

Coast Guard partners are neighborhood watch on ocean

Originally published: September 4, 2010 5:50 PM

Updated: September 4, 2010 10:37 PM

By BILL BLEYER bill.bleyer@newsday.com

QUICK SUMMARY

In a post-9/11 world the Coast Guard is asked to do more with less.



Photo credit: KEVIN P. COUGHLIN | Auxiliarant Joe Gangai, left, of the [United States Coast Guard](#) Auxiliary, points out sea traffic to Auxiliarist Erin Mondello during a Homeland Security mission on [Moriches Bay](#). (Aug. 30, 2010)

Vincent Pica started his day on the water by docking his 25-foot powerboat at a South Fork marina and asking the owner whether he had seen anyone suspicious lurking around the waterfront.

In [Oyster Bay](#), Larry Weiss steered his 33-foot cabin cruiser out into the harbor, where he and his crew checked buoys against the navigation charts.

In a post-9/11 world where the Coast Guard is asked to do more with less, Pica and Weiss are the equivalent of a neighborhood watch on the water.

The two boaters and their volunteer groups - Pica is with the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary and Weiss with the U.S. Power Squadrons - aid the Coast Guard in duties that range from teaching safety courses to being an added set of eyes and ears looking for threats to [Long Island's](#) shores.

Relying on auxiliary's help

"The public should be grateful that we have such organizations that focus on important aspects of boating safety," said Coast Guard Capt. Joe Vojvodich, the commander for this region.

He said the boating safety courses and equipment inspections offered by the auxiliary, the Coast Guard's volunteer arm, and the Power Squadrons, a national safety group, help reduce accidents.

Vojvodich says his agency also increasingly relies on the auxiliary, whose volunteers get rigorous training so they can handle most of the same duties as regular Coast Guard personnel, such as taking on homeland security duties like looking for things out of place at marinas, launching ramps and dive shops.

Pica, a [Westhampton](#) resident who runs a small investment company, joined the auxiliary the day after the terrorist attack because "I had six friends go down with the buildings" at the [World Trade Center](#).

Now he's district captain of Sector [Long Island](#) South, the top auxiliary officer on the Island, where there are almost 1,000 members. "We do everything from cooking in the [station] galley to search and rescue," Pica said, but the volunteers leave the weapons and law enforcement to the Coast Guard.

The auxiliary volunteers, who wear uniforms identical to the Coast Guard, patrol in their own boats and airplanes as well as Coast Guard vessels, tow boats in distress and monitor radios at Coast Guard stations.

On a recent morning, Pica pulled into to Remsenberg Marina where he chatted with owner Roy Bartel about whether he had seen anyone suspicious. Bartel replied he hadn't and then heaped praise on the auxiliary. "They're always on patrol, and we support that," he said.

Then Pica and his crew motored out on [Moriches Bay](#) to look for vessels in trouble or without proper safety equipment, one of the auxiliary's traditional duties.

Taking the job seriously

In [Oyster Bay](#), as Weiss, owner of a telecommunications company, maneuvered his cabin cruiser, a fellow officer used a handheld [GPS](#) unit to check the location of the buoys. It turned out that of the 36 buoys, 12 were missing and 10 were either misnumbered or out of position. The ones placed by the town were, in Weiss' words, "a mess." He added that "the misnumbering could confuse somebody" with a slight possibility of causing an accident.

The town said it alerted the Coast Guard last month that it had removed some buoys because there were so many that it was confusing. The numbering discrepancies will be corrected next season.

Members of the Power Squadrons, organized by the sailboat-oriented [Boston](#) Yacht Club as an offshoot for its powerboat-owning members, also use their own vessels and usually wear name tags instead of uniforms.

John Sanfilippo of [East Moriches](#), District 3 commander, the top power squadron official for Long Island, said that unlike the auxiliary, the 1,700 members from Brooklyn to [Montauk](#) don't make safety patrols. And unlike the military oriented auxiliary, his group incorporates a social component such as boating trips.

"We are a private organization of recreational boaters who take it seriously enough that they want to stay on top of their education and provide public service," Weiss said.

They make LI's waters safer

U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

The volunteer arm of the Coast Guard created by Congress in 1939:

Formal quasi-military organization works with Coast Guard personnel in all operations other than law enforcement

Checks for terrorist activity at marinas and launching ramps

Teaches boating courses

Conducts marine patrols and tows boats in emergencies

Offers free boat safety equipment inspections

Website: <http://www.cgaux.org>

U.S. Power Squadrons

A national safe boating group created in 1914:

Teaches boating courses

Conducts free boat safety equipment inspections

Organizes boating trips and social events for members

Website: <http://www.usps.org>