

The Successful Use of the Auxiliary in the Sector

SPECIAL
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ISSUE



by MR. MICHAEL LARUE, AUX, S.T.M., M.S.
Planning Assistant, U.S. Coast Guard Sector Delaware Bay

We at Sector Delaware Bay have been working to implement this directive, with varying degrees of success, and offer this overview in the hope that other commands may be able to copy and improve upon our successes, avoid our mistakes, and work together to overcome obstacles to effectively implement this directive.

Auxiliarists at Sector Delaware Bay

In the last few years, Sector Delaware Bay has experienced significant success in attracting a small but devoted and professional group of volunteers to forward our mission. We started with four or five volunteers who persisted despite some obstacles, with the assistance of people in the command who were convinced that the auxiliary was both useful and underutilized. These volunteers were able to make a difference, and to convince more people in the command of the auxiliary's usefulness, such that now we have a dedicated group that provides thousands of hours annually to support the sector.

We are now successfully employing auxiliarists on the aids to navigation team, as our interim educational services officer, in the command center and command suite, on the quarterdeck as watchstanders, and (the largest number) in planning. Auxiliarists not only provide administrative support, but also have also successfully headed up projects of their own. An auxiliarist

On September 13, 2006, the Commandant of the Coast Guard, Admiral Thad Allen, issued a new auxiliary policy statement that included the following directive:

"Every commander, commanding officer, officer-in-charge, and program manager shall work closely with their Auxiliary counterparts to fully leverage the resources, skills, qualifications, and profound dedication that reside within the

Coast Guard Auxiliary. Such focused collaboration is essential to our unwavering commitment to mission excellence in serving and protecting the public trust."

Coast Guard Auxiliarist Bill Hougart works with the Grant County Sheriff during a holiday weekend patrol at Wanapum Lake, Wash. USCG photo by Petty Officer Eric J. Chandler.



serves on the sector's history committee. One of our auxiliarists

has even turned into something of a physical fitness buff in the last year, and is now active as a unit health promotion coordinator and on the wellness committee.

The Care and Feeding of Auxiliarists

Some key factors played into this success. Our auxiliarists have always been professional and dependable. In addition, our auxiliarists are comfortable working in a military environment, and able to work in a military culture. It helped a great deal that two of our volunteers are retired senior military officers.

Another factor is that we have been selective about the auxiliarists to whom we have given orders. Not every auxiliarist is going to be a good fit at such a command. It is hard to say no to volunteers, but sometimes you have to. It also takes time and patience to build up trust in the command.



Additionally, our auxiliarists have been willing to put up with a lot, go out of the way to be responsible and make a good impression, be quick to admit and correct mistakes, and even to seek out correction. Not everyone has this level of patience or humility.

We also found it useful to look for self-starters—people who can be given projects and then run with them. Active duty personnel and civilian employees often simply do not have time to baby-sit volunteers, so having someone who can take charge and do a good job is most helpful. Conversely, having auxiliarists who are cheerful about doing grunt work is also a great help.

Having a good auxiliary sector coordinator (ASC) is key to the success of our program. Our present ASC clearly demonstrates the important traits necessary—being diplomatic and having good people skills and good judgment. If one is looking for auxiliary help, it is first useful to identify shortfalls and then look at what auxiliary billet might fill that shortfall, including the hours

and skill sets desired. The ASC may then be able to find people who can fill those needs. We are just beginning to get a formalized process in place to facilitate this.

Exploring Areas for Improvement

Many obstacles—cultural, personal, and institutional—prevent the successful use of the auxiliary, as we have discovered. Some aspects of the problems facing the auxiliary are ongoing and unlikely to change. The spirit of volunteerism is unlikely ever again to return to the level it was in the 1950s.

However, there are still untapped or underutilized sources of talent. That being the case, we should consider how best to attract the kinds of volunteers we need into the auxiliary. The most attractive things about the auxiliary are its traditions (which embrace those of the Coast Guard), its mission set, and the opportunity for fellowship with others of similar interest.

As with the Coast Guard in general, custom and tradition are very important in maintaining professionalism and dedication among personnel. Sociologically, learning about its history and engaging folks in the customs and traditions of an organization reinforce their sense of belonging and their commitment to being responsible members of that organization.

At our sector we have seen the benefits of having a brief on sector history. It raises our people's awareness of the past accomplishments of the Coast Guard in this region, makes them proud of being members of the sector, and sets good examples for them to follow. In addition, anything we can do to make our people aware of the auxiliary and its past achievements, and to encourage pride in our auxiliarists, will further our goal of having a good working relationship with auxiliarists.

Get Them on the Water

Probably the most attractive mission that the auxiliary has is its involvement in search and rescue. Getting people involved in on-the-water activities is a powerful recruiting tool, and often leads to willingness to perform other kinds of missions. Working directly with the active duty personnel in any kind of operational activity is also a powerful motivator.

Further, people recruited into these kinds of activities will tend to be younger and more physically fit, and thus better in the long term as volunteers. It thus seems prudent that we should better explore opportunities for expanding operational use of the auxiliary and how to recruit on this basis.

Who Salutes Whom?



There is probably nothing about the auxiliary that causes more confusion (and no small amount of resentment) than auxiliary office devices. First, as set forth in the auxiliary manual, auxiliarists are to exchange uniform courtesies with officers.

This is entirely appropriate, given that they are in uniform. However, the fact that they are supposed to do this is not widely appreciated, even within the auxiliary. Further, given that auxiliary officer devices do not represent rank, there is much confusion about who is to initiate a salute.

A simple solution, and one envisioned by the auxiliary manual, is to have one's auxiliarists not wear auxiliary officer devices. Some auxiliarists will not like this at all. There is also the question of how to deal with, say, an auxiliarist who is also a retired Navy captain, someone certainly deserving of the title and recognition his retired military rank deserves.

There is probably no single solution short of entirely reworking the auxiliary officer devices, but in dealing with the auxiliary at sectors or other commands it is important to know that these are problems, so that one can mitigate the difficulties as best as one can.

Physical fitness is necessary at any age, and just about anyone can participate in activities to improve health. It has already been mentioned that we have an auxiliariast as our unit health promotion coordinator. Anything that commands can do to get auxiliariasts involved in physical fitness is likely to have payback in terms of a better member who will work and look like a credit to the command. Further, the benefits to one's health provided by participation in Coast Guard wellness activities can be a powerful additional incentive for an auxiliariast.

This Does Not Compute

Unfortunately, at the same time that the auxiliary began to function more independently from the rest of the Coast Guard, computer information systems began to come into use. This means that separate information systems, separate databases, separate credentialing (including separate systems for ID cards), and separate business procedures came into use, which in turn made it very difficult to do certain things with auxiliariasts. I would suggest this is one of the major obstacles to using them.

Our most recent problem in this respect had to do with travel claims. Further significant problems have had to do with getting some kinds of training recorded, with procuring necessary uniform items when the source of supply was a Navy exchange, and even with getting auxiliariasts' phone extensions in the sector directory.

Unfortunately, here at Sector Delaware Bay we have wasted hours on sometimes fruitless attempts to get things done with a bureaucracy to whom auxiliariasts are invisible, and it can be fatally discouraging for the career of some volunteers. Until those with more authority find solutions to integrate the auxiliary better with the rest of the Coast Guard, it is important for anyone using auxiliariasts at the sector to identify these problems, to work together to find ways to work around them, and to do everything we can to ensure that our auxiliariasts do not have to shoulder an insupportable and alienating bureaucratic burden in order to be of service. Support from one's Coast Guard supervisor and willingness to intercede with the bureaucracy on behalf of one's auxiliariasts can make a decisive difference.

Acknowledgment

The only pay that auxiliariasts receive is the sense of belonging to an important team accomplishing an important mission, and the thank-you of their superiors and team members when they have done a good job.

At Sector Delaware Bay, we have a small annual event for auxiliariasts. The command has also been good about

Course Correction

It has proven important, when difficulties or issues have arisen with auxiliariasts who were not meeting the basic standards expected of them (for example, not wearing the uniform properly or behaving inappropriately), to take quick remedial action.

Positive peer pressure is very useful in this, and can prevent a superior from having to take action. Often we have found that just taking the auxiliariasts aside and quietly informing them of the problem will solve it.

Sometimes one has to be persistent. The auxiliariast will usually either correct his or her behavior or stop volunteering. On the other hand, trying to sidestep or ignore a problem in order not to offend the auxiliariast has been shown time and again to have negative results—on all sides.

ensuring that auxiliariasts receive awards when deserving. However, even a habit of saying "thank you" has great benefit and is a powerful motivator. Remember, these people are not doing it for money, and showing gratitude is a very inexpensive way of paying for the hours of service they provide.

The Coast Guard needs all the help it can get, and we should be grateful for the foresight of those in the Coast Guard in the 1930s who saw the need for such a force of volunteers. We can and should take full advantage of the means that they and others who have gone before them have provided to better and more fully accomplish our mission.

About the author:

Mr. LaRue has been a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary for nine years, and has served on the planning staff of Sector Delaware Bay for two and half years. He is also a rare materials cataloguer and researcher with expertise in naval, military, and maritime history, and is active in humanitarian work through the Order of Malta. In the fall of 2006 he received the Auxiliary Achievement medal for his work on improving force readiness and information management at the sector level.

Auxiliariast Larry Owens, right, and SN David Jacobson exit the water after a rescue demonstration. USCG photo.

