he contacted long time friend General George Casey and offered to quit his job and move to Washington to help. Knowing of Pica's boating background, the General told him to look into the Coast Guard.

“So I did. I was 47 at the time and was told, ‘I don’t think we have anything for 47-year-olds’.” Willing to do anything, Pica acted on the suggestion to volunteer for the Auxiliary, and six months later, he became a USCGA captain. Beyond finding a new hobby or honoring fallen co-workers, Pica found his passion.

At one point while at the helm, Pica talked about Bill Adams, who served in the USCGA until his passing at age 96. When asked if he was going to be another Bill Adams, he said, “I hope so. God willing.”

Mate Greg Sarafin relates how he found his passion. His parents were both USCGA members, but he had no early interest in following in his parents’ wake. At age 17, though, he had a change of heart. “With my parents, it was either do my homework or go out on the boat,” says Sarafin,



so while other teenagers were sleeping in, he was up early, patrolling the waterways of Long Island.

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What began as a hobby to avoid homework has now provided the focus for Sarafin’s life. “I’ve been in the Auxiliary, and after college I want to join the active duty Coast Guard. When I’m done with that, I want to return to the Auxiliary.”

Pica says Sarafin’s ambitions are common. “Twenty five percent of all auxilarists are related to each other either by blood or by marriage,” says the man whose son and daughter are USCGA members. He laughingly longs for his wife to join “the family business” as well.

After four hours on patrol, we head back to the slip. It was a quiet patrol, providing little in the way of excitement, and that’s how Pica and Sarafin like it. They are not in the USCGA for adventure, and consider it a successful day when they pluck a plank, and not a person, from the water.

By Daniel Harding, Jr





BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you “get in this thing...”