

Boating Tips

Coast Guard Helos

So I got to thinking about writing another column regarding the United States Coast Guard (USCG) and their relationship with the general boating public. I feel (strongly) the more we know about what they do and how they do it the safer we'll all be out there on the water.

But what to write about? I've already done articles on the importance of getting an annual vessel safety check (VSC) (twice), the boarding process, how to effectively communicate with the CG via VHF radios (three times), and false Maydays. Hmm... Perhaps I could do something about CG helicopters assigned to Sector San Francisco and how they fit into the mission of the CG?

Sounds like a plan. Now, first things first... How can I possibly write about these contraptions if I've never experienced what it is like to actually go out on patrol on one of these high-performance birds? Question then is: How tough could it be to hitch a ride on one of those babies and see for myself what it's like to fly at very low altitude, extremely fast, looking for a "needle in a haystack," which is basically what a small vessel looks like from this perspective?

So I was put in touch with a CG aviator named Lieutenant Matt Udkow, who is stationed at Air Station San Francisco at SFO. Matt is a 9-year Navy veteran. He's flown numerous helicopters and spent 8 months assigned to the (massive)



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, *Abraham Lincoln*. He joined the USCG in 2006. When asked why he chooses to pursue this career, he stated: "Every day presents exciting new challenges and opportunities, and I'm extremely proud to serve among the high-caliber professionals that make up the United States Coast Guard."

The USCG uses a European-designed and built helicopter called the Dolphin. The Dolphin is primarily a Short Range Recovery (SRR) aircraft. There are now a total of 102 Dolphins in the Coast Guard Fleet. The fleet has homeports in 17 cities on the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, Gulf of Mexico, Hawaii, and the Great Lakes region.

The Dolphin is usually deployed from shore, but it can be deployed from medium- and high-endurance Coast Guard Cutters. The Dolphin's main jobs are: search and rescue, enforcement of laws and treaties (including drug interdiction), marine environmental protection (including pollution control), and military readiness.

The MH-65C is also used to patrol the air defense identification zone (ADIZ) around Washington, D.C., also known as the National Capital Region (NCR).



Left to right, the author, Kevo, Aviation Maintenance Technician 3rd Class Christopher George, LT Kyle Young and LT Matt Udkow. Photo courtesy of Matt Udkow.

Specifications:

Crew: 2 pilots and 2 crew

Length: 44 ft. 5 in. (13.5 m)

Rotor diameter: 39 ft. 2 in. (11.9 m)

Height: 13 ft. 6 in. (4.1 m)

Empty weight: 6,333 lbs. (2,872 kg)

Max takeoff weight: 9,480 lbs. (4,300 kg)

Power plants: 2 Turbomeca Arriel 2C2-CG turbo shafts, 1054 Shaft horse-power (697 kW)

Maximum speed: 160 kt, 184 mph (294 km/h)

Range: 356 nm, 409 mi (659 km)

Service ceiling: 15,000 ft (4,573 m)

I arrived at Air Station SF at 10:45 a.m. on Thursday, Nov. 6, 2008. Lieutenant Udkow greeted me at the front gate and escorted me to the huge hangar where these aircraft are stored, maintained and inspected. There were three in the hangar and one outside. The one outside was ours. HA! One of the aircraft inside had no main rotor blades on it and a swarm of aviation mechanics working all over it.

Next, I got suited up and was told the basics of safety and my responsibilities as a member of the crew. (As in... "Don't touch that!") My responsibilities as a crewmember included communicating to the other crewmembers any birds, aircraft, smoke or anything else that might impact (excuse the pun) the safety of our flight.

After donning my flight suit they gave me an inflatable life vest to wear. I told them I was very familiar with these devices and knew how to deploy one. Then I noticed it did not have the automatic trigger mechanism to inflate in case you accidentally fall in the water and bump your head, getting knocked out and not being able to deploy your inflatable vest. I asked why they didn't use these. The answer was frightening: "If this bird goes down in water and you are trapped inside, trying to escape, the last thing you want is for this thing to explode and pin you against the ceiling of the aircraft." Yikes! Good thinking!

After meeting my fellow crewmates we went through an exhaustive preflight check. Me included. I walked around looking like I knew what I was looking for until all were satisfied. Next, they strapped me in to what appeared to be a baby car seat on steroids for takeoff. After leaving the SFO restricted airspace they cut me loose and I was tethered to the craft by a belt around my waist. Now I could open the doors and take some photos.

After passing the SF Bay Bridge we headed west over the SF cityfront.



Formation landing after Rotary Wing Air Intercept (RWAI) training flight. Photo courtesy of Matt Udkow.



Formation practice and security patrol near the Bay Bridge in San Francisco Bay. Photo courtesy of Matt Udkow.



Formation photo flight near Marin Headlands. Photo courtesy of Matt Udkow.



Port security patrol near the Golden Gate Bridge. Photo courtesy of Matt Udkow.

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We cruised by the Golden Gate Bridge at roadway level. This was awesome. Next we passed Mile Rock, then headed north over the Marin Headlands. I swear the folks at the top of the hill we came over were ducking when we came screaming out of nowhere (from below) over the hill!

After that we cruised through Richardson's Bay. I was not aware that one of their patrol duties in this area is to watch for illegal waste discharge from the many anchored vessels in this area. (Richardson's Bay is a "no discharge zone".) Then we flew over Belvedere Point. Whoa! And I thought those properties looked expensive from the water! After that we cruised over San Quentin Federal Prison. (Even scarier from above!)

Next we cruised (at about 120 knots) up San Pablo Bay and into the Carquinez Straights. This is when things started getting interesting. The first thing I noticed was a heightened awareness of high voltage power lines. They seem to be EVERYWHERE in the Delta. We were constantly evaluating time, distance, altitude and alternatives to deal with these hazards. Can you picture yourself having to deal with these power lines at night with a CG Helo? No thank you.

Which leads me back to one of the points of writing this article... If these aviators are out on a search and rescue (SAR) mission in the Delta at night and it is a hoax or false Mayday, every member of that crew is in extreme danger. I found it interesting that in the minds of the guys I flew with that day, strobe

lights are by far the best way to pinpoint a mariner's position for a CG helo to (safely) render assistance (at night).

Somewhere east of the Antioch Bridge at about 400 feet flying at approximately 120 knots I smelled smoke. My instructions were to relate ANY information I felt was relevant to the safety of the flight. I said calmly and firmly into the onboard communications system: "Gentlemen... I smell smoke." They all got a big laugh because we just flew by a controlled burn going on on the port side on a farm I could not see. However, they said "GOOD JOB! That's what we want!"

Next we buzzed Korth's Pirates Lair Marina, Riverboat Marina and Willow Berm Marina on the Mokelumne River. After that we headed south over the San Joaquin River to Mandeville Cut. On the way back we went down the Pacific coastline right above the cliffs. Awesome view! Finally, we returned to Air Station San Francisco by flying directly over the peninsula. A perfect flight!

Kevo's Tip:

Flying Coast Guard helicopters is serious business. These CG assets are essential to the mission of the USCG. Personally, in the future, I know that every time I see one of these birds flying overhead I'll remember what a dedicated team of professionals we have looking out for our safety on the waters of Northern California.

I'd like to thank Lieutenant Matt Udkow and the entire team at USCG District 11 for their help and support of this project.

As always, feedback is appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or kevo@yachtsmanmagazine.com. ⚓