



Narragansett

Auxiliary units help the Coast Guard in several ways

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By Arline A. Fleming

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Coast Guard Auxiliary member Jim Beardsley works with Spencer Kelly, left, of Virginia, and Mary Miller, of Texas, two teenage members of the Sea Cadets, in a session at Wickford Harbor on Tuesday.

Providence Journal Steve Szydlowski

NORTH KINGSTOWN — “Don’t just jump in your boat and go fishing,” Jim Beardsley, a Coast Guard Auxiliary member from Point Judith Flotilla 79, advised a group of teenagers enrolled in the Sea Cadet program, at morning boating safety classes held this week in Wickford.

Beardsley, of Charlestown, is in uniform, with insignia and identification tag, as is Ken St. Amour of South

Kingstown. Both look as official as enlisted members of the Coast Guard, yet both are volunteers who are giving up clear summer mornings to further the Coast Guard Auxiliary cause.

Though it has a 60-year history, the function of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, members agree, is murky in the minds of the general public.

Are they civilians? Retired military? Spouses of military?

Civilians, actually, who provide support to the Coast Guard by helping with search-and-rescue missions, boating safety courses and vessel inspections. This week they are devoting several mornings to the Sea Cadets enrolled in a federally financed youth development program operated through the Navy.

They'll be back on Sunday, offering free kayak safety checks in Narragansett at the Route 1A Sprague Bridge launch site, from 10 a.m. to noon.

But if needed, auxiliary members will be on the water assisting with rescue missions, said Chad Curth, Point Judith Coast Guard's senior chief officer in charge.

"They're trained in first aid and towing," he said. "They're very helpful, especially in search and rescue, he said, noting that sometimes auxiliary crews can offer immediate assistance in rescue situations while the Coast Guard is en route.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary in Rhode Island is made up of chapters, also called flotillas at the local level, with several in nearby Massachusetts. In South County, the local chapter is Point Judith Flotilla 79, and its 48 members spend a considerable amount of time offering boating safety classes and vessel inspection.

At the Wickford classes this week, the local auxiliary members guided Sea Cadets, who came from all over the country, in the basics of safe boating as one aspect of their summer training session. After morning classroom sessions, they applied what they learned aboard boats.

"It's a way to educate," said Beardsley.

He asked the Sea Cadets for a show of hands: "How many of you have seen a boat with too many people on it?"

Almost all answer that they have.

"It happens all the time," Beardsley tells them, a situation similar to clowns stuffing themselves into a tiny car.

"Don't do it."

He talks about boat capacity and how to make a determination based upon information found on a boat's capacity plate.

"If you exceed that, the boat can become unsafe."

Established by Congress in 1939, this volunteer branch of the Coast Guard conducts vessel safety checks and offers boating safety courses such as the one this week in Wickford and Sunday's session in

Narragansett designed for kayakers.

Kayaks, said Beardsley, are particularly problematic because they are so accessible.

“Many people think kayaks are a toy,” he said. Casual attitudes lead to accidents.

Random kayak checks turn up boaters without life jackets or emergency equipment, he said.

At a check earlier this summer, he said, only 1 in 20 kayaks met a list of required safety equipment, which include life jackets for each person, a sound-producing device for signaling, distress signals and navigation lights. They also recommend items such as a first-aid kit, waterproof charts, a spare paddle, filing a float plan and traveling with a friend.

Beardsley and other members of the local Coast Guard Auxiliary put in hundreds of volunteer hours advocating for safe boating practices, while also supporting the Coast Guard in its missions, apart from military and law enforcement situations.

“We represent a full range of ages. You can join at 17, and there’s no maximum age,” he said. It is open to men and women who pass a basic background check. There are no required hours of service.

Point Judith Flotilla 79 represents an area that spans Westerly to North Kingstown. It meets monthly to plan activities or to figure out the needs of the local Coast Guard. New members are welcome.

Point Judith Flotilla Commander Tiney Singler of Hope Valley, originally from Texas, said he joined as a way to help the public and because “it’s good camaraderie. And you can never learn too much about boats.”

But a major reason for the existence of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, he said, is to support the Coast Guard.

“The Coast Guard depends on us more and more as their function grows with Homeland Security. They have a lot more to do now.”

Point Judith Coast Guard’s Curth said the auxiliary members “volunteer their time, and they don’t get paid. It’s completely on a volunteer basis. They’re trained in first-aid and towing,” and so participate in search-and-rescue operations, he said.

“They do so much for us.”

The auxiliary is also present during public events, such as Ironman competitions, “securing the waterways,” he said.

Though volunteers who aren’t enrolled in official military service, Coast Guard Auxiliary members wear uniforms “very similar to ours,” Curth said. “There’s a little leniency because it’s not the military, but when they are out doing auxiliary stuff on the water, people know they aren’t just some civilian.”

“Basically,” explained John P. Suckow, auxiliary liaison for the Coast Guard’s Southeastern New England sector, and an active duty lieutenant junior grade in the Coast Guard, “the Coast Guard Auxiliary supports the Coast Guard in all its missions,” which according to its Web site is “to protect the public, the environment, and U.S. economic interests in the nation’s ports and waterways, along the coast, on international waters, or in any maritime region as required to support national security.”

For information about the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary, Point Judith Flotilla 79, contact Tiney Singler, flotilla commander, at (401) 539-4019, or for a free vessel safety check, call Dennis Meagher at (401) 788-0861.

Online, check www.cgaux.org, click on Join the Auxiliary, then local Auxiliary Web sites, which breaks the auxiliaries into districts. Click on the town, and individual meeting times, officers and contact information will appear. (District 1 includes Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and Rhode Island.)

According to Suckow, flotillas exist in East Providence, Warwick, Wickford, Providence, Point Judith, Bristol, Castle Hill.

There is also a Southeastern New England Command Center telephone number for information. It is (508) 457-3211.

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