

The Houghton Lake **Resorter** Houghton Lake, Michigan

Coast Guard Aux seeks new members to benefit boaters

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SUPPORTING THE COAST GUARD During a September, 2020, mission near Mackinac Island, members of United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 091-26-03 of Roscommon County supported a training mission of active duty members of the U.S. Coast Guard. This photo shows active duty members of the USCG participating in the exercise while aboard Flotilla Commander Larry Leighton's 23-foot Key West boat. (Photo courtesy of Larry Leighton)

By James Munger

Vice Flotilla Commander, Flotilla 091-26-03

United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla 091-26-03 of Roscommon County is not your typical group of volunteers. They are a uniformed, unpaid wing of the Coast Guard who train alongside their military counterparts and participate in search and rescues, towing, vessel inspections, education and answering distress calls.

“Our mission is recreation boater safety, to be the face of the Coast Guard for people of the Roscommon area,” said Larry Leighton, flotilla commander.

Commander Leighton and the other auxiliary members work side by side with Coast Guard officers stationed in other parts of the state. Most of the auxiliary members are retired and are passionate about boating and being a part of a mission, he said.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary was originally established in 1939 after Congress directed the Coast Guard to use civilians to promote safety. Two years later, Congress officially redesignated the civilian part as the auxiliary. During World War II, 50,000 members joined the war effort and many of their private vessels were placed into service. Today there are more than 20,000 members of the auxiliary.

Now, the auxiliary members cook on ships, perform courtesy vessel safety inspections, teach boater safety and navigation courses, serve as communications watch standers, patrol waterways and help the Coast Guard with homeland security duties. The line is drawn with law enforcement and military, which are the two functions in which the auxiliary does not participate.

One of the primary activities of the flotilla is conducting boating safety education training. A continuation of its public information mission is the vessel safety inspection program on recreational boats. These are voluntary and done while at a private dock, on a ramp or on land (on a trailer) and the auxiliary checks for

working items such as navigation lights, bilge pumps, flares and proper number of life jackets. Once a vessel has been inspected and passed, a USCG vessel inspection sticker is applied.

According to Commander Leighton, one advantage to having a boat inspected by the flotilla is that the inspection is recognized by both county and state marine law enforcement agencies.

On average the Roscommon auxiliary checks around 200 boats every year. If someone is interested in having their boat inspected, they should call Commander Leighton at (810) 287-4663. Leighton emphasized that the safety inspections are done free of charge.

Often the public does not differentiate between Coast Guard active duty and the auxiliary since the uniforms are essentially the same to the untrained eye.

“We look like active duty with our uniforms and we take that very seriously. We are always aware we are representing the Coast Guard and act accordingly,” Commander Leighton said.

Those interested in search-and-rescue missions participate in training similar to the training provided to active duty members of the Coast Guard. That training includes first aid, CPR, man overboard drills and correct towing techniques.

“As soon as we leave the dock, we are under Coast Guard orders and are now an extension of the active duty personnel. While the flotilla works closely with the marine unit of the Roscommon [County] Sheriff’s Office, often we are the boat that is out there and we stay on scene to make sure the boaters are safe,” Commander Leighton said. The members of the auxiliary are a force multiplier, not only for the active duty personnel but for other local and state agencies.

And when they are on patrol, these volunteers use their own personal boats. They are reimbursed for fuel and, if they get hurt on the job, can use federal health insurance.

Recently the Roscommon Flotilla established a fixed marine radio facility for the Houghton Lake and Higgins Lake areas. The intent is to have this facility operate during peak lake seasonal times and special events as much as possible. The station will monitor Marine Radio Channel 16 for radio calls from recreational boaters, local fishermen and flotilla units on patrol. When a call for assistance is received, the station can locate other nearby members of the public to assist or contact commercial assistance. The station will issue weather alerts and other water safety information.

A continuation of its public information mission is its vessel safety inspection program on recreational boats. These are voluntary and done while at dock and the auxiliary checks for working navigation lights, bilge pumps, flares and proper number of life jackets.

Like other organizations and businesses, the auxiliary's activities have been heavily impacted by the COVID-19 situation. Under the restrictions, almost all in-person contacts were prohibited, including recruitment of new members.

According to Commander Leighton, one of the primary goals is to ramp up recruitment activities.

“We’re generally older, retired, white and male,” he said, a fact he would like to see changed. He would love to see more women and young people join.

Membership is open to anyone 17 years of age and above. Joining the auxiliary is a fantastic way for someone considering enlisting in the activity duty forces to become familiar with the USCG and its mission and various activities.

According to Commander Leighton, the flotilla is also seeking individuals with watercraft or private aircraft who are not only interested in becoming members, but who would also like to offer their water or aircraft for approval as an official facility for missions. When they are on patrol, these members are reimbursed for fuel and other related costs.

While in-person activity is still restricted, joining now would give new members time to pass the necessary background check and complete the basic qualification training which is all done online. Getting these preliminaries done this winter and spring would allow folks to start boat crew training and other specialties come the summer months.

Commander Leighton encourages anyone who is interested in learning more about the local flotilla, its programs or becoming a member to contact him at larrleigh@gmail.com or (810) 287-4663.

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