

# Coast Guard Auxiliary adds layer of safety at Tahoe

By Susan Wood

When it comes to those who venture out into a vast and cold Lake Tahoe, it's good to know the ones who provide backup for emergencies have backup of their own.

The U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary achieved its 50<sup>th</sup> year in service to the Lake Tahoe region on April 20, serving as support for the station located in Tahoe City.

The service is much-needed, especially in years like this one in which the banner snowfall is resulting in a deluge of runoff that has raised the lake level so much the beaches have all but disappeared.

High water mixed with high temperatures in the two valleys east and west of Lake Tahoe usually equate to increased boating, swimming and even debris floating around. The latter can place even the most cautious boater in hazardous conditions.

In the last decade, the lake has averaged two to three drownings a year. But in the wake of stand up paddleboarding's immense popularity over the last few years, that number has at least tripled.

"The problem is, when something goes wrong, it goes terribly wrong," said Bruce Martin, who has volunteered in the Coast Guard Auxiliary in this district for five years.



Mort Meiers and Bruce Martin stand guard at Ski Run Marina during windy conditions. Photo/Susan Wood

The district has 21 South Lake Tahoe volunteers working the sidelines. Nationally, there are more than 30,000 men and women who have volunteered over the last 75 years. The Auxiliary is under the wing of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The volunteer organization has played a role in every major conflict since World War II. Most notably in recent times the Auxiliary helped with Hurricane Katrina relief efforts.

The Coast Guard itself is 226 years old, under the same U.S. cabinet – but can be transferred to the U.S. Navy by the president or Congress during times of war.

“Our main focus is recreational boating safety,” Martin told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The retired South Shore fire chief, whose father served in the U.S. Navy, knows the hazards that can occur in an emergency.

Hypothermia can set in less than 15 minutes in the most extreme of cases as in lake temperatures at 32.5 degrees. When it rises to double that, a victim may not even survive two hours. The cold water renders the muscles useless when hypothermia takes over, causing the swimmer to stop paddling. Some drowning cases happen when the swimmer dives in and gulps water during the shock of the temperature. Without a life jacket, the body may never surface. People have drowned close to shore.

That's why in the Coast Guard Auxiliary's role to be proactive in water and boating safety education it's all about water adventure seekers wearing their life jackets.

Many paddleboarders have not been wearing them.

In its duties as the civilian volunteer arm for the Coast Guard, the Auxiliary will put on events aimed at teaching safety, as well as conduct vessel examinations, patrols, drills and even monitoring the buoys to ensure they don't get blown off.

One drill involved the Coast Guard chief being dropped off in the middle of the lake in a dry suit, with auxiliary patrollers plotting where to find him. The chief was out there for an hour.

"I was impressed," Martin said of the commitment.

Auxiliary volunteers must be certified, and it takes all summer to complete crew training, but the South Shore district welcomes more. One may be asked as a "first aider" to rescue dummies and navigate lake waters.

Volunteers are responsible for a number of duties – even if they just want to cook for others at events.

“We need all hands on deck,” Martin said of the demands of boating safety on Lake Tahoe.

Auxiliary members may see the gamut of disasters or near misses.

“In the times I’ve been out on patrol, I’ve seen people going too close to shore and hitting a rock. We inform Vessel Assist,” said Mort Meiers, a longtime South Shore resident, boating enthusiast and 27-year Auxiliary member.

Meiers recalled how a man operating a Jet Ski near the Tahoe Keys found it hard to reach his watercraft with no leash while it continually made circles.

As it turns out, fires on board prove to be life threatening.

Then there’s the drinking that’s often associated with boating, a misfortune Coast Guard auxiliary members can only attribute to the planet’s “pirate history.”

The hazards are such that in 2018 California law will require a boating license. The Golden State is one of the last to mandate the license. Alaska is another.

To the Coasties, the Auxiliary team is “indispensable.”

Tahoe City Executive Petty Officer Josh Fennell called the team “a force multiplier for us,” meaning an “extra set of hands and an extra set of eyes.”

“We only have two boats and can only be in so many places. It’s nice to have reinforcements in South Lake Tahoe,” Fennell told *Lake Tahoe News*, adding that having Auxiliary members conduct the vessel inspections helps substantially.

Other law enforcement agencies such as El Dorado County, Douglas County, South Lake Tahoe and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency also have boats patrolling the South Shore waters alongside the Coast Guard.

“The Coast Guard Auxiliary is one of the Coast Guard’s greatest hidden gems. Without their countless volunteer efforts, Coast Guard Station Lake Tahoe wouldn’t be able to operate safely and efficiently,” said local Cmdr. Dustin Finkelson, who just reported to duty last month from the station in Galveston, Texas.

It’s a welcome sign to longtime residents who have gone boating on Lake Tahoe – especially those who are familiar with the lake’s treacherous history.

“I’ve been here almost 60 years, and I had a boat for many years. Of course, if we’re going to provide amusement for people on the lake, at least we should be responsible to advise of what’s available to help them,” said Betty Mitchell, longtime Lake Tahoe Historical Society volunteer. She and her late husband owned a sailboat together. Sailing on the lake can be tricky enough with its bowl-like geography and wind spurts.

So to Mitchell, a life jacket should just be considered an appendage to a swimmer or boating enthusiast.

“I respect the water. Anyone who doesn’t use a life jacket when the conditions call for it is a little bit crazy,” she said.