

Meals for the Masses

Story and photo by PA3 Barry Bena, D7 Public Affairs

MIAMI -- Food; it's what sustains life. We consume it to fuel our bodies and to provide energy necessary to make it through the day.

Cooking the food is just as important as what we eat and we all need the vitamins and minerals to help us get the job done.

One group of Coast Guard personnel has the ever-important job of making sure Coast Guard crews eat good, well-prepared food.

There are those few who do it in a confined space on a rocking ship. They are food service specialists in the Coast Guard.

Their training begins with 12 weeks of specialized instruction at food service specialist "A"-school in Petaluma, Calif., or with on-the-job training at their unit. Training consists of acquiring or honing cooking skills, accounting, management and leadership skills. They also learn equipment safety and use, recipe conversions, food preparation terminology, basic food preparation skills and baking. Sanitation, purchasing, storage, nutrition and wellness cooking, and dining facility management are also taught at their school.

After graduation, many of the newly trained food service specialists are sent to cutters.

"[On a ship] You're limited to what you can make," said Petty Officer 2nd Class Michael Allen, temporarily assigned to Coast Guard Cutter *Sitkinak*. "At a shore facility, you have unlimited supplies and possibilities."

On the 110-foot cutters, the crew compliment is between 13-15 people with one food service specialist to make sure everyone is fed three squares a day. They cook in a space roughly 10-by-4 feet, which includes a grill, cold storage, sink and countertops, which countertops are only 5-by-2 feet.

Being on any vessel comes with the possibility of hitting rough seas. Eight-foot seas may not be much for a high-endurance cutter, but being on a patrol boat and hitting seas like



MIAMI -- Petty Officer 3rd Class Michael Allen, from Integrated Support Command Miami, prepares lunch for the crew while aboard the Cutter *Sitkinak*. It is common for food service specialists at ISC Miami to deploy aboard cutters and assist with all ship evolutions while underway. Coast Guard photograph by PA3 Barry Bena.

that can definitely make things fall. Both situations can cause motion sickness in the crew as well as the cooks.

“It’s very difficult to cook something when the boat is getting tossed around,” said Petty Officer 2nd Class Lance Turner, a food service specialist at ISC Miami who once served on the patrol boat *Tybee Island*.

Allen reiterated by saying rough seas will mess with their meal plan. He mentioned you have to be mindful of what you cook on days people are sick. He said they have to try and make light, non-greasy foods that people with nausea can keep down.

“I carried a bag with me just in case, but I still did what I had to do, and that was cook,” said Turner.

Along with cooking, food service specialist’s have many responsibilities outside of the galley.

“I had to prepare and cook the meals, then clean up and get ready for the next one,” said Petty Officer 2nd Class Hipolito Sharon, the food service officer aboard the cutter *Chandeleur*. “I also serve as the ship’s investigator during emergencies.”

The Coast Guard is a small service and the food service specialist rate is even smaller, because of this, the cooks aboard the ships seem to form a somewhat unique bond with the other personnel on the ship.

“Thirteen people, you get to know their likes and dislikes,” said Allen. “You always know who you’re cooking for.” Allen also serves as a line-handler during mooring, getting underway and small-boat operations.

Sharon believes the crew on a cutter becomes like a family and that it is rewarding to serve his country and his shipmates.

Food service specialists are trained to prepare and cook in all types of weather conditions.

Without these culinary experts, Coast Guard personnel afloat and ashore, would not have the energy they need to conduct the Coast Guard’s missions everyday.

“I enjoy and love what I do,” Sharon said.

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