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## Citizens on patrol keep waters safe

BY BRYAN FINLAYSON



U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Division 18 Commander Vincent Pica, 55, of Westhampton is the coxswain of U.S. Coast Guard vessel 251384, a 25-foot Parker owned by Mr. Pica, who has been a volunteer with the Auxiliary since 2001. □ BRYAN FINLAYSON

U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary Division 18 Commander Vincent Pica, on patrol duty on Tuesday afternoon, peered off the starboard side of his 25-foot Parker toward a shape in the distance.

Something blue and round was floating far off in the Moriches Bay. Could it be debris, or, God forbid, a person thrown overboard?

“It looks like one of those mylar balloons,” said Mr. Pica, 55. “That could end up in someone’s mouth.”

The Coast Guard Auxiliary, which serves to reinforce the regular Coast Guard, celebrated its 70th anniversary on June 23 as a nationwide organization. Encompassing an area of operations roughly from the William Floyd Parkway to the eastern ends of the North and South forks, Division 18, one of the oldest Coast Guard Auxiliary divisions in New York, was created in 1967.

Division 18 is split into four units, East Moriches, Montauk, Southold and Riverhead, each operating out of a different Coast Guard station. It boasts membership of 148 people. Nationwide, the Coast Guard Auxiliary has about 30,000 volunteers.

While on patrol, Coast Guard Auxiliary men and women take their assignments seriously, like volunteers in a Neighborhood Watch. Auxiliary volunteers have no law enforcement abilities—they can’t board boats or make arrests. But they are the “eyes and ears” of the regular Coast Guard, which is summoned if anything suspicious is spotted, Mr. Pica said.

“We go out there to see and be seen,” Mr. Pica said. “We’re like a cop on a beat. You just walk around and hope there is nothing to do. But, if there is, we are ready.”

Assigned the task of keeping the waters safe, Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers also look for anything that might pose a danger to boaters, no matter how small, and that includes derelict balloons.

Mr. Pica slowed the boat and steered it alongside the balloon. He was on patrol with a crew of three other Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers. One of the crew members, George “The Admiral”

Nelson, 64, of Shirley leaned over the starboard side, clutching a long pole. George Sarafin, 55, and his wife, Marion, both Center Moriches residents and teachers at McGann-Mercy High School in Riverhead, were also on board on Tuesday.

“Prepare to retrieve balloon!” yelled The Admiral, a former submarine officer with the U.S. Navy. Using the pole—a hook was attached to one end—he plucked the balloon from the water.

Making regular patrols is only a part of the duties performed by Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers. Volunteers also carry out safety inspections of recreational boats, marinas and boat dealers. In 2008, Mr. Pica said, Division 18 volunteers performed 6,000 marine dealer visits and made 10,000 recreational boat checks.

“There are many different things,” Mr. Nelson said. “Boat crew is just one small part.”

To keep their status as a member of the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, volunteers are required to serve about 100 hours every year. Mr. Nelson, who has clocked in over 1,000 hours since he joined in 2006, said volunteers are on call 24/7 in the event of an emergency that taxes the resources of the regular Coast Guard.

Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers use their personal boats to patrol waters. Mr. Pica was using his boat, Coast Guard vessel 251384, otherwise known as “Maruna,” which came equipped with an onboard Global Positioning System unit, infrared camera and a 250-horsepower Yamaha engine. In order for boats to be used for Coast Guard duty, 44 items, including tow lines and extra life jackets, are required on board, Mr. Pica said. It costs volunteers several hundred dollars to outfit boats to Coast Guard requirements, he said.

Mr. Pica, a real estate investor based in Manhattan who owns a summer home in Westhampton, joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist

attacks. Mr. Pica knew people that died in the Twin Towers in Manhattan, and the tragedy inspired him to volunteer, he said.

“I had six friends go down in those buildings,” Mr. Pica said. “I said, ‘I can’t just write a check to the Red Cross. I gotta do something about this.’”

Mr. Pica signed up, took the basic boating course required to become a trainee, and, after about two years, became a full-fledged Coast Guard Auxiliary crew member.

“You do what you can, and you just have fun doing it,” Mr. Pica said. “You’re doing a service for your country.”

In 2008 alone, according to Mr. Pica, Division 18 volunteers saved nearly 20 lives, assisted 527 people and saved more than \$14 million in property.

Once the balloon was safely stowed away, the volunteers continued on their patrol. They reported a possible overcrowded boat to the regular Coast Guard, and warned another boater to wear a life jacket.

A day’s work done, the crew was ready to head back to port at the Remsenburg Marina at 2 p.m., after shoving off at 10 a.m. On Wednesday, Mr. Nelson and Mr. Pica patrolled the Shinnecock Bay.

Mr. Sarafin, who was wearing aviator sunglasses, said he joined the Coast Guard Auxiliary 20 years ago, with the intention of enlisting in the U.S. Coast Guard Reserves. That never panned out, however, and Mr. Sarafin chose to stay with the Coast Guard Auxiliary because he wanted to learn more about safe boating practices.

“I think the Coast Guard is a great place to be,” Mr. Sarafin said. “You just learn so much. You learn discipline and you learn skills.”