

Coast Guard Commandant Admiral Bob Papp's Remarks

At the

Coast Guard Auxiliary National Conference

San Antonio, Texas
Saturday, August 25, 2012

Good Evening, Shipmates! I am so proud to be here today amongst such a distinguished group. On behalf of all the men and women of the Coast Guard, it's my very distinct honor to have the privilege to talk with you this evening.

As some probably remember, I last spoke with you in Arizona at the 2010 National Auxiliary Conference. Unfortunately I was not able to attend last year's conference in Charlotte. But when I learned I'd be speaking at this year's conference in San Antonio, well, I will admit to having some mixed emotions....

Don't get me wrong. You know I love the Auxiliary. And San Antonio is an absolutely beautiful city and I love visiting here...

But...I noticed a disturbing trend of conference sites that are landlocked! And I thought this was strange for an organization with such a rich maritime history.... And then I realized that San Antonio does have a maritime environment... Not only do you have the beautiful Riverwalk right outside this hotel, but I've also learned that the Sea World here in San Antonio is largest maritime theme park in the world....a fitting site for the world's largest volunteer marine safety organization to meet... So, well done!

I am especially grateful to our international Auxiliary and volunteer maritime organization leaders who are present tonight. Thank you for travelling so far to share your insights with us. We look forward to continuing to strengthen our partnerships in the days ahead, and we have greatly benefited from our mutual exchanges over the past week. No matter where we call home, we are all part of the same fraternity. Thank you for coming; you honor us with your presence.

Commodore Vass, I would like to personally congratulate you on a job well done. Your leadership as National Commodore over these past couple of years has been instrumental to the Auxiliary's success – and the success of our service as a whole. You have also been a crucial member of the Coast Guard Leadership Council, and your sage advice has been particularly valuable to me – and I've enjoyed your terrific stories almost as much as your counsel! There were days I really needed a good laugh and you never failed to deliver! We really missed you in Washington this week but I certainly understand why you chose to be here instead!

You know, Jim, when the invocation was given tonight it made me chuckle a bit thinking of an incident from a previous National Conference – I'm sure you'll remember....

The announcement was made for everyone to rise for the invocation. And, of course, everyone dutifully did as they were told – just like we all did tonight. The only difference was – no minister appeared.... After an uncomfortable period of everyone looking around, it became apparent that there was no minister.... And that's when Jim did what leaders do. He told Anne to relax, he stepped to the mike, and he delivered a flawless invocation, just as if it had been planned that way all along. Now that's being cool under fire.

And using that same grace and leadership to chart the Auxiliary's course, you have achieved remarkable success....

Understanding that diversity of thoughts, ideas, competencies and people is imperative in keeping the Auxiliary strong, you established an Assistant National Commodore for Diversity under the leadership of Commodore Don Lloyd. You also established Diversity Officers at the Flotilla and Division levels, and are developing and putting into place metrics to allow us to track our progress on this critical initiative. That's terrific work!

You commissioned a study to look at increasing and improving the delivery of Educational Courses to the boating public. You directed not only a review of the course content, but also the means of delivery. I understand that the recommendations from that study are in the process of being reviewed and implemented – and that you are currently conducting instructor workshops by webinar and that you have now 3 e-books available for use....

And you also commissioned a study on Boat crew and Facility qualifications with the goal of increasing both the level of participation and the number of qualified members – as well as their degree of proficiency. That is something near and dear to my heart that I'll talk more about in a minute. I believe your Team Coordination Training and Incident Command System process improvements are almost complete. That's outstanding!

There is an old saying that goes "If you ever start to think you are a good leader – try leading an all-volunteer organization...." Well you have been a great leader and have done a terrific job leading the best all-volunteer organization in the nation!

And you have a superb leadership team to work with – welcome also to the National Executive Committee, our District Commodores and our Directors of Auxiliary who are with us tonight. It's great to be here with you.

And to all the Auxiliarists with us this evening, I want to say Thank You!! Thank you for your Service, your Patriotism, and your volunteer efforts. They are greatly

appreciated – and much needed. Your volunteer spirit is contagious and a true force multiplier...

And I must also thank our active duty Auxiliary staff – CAPT Rokes and everyone at the Office of Auxiliary and Boating Safety. You're doing absolutely outstanding work! Thank you!

Congratulations to all of you on your achievements this year, and on holding this successful National Conference. And thank you for allowing me to join you on this most special of occasions.

I always enjoy being around my Auxiliary shipmates....you always seem so happy! And I bet it's not just Commodore Vass' stories that make you all smile so much – although that's certainly a good reason. I'm reminded that President Kennedy used to say that the true definition of happiness is the full use of one's powers along lines of excellence. Well that certainly describes the Auxiliary – and is certainly a reason you should be happy!

And speaking of Happy, I'd also like to take the opportunity tonight to wish you all a very Happy Birthday!

Now you're probably thinking "Admiral – you're a little late...that was months ago..."

And, in a way, you'd be right. I did send a message a couple of months ago congratulating you on the 73rd Anniversary of the Coast Guard Auxiliary – recognizing that on June 23, 1939, President Roosevelt signed into law "An Act to Establish a Coast Guard Reserve to be Comprised of Owners of Motorboats and Yachts." As I'm sure you all know, this was the legislation that established the Auxiliary in law and brought this great organization to life. A few years later this act was amended to create the modern military Reserve we have today and renamed the original "Coast Guard Reserve" the "Coast Guard Auxiliary."

However, I think there is a good case to be made that this week is your real birthday – that the real genesis of the Coast Guard Auxiliary occurred some five years earlier than Roosevelt's signing of the Act. The real beginning came with a letter written 78 years ago this past Thursday....

You see, in 1934, a man by the name of Malcolm Boylan was the commodore of a new yacht club in Los Angeles. He was also a Hollywood screenwriter who wrote over 100 movies and television shows, including episodes of Bonanza, Zoro, and Colt .45. He also wrote the scripts for movies like the Dangerous Waters (with Jack Holt and Robert Armstrong), Hell Divers (with Clark Gable)(1931), St. Louis Blues (with Dorothy Lamour) and If I had a Million (with Gary Cooper and W.C. Fields).

One of the first outings planned by this new yacht club – which was called the Pacific Writers Yacht Club – was a trip to Catalina Island, off the California coast. And Mr. Boylan was worried that some of the boats in the group may not be in good enough shape to make the trip safely.

Well, as luck would have it, prior to their planned Catalina Island excursion, there were two 165-foot THETIS-Class Coast Guard cutters anchored nearby – the AURORA and the HERMES. Until recently these two cutters had been home ported in New York and were used on the east coast in the Coast Guard's war against rum-runners. But, with the ratification of the 21st amendment in December of 1933 – which ended prohibition – the Cutters were transferred from New York to San Pedro, for eventual use in the Bering Sea patrol. So Malcolm Boylan went over to visit the senior officer aboard those cutters, the CO of the HERMES, and asked if his crew could inspect the club's boats to ensure they were all safe for the trip. And he also invited the CO to accompany him as his guest for the cruise. The CO of the HERMES wasn't able to make the trip, but he did send the CO of the AURORA. His name was LT Francis Pollard.

Now LT Pollard would later go on to great exploits in the Coast Guard. He would relieve CAPT Von Paulson as the CO of the CGC NORTHLAND on the Greenland Patrol, and his actions there would earn him the Legion of Merit with Combat "V", the Navy-Marine Corps Medal, the Order of the British Empire, and the Order of the Fatherland First Degree from the Supreme Soviet! Not many Coast Guard officers can claim that distinction! Sadly, he passed away just this past December.

But, on this day, LT Pollard accompanied Malcolm Boylan on the cruise to Catalina Island. And along the way the two of them struck up a fast friendship. They spent much of the cruise talking about the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard's missions – and the fact that the Coast Guard's lacked a reserve force.

The discussions that day made an impact on Malcolm Boylan. Following that cruise and their long discussions on the Coast Guard, he wrote a letter to LT Pollard which contained the first spark of an idea for the Coast Guard Auxiliary. And that letter made it all the way up the chain of command to RADM Harry Hamlet, who was then the Commandant – and also to his aide, CDR Russell Waesche, who, just 2 years later was promoted to RADM and succeeded RADM Hamlet as Commandant....

Can you believe that? Promoted directly from Commander..... to Admiral!

From being the Commandant's Aide... to being the Commandant!

Commander Goldschmidt ----- don't get any ideas!

RADM Waesche saw the true merits of a Coast Guard Reserve and he assigned officers on his staff to draft a bill to create just such an Auxiliary force. That was the bill signed by President Roosevelt on 23 June 1939 – and marks the date we now recognize as the birth of the Auxiliary.

By the way.... ADM Waesche saw this – at least in part – as a way to create a reservoir of manpower that could be called upon without increasing the Coast Guard’s budget. Well – over the last 3 years the total Auxiliary budget expenditure has held steady at about \$17 million.... And there are no planned cuts for FY13. So I guess he missed the mark a bit there....but in my opinion its one of the very best bangs for the buck the American taxpayers get!

But the real beginning was that cruise to Catalina Island and the letter written by Malcolm Boylan – who, by the way, eventually became the Commodore of the Eleventh District Auxiliary. And a LCDR in the Active Reserves.... Maybe he was hoping to make the jump to Commandant, too!

I have a copy of that letter – dated 78 years ago this week – August 23, 1934.

In that letter to LT Pollard – reflecting on their earlier discussions regarding Coast Guard origins, traditions and functions – Mr. Boylan wrote:

“This brings me to the suggestion that a Coast Guard Reserve would be an excellent thing to perpetuate these traditions, preserve its entity, and, more practically, to place at the disposal of the Coast Guard officers, auxiliary flotillas of small craft for the frequent emergencies incident to your twenty-two prescribed missions and countless unexpected duties.”

Wow. Twenty-two missions! And that was before we picked up the duties of the Bureau of Inspection and Navigation. I guess we have it easy now with only 11 statutory missions, right?

It’s amazing to hold this letter in my hand and see the earliest seeds of the idea that led to such a tremendous organization and the outstanding group I see before me. But what really caught my eye was what came next. Something very important to me and something I’d like to talk a little more about tonight.

The letter continued:

“I know from our conversations that you will also agree that commissions should be issued only to those of high qualifications; ... who have not only seamanship, but – and I hope my use of the term will not be misunderstood – personal standards – calculated to uphold the dignity of the Service.”

Let me say that one part again: “only to those of High Qualifications”

As I mentioned earlier in talking about Commodore Vass’s study on Boat Crew and Facility Qualifications, that’s something very important to me and to our Service – and something I have been talking about since I became the Commandant two years ago.

I call it Proficiency.

Now when a new member gets to a flotilla, they are encouraged to become qualified at a particular job. They have a qualification book and tasks get checked off as they learn and complete them.

This is an important step, and we should all seek to become qualified at anything we choose to pursue. But proficiency is much more than that. Getting a particular qualification - whether it's small boat coxswain or pollution investigator, - is only the first step in becoming proficient.

And when I talk about proficiency – I break it down into three essential parts, each of which is critically important – and which I see over and over again in our very best people and in the successful exploits of our service. They are Proficiency in Craft, Proficiency in Leadership, and a Disciplined Initiative.

Let me share a story with you to show what I mean by this.

I had the honor a few weeks ago to commission our second Fast Response Cutter, the RICHARD ETHERIDGE. These are terrific new ships. We're going to build 58 of the magnificent cutters. These Fast Response Cutters will all be named for Coast Guard enlisted heroes – and the RICHARD ETHERIDGE is no exception.

You'll also notice that these cutters are named for individuals. While we all work together as a team to accomplish our mission, each member of our Coast Guard family – whether at a Sector, aboard a cutter or Auxiliary facility, or at a Flotilla – is an individual who is capable – and expected – to make a difference. And RICHARD ETHERIDGE provides a terrific example that one person – with proficiency – can truly make a difference.

Richard Etheridge was the Keeper of the Pea Island Lifesaving Station on the North Carolina Outer Banks. He rose to that position in 1880 and served there for the next 20 years.

He was the first black man ever appointed as Keeper of a U.S. Lifesaving Station. What's remarkable about that is that less than 40 years earlier, he had been born into slavery near Oregon Inlet, just north of Pea Island.

And only 15 years before his appointment he had become a freeman by joining and serving in the Union Army during the Civil War.

After leaving the Union Army he served for a time as a surfman at a nearby Lifesaving Station on Bodie Island. And at Bodie, he was the lowest raking surfman at that station.

And then, in 1879, he finds himself being recommended by the Superintendent of the Lifesaving Service, Sumner Kimball, to the Secretary of the Treasury, for a position in Command of a Lifesaving Station.

In an era of such open and hostile racism, post-Civil War, why was Richard Etheridge chosen for this job?

The reason? “High qualification.”

It was his proficiency.

You see, he was not the lowest ranking man at that first Life Saving Station because he was the least proficient surfman or the newest member to report. He was the lowest ranking man because in that post-Civil War era, black men were always listed last on the rolls.

He was actually incredibly proficient. He had grown up on the shores of the Outer Banks and knew the winds and tides and currents as well as anyone. And his proficiency was recognized by an inspector for the Life Saving Service. This inspector was so impressed that he took the time to write a letter to the Superintendent of the Service about what he had seen in Richard Etheridge.

I know this because have seen the original letter written by that Inspector, LT Charles Shoemaker, to Superintendent Kimball, recommending Etheridge for the job. It read:

“Richard Etheridge is 38 years of age [and] has the reputation of being as good a surfman as there is on this coast, black or white...”

That’s proficiency. Those in authority recognized it and knew that it was what really mattered.

The letter continued: “I am aware that no colored man holds the position of keeper in the Lifesaving Service. I have given the matter as careful consideration as I am capable of and have weighed every argument for and against its adoption... I am fully convinced that the efficiency of the service at his station will be greatly advanced by the appointment of this man to the keepership...”

The service was facing heavy criticism in the face of loss of life and property and needed skilled Keepers. Despite the racism of the time, his Proficiency of Craft got him the job.

But Keeper Etheridge knew instinctively that his own proficiency of craft alone was not enough. He knew that he needed his crew to be just as proficient. And he knew that he needed to lead them there. He understood the requirement for Proficiency of Leadership.

He developed rigorous lifesaving drills that his crew performed 6 days a week. He demanded swift obedience and required strict adherence to standards of grooming and appearance. We know how hard Etheridge trained his men because he kept meticulous records of their daily activities. Patrols, drills, training and inspections were conducted continuously. He trained his crew until satisfied they could take on any mission. And on Sundays, their “rest day”, Etheridge read the regulations to his crew and quizzed them on their knowledge of procedure.

The Coast Guard still relies on – and requires – this type of leadership. It inspires us. It motivates our crews. It allows us to reach that which was thought unachievable.

Proficiency of Craft and Proficiency of Leadership would pay off for Richard Etheridge and his crew. They would go on to rescue hundreds of souls, including their most famous rescue - that of the E.S. NEWMAN. The E.S. NEWMAN was caught in an October Hurricane in 1896 on her way from Providence to Norfolk. When her captain realized there was no hope for making it safely to port, he grounded his ship close to shore near Pea Island and shot off a flare. That evening to the storm was so bad Etheridge had kept his men from patrolling the beach with fear that they would be swept away by the tide. But one of his surfmen, who was watching the coast, spotted the distress signal and reported to Keeper Etheridge.

When Etheridge and his crew arrived on scene, it was apparent that the normal lifesaving procedures would not be effective. Their Lyle Gun – a beach cannon used to shoot a line to a vessel in distress and establish a Breech’s buoy – could not reach the ship. Strong winds and high tides kept the E.S. NEWMAN too far off shore. Keeper Etheridge later wrote in his log “It seemed impossible under such circumstances to render any assistance.”

But it was then that Keeper Etheridge demonstrated that final piece of proficiency I spoke of – one that comes only with Proficiency of Craft and Proficiency of Leadership: Disciplined Initiative.

He recognized that he needed to deviate from the normal operational doctrine and exercise on-scene initiative if he was to rescue the crew of the foundering vessel. He trusted in his crew, and he trusted the training and discipline he had instilled in them. He directed two of his surfmen to bind themselves together with a line. These two surfmen then grabbed a second line and fought their way through the howling wind and breaking surf until they reached the foundering E.S. NEWMAN. When they reached the distressed vessel, the second line was tied to a survivor and the crew on shore pulled the survivor and the two surfmen back to the shore. They repeated this process ten times that night – ten times in the middle of a hurricane – until they had rescued all of the survivors aboard the ship.

It is interesting to note that on the first trip out to the E.S. NEWMAN, a wave caught the leading surfman and knocked the air out of him. That wave would have carried him away and may have ended the rescue right there – and meant certain death for the crew of the E.S. NEWMAN – had he not been tied to his fellow surfman. He was bound to his shipmate the same way that training and discipline binds every member of a crew – or a Flotilla – to the other. While one person can truly make a difference, bound together we are practically unstoppable.

Richard Etheridge's dramatic rescue that night came after a career of building proficiency.... And it is critically important that you continue building yours. But it is equally important as leaders that you begin to develop it in new Auxiliary members the moment they put on that silver shield and eagle and step aboard a Coast Guard unit or Auxiliary facility – and that you also instill and inspire the desire and the need for proficiency the boating public through your outreach, education, and inspection programs. Because you never know when you might be called upon....

Achieving proficiency is not easy. In fact, it is often hard – especially for a volunteer who has other important responsibilities demanding his or her time – or the boating public, who may not fully appreciate the peril when things go wrong....

But through your efforts and leadership, we call all – active, reserve, civilian, Auxiliary – and our boating public - move closer to true proficiency – the kind that Richard Etheridge demonstrated over 100 years ago – and the kind that the men and women of this service have consistently demonstrated both before and since. And the purpose of this journey towards proficiency is so that when you spot a distant flare on a dark and stormy night, you are not only willing, but ready to respond.

At most Flotillas out there, Auxiliary members are regularly involved in helping with front-line Coast Guard operations. We face many challenges out there. I call them “uncertain and stormy seas.” The continued flow of drugs and migrants towards our shores. Threats to our fisheries. Increased activity in the Arctic. Our mandate to protect the safe and secure approaches to American ports.

And sometimes our challenge is the sea itself..... It was 20 years ago today that Hurricane Andrew devastated Florida and became – at the time – the costliest storm in U.S. history. Then, only 7 years ago next week, Hurricane Katrina came ashore in New Orleans. We all remember what happened there. With both of these storms, the Auxiliary was a critical part of our ability to respond and recover.

To meet these threats, we must all continually build our High Qualification - our proficiency. It will serve as an anchor to which we can all hold fast in uncertain and stormy seas.

And we don't fear uncertain and stormy seas.

That's when we go to work.

That's when our country needs us the most.

And that's when we are at our best.

Thank you so much for volunteering your time and giving so unselfishly of yourselves to serve this noble pursuit.

Bravo Zulu to all of you!

....and Semper Paratus.