

# U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary ready to train and assist Flotilla 81 patrols Intracoastal Waterway

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Sentinel staff

**1** OCEAN CITY – Commanding their small boats, members of the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 81 patrol the Intracoastal Waterway, respond to vessels in distress and teach boating-safety classes.

The auxiliary's motto is Semper Paratus (Always Ready), and it stands as a testament to the organization's commitment.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2014, has units in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Guam. In addition to improving recreational boating safety, local auxiliary flotillas provide trained crews and facilities to augment the U.S. Coast Guard.

Established by Congress in 1939, the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary operates in safety and security patrols, search and rescue, pollution response and patrols, mass casualty or disasters, Homeland Security and conducts recreational boating safety, commercial fishing and vessel exams and recruits for all service in the Coast Guard.

Flotilla 81 of Ocean City is the oldest Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla in New Jersey, having been chartered on June 1, 1940.

David Wilson, commander for Flotilla 81 Ocean City, said the flotilla's mission is identical to the Coast Guard's, except the auxiliary doesn't involve itself with armed conflict.

"On our patrols we are the eyes and ears of the Coast Guard, but we ourselves would not interdict or interject into any kind of law enforcement activity," said Wilson, who previously served in the U.S. Army as a combat engineer. A member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary for 10 years, Wilson said being an avid boater and community service attracted him to the auxiliary.

Wilson said the auxiliary combined fun and community service.

"The flotilla is an integral part of the United States Coast Guard. Most people look at the auxiliary as being something like the VFW or the American Legion. The biggest difference is this: the regular Coast Guard has three components. The active duty Coast Guard are the men and women around the world who are active duty every day. The Coast Guard Reserve, which is like the Army, Navy and Marine reserve, are people who have completed their obligated tour and are serving their reserve time for the Coast Guard. The third component is the civilian component, the Coast Guard Auxiliary," Wilson said.

Eight Coast Guard Auxiliary flotillas exist in the southern New Jersey region in Cumberland, Cape May, and Atlantic counties.

**3** required by federal and state law.

Flotilla 81 performs public outreach to the boating community. Babezki visits marinas and boat dealers and disseminates pamphlets about boating safety to the public. Flotilla members also frequent boat shows, block parties and other events to alert the public of the Coast Guard Auxiliary's many functions.

"We do a lot of things just to make sure the public is made aware as much as possible of the concepts of boating safety," Babezki said. "In today's marketplace, paddlecraft are becoming a big issue. Because so many people are buying paddlecraft, we have to make sure that the operators of those craft are made aware of safety rules."

Kayaks, standup paddleboards or any craft paddled for propulsion are considered by the Coast Guard as being a vessel, Babezki said.

Wilson noted all vessel operators on New Jersey waters must have a safe-boating certificate. He said the Coast Guard Auxiliary's eight-hour boating safety class, held on the last Saturday of the month, provides a test from the Coast Guard.

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—David Wilson  
Commander, Flotilla 81  
U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary

To become qualified for the Coast Guard Auxiliary patrol, one must go through a Coast Guard-approved training course and meet appropriate qualification requirements for a boat crewmember. After 24 hours of experience on board boat crewmembers can train to be a

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Coast Guard Auxiliary-novias are found throughout the country, in maritime coastal communities and in the Midwestern and Western regions.

"The Coast Guard Auxiliary is active not only here on the coastal waters, but inland also on the rivers and Great Lakes and even out in Arizona on Lake Mead and other lakes and reservoirs out there," Wilson said. "The Coast Guard Auxiliary is active in those same capacities; public safety, public education, search and rescue."

Wilson said Flotilla 81 has 53 members ranging in age from young to old. Membership in the Coast Guard Auxiliary is open to anyone 18 years of age or older who is a U.S. citizen and can pass an introductory test and a background investigation.

Flotilla 81 meets on the second Thursday of each month at 7 p.m. at St. Peter's United Methodist Church.

"We do have some younger members. Some young folks have found that it is very advantageous to join while they are a senior in high school and maintain their membership because if they certify for crew while serving in the Coast Guard Auxiliary and go into the Coast Guard on an active duty basis, it's the same certification. They already have a qualification the day they arrive for boot camp. That's kind of an incentive for younger people to get involved with the Coast Guard Auxiliary," Wilson said.

He said the flotilla is very active during summer months, when recreational boating is abundant.

"We utilize our own boats when we're on patrol. However, the boat is fully certified by the Coast Guard," Wilson said. "Here's what makes it different from the volunteer organizations; we're actually on orders from the Coast Guard. Once we leave and the flag is up and the banners are on the boat, that's called a Coast Guard facility and we are under the direction of Atlantic City or Cape May (Coast Guard). We file our operations plan with them so that they know where we are continuously. In the event of a boating mishap or someone is having a problem, they know where we are and we can be dispatched by radio to them on the water."

During the 1930s, the Coast Guard was the only military branch without a reserve component. As the war in Europe loomed, the Coast Guard's tasks increased, including monitoring the safety of small boats, including recreational craft.

Bob Babezki, vice flotilla commander and public information officer, said the Coast Guard Auxiliary was first formed by an act of Congress on June 22, 1939.

Initially called the Coast Guard reserve, individual flotillas were formed, beginning with the Flotilla S-1 in New York in November 1939. In 1940, flotillas were founded in Atlantic City, Philadelphia and Ocean City.

Ocean City's Flotilla 81 was chartered on June 1, 1940. In 1941, Congress enacted a new law that created a true Coast Guard Reserve and renamed it the Coast Guard Auxiliary, a volunteer component of the Coast Guard.

During World War II, Ocean City's flotilla was the only one with a fully staffed Coast Guard Auxiliary hospital.

"We're an extra set of eyes and ears for the Coast Guard in areas where there's a lot of recreational boating activity. We look out for boaters who might be in trouble," said Babezki, who joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary in June 2006 and became a certified vessel examiner. Babezki works with boat owners to ensure they have necessary safety equipment

mission commander, or coxswain.

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"(Becoming a boat crew member) would require a certain number of on-water experience, the completion of book learning and exams and demonstration of your competence to an independent third-party evaluator, usually a Coast Guard officer," Wilson said

Mission commanders must have a privately-owned powerboat equipped to meet Coast Guard requirements as a facility, and receive an operational identification from the Coast Guard.

"We are acting completely under the orders of the Coast Guard when we go out on patrol," Babezki said.

Shifts run from the height of the boating season and on weekends. Crewmembers are on call the rest of the week.

Auxiliary members receive their orders from Coast Guard personnel before the daily patrol. Typical patrols last around four hours and include the waters between Ocean City, Longport and as far south as Strathmere.

"We often find boats that have run aground. We'll find families who have youngsters on board who are not wearing life jackets. We're the good guys. People will recognize us as uniformed Coast Guard. Our uniform is exactly the United States Coast Guard uniform," Wilson said. "If you're committing a boating violation and we see it, we'll try to get your attention and pull you over."

Vessels towing inner tubes or water-skiers must display a red triangular pennant, Wilson said.

"We are in regular contact with station Atlantic City. If a boater reports that they're having a problem or they have run aground or maybe they're drifting towards a jetty and can't get started, we'll appear on the scene and we will inject into that only to the extent that we don't endanger anybody on our crew, we'll stand by and render assistance until the commercial towing companies get there," Wilson said.

There's no such thing as a typical patrol. Small craft can capsize, run aground or take on water. Sometimes fires aboard vessels occur. When a boat is incapacitated, it's usually the Coast Guard Auxiliary that arrives before the authorities.

"We are most usually the first responder and we will stabilize the situation and be a supporting role until either active Coast Guard arrive or commercial towing arrive," Wilson said. "We don't compete with the commercial towers, but if somebody is drifting towards a jetty, we're going to tow them away."

Babezki said in addition to the regular missions, the Coast Guard will assign maritime observation missions, in which the auxiliary members have to perform an inventory of channel markers along the Intracoastal Waterway.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary also provides perimeter security for fireworks displays, as fireworks are launched from barges offshore.

Other missions include acting as safety for boat races, Night in Venice and the Atlantic City Air show.

"We'll actually have auxiliary vessels working in conjunction with New Jersey Marine Police and U.S. Coast Guard vessels to maintain safety for an area that the pilots are instructed they have problems they can drop down, called safety zone or exclusion zone.... We have to make sure no spectator boat goes into that zone," Babezki said.

For more information on the Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 81, call (609) 399-4299.