

COAST GUARD REQUESTS BOATERS HELP ON THE WATER

New neighborhood watch program for waterways helps thwart terrorism

By John P. Whelan, United States Coast Guard Auxiliary

With reports of increased threats of a terrorist attack on our shores, the United States Coast Guard is requesting the assistance of America's 70 million boaters and others, who work, play, or live around our waterfronts, rivers, lakes, and coastal areas to become part of our nation's first line of defense, called America's Waterway Watch (AWW).

America's Waterway Watch is an outreach program akin to neighborhood watch programs in many local communities but is focused strictly on marine-related areas. Let's face it; with over 95,000 miles of shoreline, 300,000 square miles of waterways, 6,000 bridges, 360 ports of call, and thousands of marinas, the United States Coast Guard simply cannot be everywhere at once. They need all the eyes and ears of those who frequent our waterways to be on the lookout for suspicious activities that might threaten our homeland security.

Neighborhood watch programs have proven to be effective in promoting partnerships, deterring criminal activity, creating a sense of security and reducing fears of crime, and building a bond in the community. "The primary objective of America's Waterway Watch is to help prevent acts of terrorism and other illegal activity by having members of the commercial and recreational boating industries, as well as the boating public, recognize and report suspicious activities that may be indicators of potential terrorism," says Coast Guard Chief Petty Officer Penny Collins, National Program Manager for America's Waterway Watch.

The Coast Guard Auxiliary, a volunteer boating safety organization made up of 30,000 members, is helping the Coast Guard get that message out to the boating public. "We are appealing to all those people who live, work or boat on our waterways, says Mike Renuart, the Auxiliary National Liaison for AWW. "They are the very people who know the absolute difference between what is normal or routine and what is out of place, peculiar, unusual, or a possible threat."

The AWW program has a central phone number, 1-877-24-WATCH (1-877-249-2824), where the public can report suspicious activities. This information goes to the National Response Center located at U. S. Coast Guard headquarters, which is staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Renuart indicated that if anyone sees something out of the ordinary or looks suspicious in any way to take detailed notes of who, where, what and when it occurs. If what's seen poses an immediate threat, call local authorities by dialing 911, or the U.S. Coast Guard on Channel 16 of their VHF-FM marine radio. If someone sees something that looks suspicious,

they should call the AWW toll-free number. “Any specific set of details will be helpful including any description of the individuals, the vessel or vehicle involved, registration numbers, vessel name, GPS coordinates, and what sort of activity was taking place,” he says.

People are strongly urged *never* to confront anyone suspicious, or to take any action themselves, other than reporting it. Furthermore, it is advised that if anyone observes a situation which is perceived to be an immediate danger, they should contact local authorities right away. Providing as much detailed information can be very helpful. For example, if the Coast Guard receives reports of suspicious activities around cruise ship terminals, in port areas, or near sensitive infrastructures, they may be able to identify a pattern of criminal intent and even anticipate a terrorist’s next move on a more large-scale plot.

Some examples the public should be on the lookout for include, but are not limited to the following:

- Suspicious persons conducting unusual activities.
- Anyone trying to forcibly obtain access to a vessel or waterfront facility.
- Any suspicious person attempting to rent a boat, especially if they seem unfamiliar with boating.
- Unknown persons photographing or making sketches of commercial ports and infrastructures.
- Unknown or suspicious persons loitering for extended periods
- Unknown vendors attempting to sell or deliver merchandise
- Vessels anchored around bridges and dams, or fishing in an area not typically used for fishing
- Recovering or tossing items into/onto the waterway or shoreline
- Unusual transfer of personnel or items while vessel is moving
- Boaters who appear to go out of their way to avoid contact with other boaters or law enforcement vessels.
- Any vessel dumping solids or liquids overboard.
- Diving or boating activity near sensitive infrastructures, like dams, bridges, power plants, etc.

Apparently, the AWW program has already helped authorities. For instance, Sayed Abdul Malike, a suspected terrorist with known connections to Al Qaeda, was apprehended back in 2003, based upon a tip from a local charter boat captain. “This gentleman was on a platform next to me, videotaping the underside of the I-395 bridge and taking photos with a camera phone,” says Capt. John J.J. Martin, U.S. Merchant Marine, “He also asked a number of unusual questions, such as ‘can you climb up on the bridge, can you stop under the bridge, where can you rent a jet ski, and how close can you get to the cruise ships?’” After witnessing this unusual activity, Martin got his first mate to take the helm and immediately called 1-877-24-WATCH.

Capt. Martin did the right thing and was not being nosy or trying to create a public frenzy. While the Auxiliary wants to enlist your help, they also want to remind the public that this is

not about spying on their neighbors nor is it intended to instill fear or create a pandemonium. "In our post-911 age, vigilance is simply part of being a responsible member of the boating community and by being the eyes and ears around where you work or recreate, we can only hope our freedoms and liberties are not again ever challenged," says Renuart.

The AWW program has several promotional tools to help spread the word including an AWW decal for the helm of your boat, a wallet card, poster, brochure, and a video that marina owners, operators, or other presenters can use to educate their residents, tenants, or customers. These items are available from your local Coast Guard Auxiliary unit. To obtain any of these, visit www.cgaux.org and use the flotilla finder or call 1-877-875-6296.

For more information about America's Waterway Watch, visit www.americaswaterwaywatch.com

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