A School Within a School

Preparing high school students for employment in the merchant marine.

by Captain Ray Addicott, (U.S. Navy, ret.)
Training Resources, Ltd. Inc.

"Shaun Pomerleau stood on the deck of the USNS Henry J. Kaiser, *a Military Sealift Command underway replenishment tanker, traveling at 13 knots in the ocean off Coronado, Calif.*

He braced his steel-toe-booted feet, lifted an M-14 rifle, pointed it at a nearby ship, and fired.

A cord from the gun sailed through the air, hitting a Navy cruiser 200 feet away. Crewmembers used the line to guide a hose from the tanker to the cruiser for refueling.

Pomerleau is a student at Mar Vista High School, Imperial Beach, Calif., enrolled in one of San Diego County's most unusual high school vocational courses—a maritime academy for unlicensed mariners within a high school. When he graduates from high school he will have a diploma in his left hand and a merchant marine document in his right." [1]

Training Resources, Ltd. Inc. (TRL) is affiliated with the Sailors' Union of the Pacific and is a provider of Coast Guard-approved training courses. In 2000, TRL began looking into the possibility of bringing maritime training programs to high school districts in the area to give students access to U.S. Coast Guard-certified training—at no cost—to prepare them for employment in the merchant marine.

They held several meetings with different school districts within San Diego County and found that most were not interested. The school districts felt that their primary goal was to prepare each student for a college education. Finally, one school, Mar Vista High School in the Sweetwater Union School District, just south of San Diego in the small town of Imperial Beach, indicated it might have an interest.

Why Offer Maritime Training in High School?

The Maritime Training Program at Mar Vista High School began with a series of meetings with school district officials over a period of two years. The key par-

Mar Vista intern Christina Ramirez takes a turn on the helm of the USNS *Tippecanoe* while operating in the mid-Pacific. Photo by Mr. Rick Nichols. All photos courtesy of Training Resources, Ltd. Inc.

Mar Vista intern Bert Leuluai works on his "rating forming part of a navigational watch" competencies under the watchful eye of the USNS *Tippecanoe* bosun. Photo by Mr. Rick Nichols.

ticipants were Training Resources, Ltd.; Sailors' Union of the Pacific; the director of Sweetwater Union School District's regional occupation programs; and the school principal and staff.

Early on it was apparent there was little understanding of the maritime industry and its career opportunities for students, so the primary purpose of the meetings turned out to be discussions about the industry. Organizers explained the potential job opportunities available to students, especially those who didn't have the resources (or inclination) to pursue higher education upon graduation.

Once consensus was reached, a 10-member advisory board comprised of educators, unions, government and commercial employers, and the U.S. Coast Guard was put in place to oversee the program and provide advice and support.

The proposed training curriculum included maritime industry familiarization and U.S. Coast Guard-certified courses of instruction. It consisted of four separate modules, all of which tied in a marine-centric focus:

- basic first aid and CPR,
- basic firefighting,
- personal safety,
- social responsibility and personal survival.

In addition, the students attend either an able seaman course or a qualified member of the engineering department course.

The California Regional Occupation Program reviewed and approved the curriculum. After that, the instructors (all TRL, Coast Guard-approved instructors) had to be screened and cleared to access the campus.

The next steps were to identify classrooms and workshops for the classes, then tackle the toughest step of all—finding funding to support the program. Initially, TRL refurbished two modular classrooms dedicated to the maritime program. Through the efforts of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, a California State Governor's Work Force Initiative Act grant was obtained to fund the first 18 months of the program. The program has been funded by the Sweetwater Union School District regional occupation programs since the grant expired in 2003.

An MMD, a Passport, and a Bank Account

Once the infrastructure was in place, officials began recruiting students. This entailed educating school career counselors and scheduling lunchtime briefings in the school library for interested students and evening briefings for parents. The goal was to achieve a commitment from each student and his or her parents.

The maritime program has been a great success since established in 2002. The successful student graduates

What's In It For Me?

Graduates typically earn salaries comparable to college graduates.

There have been many success stories from graduates working in the industry. This program has changed the lives of many students and their families.

In one case, a young lady recently graduating from the program, now sailing as a merchant marine, was able to buy a home for her single-parent mother and family. In another case a young man, abandoned by his family several years ago, successfully completed the program, and is achieving great success in the merchant marine, working toward his third assistant engineer's license.

Interns enjoy a topside break aboard USNS *Tippecanoe*. From left: Luis Berrelleza, Ruben Torres, Geraldo Valdez, David Sanchez, Michael Rosignolo, and Luis Marmalejo. Photo by David Alvarez, Mar Vista intern.

Interns prepare for alongside refueling of a U.S. Navy combatant while serving aboard the *Tippecanoe*. Photo by Mr. Rick Nichols.

with a merchant marine document in hand, a passport, and a bank account. Thanks to the Military Sealift Command (MSC), during the summer many students sail as paid interns aboard MSC ships operating in Southern California and Hawaii.

In addition to the paycheck, they obtain valuable experience and the opportunity to satisfy sea time requirements and complete competencies for a rating forming part of a navigational/engineering watch. Students who excel in the program learn exactly what going to sea is like and become confident employees who likely will stay, greatly improving retention.

Benefits for Students, the Community, the Industry

The Mar Vista maritime training program is an example of what can be achieved to provide young, well-trained, confident men and women to the maritime industry on an annual basis to replace an aging employee base. More than this, maritime training programs embedded in a school bring the school and the community awareness of the value of the industry to our country's economy and security. Another bonus is that the Mar Vista High School career counselors become permanent recruiters for the industry.

This training program can also prepare students for shoreside career options such as firefighting, emergency medical response, ship repair, and facility maintenance, to name a few. Moreover, regardless of their ultimate career paths, these trained mariners will have all the documentation necessary for service in case of a major activation of the Ready Reserve Force and could form a core of civilian unlicensed merchant marine reserves.

In 2003, then-Maritime Administrator Capt. William Shubert visited the Mar Vista maritime program and spoke with the students. He commended the program and recommended that the Mar Vista model be replicated in other schools.

Programs such as Mar Vista can be replicated, but it takes time, cooperation, and funding. Educational budgets for schools in California, for example, are subject to budget cutbacks that put vocational training programs such as the Mar Vista maritime program at risk.

What is needed is congressional awareness and support of successful grass-roots programs that have the potential to meet the future needs of the maritime industry, such as Mar Vista. Better support, such as that presently provided to maritime academies that graduate licensed mariners, would greatly enhance replication of this program.

As of this issue's publication, 30 of the 40 students enrolled in the continuing Mar Vista program graduated in June, and 40 to 60 more students were expected for the fall 2008 semester. As one of our graduates now working in the merchant marine recently commented, "It's a good way to go."

About the author:

Captain Addicott served in the U.S. Navy for 30 years. During that time he served in command of several ships, including USS Fox. *He also served as commander for the Military Sealift Command-Pacific during Operation Desert Storm. Following his retirement, he held the position of California Maritime Academy's director of continuing education. He co-founded Training Resources, Ltd. Inc. in 1998 with Cdr. Ray Gillip, providing maritime training programs for those serving in the merchant marine.*

Endnote:

1. Chris Moran, "Seaworthy Schooling," San Diego Union-Tribune, July 28, 2007.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Training Resources, Ltd. Inc.
1400 Grizzly Peak Blvd.
Berkeley, CA 94708
(510) 704-8978
Website: www.maritimetraining.cc