

THE COXSWAIN SHACK

SURFACE OPS PATROL TIPS & TRICKS

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OPS Opportunities During the Down-turn in SAR Work

You hear it all the time, “How can I keep myself and my crew motivated when we seldom get SAR cases anymore?” And if you throw in the frequent complaints about it being harder than ever to keep your quals (Nav Rules, ICS Courses, TCT Refresher, Ops Workshops, and Currency Maintenance) it’s easy to see why many Coxns and Crew are questioning their commitment to remain in the Ops program.

One thing’s for sure, if you gauge your value to the Ops Program based on the number of SAR cases you work, you’re undoubtedly very frustrated. Years ago, in the 1970’s-80’s, your odds of “getting a case” were better than 50:50 on most weekend and Holiday patrols. Many attribute that to the high percentage of “clunkers” out there on the water at the time. Boaters would venture out with poorly maintained engines and leaky hulls, content in the knowledge that if they ran into problems the Auxiliary would be there to lend a hand and tow them in.

But today, in the era of commercial salvagers and high fuel prices, there are less and less boats out to get into trouble and require our assistance. Some explain this in the context of the current economic “down-turn”. Others might claim that our RBS efforts in Vessel Exams, or “Safety Checks” and PE courses are the cause. Yet the numbers in those programs are down too and it’s just as likely for a vessel displaying a Safety Check decal and skippered by a PE course graduate to plow into a partially submerged piling today as it was years ago; there are just less of them out there.

So what’s an enterprising Aux Coxswain and Crew to do? In the balance of this article, we’ll take a look at some opportunities that exist that you might not have considered before.

First off, I’d be remiss if I didn’t point out the numerous training opportunities that exist

with your local USCG station. I know that in my area (San Francisco Bay) both Stations San Francisco and Golden Gate regularly use Aux vessels to practice their towing and other skills. Indeed a regular feature of the PAC (Patrol Area Coordinator) meetings I attend is a discussion of Aux support to Station boat training used at most stations throughout our district.

Incidentally, a benefit of becoming known to a particular CG station is that they may remember you when it comes time for a plum assignment. Work with your local PAC to learn about great missions that develop occasionally.

Let me highlight another benefit of working with your PAC. Five years ago I switched boats, from a 34’ FBSF that was ideal for SAR work to a 47’ cruiser that serves as a part-time home for us. I wanted to keep the new boat Operational, but was unsure of how well conducting patrols in our floating “home” would work out.

With a boat that topped out around 10 knots, and was full of standard “liveaboard” gear, I wanted to investigate other opportunities to contribute. I mentioned it to my PAC, and got her to keep an eye out for missions that could use an experienced crew and well-equipped boat, but less suited to high-speed ambulance-chasing. That has worked out well.

We’ve served as a training platform for several CG boarding teams; participated in a Bay Area exercise of the Mutual Aid Program where ferries respond to simulated bridge collapses and similar catastrophes; and recently ferried Coasties living in the East Bay to YBI during the Bay Bridge closure. Semper Gumbie!

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