

## Vessel Safety Check?

It's a blustery, mid-week afternoon as we are entering the marina's minimum wake zone on our way back to our berth. This particular day, we have a SE wind blowing steady at 18-20kts. Normally I'm not too concerned with a 20kt wind since the prevailing winds are from the West and parallel to my dock, but at my dock, a SE wind blows me off the dock, making docking just a bit more challenging. As we enter the marina and pass the guest dock, I notice a USCG 25' Response Boat just getting under way. It looks like we are the only two boats moving around the marina so I give a quick wave and turn my attention back to discussing with my first mate how I plan to maneuver the boat for docking. As we proceed through the marina towards my slip, I notice that the patrol boat has turned and is now following me. My first mate suggests that perhaps the "Coasties" think that I may need help docking in this wind. Wrong. Docking with an audience is always more interesting and challenging, but fortunately even in this wind we were able to get the boat up to the dock and get a spring line secured on the first attempt. After we get the bow and stern lines secure and I'm feeling less pressure. I look over and see the patrol boat standing off 50 feet observing my docking skills. I now notice they have activated the blue light. It looks as though we are going to have company this afternoon.



Once we are secure at the dock, one of the officers passes us a line and another officer requests permission to come aboard. We tie them off to our starboard side and welcome the boarding party. This patrol boat is from Coast Guard Station Rio Vista and they are out doing random boardings and safety inspections. Since we were the only boat in the area moving, we were randomly selected.

Over the years I have been boarded more than 20 times and can say that I have never had a negative experience. That may seem like a lot of boardings, but I am out on the water nearly every day and seem to be luckier with random boardings than I am with the lottery. The Coast Guardsmen that I have encountered have always been professional, generally friendly, and have left me with a positive experience. I have heard from other boaters that have had less than positive boarding experiences, but

when you get into the details it is usually because they were not prepared. Preparation is the key. The USCG has a very specific list of mandatory equipment that must be on board your vessel and this is what they are looking for. There is no secret here, just have the required equipment and the boarding will go well.

Both the United States Power Squadron and USCG Auxiliary offer courtesy vessel safety checks to any boater that wishes one. During a courtesy check all of the items that the coast guard looks for are checked and discussed with the vessel owner. We look for

registration/documentation papers, proper display of the registration/documentation number, proper type and amount of personal flotation devices (lifejackets), proper number, size, and serviceability of fire extinguishers, suitable visual distress signals, operational navigation lights and sound producing devices, display of required placards, and overboard discharge of the marine sanitation device. If your vessel is over 39 feet there are a few additional requirements, and if you are over 65 feet there are a few more. You must have a trash disposal plan and must have a copy of the USCG Navigation Rules on board. During the courtesy check any deficiencies are noted and the owner then knows what needs to be corrected in order to meet the USCG minimum requirements. Once the minimum requirements are met, a decal is placed on the vessel. However, having had a courtesy check and a decal affixed to your vessel does not guarantee that the USCG will not board you. But, having the courtesy check does give you confidence that you have the required equipment, will meet the USCG requirements, and that the boarding will be much less stressful.

Being boarded by the Coast Guard is not like being stopped by land based law enforcement. The Coast Guard is not looking to write you a ticket to enhance revenue; they are looking to see if you have the minimum safety equipment on board that may someday prevent a rescue. In most cases they will help you; are you missing a required placard, they usually have these with them and will give you one. If you are missing a larger item they will issue you a fix-it ticket. Simply show proof that the missing item has been acquired and mail it to USCG. I know of only two ways to guarantee a large fine. One is to have been boarded, issued a fix-it ticket, and then boarded again having the same missing item. Two strikes and your out. The other way to guarantee a fine is to have your sanitary system dumping overboard. You must have the overboard discharge valves closed and locked, the system disabled, or other method that prevents raw sewage from being pumped into the water. The fines start at \$10,000!



I am an approved Vessel Safety Examiner for United States Power Squadron therefore I am confident that everything on my boat is in order for this inspection; there is nothing to worry about. As it turns out, today was one of the boarding officers first day doing vessel inspections and I was his first customer so everything was by the book and very thorough. While my first mate accompanied the new officer around the boat showing the required equipment, I stayed in the pilothouse with the other officers go over the paperwork and having a nice discussion. It's important to keep in mind that the coast guard is checking the vessel for the minimum safety equipment. Since we are being boarded in the Delta, they are only

inspecting to the inland water requirements. The minimum equipment requirements for offshore are more extensive. It is good practice to have more than the minimum life jackets, visual distress signals, and fire extinguishers aboard any vessel and be sure they are in serviceable condition. Other equipment that is not required but good to have on board are a marine VHF radio, anchor and rode, first aid kit, paper charts, and a manual bilge pump.

The vessel safety examiner will discuss these and other items that can make boating safer and more enjoyable.

The courtesy vessel safety check from the US Power Squadron and the USCG Aux is provided as a public service on a volunteer basis and without cost. To schedule a courtesy vessel safety check, you can contact either the US Power Squadron at [www.usps.org/national/vsc/](http://www.usps.org/national/vsc/), the USCG Aux at [www.cgaux.org/vsc/](http://www.cgaux.org/vsc/), or if you are in the San Francisco bay and Delta area drop me an email at [pat@bayyachting.com](mailto:pat@bayyachting.com) and I would be pleased to come to your boat and do the check.

The next time you look off your beam and see an orange boat with a blue light activated, on an apparent intercept course, there are no worries. Just slow to steerage and prepare to be boarded. It is likely that the Response boat will hail you on VHF Channel 16 and provide instructions. On more than one occasion I have had the patrol boat turn away after seeing the vessel safety check sticker prominently displayed on my port side. It's all about safety. The USCG wants you to be safe and having the minimum safety equipment on board is a good first step.



After another fun day of boating and making some new Coast Guard friends, it's time to sit back and enjoy a late afternoon cigar and glass of port. Thinking over the day's activities I'm sure glad that I was prepared.

Have a boarding story you want to share. Drop me an email, I love a good story.



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