

The Force Multiplier

Story and Photos by PA1 Krystyna Hannum, District Seven Public Affairs

From the earth's surface, the plane appeared to be like any other single-engine aircraft. The faded blue-green stripe along the fuselage lent no information to an observer that this piper is actually, on some days, an instrument of the federal government and used to conduct air patrols over the waters of the Florida Keys.

The pilots and owners of the Piper Cherokee 140 are Gerald and Elsie Metcalf, who are 75 and 70 respectively, and just two of the more than 28,000 people nationwide that make up the eyes and ears of the Coast Guard Auxiliary. Dubbed America's Volunteer Lifesavers, the organization has been around since 1939 and began in the Keys in 1972 with the creation of Division 13.

"I can't say enough about the Auxiliary here," said Cmdr. James R. Olive, deputy of Coast Guard Sector Key West. "They are a force multiplier that works across the spectrum of Coast Guard missions from writing awards to search and rescue and overflights. They are a tremendous assistance in a resource-deprived environment."



Elsie and Gerald Metcalf stand in front of their Piper Cherokee 140. Since the beginning of 2008, they have averaged ten Coast Guard patrols a month.

The missions of the Auxiliary mirror that of the non law enforcement missions of the active duty component; such as search and rescue and environmental protection. The Auxiliary also devotes time and effort to raising awareness of safe boating through boating courses and vessel safety checks.



The structure of the organization is similar to the Coast Guard, with local flotillas (like stations), divisions (sectors) and district offices. Over 200 auxiliaries are assigned to Division 13, which is split into the five flotillas spaced throughout the 126 miles of the Florida Keys. When an auxiliary's resource is on a mission, they work directly for an active duty unit, such as a sector or station.

Since joining the Auxiliary in Jan. 2006, the Metcalf's have flown over 100 missions for the Coast Guard, and they say it is a treat for them.

"We will fly as often as they [the Coast Guard] will let us!" said Elsie. The Metcalf's plane is just one of five aircraft in Division 13. In the air, Gerald and Elsie began their run northward along the shoreline, looking for anything unusual, and counting boats along the way.

"We count boats to keep our eyes trained on the water as well as to get an idea of the number of vessels, big and small, out there," said Gerald. "We're looking for anything unusual, anyone in distress, or any type of environmental issue."

While the sky is the limit for the aircraft, the sea is the frontier for the more than 40 small boats in the Division 13 assembly. One of those vessels is the Discovery, a 31-foot sport fisher owned by Vince Melendy, 60, who spends winters in Key West and summers in Gloucester, Mass. Melendy's time in the Auxiliary began over 15 years ago in Massachusetts after searching for an organization to get involved in.

"I wanted to give back to the community," said Melendy. "I thought, 'What can I do?' I've been boating since 1965 so I thought I'd try to join the Coast Guard Auxiliary."

Melendy did get in and now in addition to patrolling the waters, Melendy "gives back" to the boating community through education. As a boat crew member, coxswain and the current public education officer for his flotilla, Melendy teaches boaters coastal navigation, basic boating and seamanship, and GPS for mariners.

In addition to teaching people about safe boating, Auxiliarists themselves are required to complete qualification procedures before performing duties such as boat/air crew member, watchstander, or coxswain for the Coast Guard. When an auxiliary asset is under orders for the Coast Guard, the vessel is considered an official Coast Guard vessel and the personnel are required to be trained the same as their active duty component.



Fred Clark, 57, makes up a line during a towing exercise June 12. Clark, who is a dock master at a Key West marina, joined the Auxiliary in 2006 with a desire to help people.



Vince Melendy drives his boat, the Discovery, while his crew, Fred Clark and Michelle Thornton, prepare the deck for towing evolutions. Members of the Auxiliary must complete crewman qualifications just like their active duty components.

Even though the organization is completely voluntary, there are fundamental requirements that must be met, which include; must be at least 17 years of age (no upper age limit), must be a U.S. citizen, have no felonies, and be able to pass a basic background check.

Additionally, those intending to be a part of operational activities must be able to perform certain physical activities, though there are no weight/health limits.

"While most Auxiliarists generally tend to be of the retired generation, the young are definitely welcome, and it is a great opportunity for anyone regardless of age," said Olive.

To those already in the Auxiliary, "Thank you, thank you, thank you," said Olive. "They come through whenever we need them and we can not do enough to show them our appreciation."

**Anyone wishing to learn more about the Auxiliary, or for more information on boating classes and vessel checks, can visit www.cgaux.org or call 1-888-470-5566.*