

Protecting the President

AND OTHER WAYS TO SPEND A WEEKEND

It's a clear, brisk January day in Washington, DC. I have a 20-knot wind in my face and one- to two-foot waves slapping against the side of my boat. The spray off the waves turns to ice on my windshield. This is not like the brochure.

When I joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary in 2003, I had no idea I would be leading Maritime Domain Awareness patrol on the Potomac River three days before the Presidential Inauguration. But here I am, bundled in a survival suit, with my crew of three volunteer auxiliaries. Our mission: to report all boat traffic heading into the security zone north of the Woodrow Wilson Bridge and to identify any other "out of place" activities on the river.

How did I get here? By day, I'm the CEO of a Web solutions firm in Alexandria, Virginia, that often works with associations. But as far back as high school when I saw a television movie about a couple rescued at sea by the Coast Guard, I've wanted to join up. As it happens, other priorities always won out.

I became reacquainted with the Coast Guard in the spring of 2003, when I took a coastal navigation class. I was preparing to bring a newly restored boat down the Atlantic Coast from Maine. I knew that I needed more navigation skills than simply "keeping the coast on my right," and the course taught by a Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteer proved to be my answer.

It also became my entry into the Auxiliary, since my instructor was a commander who invited me to his next flotilla meeting. It wasn't long before I was hooked. What better way to spend more time on the water (without maxing out the family boating quota), help other boaters, and assist the regular Coast Guard with homeland security patrols? My wife even insists that I like to wear the uniform (despite my protests to the contrary).

The route to today's mission has taken two years. During that time, I've spent lots

of time studying and many hours out on the water — all in order to earn my boat crew and coxswain qualifications. Members of the Auxiliary have to meet nearly all of the same qualification requirements as active-duty Coast Guard personnel before participating fully in on-the-water operations and patrols.

Although I've spent many hours on the river during the warmer months, today is my first real winter patrol. I've got an experienced crew, and we're using one of the Coast Guard-owned boats, but the conditions present some unique challenges.

Take the survival suits that we are required to wear, for instance. If you have ever seen footage of astronauts being helped into their space suits by technicians, then you can imagine what it's like to get into (and out of) these things. Considering that the survival time in 35-degree water is nearly five hours (compared with 20 minutes without the suits), I figure I can find a way to deal with the discomfort and claustrophobia.

And then there's the ice. During the course of the day, we learn that anything that can possibly freeze up will freeze up — gauges, valves, windows.

The biggest surprise of the day comes when I open a storage compartment to retrieve a fender for a "man-overboard" drill. I'm startled to find the compartment filled with water. Realizing that a call to the Coast Guard Station to tell them that "we appear to be taking on water" might trigger an emergency response (and necessitate sending other Coast Guard resources, perhaps even a helicopter, out after us), I decide to work with my crew to identify the problem.

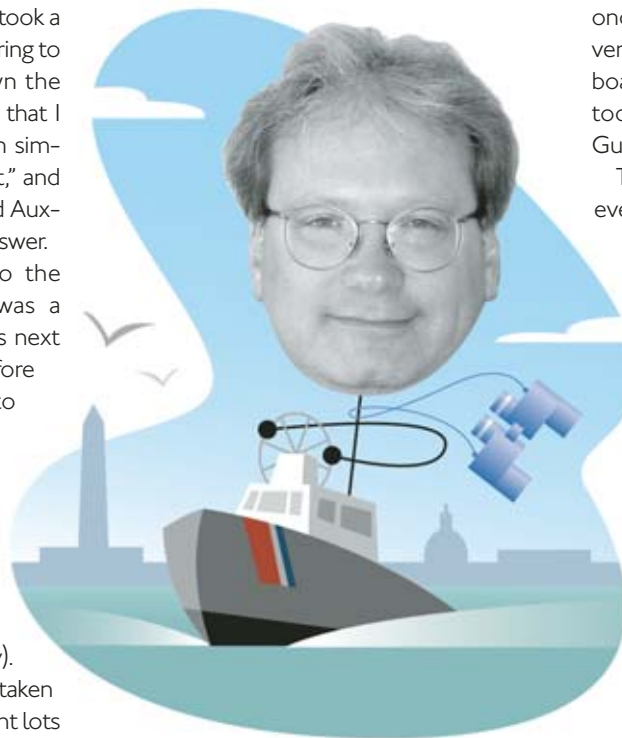
Quick inspections reveal we have nothing more than an annoying mystery. No water is rushing in, and the other compartments are bone dry. We use a dewatering device to pump the water out of the compartment and head back to the station. A frozen valve turns out to be the culprit. Mystery solved!

Volunteering for the Coast Guard through the Auxiliary is a special activity for me. Some days, I feel like it's a second career (albeit without pay). But I'm very proud of what we do, from helping boaters in distress or, as is the case with today's mission, supporting the Coast Guard with homeland security efforts.

Turns out that this volunteer work is even better than the brochure.

The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary (www.cgaux.org) is the civilian volunteer arm of the U.S. Coast Guard. In addition to providing public education classes and vessel inspections, the Auxiliary supports the active-duty Coast Guard with boat patrols (marine safety and security, harbor security, and environmental protection, among others).

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