

At NACON with Admiral Papp

Barry Novakoff, director of Auxiliary public affairs, Flotilla 79, Point Judith, Rhode Island, interviews Admiral Robert J. Papp, Jr., Commandant of the Coast Guard.

There is no better way to understand how the Auxiliary is viewed by the Coast Guard and how we fit into its future than to talk with the Commandant. We had such an opportunity at the 2013 National Conference in San Diego. Admiral Papp's admiration and respect for the Auxiliary are evident in his comments.

NOVAKOFF: It's easy to get bogged down with budget issues and immediate day-to-day crises, but looking long-term, say 10 years out, where do you see the Auxiliary going and what do we need to do now to prepare?

Commandant: I think it's probably of value to look at where I think the *Coast Guard* is going to be 10 years from now. I'm hopeful that the economy is going to turn around and the federal budget will start gaining some revenue, start buying down the deficit and getting our budgets a bit healthier. But, if we're confronted with reductions, then I think all bets are off. Whatever happens on the active duty side of the Coast Guard there will be a reflexive action within the Auxiliary. Right now we're formed up, I think optimally, on both sides so that over the next five to ten years, maybe out to 15 years, we can keep the organization firmly in place and focus on other challenges.

Part of our focus is on the Arctic and I'm very proud that just recently we published the Coast Guard's Arctic Strategy which is a first for any agency in the government. I think it's fitting since the Coast Guard has been in Alaska for 150 years or so.

Within the next couple of months, we will publish our Western Hemisphere Strategy. The President has talked about the Department of Defense refocusing



On a visit to Air Station Los Angeles, Adm. Bob Papp greets Don Hetticher, Flotilla 12-5, Beach Cities, who stands watch at the station.

towards the Pacific. As a result, most of our armed forces, particularly the Navy, are forward deployed, leaving the question open as to who has responsibility for security and other issues in the off-shore regions closer to our own shores? Clearly it's the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard does have a role supporting engagement with countries in the region. However, rather than trying to be a second Navy, and push a significant amount of forces out there as well, we are going to focus the majority of our efforts on current and emerging threats in the Western Hemisphere.

Considering the scarce resources we get, we're assessing where we are really needed and how we continue to carry out the duties we're assigned. Specifically for the Auxiliary, we need a force that's focused on recreational boating safety and I think that will continue to be the bread and butter for our volunteer force. Despite our efforts, we still have too many recreational boating deaths every year. As much as we tell people to put on a life jacket, don't drink before boating, we continue to lose a lot of people. We will also continue taking advantage of the special skills that Auxiliarists bring to the table. As we find

our operational tempo increasing at the same time our budget is reduced, I think the Auxiliary is a proven tool for the Coast Guard. I don't see a lot of deviation in terms of what we are doing already, but look at the numbers. We're up to about 32,000 Auxiliarists right now. Does everyone have an opportunity to contribute? Perhaps we need a better catalog of skills to see where Auxiliarists might augment the active duty in the decade ahead.

NOVAKOFF: What is your most significant or memorable experience as Commandant?

Commandant: Well, foremost, being Commandant is a tremendous honor and a privilege. I am humbled every day to be the leader of this organization with 42,000 active duty people, 32,000 Auxiliarists, 8,000 civilians, and nearly 8,000 Reserves. I can recite those numbers because each one of them is valuable.

It's hard to isolate any one significant incident that is most memorable, because the last three-plus years have all been memorable. Clearly, the Deepwater Horizon oil spill was very significant. Seeing the entire Coast Guard rallying to take on that very unique

Petty Officer 2nd Class Annie R. Ellis.

challenge in the Gulf of Mexico was gratifying as well as memorable and exciting.

Hurricane Sandy was another memorable event, because it was the culmination of reorganizing efforts, particularly on the mission support side, to make sure we are able to respond adroitly and effectively when a disaster, whether man-made or natural, hits. It worked marvelously at every step along the line. Wherever I met with all hands to congratulate them and cheer them on, there was that contingent of Auxiliarists raising their hands to volunteer. That never fails to bring a smile to my face. Just getting to see all our Coast Guard people in my travels has been rewarding.

NOVAKOFF: That's very good, thank you. Will the Auxiliary be part of the Coast Guard Museum when it moves to its new facility in New London, Connecticut?

Commandant: Well, I am tremendously excited about the museum. I just made two calls yesterday morning looking for honorary directors. You might have heard the name John David Power, J.D. Power and Associates [a global marketing information services company]. Not many people know he was a Coast Guardsman. He served in the 1950s for about four years on an icebreaker and credits the Coast Guard with teaching him very strong life skills that made him successful. Another person I spoke with was John Amos, the actor who was in the movie *Roots*. He has a strong connection with Vince Patton, a former master chief petty officer of the Coast Guard. We're hoping Arnold Palmer, who served as a yeoman during the Korean War might be enticed to join us as an honorary director. We hope to break ground before I am relieved sometime next year.

To get to your direct question, I don't see how you can tell the story of the Coast Guard without having a portion of the museum devoted to the Coast Guard Auxiliary. I don't know how much out of the 54,000 square feet, but clearly, the Auxiliary is going to be in there and, I would hope it provides some opportunities in the New London area for docents. Perhaps our Auxiliarists in the New London area will help us.

NOVAKOFF: Stressing the Coast Guard partnership is one of your guiding principles. Auxiliary members have business and personal relationships with U.S. and international leaders and organizations. Do you see those relationships contributing to the strength of the Coast Guard?

Commandant: I don't see why not. Anytime we can leverage relationships we should. I mean most of what we get done is based upon relationships. Let me give you an example that happened in Alaska. Sector Anchorage was in an office building it had outgrown. It did not have the technology we needed and the command center was crowded. We would never have been able to buy new space with our budget, so we entered into a partnership with the Alaska National Guard. They built a new building on property where the National Guard has its headquarters with a wing that will house Sector Anchorage. The rent is less than we were paying downtown. I encourage our leaders to reach out within the community, get to know all the various federal, state and locals, but also talk to Auxiliarists who provide continuity in their communities and a base for relationships.

Another example. . . I met an Auxiliarist named George White [New London Flotilla 25-5] up in Waterford, Connecticut, as I was becoming commanding officer of *Eagle*. He worked in the theater in New York City and is, or was at the time, the president of the Eugene O'Neill Theater in Waterford and he knew we were going to Russia. Here's this guy I've just met who comes up and starts telling me all the things he's set up for me in St. Petersburg, Russia. And I'm thinking, 'Yeah, sure.' So, I get to Russia and every one of these things comes true. The point is, I didn't know his background. I didn't know he had taken Broadway plays to Russia, while it was still the Soviet Union through a program with the State Department to encourage relationships as the Cold War was ending. It taught me that Auxiliarists are treasures and inside each and every one of them there is some relationship, or some skill, some talent that can be of valuable service to us in the active duty.

NOVAKOFF: Very nice, I like that, thank you. The 9/11 terrorist attacks moved the Coast Guard into new mission areas requiring more personnel. However, personnel are expensive, while Auxiliarists volunteer their time and expertise with no pay or health cost and have the ability and skills to perform many non-military, non-law enforcement missions. Do you see Auxiliarists freeing up some of the Coast Guard resources so you can concentrate on more specific tasks?

Commandant: It's hard to quantify where and when, because you never know exactly what sort of skill set or talent might be needed. But, wherever I go I see Auxiliarists freeing up traditional things like communications watch standers or our food service specialists. I don't think freeing up people in order to get more accomplished is the answer, but where we can economize, where we can be more efficient, I think one of the best uses of the Auxiliary is taking a little bit of the burden off our active duty people.

NOVAKOFF: What would you like every Auxiliarist to know about being a member of Team Coast Guard?

Commandant: I'd like every Auxiliarist to know that we value every member of the Coast Guard family equally. I often talk about what the term "shipmates" means to me. It's very important, because "shipmates" to me, a sailor, are like family. It includes active duty, Auxiliary, Reserve and civilian.

NOVAKOFF: Final question. Are there any special events within the Coast Guard next year that will support the Auxiliary's 75th anniversary?

Commandant: I'm going to make sure that our public affairs people work this into everything that we do over the next year. By the way, you've got a great logo—I really like that.

NOVAKOFF: Thank you, Sir.

Commandant: It's my pleasure.