

Boating Tips



BY KEVIN O'LEARY

BOARDED!!

The seas had an eerie calm to them the day I delivered a 32-foot express cruiser from Antioch to Vallejo. This was a combination instruction/delivery. The husband and wife team onboard were on their first dreamboat cruising at a smooth 30 knots. Navigating from Antioch to Vallejo can be very challenging, as there are many opportunities to run aground if you're not very familiar with the route. On the way back, the husband asked the wife if she would drive the boat. She was mortified. She had never driven a boat before in her life, and we were cruising along at about 30 knots, which feels like you're going much faster to the novice mariner. He insisted and I did not interfere.

It is (usually) my policy to never hand over the helm while the vessel is in gear. However, in this instance, we were in the Carquinez Straits and there wasn't a soul to be seen (or so I thought) as it was late November. So she grabbed the helm and was "white knuckling" it and not confident at all whether or not she could drive this yacht when after a few seconds, all of a sudden, all hell broke loose. The Coast Guard was right behind us in hot pursuit, with the lights on and sirens blaring. We were about to be boarded.

The wife, having never driven a boat before and never been confronted with the Coast Guard, just freaked out. She screamed, let go of the helm and scrambled away. I had to grab the helm and bring the vessel off plane to prepare to be boarded. I thought: Whoa! This lady just totally panicked and is scared to death. She thinks she's going to jail.

Being boarded by the Coast Guard can indeed be a traumatic experience, but it need not be if you just understand what it is that's going to happen.

Fast forward to Friday, April 25, 2008. My assistant, Mr. Kevin Burdt, and I were invited to ride along on a U.S. Coast Guard tender and observe the boarding process. This seemed like a great opportunity to familiarize the general recreational boating public with what the Coast Guard is trying to accomplish with the boarding process and what you can expect if, in fact, you are ever boarded.

Waiting for us at our rendezvous point at Jack London Square were

Boatswains Mate 1st Class Jay Rudometkin, Machinery Technician Third Class Kevin Sweitzer and Boatswains Mate 2nd Class Marcel Gradwohl. After some greetings and photos, we headed out the Oakland/Alameda estuary looking for recreational powerboats underway. I commented that there were none at all in the estuary. Jay smiled and said: "We know where they are!" Apparently, the tender we were on belonged to the 87-foot cutter *USCGC Pike*, which was anchored a few miles south of the Bay Bridge. It just so happened that there was a big "hit" of halibut going on just off Bellina Isle marina,

From left to right, Bob Johnson, Ryan Forsyth, USCG Boatswains Mate 1st Class Jay Rudometkin, James Forsyth and Chris Scott.



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within sight of the cutter. Dozens of recreational and commercial fishing vessels were scattered about and the fish were biting.

We spotted a vessel heading toward the fishing grounds about a mile ahead. We were gaining on it steadily and just before the fishing

From left to right, Boatswains Mate 1st Class Jay Rudometkin, Machinery Technician 3rd Class Kevin Sweitzer and Boatswains Mate 2nd Class Marcel Gradvohl USCG.



grounds we announced our presence with lights and sirens and they slowed down. Jay asked if they had been boarded in the last year and the answer was no. He requested permission to come aboard and the skipper/owner of the vessel, Mr. James Forsyth, welcomed him with a smile. The rest of us stayed on the tender while Jay went through his checklist of safety/identification items to be examined. As we were in this process numerous fishing vessels around us packed up and took off, concerned that they might be next. It turns out we picked the right vessel. This guy was



James Forsyth getting a clean bill of health and a hearty handshake from the CG for running an incredibly tight ship.

the “poster boy” for safe boating practices. He had everything, including redundant electronics and a survival pod strapped to the roof! (Nice touch, James!)

Contrary to popular opinion, the Coast Guard does not issue citations during the boarding process. If the vessel is deemed unsafe or the seas too rough, they can “Terminate your voyage.” This means you will be ushered back to port or towed back. The boarding officer can file a report of the incident and violation to a case officer, who may or may not follow up on the report and may or may not issue a citation. The boarding officer

can detain the vessel and summon law enforcement to the scene.

If you pass muster with the safety/security check, they will issue you a receipt documenting that your vessel has been boarded. It has been my experience that you will not be boarded if you have already been boarded in the past year. However, the Coast Guard reserves the right to board your vessel at any time.

A Boater's Reaction to the Boarding Process

So I thought it would be enlightening to our readers to hear first hand how a recreational boater who has recently been boarded felt about the boarding process:

Kevo: When you first realized the Coast Guard was stopping you, what was going through your mind?

Mr. Forsyth: When I first saw the Coast Guard coming directly at our vessel I immediately knew we were in for an inspection. My immediate thoughts were: “I hoped everything was in order and we had the required equipment considering it was a new

boat with new equipment and our first time being boarded.” Not to mention I certainly didn’t want a ticket!

Kevo: Do you have any comments about the courtesy, thoroughness or professionalism of the officer who boarded your vessel?

Mr. Forsyth: The Coast Guard crew that boarded our boat was very professional and courteous. The officers were very detailed in their inspection and were very helpful in questions we had regarding the inspection.

Kevo: What advice would you give to others who might be boarded by the CG?

Mr. Forsyth: Don’t panic, as they are there to help you and make sure your vessel is safe in the water you are operating in. I was very thankful to the Coast Guard and was given a complete satisfactory inspection.

Kevo’s Tips:

My clients at Pacific Powerboating who fly planes always say: “The best way to get out of trouble is to not get in it in the first place!” This is essentially the same with boating. Staying out of trouble starts with a healthy respect for the water and having all necessary safety gear onboard before you embark.

The Coast Guard’s primary purpose when boarding a recreational vessel is to ensure the safety and integrity of the crew and vessel. Run a tight ship and you, too, will get to shake the hand of any CG officer after he compliments you on your safety gear.

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