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LOCAL NEWS HEADLINES

Sea Cadets learn to deal with disaster

By Joe Baker/Daily News staff

The USS Buttercup was sinking.

Strafed by enemy aircraft, water flowed over the deck and was quickly filling lower compartments. Within minutes, the ship's crew went into action. A team of investigators ventured below deck to assess the problems. Once they reported their findings, damage control teams went to work.

The ship began listing to port. With water rising above their waists, the crews battled a variety of problems - ruptured pipes, holes in the deck, leaking bulkheads. But one by one, the problems became manageable.

The Buttercup was saved and would live to fight another battle.

The Buttercup is not a typical Navy ship. And the damage control teams were not real sailors. This was the final exercise for members of the Navy Sea Cadets in a weeklong Surface Warfare Training course held at Naval Station Newport. The 28 cadets came from as far away as California.

The Sea Cadet program, which began in 1958, gives youths from 11 to 17 years old a chance to experience naval life firsthand. They take the same training and tests as regular sailors.

In addition to training at least one weekend a month, cadets also take a weeklong training course in the summer that ranges from Navy SEAL team training, explosive ordnance disposal training and mine warfare operations to culinary arts, photojournalism and music.

This week's course in Newport included a war-gaming exercise in which cadets were told they had to rescue 20 American hostages. After discussing all the "assets" at their disposal, cadets outlined their plan of attack. They also used a simulator that allowed them to steer a "ship" through the Straits of Hormuz and plotted a real navigational chart for getting out of San Diego Bay.

"This allows them to practice their leadership skills," said training officer Lt. j.g. Andrew Munoz, a former Sea Cadet, who was heading the session on a week off from his regular



Sea Cadet Stephen Terrill fits a jubilee patch onto a ruptured fire main Friday during damage control training. (David Hansen/Daily News staff)

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job in the Coast Guard. "It builds confidence and it gives them an area where they can make mistakes and learn from them without the real-world consequences."

On Friday, the cadets got about three hours of instruction on damage-control techniques before being exposed to the Buttercup. The simulator is like a partial ship in a big tank. Water is flooded on the decks and into the compartments from various "leaks" and the cadets have to work together to plug those leaks and save the ship. It is the same course given to members of the Navy, said Capt. James Pillsbury, commanding officer of Officer Training Command.

"It's very disconcerting when you're waist deep in water," said Pillsbury, another former Sea Cadet. "But it's better to learn these lessons before you go out to the fleet."

Todd Amaral, 16, of Bristol was the only Rhode Islander in the class. A cadet for four years, Amaral had gone through the damage-control class before.

"I like the responsibility we get, the leadership roles we take," said Amaral, who added that he is interested in joining the Navy when he's old enough.

Lauren Weigand, 16, of Parma, Ohio, was one of four girls in the class. She joined the cadets a year ago.

"I really like the military side of it. I like the whole structure," she said.

The instructors - the same ones who teach actual sailors - do not downplay the exercise for the cadets. After successfully saving the Buttercup in their first exercise, the cadets had to go through a second drill, this time fighting leaks caused by a submarine torpedo. And this time, they weren't as successful.

As the teams battled the rapidly rising water, there was a sudden announcement over the loudspeakers.

"This is your captain speaking. Flooding is out of control. Abandon ship."

Two dozen dripping wet cadets filed up the stairs to the listing deck.

"Sir, why did they call abandon ship on us?" Amaral asked Munoz.

"You were sinking," Munoz replied.

"We want to show them as real as possible what can happen," said Machinist Mate Chief Dio Urgason, the officer in charge of the damage-control course.

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