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A Life Saving Tradition

Story and Photos by PA3 Eric Chandler

Entering the front door of Coast Guard Station Juneau, the traditional Coast Guard standards of perfection are immediately apparent. The floor gleams with polish and the scent of curing paint creates an atmosphere of a recently constructed building. A watch stander greets and directs arriving personnel.



JUNEAU, Alaska – Coast Guard Petty Officer Robert McCormick prepares crewmember for the approach of a vessel simulating distress in the Gastineau Channel. Official Coast Guard photo by Petty Officer Eric J. Chandler.

Juneau's winter prevents the majority of outdoor activity on the water, and reduces the number of search and rescue cases. Most recreational vessels are no match for the elements and rapidly changing weather of the waters surrounding Alaska's capital. Coast Guard personnel standing duty need to find ways to pass time during the winter months.

“Well, we don't hibernate when the snow arrives. We continue to train underway and have to meet our semi-annual qualification currency requirements,” said Senior Chief Petty Officer Jeffery Kihlmire, Officer in Charge at Station Juneau. Kihlmire is a qualified surfman, and has served at heavy weather and surf stations for much of his 21-year career.

The contrasting seasonal workload at most stations can be difficult to impress upon newly arriving personnel. Southeast Alaskan waterways become a convergence of seaplanes taking off in close proximity to recreational, fishing and cruise vessels during the summer. Similar changes happen nationwide, as fishing seasons and weather conditions increase boater activity.

Kihlmire explained that arriving personnel spend the first two weeks of their tour as break-in watch standers and must pass an oral board examination before receiving final watch qualification.

Next, new personnel start the crewman break-in period of four months guided by the Boat Crew Member Personal Qualification Standard, a Coast Guard standardization manual. When new crewmen have completed all the tasks for both the motor life boat and RB-S (response boat small) they will receive an additional examination to test their knowledge of the vessels and their crewman skills. After passing the board they move on to the underway check ride, which is a practical, hands-on test of what they have learned.

Petty Officer Ricky Johanson, Station Juneau's operations officer, explained the conclusion of the process saying, "When those tasks are completed successfully, the crewman is qualified and ready to do the job. The process is expected to take about six months and crewmembers are left excited and eager to use their new skills." In Juneau a qualified crewmember can expect to spend between 175 and 200 hours underway in one summer.



JUNEAU, Alaska – Coast Guard Petty Officer Robert McCormick observes a vessel simulating distress during a training exercise in the Gastineau Channel. Coming up with an approach plan and considering all possible dangers is the responsibility of the vessel coxswain. Photo by PA3 Eric Chandler.

Surfman is the highest qualification achievable as a small boat coxswain, and can require four or more years of training, determination, and uncommon vessel handling skills. Facing down the storm and going where no one else wants to be in order to help another seems to be a desirable lifestyle for some.

Senior Chief Petty Officer Scott Lowry, executive officer of the National Motor Lifeboat School (NMLBS), described the appeal of becoming a surfman. "Many of us are originally from the Pacific Northwest. I grew up fishing on the jetties, watching the boats come in and out. My father was a Coast Guard surfman, and my son, Coast Guard Petty Officer Augusta Metz, is studying to become a surfman. Most of us share a common desire to be the best in our field and to help people."

"The success rate here is high, although a few people find that it is not what they had expected and change their minds. It takes a person willing to dedicate their career to living in small towns throughout the Pacific Northwest and dealing with some of the most dreary and frequently severe weather mother-nature can whip up," said Lowry. He describes a surfman as the best of the best. A seasoned person who must make the correct decision, often facing the fury of an angry ocean with the lives of his or her crew and those being rescued hanging in the balance.

Lowry added that completing the school is not the final step in qualification. The NMLBS teaches team coordination, situational safety evaluation and skills necessary for inclement weather boat handling. Determining if a member is qualified to operate a 47-foot motor life boat in the surf is the responsibility of local unit commands, and that is who issues a certifying letter of qualification.

Search and rescue is one of the Coast Guard's oldest missions. The United States Life Saving Service merged with the Revenue Cutter Service to become the Coast Guard in 1915, under an act signed by President Woodrow Wilson, which combined small boat stations (formerly life saving stations) with the cutter fleet as one federal agency.

Early heavy weather boats were built with air pockets and buoyant cork in the bow and stern to give them a limited self-righting and bailing ability. Hardened crews combined sails, oars and will power to transit dangerous seas and help the victims of storms, errors of navigation and bad luck.

Over the years a fascinating evolution in heavy weather response craft progressed to culminate in the production of the 47-foot motor life boat used at most heavy weather and surf stations today. The aluminum hulled surf boat is

built of sealed compartments with watertight doors giving the vessel the ability to stay afloat even with one or more flooded areas. Crewmembers don dry suits, signal kits, life vests and surf belts.

Although safety and functional improvements have taken huge strides since the early days of the lifesaving stations, the nature of the crews have in no way been diminished. Tradition and pride can still be seen in every aspect of training, execution of mission and ceremony.

It is the trait that makes a lifesaver take action when others hesitate. It reflects the courtship of the sailor and the sea, and a personality drawn to confront the unimaginable. It is a timeless and indefinable truth, harbored in an expression of calm confidence and personifying the statement, "We are always ready."

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