

THE COXSWAIN SHACK

SURFACE OPS PATROL TIPS & TRICKS

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Coxswain Basics

In response to several requests, we're going to dedicate the next few columns to the basics of qualifying as an Auxiliary Coxswain. There are several steps you can take to prepare yourself for this task. I'm going to recommend some initial steps to help you get started:

Find a good Mentor! "Mentors" have only been a formal part of the Boat Crew Qualification Program (BCQP) for some ten years now. But finding someone to help you through qualifying has always been a good way to get qualified. Over thirty years ago, I was lucky enough to have the DSO-OP in my flotilla and he took me under his wing. I served on his crew for years before I learned most of what I know now about Aux Operations from him.

Some flotillas have a "coordinator" to help you in the qualification process. In others, the FSO-OP or -MT takes on this task. In some, you're pretty much on your own. But in any case, a little effort spent at the beginning, to find an experienced Coxswain, who works well with candidates and knows his/her stuff will pay off handsomely. If you don't have a suitable mentor in your own flotilla, look at neighboring flotillas or the Division.

Become an experienced Crewman! If you crew aboard your Mentor's vessel (the best strategy) or aboard another member's boat, the experience you gain on patrol will form the basis for your own Coxswain skills. If conditions permit, ask the Coxn why he performed certain tasks one way or another. "Why did you approach that PIW from downwind?", "Why did you position the boat upwind before having the crew heave lines over?", and "How did you know that that tug would be going through here?" are examples of good questions.

Pick an appropriate patrol boat! This is a tricky topic, as there is no universal agreement on what makes the best boat for patrol work. Crewing aboard several boats will help you get an idea of the strengths and weaknesses of the various types of craft. Look at outboard(s) vs. inboard(s), twin-screw vs. single, gas vs. diesel, mono-hull vs. cats, and trailerable vs. docked.

Factors to consider include whether the boat will be mostly dedicated to patrol work or also used for fishing, cruising and other purposes. Years ago, when I first began to think about what might make a good patrol boat, I thought about a Bertram 31 FBSF. They were fast, highly maneuverable, could cut through rough seas and had a massive cockpit from which to conduct SAR work. If you can indulge your fantasies and dedicate a boat to patrol work, you may be able to get one that is especially well-suited for it. But, if you're like most of us, the boat will need to do double-duty as a family-cruiser, a fishing platform or some other use. Whether you want to patrol mostly in one area, or be able to move around among multiple areas will also impact your decision.

There is also the "minimalist" vs. the "everything but the kitchen sink" argument regarding how much gear to carry aboard your boat to consider. You'll want to evaluate GPS, Radar, radios, hailers, depth-sounders, computers and all sorts of other electronic gear, and that too plays a role in determining what type and size of boat you'll want.

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