

**We're being boarded – now what!?**  
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**When the Coast Guard Comes Calling**

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## When the Coast Guard Comes Calling

Our boat hit the water a couple of weeks later than we originally planned this year, so we were really excited when it came time for our first voyage. We invited our friends Julie and Charlie to join our family (these same friends came along on our final cruise of last season, when we were stuck in our canal at low tide, so I owed them a good time).

As it was our maiden voyage, I did a quick survey of the cabin and head to make sure we had all the necessities. As an experienced boater and parent, my checklist for pleasure cruises starts with jackets, snacks, drinks, and toilet paper; my inspection revealed that I needed to add garbage bags, paper towels, and soap. My list usually doesn't contain anything to do with safety— I always assume we're good in that department.

The evening of our first excursion was the picture of perfection— clear, calm, and with hardly another boat in sight. We'd decided that we were going to try a new restaurant in

the Shinnecock Canal; it's a short cruise across the Great Peconic Bay, but still a long



enough trip to take in the sights.

The locks at Shinnecock were closed, which meant we had to wait inside the gates until they opened on the other side. We were chatting, laughing, and reminiscing— basically having a good old time after a long winter's break from our beloved vessel. Those good feelings evaporated the moment we spotted a U.S. Coast Guard boat, bobbing just ahead of us on the other side of the lock gates. Its lights were flashing and the officers were in place on the bow, staring directly at us. Gulp.

We all pretty much said “Uh-oh” in unison. Not that we were doing anything wrong, mind you. It's just that when figures of authority decide to hone in on you, it takes a toll on your nerves. As the gates opened, we went forward, trying to keep our poker faces even as our hearts were aflutter. In seconds, the Coast Guard vessel approached us and announced they wanted to come aboard.

My son Dean and our friend's daughter Ellie were sitting on the back of the boat, seemingly in a state of shock. Two officers made their way onto our boat, armed and adorned with all kinds of gear (that's pretty scary looking to small children). Dean and Ellie— ages seven and six respectively— had their big, bright orange life vests on, so that was one “whew” to begin the inspection. The kids usually do wear their jackets, but if they've just come up from the cabin, it sometimes takes a little coaxing to get them back on.

My daughter Alexa, who is 12, did not have a life jacket on, but as it was a little too late to throw one on her, we had to take our chances. The Coast Guard never mentioned it, and as it turns out, the life jacket requirement applies to kids under 12 (New York State law), unless in an enclosed cabin (it also applies to all passengers aboard a vessel under

21 feet in length, on a personal water craft, or anyone being towed, so I'll be more



diligent from now on).

The officers had their checklist, and one wrote things on a clipboard while the other announced requests to produce or otherwise locate items. Besides the life jackets, I wasn't exactly sure where many things were, but my husband, Pete, was knowledgeable about the whereabouts of the fire extinguisher, flares (expired!), and registration. The one item that escaped us was the life ring. I swore we didn't have one aboard, as I had never seen it. However, after a brief (and frantic) search, *voilà*, there it was! A beautiful, brand spanking new throw ring in navy and white. I made a comment about what a "nice decorative addition" it would be, now that we had found it; I don't think that my levity went over too well.

We got through the safety check without a hitch— no fines, no write-ups, no nothing. The officers remained aboard for a good 20 minutes, and I have to say they were very friendly. Yet no matter how nice they were, we were all glad to see them go!

The moral of our story is to do a thorough check of your vessel once per year to make sure you have everything required on board. It really is for your own good and the safety of all those on your boat! The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and the U.S. Power Squadrons offer free vessel safety checks: <http://www.safetyseal.net/GetVSC/>, and all the requirements for each type of vessel are included here: [www.uscgboating.org/fedreqs/default.html](http://www.uscgboating.org/fedreqs/default.html).

By Maria Orlando Pietromonaco



*There are two boats involved in a boarding story! Read about a boarding from the U.S. Coast Guard's perspective, exclusively on our website.*

*Vincent Pica, Chief of Staff, First District, Southern Region (DISR), United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, takes a look at the boarding from the officers' perspective.*

If you've ever seen the reflection of the blue-rotating hailing light in the reflection of your windshield, you've felt the quickening in certain parts of your body — “Jeez, what did I do wrong?” It is quite natural— despite being 100% sure that you haven't done anything wrong. The United States Coast Guard (USCG) can and will board you at their discretion. They need no search warrant, no provocation, no reason other than, “Good Morning, sir. My name is Officer Jones with the U.S. Coast Guard— the Coast Guard is here today to ensure you are in compliance with all applicable federal laws and regulations.”

### **What Happens First**

First, you will be impressed by their youthfulness and their polite and professional demeanor. These are highly trained Federal officers. And the very first question that they will ask you, before they even step off their vessel onto yours, is likely to be, “Without reaching for them or touching them, do you have any weapons on board?” Subtly but powerfully, the tone is set. “I am polite. I am professional. I mean business.” Let's assume (and hope) that the answer to that question is “no” since I would need a lot more space than this column if the answer is “yes.”

### **What Happens Next**

The inspection that follows is driven largely by the size of the vessel with a few standard exceptions. Your actual registration needs to be aboard and current. The “HIN” number, like your car's “VIN” number, needs to be the same on your registration and on your boat (low on the starboard side of the transom.) If they don't match, someone has a lot of explaining to do. The registration numbers must be of proper size (at least 3

inches), of contrasting color to your hull and be the most forward of any numbering or lettering on the boat. If you have a “MSD” (Marine Sanitation Device, a.k.a. a “head” or toilet), regardless of the size of your vessel, it must conform to regulations. All our bays and creeks are “No Discharge Zones” so, if there is an over-board through-hull fitting from the MSD holding tank, it must be in the locked/closed position and the key must be under the control of the skipper. It can be seized (lashed) closed or, lastly, the handle can be removed and it must be in the closed position.

The rest is largely going to be driven by the size of your vessel:

- How many personal flotation devices (life jackets) – at least one for everybody aboard, be in good working order and readily available
- If there are children aboard under 12 (NYS trumps Federal, whose rule is under 13), they had better be on them...
- If the boat is less than 21' and it is between November 1 and May 1, they had better be on everyone...
- Fire extinguishers – boat size dependent but all must be in working order
- Flares – boat size dependent but all must “good to go”, i.e., unexpired!

### **What Happens Then?**

Well, there are three outcomes from here. First and best, you will get a Report of Boarding and it is marked “No Violations.” You are good to go. Secondly, your Report of Boarding is marked “Written Warning” about some violation that has not risen to the level of Notice of Violation. One caveat: if the boarding officer returns to the station and finds that you already have been given a warning for the same issue, your notice becomes a Violation. That is also the third outcome that could happen right at the boat— a “Notice of Violation” is issued. There are two general outcomes from here. If the boarding officer believes that the nature of the violation is inherently unsafe, you will be directed to follow the Coast Guard back to the dock. They are not going to allow you to keep fishing with some aspect of your boat that can lead to serious injury or death to you, your crew, or other boaters. Secondly, it can take on the aspect of a driving violation. The notice is mailed to the Coast Guard hearing office in Portsmouth, VA. There a case officer will review the boarding report and fines, further letters of violations, etc. may be issued. You will be notified by mail and you will have time (15 days) to file an appeal.

### **How to Avoid All This?**

Well, the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary conducts free (your favorite price) vessel exams all season long— and they are not enforcement events. If your boat “fails” virtually the same inspection that would be conducted by the regulars, you get a report that details the deficiency— and the inspector’s cell phone number. He or she will tell you, “When you have this addressed, call me. I will come down and re-run the inspection.” This results in a USCGAux sticker of compliance being affixed to your windshield.

Did I mention the price? Free. <http://www.safetyseal.net/GetVSC/>

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at [JoinUSCGAux@aol.com](mailto: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...”