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No Fuss, No Muss - Free Vessel Exams

By Vincent Pica

In the springtime, the saying goes that a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of love. This may be true but just about everyone I speak to lately has had it with "cabin fever" and wants to get back out on there! And, fitfully, spring is nearly here. When getting to work commissioning your boat for the water, stop for a moment and consider getting the "gilt edged" United States Coast Guard Auxiliary Vessel Safety Check - better known as the Vessel Exam.

Oh, and it's free.

What It Is Not

USCGAux vessel safety checks are not a regulatory event. If your boat doesn't pass all components of the exam, no one "turns you in." The examiner will explain exactly what needs to be brought back into line to conform to federal standards and, most likely, will also give you his or her cell phone number. "Call me when you've addressed the issue. I'll come over and we'll get this boat decal'd as having passed the USCGAux Vessel Safety Check."

What Does The Decal Mean?

It says something very simple. This boat meets, at least, federal minimums for 15 specific safety or regulatory features. Can USCG active-duty members still come alongside and board you? Of course they can. But experience tells me that when the regulars are faced with two boats, and one has passed our exam and the other hasn't, the other guy had better hope that he has no reason to worry.

How to get one?

In an out-reach program started a few years ago, the USCGAux flotillas "Out East" created "Vessel Exam Days" with a number of marinas and dock masters. Some throw BBQs for their customers. Some set up tables with fresh sets of flares (the most common reason for a boat not to get its decal) and other necessary items like fire extinguishers or air-horns, etc. So, check with your dock master and, if he or she isn't planning to sponsor a "VE Day," email me below and I will follow up directly. Or, you can go online to www.cgaux.org and click on Vessel Safety Checks. Follow a few simple prompts and you will be asked for your zip-code. The computer will then list for you, closest first, where the Vessel Examiners are and you can email them automatically. Or just email me and we'll get it set up for you.

What Will The Vessel Examiner Check?

Believe it or not, the first thing that the Examiner will ask for is your registration. The registration, not a copy, is required by law to be on the boat. If it isn't there, the examiner will still conduct the exam to see if there are any other show-stoppers but the VSC decal cannot be awarded without a valid registration on the boat. It can be in your wallet as long as you are on the boat!

An important reason for the registration to be in hand is that right on it is the length of the boat as it is known to DMV. USCG safety standards are size-dependent. For example, a boat over 39.4 feet shall (must!) have a copy of the Navigation Rules (the COLREGs you've seen so much on here) on the boat. Twenty-six feet or more? Where's your Pollution placard? Trash placard? At least two "B-1" fire extinguishers aboard?

Why Don't All Boats Pass?

Well, as I noted above, the most common reason is expired flares. What does that mean? Your flares come from the factory with 40 months of "life" and that date is stamped on the side of the flare. Why 40? So, after shipping and sitting on a shelf, hopefully you have three years' (36 months) of coverage. Are the flares still good after the expiration date? Almost without a doubt, they are. But the Examiner cannot give you your decal unless you have at least three day and three night "pyrotechnic devices" aboard in an un-expired state.

What else can go wrong? Well, before you get nervous, with over 100,000 exams as the basis, 75 percent of all boats pass on the first pass. And it is not a regulatory event if it doesn't. You get specific advice from the Examiner on what you need. And likely his or her cell phone number to schedule the re-exam. And, oh yes, it is free. Both times.

Does every boat need to pass every item? Not at all. If you don't have a marine sanitation device (a "head") aboard, the Examiner just checks "N/A." But if you do, it must meet federal standards for safe and secure operation. Does your 20' Seahunt need a set of Nav Rules aboard? Nope. But that 46' Ocean yacht of yours does. You get the picture.

So, let's be sure we go to sea with a vessel that meets the gold standard and increase the safety of life at sea - yours!

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux@aol.com or go direct to the D1SR Human Resources department, who are in charge of new members matters, at [DSO-HR](#) and we will help you "get in this thing..."